

NORINIAN UPRISING

Norinian Uprising

JOY SLAUGHTER



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To the child I used to be

Other Works by Joy Slaughter

Crossing the Line

White Cloud



Gavony Peninsula

Interactive map available at:

<https://www.AuthorJoySlaughter.com>

Lexicon & Pronunciation Guide

found at the end of this book

and at:

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NORINIAN UPRISING

Chapter 1

CADOC

Southern Seas

Commodore Cadoc Andersyn clung to the mizzenshroud of the clipper ship, *Basilisk*. He extended his arm and leaned his weight over the ocean, watching the dark waves surge below him. The spray wet his face, and the wind roared in his ears. He flew across the water, and nothing else existed in the world but the sun, the sea, and his ship.

The bosun's whistle for the change of watch disrupted his reverie, and Cadoc pulled himself up and around the ropes, leaping to the quarterdeck as his sailors gathered in an orderly manner on the main deck below him. The women and men of the crew formed a smart bunch in their loose, tarry trousers, black shirts, and stiff tarpaulin hats. Black silk neckerchiefs wafted in chorus in the breeze. The many bodies displayed every shade of humanity, each tanned darker by the intense and unrelenting sunlight of the southern seas. Cadoc's eye fell on each one, and if his gaze was returned, he nodded in solidarity.

“Toe a seam!” First Officer Cecily Layton shouted as she strode before them in officer blacks with two rows of shiny gold buttons on her jacket and gold trim stripes on her trousers. Her skin, once fawn, had weathered to a russet brown. Deep wrinkles slashed her cheeks and encircled her eyes, signs of both her severity and her quick laughter. The crew obeyed her orders instantly and without question, lining up and awaiting further commands. She had no qualm over drawing blood, and they knew it. She displayed a strong arm and steady hand, whether in storm or battle. Few captains had officers as competent as she, and pride billowed in Cadoc’s chest as he watched her work.

“Ship ahoy! Port bow!” cried a sailor aloft.

Cadoc extended his glass and peered across the water. As he focused, another clipper ship appeared in the circle of the lens. He squinted, intrigued.

Layton stood at his shoulder. “What they flagged to, sir?”

“Shialor.”

“Never heard of ‘em.”

“It’s a small island far to the southeast,” he said as he scanned the cut of the sails to determine the foreign ship’s capabilities.

“Buncha countries down there that all runs together. Can’t never keep ‘em straight.”

He read the signal flags. “They’re in distress. How far are we from the atoll?”

“Nearly spittin’ distance, sir. If they be in distress, that be the place for ‘em to go.”

“I suspect that’s what they intend.” He lowered his glass.

She grinned. “What we intend for ‘em, sir?”

“It’s unlikely there are any other ships out here for a three days’ journey,” Cadoc said. “If they need help, then we are their only option.”

Her smile faded. “Help, sir?”

He rested his brown hand on her shoulder. “To help properly, we must inspect the hold.”

Her grin returned. “Aye, sir! That we shall!”

“Beat to quarters.”

Layton danced a jig before shouting the command to the crew. Cadoc smiled at her antics, but as the sailors scrambled to their battle stations, he turned his attention to engagement. “Stand by to tack.”

“Aye, aye, sir!”

He closed his eyes, sensing the roll of the ship and the breath of the wind. Energy and exhilaration rose within him, and he turned his face upward. *Basilisk*’s three square-rigged masts scraped the sky, the ivory canvas sails full and responsive to his will. He scanned the sheets and, with a nod of approval, turned to Layton. “Ready about.”

Layton relayed his words, and the sailors spread across the deck, taking the many sheets and bowlines. More hands climbed aloft in the rigging, preparing to bear the backstays and overhaul lifts and trusses. The midship saw hands ready to overhaul the rolling tackles and tend the head braces.

Cadoc searched for the moment, and when it was right, with his sailors at their stations, he called, “Ready, ready!” and pointed to the two sailors at the wheel, directing them to ease down the helm. At the same time, Layton called for the hauling of the spanker boom.

“Helm’s a lee,” Cadoc said when the helm was down. Layton shouted his words, and the second officer, a hulking mountain of a man, repeated them further along the

ship. The sailors responded by letting go of the head sheets, allowing the ropes to ease out and run long. With a keen eye, Cadoc watched the mainsail release its tension until the wind was fully gone. “Rise tacks and sheets. Overhaul lifts and trusses. Bear backstays.”

Layton called his commands, and the main tack and sheet were raised. They commenced their turn toward the Shialorian vessel, and as the ship veered, Cadoc stood as though planted, his stance wide, his arms loose with his glass in one hand.

The sailors aloft moved too slowly for his liking. He pressed his lips together and watched. Still, their movements lagged.

Cadoc stepped forward and lifted his hand to his mouth. “Way-ho! Way-ho! Hey-ho! High!” he sang at the tempo he wished to see.

“An’ way-ho! Hey-ho! High!” the second officer answered, his bass voice aligning to the same beat. The sailors, both on deck and in the rigging, joined in,

“Haul now, b’y, this mausey day.
 What odds? Who cares? Sail on!
 Damn th’ coral.
 Damn th’ sand.
 No tide be movin’ me.”

As they sang, water crashed against the bow, and *Basilisk* moaned and creaked. The ship heeled with the force, tipping to the side, but Cadoc remained fast, leaning against it, observant and waiting for the luff as his sailors continued to sing.

“Way-ho! Way-ho! Hey-ho! High!
 An’ way-ho! Hey-ho! High!
 Come ye, tar, this stormin’ day.
 What odds? Who cares? Sail on!
 I ain’t dwolin’.
 I ain’t stun.
 No tide be movin’ me.

“Th’ hawful spirits o’ the deep,
 Th’ fury o’ the waves,
 Live or die
 Between her thighs,
 Me back scrob t’ the flay.

“Way-ho! Way-ho! Hey-ho! High!
 An’ way-ho! Hey-ho! High!
 Pull ye, dog, this squallie day.
 What odds? Who cares? Sail on!
 High or low or
 Spring or neap,
 No tide be movin’ me.”

At last, the sail spoke, and the main topsail slapped well aback. “Lee ho,” Cadoc said.

“Lee ho!” Layton shouted over the rush of the wind.

With the turn past its apex, Cadoc held the ship steady to complete the tack. “Haul well taut. Mainsail haul.” The yards swung, and *Basilisk* settled into her new course, the aft sails filling. “Haul taut. Let go and haul.” *Basilisk* had kept her headway, so he motioned for the helmswoman to right the helm a little early.

As Layton sprang about, calling for the sailors to trim sheets and coil down the rigging, Cadoc walked to the rail and propped his boot on the base. *Basilisk* rose on a swell, then plummeted forward and plunged her head into the sea before rising again. Unshaken, Cadoc leveled his gaze, and the three square-rigged masts of the Shialorian ship grew in his vision. He nodded, pleased with *Basilisk's* direction and speed.

They approached the limping ship astern, and he studied the build and rigging. She was larger than *Basilisk*. The black hull showed signs of damage, but the masts and sails seemed whole. Sailors covered the deck and climbed about in the rigging, and he guessed they outnumbered his own crew, though not by many. He ordered signal flags raised, communicating their desire to help. He chuckled when their offer was refused. His course and speed held steady.

"We're almost in range of a bow rake," he said. "I expect one any time. Bring up the chase cannon and prepare to return fire with bar shot."

"Aye, aye, sir!"

Cadoc crossed the quarterdeck, then lifted his glass again.

Cannon flash lit the distressed vessel.

"Get down!" he shouted.

Sailors shouted as chain shot growled toward them and exploded into the foremast, splintering wood and twisting sheets into sickening angles, some snapping as they jerked taut.

Cadoc buzzed with the action around him, and his heart pounded as though it would burst. Despite the strong sensations, he merely tensed his jaw and flared his nostrils,

determined to display only courage to his sailors. "Return fire," he said in a calm, easy manner.

"Fire!"

The chase cannon exploded, and the sound wave rattled his chest as he surveyed *Basilisk's* masts and rigging, assessing the damage.

Cannon boomed in the distance. Cadoc tensed, but water geysered into the sky as the shot missed. "Fire," he said in return.

"Fire!"

The cannon sounded, and the smell of the smoke reached his nostrils. Layton jumped to his side, her cheeks flushed. "Fire again, sir?"

"Hold," he said, watching the other ship. Waiting. Their shot had flown true and added further damage.

The Shialorians struck their colors.

Cadoc stepped back, nodding as he watched the flag sink. "Prepare to board."

"We're goin' aboard!" Layton whooped. The crew cheered and ran for rifles.

Cadoc lifted his glass once more. Two of the three Shialorian masts remained whole, but the third was broken, the top two sections of the mizzenmast hanging from tangled rigging. The damage to the hull concerned him even more, but he noted the ship's sharp ends and wide dimensions. She was a clipper of great capacity and speed, solidly constructed, a ship with which he could achieve much.

He instructed the helmswoman to draw *Basilisk* alongside their target. As they approached, the defeated sailors came into view, shuffling on the deck in rust-colored shirts. Each had copper skin and long, dark hair braided into one

plait, and each wore an expression of anger tinged with fear in their glinting black eyes.

The crew threw ropes and planks into place, and the sailors on both sides shouted and jeered. Though every able hand held a rifle or pistol, none fired.

Cadoc climbed to stand atop the railing. "Listen!" he shouted. "Where is your captain?"

"Here!"

The sailors of the other ship parted, and a man with a plumed round hat appeared. He otherwise wore the same uniform and braid as his sailors, and his eyes flashed with the same hatred.

Cadoc bowed his head in greeting. "Permission to come aboard."

"As I have no other choice," the captain said slowly, "permission granted."

Cadoc turned to his crew. "Sailors of the first watch shall accompany me. Others stay as you are." He walked over the plank to the other ship, the 25 men of the first watch following close behind, some on the plank, and the rest crowding at the rail, waiting to climb. Cadoc approached the captain. "Your sword," he said, holding out his hand.

The Shialorian captain scowled, then with a jerking motion, unclasped his sword and handed it to him.

"What is your name, good sir," Cadoc said, "and what is the name of your vessel?"

"I am Juno, and you are aboard *Darsham*. We are taking on water. The hull was damaged even before you blew a hole in it." Juno sneered. "I only hope there is time to sail to the atoll before we are on the bottom of the ocean."

"I see," Cadoc said. "And what are you transporting?"

Juno waved his hand. “Timber, wool, simple wares. Hay. That sort of thing. You are welcome to see the inventory.”

“I’ll see the manifest, instead.”

Juno rocked his jaw from side to side. “You don’t believe me then.”

Cadoc shrugged. “Your personal manifest will remove all doubt.”

“I’m not inclined to show that to just anyone.”

Cadoc smiled. “I’m not inclined to let you live.” He drew his ceremonial knife, seized the captain, and sliced the blade across his throat. The crews of both ships roared. Rifles fired. The remaining crew of *Basilisk* leaped aboard *Darsham* and commenced the fight.

As blood spilled to the deck in a growing pool at Cadoc’s feet, he carefully wiped the ceremonial blade on the shoulder of the Shialorian captain, resting it in place for a sacred moment before shoving the body to the deck.

Cadoc raised his knife. “Take the ship!”

Chapter 2

BRYNNA

Robynton
Wyclythe Province
Norin

With a furtive glance over her shoulder, Brynna snuck out the back of the woodworking shop, leaving the door ajar so the noisy latch wouldn't give her away.

"Many sins can be overlooked, but neglecting the books is not one of them," her father had said. It was sensible advice, worthy of the serious tone he had used, but she craved any sign of Trinan's impending arrival. Papa's precious profit and loss statement could wait.

Brynna jumped to hang from the bottom branch of the old poplar and swung her leg over, pulling herself up with the motions she'd learned as a child. The action swept her skirts aside and bared her thigh, but this was no time for modesty. Limb to limb, she climbed upward, high over the buildings. The anxiety buzzing within her centered only on Trinan. Today was the day.

Reaching the top, Brynna clutched the narrowing trunk and bobbed in the sea breeze, her tousled brown hair tickling her face. A brisk gust bowed her perch, and she tightened her grip as the tree top plunged downward and flung back up. Her stomach protested the ride with a twinge of nausea that lasted until the branch stilled once more.

The harbor town of Robynton bustled below her. Stores, professional offices, and houses with neatly-tended vegetable gardens lined dirt and cobblestone streets that stretched toward the wharf. Ship masts with skeletal spars punctured the sky, a few waving their pennants over the roofs like ribbon dancers at Harvestide. She ignored them all and twisted her body to place them at her back.

Squinting against the midday sun, Brynna peered toward the rolling hills that hid the distant Wyclythe fortress from view. The last of the year's flax stood ripe in the fields, and the workers, so tiny from her vantage point, pulled the stalks from the ground in handfuls, gathering the bundles into pointed sheaves, row upon row of knee-high cones.

Sweat beaded on her forehead. She wet her lips and watched. Any moment now.

He appeared on the border of road and sky, galloping toward Robynton.

Her eyes widened.

Grabbing the bough below her, Brynna swung from branch to lower branch, choosing speed over caution. "Papa!" she called, stretching to another gnarled bough. "Papa!"

Through a break in the green leaves, she saw her father step outside, pause, then look up.

Brynna reached for the next branch and caught only air. Panic flashed through her, and she fell, plunging downward

and tumbling through the boughs. She hit the ground with a grunt and bit through her tongue and her pride.

Her father crossed his thick arms over his barrel chest and peered down at her. “What now?”

She coughed and sat up. “Trinan’s almost here,” she said, standing and testing her bones and joints.

He raised an eyebrow. “You look frightening.”

She examined her dress. The skirt was torn in two places, and dirt smudged the entire left side. “Do you think he has an answer?”

“You have blood on your chin.”

She wiped her mouth with the back of her wrist. “Doesn’t matter.”

“It does,” he said. “Greatly. Go wash.”

“There’s not enough time—”

“Brynnalyn.”

She tensed, then rushed inside.

In the back room, Brynna stuck out her tongue and ran her finger over the gash. It stung but seemed harmless, so no need to summon a witch to heal her. She splashed in the washstand, scrubbed the bloody smear off her face, and buried her nose in a towel that smelled of varnish. Clean enough. After brushing the dirt from her taupe linen serk and the green hangerok she wore atop it, she smoothed her hands over her hips and smiled, convinced the intricate embroidery would catch Trinan’s eye. She picked the leaves from her braided hair, straightened the belt that held her ceremonial knife at her waist, and dabbed a bit of spiced fir oil behind her ears. He’d smell it when he kissed her again.

The bell jangled on the front door. Brynna froze as heavy boots traveled down the hallway from the lobby, past her office and the back room in which she stood, and toward

the workshop proper. Deep voices rumbled. She knew his voice. She lived to hear it. All the air left the room, and as her heart pounded, she broke into a cold sweat. Flailing her arms, she shook the bodice of her hangerok, hoping to avoid sweat circles under her arms. She must calm herself. Act serene. Behave like a fine lady. One doesn't receive news like this every day. Straightening her posture, she walked forth to meet them.

Stacks of lumber, domestic and exotic, lined the workshop walls, ready for carving or direct sale. Hooks held a hodgepodge of saws, drills, and chisels with worn handles, and a bench plane lay on a table scattered with auger gimlets. She inhaled the scents of oak and cedar, smells tinged with a hint of smoke, and her shoes crossed the detritus on the floor, crunching shaved curls and sinking into sawdust.

Trinan shook her father's hand. "Thank you, Seth."

The men matched each other in height and in the fair skin tone of the indigenous Norinian families, but Trinan displayed the sleekness of early adulthood while Seth bested him in brawn, beard, and paunch. Trinan's short brown hair had been styled with a traditional, reassuring side part, but the finger-length strands on top insisted he still belonged with the vibrant young voices of the day. His handsome, clean-shaven face held his lips taut with chronic tension, and fine lines encircled his piercing blue eyes, evidence of how quick they were to narrow in judgment. His fashionable burgundy suit, with a high cravat and silk waistcoat, was of a foreign cut that had originated in the lands far away in the southern seas. Brynna flicked an overlooked leaf from her braid and second-guessed her folk wear, even with embroidery.

Seth nodded. "You will bring honor to your name."

"It's certain, then?" Brynna asked. She held her tone steady, even as she dared to hope.

Trinan turned at her voice, and she saw a glint. He touched the golden chain of office that draped across his broad shoulders. "I am now the chancellor of Wyclythe."

She laughed with celebration, and he winked at her, making her stomach flutter.

"What about port oversight?" Seth asked, rubbing his graying beard.

Brynna cringed and cast Trinan an apologetic expression. Today was a day for toasts, not interrogation. "Papa—"

"It's under my control," Trinan said in a gracious, accommodating tone. "I now hold authority over all customs regulations in Wyclythe Province, and the harbormaster answers to me. My commands are limited only by King Wyclythe and High King Corradh."

"And tariffs?"

Trinan nodded. "Wyclythe sets the rates. I control enforcement."

"A new era," Seth said.

"Yes, sir." Trinan's forehead creased with certainty. "One of prosperity for us all."

Seth turned his head and spat to affix the words as prayer. "Amen."

Brynna clasped her hands and waited for the conversation to continue. Seth tucked his thumbs into his belt, and Trinan stared at the floor. Uneasiness sparked within her. Something had changed between her father and the man she loved, something she was not privy to. As the silence extended, she, too, studied random objects throughout the room as if they offered words she could use. A hammer here. An awl there. The broom at an angle.

Trinan pointed to the workbench. "Is that the box?"

Seth moved the small chest for them all to see. "A work in progress," he said. "Its time will come." He ran his hand across the heavy lid. The chest was exquisite, one of the finest items he had ever made. He had carved scrolls, curls, and leaves into the beveled edge, and the front displayed a half-formed triquetra, the foundation of the Great Seal of Norin. Pencil marks indicated where the rest of the design would soon be carved.

Trinan hummed his approval, and Brynna warmed at his recognition of the beauty and importance of her father's work.

"Glorious," Trinan said. "Mahogany?"

Seth nodded. "It is. Courtesy of the commodore."

Trinan nodded, and the room quieted once more. Brynna furrowed her brow at the atmosphere's heaviness which was so unlike their normal interactions. Perhaps they had argued.

Trinan twitched his fingers, then cleared his throat. "May I speak with Brynna? Alone?"

Brynna's mouth turned to cotton as she realized this day would hold yet more cause for celebration.

Seth chuckled. "Certainly. You two may step into the office." He withdrew his bronze pocket watch and clicked it open. "But you must excuse me. I intend to harvest that red oak on the Bryton border this evening, and I need to leave now in order to finish before sunset. Are you still able to help me?"

Trinan nodded. "Of course. I'll change into work clothes and follow you shortly."

Seth patted Trinan's back as they shook hands once more.

“Thank you again, sir.” Trinan said. “I’m forever in your debt. Norin Å Sdolevy.”

Seth nodded slowly, his face solemn.

Trinan stepped toward the doorway and glanced back at Brynna. She knew to follow, and her heart quivered as she trailed behind him to her office. He closed the door, then slipped his hand to her waist and pulled her against him, enfolding her in his arms. Tipping her face upward, he gently kissed her, and she dissolved into bliss.

He drew back. “Why do you taste like blood?”

She blinked. “I fell out of the tree.”

“Why were you—” He shook his head, stepping away. “Never mind.”

She caught his hand. “Congratulations. . .my lord.”

A smug smile slid onto his face. “That’s the first time someone has used that honorific for me,” he said, reaching for her again and running his thumb over her cheek. “You may continue using my name in private.”

She nestled against him. “If I ever see you. You’ll be very busy, with no time to come to town.”

“It’s a critical moment.” He kissed her forehead, then took her shoulders and looked straight into her eyes. “The right people are moving into place. Norin is poised to become the political center of the Gavony peninsula. We can advance against Hykos and Gantu. We can rule over them—over all of Gavony. True power is brewing. Do you feel it?”

Brynna shied away from the intensity of both his gaze and his dreams of leading the world. A disagreeable sensation rose within her, but she knew better than to call it jealousy. “Feel what?” she said. “I’m an accountant. I feel nothing.”

“You understand matters of state.”

She laughed. “I stay cooped up in this office, adding columns of numbers until my eyes bleed. Nothing but timber inventory, surety bonds, and expense reports. And patronage events for small-minded people obsessed with the price of haddock.”

His mouth curved upward. “You are dissatisfied.”

“Satisfaction is for royalty.”

“You want more.”

She shrugged.

“Brynna,” he said, his voice filled with emotion and determination. She held her breath as he trapped her hands, his grip urgent, insistent. “Be my attaché.”

Disappointment crashed through her heart. Her lips parted, and her shoulders sank.

He chuckled. “Don’t look so surprised. I need someone to assist me.”

She pulled away. “I know nothing of such things.”

“That’s a lie. You’ve forgotten I also attend those fancy-dress balls you so disparage. I’ve watched you hold your own in policy debates. I’ve heard you discuss the Valsyidian Conventions and diplomacy with Gantu—”

“Perhaps for a moment before my father sends me away to dance.”

Trinan caught her hand and twirled her under his arm, pulling her back against him. “You do that well also,” he said with a squeeze.

She closed her eyes and leaned her head back on his chest, savoring his closeness. “And you want me there for my opinions on policy?”

He nuzzled her neck. “I have some other ideas, too.”

As his soft lips touched her skin, she struggled to focus on the negotiation at hand. She wriggled to face him. “Be

realistic. I can't leave my father. It's my duty to help him. His accounts and compliance with timber—"

"He'll be fine," he said, releasing her. "Or maybe I'll go it alone and change the regulations on the valid conveyance of. . .unsevered cutting rights and. . ." He furrowed his brow. ". . .stumpage. . .of the. . .timber export licenses."

She laughed. "You don't know what you're talking about."

He flashed a lopsided grin as he rubbed the back of his neck. "Words I've heard you say."

"Norin is doomed," she said, returning his smile.

His expression grew serious, and as his lips thinned and his shoulders straightened, he transformed once again into the powerful politician he had become. "If Norin is doomed, it is because Hykos stands on our neck." He glanced at the closed door and stepped closer, lowering his voice. "There was another skirmish last night."

A weight settled in her stomach. "Hykosi or slavers?" she whispered.

"Hykosi."

"Nearby?"

"Just outside of town," he said, his words spoken at the rapid speed secret conversations demand. "A Hykosi regiment flushed out a group of rebels."

"Casualties?"

"Two."

"Shit," she said, propping her hands on her hips. "That's too close. And Robynton is as far from Hykos as one can get—how could anyone not see that we're occupied? The Grand Ambassador must push back diplomatically before things explode."

Trinan's mouth twitched as though he had just revealed the punchline of a joke. "A mere accountant."

She puffed a strand of hair out her face.

His fingers touched her temple and brushed the unruly curl behind her ear. “Norin is rising.” He moved closer, his body blocking her in place just as his words had a moment before. “Brynna, I need you. Help me build Norin to the heights she deserves. Help her come into her own. Strengthen my hand. Stand at my side.” His hands cupped her face, and he kissed her. “Warm my bed.”

She stared into his icy-blue eyes, wondering if he was finally asking her to be his wife and dance Teerlagee in the Great Circle. “What are you saying?”

He rested his hand on his ceremonial knife. Her heart pounded as she waited for his proposal.

He hesitated. “Be my attaché.”

She deflated, releasing her breath with a slight shake of her head. “I’ll have to ask Papa.”

“I’ve asked him. He approves.” He held out his hand. “Trust me, Brynnalyn,” he said, daring to use her full name, the Norinian mark of deepest intimacy.

Her eyes flew to his. Her father had certainly granted him permission, or Trinan would face his wrath. There was little else for her to consider. As Trinan’s attaché, she would spend every day in his presence, at his side, helping him with his work. She would be his consort, attending court on his arm and sharing his bed—everything she wanted had she dared to dream. They would be true partners in all but the final, permanent bond of Teerlagee, and that would surely come in time.

Brynna placed her fingers on his palm. He kissed her hand, then walked to the door and looked back. “You will be my attaché,” he said, not as a command but as a statement of irresistible fact.

Chapter 3

MEELA

Wyclythe Forest
Wyclythe Province
Norin

Meela's smile flickered with wicked anticipation. She hurried through Wyclythe Forest, grateful for the enchanted ancient paths that allowed her quicker movement than the trails used by the peoples of Gavony. She shouldn't search for him. Witches didn't do such things, and she, chief of the canonical witches, would be held to a higher standard. She shouldn't even watch him. But her knowledge of the rules had only planted the seed of rebellion within her and sweetened the exhilaration of finding him once more.

Running and hopping over stones, her purple witch's robe billowing around her, she darted between the wide gray trunks of the towering trees, light as a hart and swift as a hare. The roar of falling water called to her, and she bounded toward the river until she saw the rising mist and

felt its coolness. There, she strolled along the water's edge, the dappled sunlight on her face, unsure where she would find him but certain he was near. She sensed his presence, and her breath quickened.

As the green canopy gleamed above her, she ducked behind a tree and peered through the glen. The huntsman stood across the clearing, dressed in a black shirt and trousers, his broad shoulders draped with dark furs. His long black hair had been tied back, and knives shone at his waist and thigh. He had slung his rifle over his shoulder, and his possible bag hung by his waist.

He knelt. At his feet, a deer thrashed on its side, a yellow-fledged arrow in its leg. He murmured to it, stroking its body as he drew his hunting knife to end its suffering.

"Wait," she said, stepping out, then pausing, waiting for his reaction, guarding herself. So many people feared the witches and their magic, even as they relied on the witches for survival. A frightened huntsman could be dangerous.

He looked up and revealed no sign of fear nor even of surprise at her presence. The deer bucked again, and he struggled to calm it.

Saddened by the suffering, Meela pushed her auburn hair behind her ears and hurried to kneel at his side. She rested her hands on the deer. A faint violet glow flowed from her fingers. The animal calmed, but the arrow jiggled in its leg. The huntsman gripped the arrow and tugged, pulling it loose. The deer jerked against both of them, but they held fast, and Meela focused her power as she closed her eyes.

The chill of injury, the *ondilska*, the essence of illness and harm, seeped into her body through her hands. The bounding nature of this *ondilska* surprised her, but she had suspected she would detect differences between humans

and deer. The cold rush dissipated, and she opened her eyes to see the deer stand on wobbly, whole legs. It flicked its white tail and sprang away into the woods. She smiled.

Meela met the huntsman's kind brown eyes, but as shyness rose within her, she dropped her gaze to his chin where a few days' worth of jet-black beard covered his golden-brown skin.

"Damn poachers," he said, his deep voice casting shivers through her middle. She nodded as her cheeks warmed.

He stood and offered his hand. She hesitated, knowing she shouldn't touch him, then placed her fingers on his palm and rose beside him. As she attempted to pull her hand away, he held it. Her heart beat so loudly in her ears that she suspected he could hear it, too.

He stepped closer. "I'm pleased to see you once again." She stiffened, and he chuckled. "You've followed me for a while now."

She caught her breath, shocked at the revelation that he had known about her all along. He took her other hand as well and moved even closer to her. Her lips tingled as she watched his chest rise with his breath. The situation had progressed well beyond anything she had expected.

"I—I shouldn't be here," she said, pulling away and stepping backward. "I can't talk to strangers in the woods."

"The woods are a big place. It's easy to get lost. Easy to be unseen."

She stared at him, wanting to stay, wishing she were anything but a witch. She had watched him at his work, caring for the forest, harvesting the king's meat, making enemies of the poachers and fighting them off. Had Meela been another kind of woman, a woman of Norin or any other nation of Gavony, she would have been in love with him, his face,

his movements, his way of walking in the world. But she was a witch, and it was as simple as that. She did not love him. It wasn't possible.

"I can't," she said, again, turning away.

"Meela."

She turned back, pivoting slowly on one foot. "How do you know my name?"

He grinned. "You're not the only one who follows strangers through the woods." He sauntered forward. "And you know my name, too."

She didn't dare to nod.

Sol closed the distance between them, their bodies touching, finally confirming the affection they had built from a distance. His warmth seeped into her clothes. He smelled of grass and sweat, and she slipped her hand to his shoulder, resting it on the furs, bewildered as to what came next.

He nudged his nose against hers. She trembled, and his hand moved to her waist, spanning the small of her back, stabilizing her against his hips. Their lips brushed—touching, then not—and she gasped at the fleeting nature, wanting more. His eyes shifted slightly as his palm swept across her cheek. She wished for him to show her how, to guide her through, and the air shimmered with her anticipation as his breath fell on her forehead. With his knuckle on her chin, he returned for the kiss, and she rose to meet him on her toes, trusting his arms and wrapping her own about his neck. Their lips met in a pure and passionate kiss lit by the gentle sunlight that filtered through the glen. As the moment faded, she leaned against his chest, listening to his heart beat as rapidly as her own.

“Nadia says the Gavony people do not have magic,” she said, reminding herself.

He chuckled as he ran his fingers through her hair. “Except for our knives, we don’t. Though I was curious what would happen if you and I did that.”

She giggled, tucking her face against his shirt.

He tipped her chin up. “It was worth the risk.” He kissed her again, once, twice. Each time, his intensity increased, and each time, her own hesitation waned. She clung to him, kissed him, moved with him, until he pulled away, lifting his hand in pause and slowing his breath, mastering himself once more.

He took her hand and guided her through the woods. They walked along the dirt paths, hand in hand, as he pointed out blooming flowers and the signs of animal life. She had seen it all a thousand times, yet everything seemed new as she walked beside him, buoyed by his sense of wonder. He seemed to notice everything, and by the time she heard the faintest sound, he had already analyzed it and responded. She had never held such a glorious bond with any other creature, so new, so fresh, and yet it seemed they had traveled the world together since the earliest moments of the First Breath.

The sound of an ax rang through the forest.

Meela started, awakened from her misguided dream.

Sol watched her, stalwart and silent.

She shook her head. “I can’t.” He reached for her, but she stepped back. “I’m not like you.”

“I don’t care.” He gestured around them. “We make our own rules.”

She tilted her head. “You know that’s not true.”

The ax echoed around them.

"This is forbidden," she said. "I cannot be with you and not expect to be crushed."

"I'll defend you," he said in a fierce tone, clenching his fist.

She smiled, even as tears welled in her eyes. "Not against cardinal witches and their power. I'm canonical. I cannot kill like they can, only heal. We have no defense against them. If I don't obey, they won't purify me, and I'll die of the ondilska building up within me." She took his face in her hands and stood on tiptoe to kiss him. He remained motionless until their lips touched, then enveloped her in his arms, crushing her to his chest. She could barely breathe and did not wish to.

She pushed away. "I must go."

"Meela," he pleaded.

She shook her head.

The ax continued, unrelenting.

"Meela!"

She ran away from the clearing, away from him, and dodged between the trees. Her breath came in gasps, and tears wet her face as she climbed a hill strewn with boulders. She had touched him outside of healing. She had dared to kiss him. His hands had explored her body, and they would find out. They would know. At her purification, the cardinals would read the resonance of Sol's presence. The deer's ondilska sat heavy within her, and the witch who purified her would feel that, too. They would kill her. She sobbed and stumbled, falling to her knees on the rocks. She covered her face with her hands and wept.

A movement caught her eye, and she turned to see a man thirty paces from her, who wore a quiver holding yellow-fledged arrows. The poacher brought a rifle to his shoulder

and aimed. She followed his line of shot, far down the hill, to where Sol had stood.

“No,” she said, her voice choked into a whisper. She stepped toward him, then ran. “No!” she yelled.

Meela swung her arm, summoning every bit, every drop, every residue of ondilska from within her. A vibration hummed deep in her core, strengthening until she pulsed with the force of it. Her hand glowed with a violet light that morphed red hot as acidic bile filled her throat and mouth. A red flare extended from her palm, entwined with violet luminescence, and a bright white flash burst from her fingers with a violent shock.

The earth shuddered. The red beam hit the poacher's chest, and the force knocked his weapon from his hands. Screams, both the poacher's and her own, filled Meela's ears. His chest darkened, and hers burned with searing pain as if scalded by steam. The pain spread from her chest to her head and along her arms and legs even as the poacher turned to dust.

The ground gave way beneath her feet. Boulders, rocks, and gravel slid down the hill with a terrible, shaking roar, and she pitched forward and fell, tumbling over and over until she hit the bottom. Stones landed, thudding around her, over her, on top of her, until they blotted the sky from her view, and sound became silence.

Meela stared into darkness. Her head hurt, and heavy boulders lay wedged around her, one leaning on her chest and preventing her from taking a full breath. Each limb remained whole, but she was pinned fast and struggled for air. She pushed against the rock, first lightly, then as hard as she could. It wouldn't budge.

A muffled voice reached her ears.

“There’s someone here!” it said. “I can’t lift it. . .I’m going for help!”

Silence returned. Time passed. White flecks appeared in her vision. She craved air, and panic formed on the edges of her consciousness.

“Together! On three!”

The boulder slowly moved, and with the release, Meela gulped for air.

A large arm appeared between the rocks, moving side to side, searching. She grasped it, hugging it to her body, and it pulled her into the daylight where she fell to the ground and lay back on the grass, sucking in the cool, sweet air.

A burly Norinian man with a graying beard towered over her, wiping his hands of dust. “Quite a tumble you took. We haven’t had an earthquake like that in 15 years!”

Sol dropped to her side. “Are you hurt?”

Meela shook her head, still breathing deeply. “Poacher,” she puffed, eyeing the ax hanging on the other man’s belt.

Sol’s brow creased. “Did you see a poacher?”

“Didn’t you?” she asked, sitting up.

“No,” Sol said, shaking his head. “The earth shook.” He motioned to the man. “Seth found you and called to me.” Sol rested his hand on her shoulder and gently squeezed before standing, a message of surreptitious affection.

“I’m glad I left Robynton when I did,” Seth said. “I was in the right place at the right time!”

Meela struggled to her feet, her eyes shifting between the two men. If Seth understood, if he saw her connection with Sol, if he figured it out, all of Gavony might know before nightfall. The potential consequences terrified her. She couldn’t stay a moment longer. She had to get away. “I must go. Now.”

Meela ignored how Sol's shoulders drooped at her words, and she disregarded the confusion on Seth's face. She walked away, her shaky steps growing stronger. She brushed the tears from her face and forced herself to look straight ahead, no matter how Sol called her or what he said. Meela's feet trod loudly, crunching leaves, snapping twigs. It didn't matter. She had to get away from him, from the consequences, from herself and her heart. If she slowed her steps, she would turn back, run to him, and break even the holiest of canonical laws.

Chapter 4

NORA

Nalta
Gantu

Nora pressed both hands to her mouth as she peeked through the curtain between the kitchen and the dining room. Marcus stood in the inn's doorway beyond, looking about, choosing from the several tables that remained empty. She held her breath and silently begged him to move to her area. He walked to the left, dodging between tables where sat richly attired men in turbans and women in silk gowns. Nora bit her lip. As he sat at a small table against the wall, she choked back a squeal.

Heart pounding, Nora grabbed a towel and wiped the sweat from her brow, patting gently so as not to blotch her olive skin. She straightened her apron and tucked her black hair behind her ears before seizing a wine glass and a bottle of Padyn red. Her blood sang in her veins.

Sweeping aside the curtain, she hurried across the dining room and arrived at his side to promptly place the glass on

the table. “Good evening, sir,” she said, offering the bottle for his approval. Marcus nodded without looking at it and opened his document portfolio.

She uncorked the bottle. “It was a warm day today,” she said, pouring his glass. She knew his order before he could ask it. It was always the same. Some would call him boring, but she preferred to think of him as predictable and trustworthy. “Shall I get you some beef stew, light on the vegetables, and two flatbread?”

He slid on his spectacles. “No, I’ll just have some beef stew—light on the vegetables—and two flatbread,” he mumbled, pulling a pencil from the loop within the portfolio. He tapped it on the table and wrote a note.

Nora giggled. “Very well, sir.”

She lingered, savoring his presence and admiring how his gray taylasan shawl covered his strong shoulders. A crystal brooch held the sides together in the middle of his chest, and the edges, lined in short gold fringe and corner tassels, had been thrown back over the arms of his formal sherwani so as not to interfere with his work. Singe marks and small scars covered his fingers, which moved in quick precision as he marked the intricate diagram before him. His noble facial features—dark-brown eyes, deep ochre skin, and an aristocratic nose—lent an authoritative air, and the overlapping folds of his turban had been creased and wrapped in perfect exactitude. Her eyes traced the golden edges, one way, then another, then back again.

He met her studying gaze with one brow lifted.

Nora started. “Oh! Will there be anything else?”

“No.”

“Yes, sir,” she said, hurrying back to the kitchen as embarrassment warmed her cheeks.

Safiyya, the inn owner, shoved a stack of linens at her. "Take these upstairs! It's almost time."

Nora peered over the top of the linens. "But I have to make Gran Messer Regá's plate."

Safiyya swung back, her white veil swirling about. "Marcus Regá?"

"Yes."

"He can wait," Safiyya said. "Dignitaries before regulars!"

"Yes, ma'am," Nora said. If she finished her task quickly, she could return to prepare Marcus's plate. She'd hurry as fast as she could. With one last yearning glance toward the dining room, Nora dashed up the stairs and into one of the private party rooms. She bowled over the footman.

"Damn it, Nora!" Ziri said, hopping on one foot and holding the other.

She cringed. "Sorry. I didn't see you."

He straightened his simple black gandoura, an angry flush tinting his olive complexion. "You come barreling in here like the inn's on fire—"

"Safiyya said to hurry," she said, setting the linens in a chair and spreading a cloth over the large table in the middle of the room. "So I am."

He squinted his brown eyes. "Is Marcus downstairs?"

Nora grabbed a stack of plates and walked around the table, placing them quickly. She ground her teeth, wishing he would stop yammering.

"Figures," he said with a snicker. "He always lights a fire in your p—"

"Don't be crass!"

He laughed and brushed his fingers through his unruly brown curls before placing several bottles of wine and liquor on the sideboard. "He's old."

“He’s not old!”

“He’s older than I am,” Ziri said. “By enough that I can see the difference.”

“He’s 28,” she said, lifting her chin haughtily as she placed forks on the table.

“And you?”

She continued placing forks. “Doesn’t matter.”

“Are you even 20 yet?”

She scowled.

“Shyan shit!” he said, dropping his hands to the sideboard and leaning forward.

“Language!”

“You’re 19?” he continued as if he hadn’t heard her.

“Almost. So what?”

“He’s old.”

“He’s not old! He’s established.” She turned her back on him as she adjusted the forks to the proper distance from the edge of the table.

He chuckled and arranged the bottles. “Old or not, he won’t ever see anything in you. Sabhirim like him never see us citizens as anything but shit—”

“Ziri!” Nora warned again, but his words rang true. Marcus was not only a sabhir—a member of the upper class—but a grand sabhir, a man at the height of society. Such men, in their golden-edged turbans and taylasans, ruled with their peers over the lesser ones around them—and everyone was lesser than the grand sabhirim. He would never notice her existence. She was nothing. Each figment of Marcus proved a mere mirage in her loneliness. “I’m not a citizen,” she blurted out, her desperate spirit compelling her to spit reckless words. “I’m a slave.”

Ziri swung around, his brow creased. “A slave?”

She nodded.

He shook his head and faced away once more. "I never would have guessed." He shrugged. "You really don't have a fucking chance with Regá then."

Nora wrinkled her nose at his back, wishing she were a citizen like him. As a citizen, she could start a business someday and take the white veil allotted to female business owners which would allow her extra privileges in town, such as permission to enter certain areas of the wharf and the ability to walk about without nosy questions from the mean-looking guards. With a white veil, she would be grown-up and respectable. She would be noticeable. He would finally see her. And love her. But she didn't have a chance of saving enough money to even purchase her own freedom, let alone enough for a business.

"Who's your owner? Safiyya?" Ziri asked, busy with the bottles.

She nodded.

"At least Safiyya's the decent sort," he said.

"She's kind."

"You lucked out."

Nora puffed through her nose.

He glanced over his shoulder at her. "Forget this foolishness with Marcus and focus on your work. Stay on her good side so she won't send you to the camp."

She pressed her lips together. He wasted his breath. She knew Safiyya could send her to the Tuli camp at any moment. She never lived a minute without the icy fear of Tuli banishment creeping up her neck. She had heard the screams, the screeching shrieks of banished slaves, as the sabhirim burned their cheeks with a cattle brand before sending them to the camp in the mountains.

Nora rubbed her face, reassuring herself that her skin remained smooth and clear, free of scars and untouched by the Tuli iron. “Don’t tell anyone,” she said, suddenly fearful she had revealed too much to him. “Don’t tell anyone I’m a slave.”

He met her eyes, his expression serious. “I won’t. I promise.”

“And don’t tell anyone about Marcus.”

“There’s nothing to tell,” he said, turning away.

A sudden pang of anxiety rippled through her. Rumors were dangerous for both Marcus and herself. Sabhirim were forbidden by law from having relationships with slaves, though many did in secret, with or without the slave’s consent. If they were caught together by the wrong person, Marcus would be fined, and she would be beaten.

Even so, Nora imagined being caught with him, his arms around her, his lips on hers. The looks of surprise and then anger on the faces of those who saw them. But their indignation didn’t matter. Consequences didn’t matter. She would endure any level of discomfort if Marcus would only speak her name. If he would only call for her, she would run to him, and he would drape the orange veil over her head, marry her, and love her forever. They would live in a small cottage in the countryside near his glassworks and raise shaggy cows with large mournful eyes and fuzzy noses.

Lifting a handful of spoons, Nora walked around the table again, placing one at each spot. She glanced at him sideways. “There’s more than one way to get a veil.”

“As his kvina?”

She straightened a spoon. “If I can’t take the white veil for myself, maybe he’ll grant me a blue one. He can give it

to anyone. That's the law." She smiled. "And then I would have beautiful dresses to wear and parties to go to."

"And be his whore."

She faced him. "A kvina is a fine lady!"

He shrugged. "Still whores. They're just exclusive to one sabhir instead of anyone with money."

"How can they be the same if kvinas don't get paid? And. . ." She scrambled for words. "And Safiyya's women don't wear veils or go to parties! Prostitutes aren't kvinas, and kvinas aren't prostitutes."

He laughed. "Of course, Safiyya's girls go to parties. We both served at one last night."

Nora remembered the sweat and the smoke and the horrible grunting. The nausea that had churned her stomach as she had listened to the rhythmic slap of skin on skin. She had served the food and fled as soon as she was able. "Prostitutes don't go to nice parties with tea cakes and waltzing," she muttered. "And kvinas wouldn't go to parties like. . .that."

"For a woman who works at a brothel, you don't know much about whores or kvinas."

"I know plenty."

He smirked and leaned on the sideboard. "Kvinas may not get paid in wages, but they do in living expenses, and they can be cast off as easily as a whore. Remember—oh, what was her name?" He snapped his fingers twice near his temple. "The woman with the green cape. From the estate near the desert."

Nora remembered. It had been the day after a rare rain, and she had rushed through her work to walk in the fields and see the flowers that had bloomed in response. She had

heard the screaming even before she had returned within the town limits.

She stared at the floor.

He stepped closer. "Being a kvina isn't what you think it is. It's rarely a position of love."

His pedantic tone provoked her. She clenched both of her fists. "You're just saying all that because you aren't capable of love!" He flinched, and she instantly regretted her words. He had revealed that in confidence. She looked away, ashamed to have hurt her friend. "Sorry."

He shrugged, his expression hard. "Look, there's no way in hell any of the Regás will grant a slave a veil—blue or orange. They own the whole fucking country."

She frowned. "They own a lot, but it's not as much as that."

"You don't bind yourself to a slave when your father's a senator. Look at his brother! Lor's wife and kvina are gorgeous, accomplished women—practically princesses! And other beautiful, rich, educated women are vying for Marcus's veils. Any woman between here and the Ruvoq desert would beg for one. He'd never choose you."

"He might."

"You're deluding yourself."

Nora tugged at the edge of a napkin and pouted.

Ziri sighed and sat down, swinging his foot and kicking the edge of the carpet. "We're all deluding ourselves, really. Sabhirim only care about themselves. If we're going to see any changes for the better, we'll have to make them through our own power." She heard the edge in his voice, his deep frustration and anger.

Nora finished the table and was now ready for another task, always another one, ready to serve again and again. It

was her place, this servitude, these dry, red knuckles. She had nothing to offer Marcus but shame.

She nodded farewell to Ziri and returned to the kitchen, her melancholy fading as she anticipated serving Marcus again. With a secretive and giddy smile, she consoled herself by preparing Marcus's plate, arranging the food precisely so. It pleased her to care for him.

Safiyya flicked her white veil over her shoulder. "That for Regá?"

"Yes," Nora said, happily scooping stew onto an already heaping mound.

"I just served him. Go to the front entrance and prepare to open it for the dignitaries. I need to dress the table."

Nora wilted. The plate tipped to the counter, and she put it down before she dropped it. Marcus was eating food someone else's hands had prepared, and if she were waiting at the front door, she couldn't even standby to refill his glass. But Safiyya's word was law. Backtalk and arguments had bad ends.

"Yes, ma'am," Nora said, slowly turning around and shuffling toward the inn's formal entrance. She looked back. "Will you be putting out the crystal?"

"Of course," Safiyya said. "Go on! And clean yourself up."

Infused with new energy, Nora rushed to the foyer, her sandals tapping on the bright mosaic floor. The curving grand staircase rose upward, wide enough to accommodate several people across. Each stair riser continued the mosaic pattern of blue stars and green diamonds, and the sweeping banister lines drew her eyes upward to a high archway flanked with potted palms, trailing vines, and large windows that caught the breeze. A shining candelabra hung at

the ceiling, and the fixtures gleamed, having been freshly polished by herself that morning.

Nora removed her dirty apron and brushed her thin pink gandoura. She opened the small pantry near the front door and took out a clean apron which she tied into place. Loosing her long hair from her plait, she brushed it as well as she could with her fingers, then rebraided and tied the end. She closed the closet and stood ready by the door's sidelight to wait for the dignitaries.

The lord mayor of Nalta and his kvina would be there. A Norinian was expected as well, and curiosity rose within her. Norinians were primitive, harsh people. They were brash and rude and carried vicious-looking knives. They didn't have any slaves. They were probably too poor to purchase and care for them. Nora was a slave, but at least she wasn't Norinian.

A carriage rolled in front of the inn, and Nora wiped her hands on her apron, ready to receive the dignitaries. Safiyya joined her on the porch. She had changed into an intricately embellished, plum-colored silk gown with a narrow, boned bodice and full skirt. Those with money and style always wore the latest in fashion from the southern seas. Her hair twisted around her head, and white lace draped down her back from a tiara of gold wire. So beautiful. Nora tried to stand precisely the same way she did.

Ziri stepped onto the porch and walked down the stairs to the street in order to lower the carriage's steps.

The carriage door opened, and the mayor appeared in a tailored charcoal suit with a high cravat. Even with a foreign suit, he still wore his taylasan and a matching turban, these dark blue with the gold trim prescribed for the grand

sabhirim. His belly rounded the front of his jacket, and the buttons threatened to burst.

“Welcome, Lord Mayor!” Safiyya called. The mayor smiled vacantly as he offered his hand to the next occupant.

A stout, middle-aged woman in a teal silk gown carefully maneuvered down the tiny carriage stairs. Nora’s eyes widened at the sight of the Norinian. The woman had piled her gray hair onto her head in curls and rolls. She didn’t wear a veil of any kind and was bareheaded like a common citizen or slave. Her clear skin shone as white as the sand lilies in her corsage. The woman walked with elegance, yet around her waist, she wore a leather belt that held a horrible knife. Nora struggled with the contrast between the woman’s gentility and her potential for violence, but at least this woman seemed like the sort who would wipe her feet on the mat.

“Welcome to the Nalta Inn, Ambassador.” Safiyya said. “Come this way. I’ve prepared a light supper to refresh you after your long journey.”

“Thank you,” the ambassador said and followed Safiyya upstairs.

Nora curtsied as the ambassador passed.

The final occupant stepped from the carriage, holding Ziri’s steadying hand. The lord mayor’s kvina smiled mildly and straightened the fiery ruby tiara and baby-blue veil that extended nearly to the hem of her soft-yellow silk gown. A ruby necklace graced her slender neck and stacks of bangles jingled on her wrists. Tinted powders highlighted her eyes and enhanced the blush of her cheeks. This was a woman who bathed in scented waters, combed her hair with oil, and found herself honored in any house she entered. Even Safiyya paled in comparison to this exquisite creature.

Nora sighed at the sophistication as the kvina passed by, then trudged up the stairs behind her, slogging through fatigue and wishing for the day to end. When all was finished, she would fling off her apron and run to the yard behind the inn where citizens and slaves would gather for the evening's food and music. Someone would play a flute, casting melody into the night. Someone would play a mizwid, squeezing the pipes for dancing. Someone would play a rebab, bowing along with the songs they would sing. And maybe they would sing the love songs that accompanied her dreams of Marcus.

"What a beautiful table!" the ambassador exclaimed. "The gourds remind me of our festival of Harvestide."

Nora peeked around the woman. Flowers and ribbons adorned each plate. At every setting, positioned around the teacups, sat five crystal glasses of varying sizes to suit their purposes. The glasses captured the light from the many beeswax candles and sparkled with every flicker, filling the room with twinkling splendor. The crystal bore the unmistakable marks of Marcus Regá's hand. No other glasswright could have created such gleaming elegance. She gasped as her heart fluttered. Ziri had told her how glass was made, and she imagined Marcus at the forge, twirling the pipe. She imagined him at the wheel, cutting facets, materializing shimmering designs that had once lived only within his mind.

"And the crystal!" the ambassador said. "Gorgeous!"

"Do you like it?" the lord mayor asked.

"Like it? It's the most elegant display of Gantish artistry I have ever seen!"

Nora liked the ambassador's taste. Perhaps the Norinians were not so primitive after all.

The mayor tapped the tips of his fingers together. “Indeed! Crystal from the House Regá. Since you are quite taken with it, I am happy to give you—as a token of our goodwill—Gantu’s, that is—twenty place settings of crystal glassware—two for each of your ten provincial kings—”

“—and queens,” the ambassador added.

“—and queens—and ten lead crystal serving bowls—and a glorious pitcher for the high king himself—all for our neighbors in Norin.”

“How generous!” the ambassador said.

The mayor beamed. “It is my pleasure!”

The dignitaries congratulated each other on the finery a few minutes longer before sitting for their meal. Nora stood silently against the wall, waiting to serve and noticing many details, including the moment when the Norinian ambassador slipped a note into Ziri’s hand.

Chapter 5

CADOC

Tadsyn
Safwyn Province
Norin

Cadoc climbed from the shore boat to the Tadsyn pier and offered a parting handshake to the woman at the oars. After a few wobbling steps to reorient himself to a stationary surface, he strode along the boardwalk, carrying his bag of personal belongings and a hard case that held the critical documents of the voyage. His way cleared as citizen and sailor alike stepped back in deference. Three young sailors, their uniforms clean, their tarpaulin hats as yet unmarred, saluted energetically. Cadoc addressed them in kind and walked on as though he had not seen their widening smiles, as if it did not please him to see the youth of Tadsyn discovering the sea as he once had.

The wharf crawled with sweaty longshorewomen and men shouting orders, loading and unloading cargo, some employing cranes to lift massive wooden crates, and others

using only straining muscles to carry the remaining boxes and bundles up and down gangplanks. Around him, schooners, sloops, and yawls bustled through the water, one occasionally catching his attention and leading his eye to its flags. Tugs and shore boats met the larger cutters and piloted them into place. As he maneuvered around broken crab traps and mountains of piled netting, the odors of salt, fish, and unwashed bodies filled his every breath. Each clump of his boots warmed his chest with nostalgia. It was good to be home.

An ancient man with white hair and sagging black skin leaned against a weathered shanty. His gnarled fingers propped a pipe on his sagging lower lip as he warmed himself in the late summer sun. His clothes marked him as a sailor whose days at sea were long past, and Cadoc exchanged a solemn nod of mutual respect.

Continuing along the riverfront streets, Cadoc passed shops and stalls overflowing with imported treasures from across Gavony and the southern seas. A sense of satisfaction rose within him—every item had been delivered by the Andersyn Shipping Company. Shopkeepers hawked their wares and motioned customers closer. Norinians in a rainbow of tunics and flowing hangeroks jostled from doorway to doorway. They complained about quality and argued over pricing, only to turn away with their newly-bought goods and brag about the deals they had snagged. Cadoc's gait remained steady even as he touched his peaked officer's cap at the occasional familiar face. He winked at a young fishwife with her basket. She giggled and smiled broadly, revealing her few teeth.

A group of children ran alongside him, shouting and jumping and begging for coins or candy, pulling at the

sleeves of his crisp black jacket. Dust covered their bare feet and smudged their ragged clothes and faces. He tossed a coin to each.

“Buy a posy?” the tallest girl asked, holding out a bundle of puffy red flowers.

He smiled. “How’d you guess that’s exactly what I need? I’ll take them all.”

“All, sir?” she asked, her large brown eyes somehow growing larger.

“All.”

“Yes, sir!” She scooped the posies from her basket and tied them into one bundle. “They’s the last of the burnets, sir. Picked them ourselves, we did. Just this morning. They ain’t been sittin’ ‘round to wilt.”

He added an extra coin to her hand. “For the freshness.”

With squeals and yells, the children ran along the street and turned as one body down an alley.

Cadoc, too, turned a corner. Above him, three buildings down, a blonde woman leaned on a rickety balcony, smoking a cigarette. Her lithe body bent at the waist, and she propped her elbows on the rail, where one hand draped the other in casual indifference. She wore only a hangerok, with no serk underneath, and displayed her leg and thigh with curves dipping into shadows. The fringe of her shawl danced as the sea breeze blew between the houses. She met his eyes as he approached and allowed the shawl to fall from one bare shoulder. He traced her body with a considering gaze but found within himself more fatigue than desire. He walked past without a break in his stride, ducking through an alleyway toward an area of wattle-and-daub houses, their high gables covered with thatched roofs.

He passed a woman in a water-splotched hangerok, her serk rolled up to her elbows. She was hanging wet clothes on a line strung between two houses, each item progressively smaller, and as she wiped the sweat from her brow, her baby peered silently from the wrap that held it tightly on its mother's back. The woman paid him no attention—a sea captain was common enough—and he did not disturb her.

Cadoc emerged to another street, stepping into the shadow of a five-story building, the tallest in all of Gavony. The headquarters of the Andersyn Shipping Company dominated the skyline as it had for five generations. While other Norinians were amazed by the structure, and some traveled from far around to see it, he barely took notice. The place of his childhood now formed only the quiet background of his thoughts.

He opened the heavy front door, careful to avoid sullyng his black uniform on the wood polish. An observant sailor issued a sharp call for attention which was followed by a scramble of those inside. Cadoc absentmindedly nodded to his staff as he crossed the grand lobby. A sparkling Gantish crystal chandelier hung from the ceiling, and diverse artifacts from the southern seas were on display to impress potential clients.

After climbing the stairs to the fourth floor, Cadoc opened the door to the Andersyn living quarters and set down his bags. Tension rolled from his body as he smelled the familiar scents of clean linens, violet water, and lemon oil. His gaze stretched across the room, past the paneled walls, oil paintings, and brass lamps, past the stylishly upholstered furniture, satin cushions, and exotic rugs. On the

far side of the room, his eyes drank in the comforting sight of a middle-aged woman with intelligent eyes and gray hair. Her mauve silk gown swished as she stood from her place on the settee and held her hands toward him. "Cadoc."

"Mother," he said, taking her small alabaster hands in his large brown ones and bowing over them to kiss each one.

Her eyes softened, yet held a hint of sadness. "Do you know what it does to a mother's heart to see her son's ship return to harbor without him?"

Guilt panged his stomach. "I can never apologize enough for adding even one worry to your burdens," he said. "But look!" He crossed to the window and threw back the brocade curtains. The window revealed the entire harbor where *Darsham* reigned in majesty. "She needed extensive repairs, and I wished to oversee them myself."

"She is magnificent," his mother said, and he heard the depth of her approval.

He smiled, feeling more pride in that moment than he had the entire journey. "I pushed her to 15 knots. There is none faster in the northern seas."

"And few in the south," she said. "Your father was a sensible man and preferred his ships with high capacity, but," her eyes sparkled with memories, "he did love a speedy one."

Cadoc nodded. "*Darsham* has plenty of cargo space. I can more than double our southern imports."

They watched the harbor a moment longer before he retrieved the bundle of flowers and held them out to her. "For you, Mother."

She gathered them into her arms. "Wildflowers. Quite pretty."

"Picked this morning. The last of the burnets, I hear."

“Indeed,” she said, laying them on an end table next to a vase of white flowers, for later arranging. “Summer is fading. Harvestide will be upon us soon.”

He crossed to the sideboard and poured himself a brandy. “Are you comfortable? Do you have everything you need?”

“My every wish materializes,” she said, sitting primly in an armchair near him. “I’m planning our autumn banquet, the food and settings.”

He chuckled. “King Safwyn’s own table settings fall short of yours.”

“I care little of Safwyn,” she said with a dismissive wave of her fingers, “though I would welcome news from Queen Gara of Elidel.”

The weight and implications of her words were not lost on him. “I haven’t seen her.” He hesitated. “Don’t set your heart on a match with Gara,” he said, gently. “I may not have time to sail to Jarta this autumn at all.”

She smiled. “Only a single day’s journey around the cape.”

“Another to return,” he reminded her.

“Perhaps during the winter,” she said in a wistful tone. “We can visit my family, and you can see her—”

“Perhaps,” he said, interrupting her dreams before they got out of hand. “Perhaps I will visit while my crew completes further repairs on *Darsham*. Focus on your banquet, Mother. It’s high time you made everyone jealous once again.”

“If those around us are jealous,” she said, her head high, “it is because of the fine work my son has done in building this company.”

“I was given the tools,” he said, kissing her cheek. “Enjoy your party planning. Spend whatever you like—I have *Darsham* now.”

“Where are you off to?”

“I must meet with Thackery on business matters.”

Cadoc took leave of his mother and returned to the stairs, climbing to the fifth floor. A vast boardroom opened before him, monopolized by a large, glossy wooden table encircled with upholstered chairs. A large bank of southern-facing windows filled the room with natural light and allowed an unobstructed view of the harbor, the wharf, and the town of Tadsyn as it perched on the steep foothills of the Paldyn Mountains. The brass fixtures gleamed, and the walls, constructed of shiplap, shone with walnut oil. Pigeonholes lined the walls, filled with rolled maps and papers. Small blocky model ships perched on a shelf, ready for plotting and planning.

As he waited for his executive officer, he counted the boats, a habit from his boyhood. All of them displayed the Norinian ensign with its blue field, the color of flax flowers, and the curved line of seven white stars. Over three-quarters of the ships flew a second flag on the mainmast, a golden “A” on a black field, the flag of the Andersyn Shipping Company.

A man wearing Andersyn blacks entered the room. His sharp movements and formal bearing complemented his closely trimmed hair and beard, and his tight gray curls offset his ebony face.

Cadoc nodded. “Thackery.”

“She’s incredible,” Thackery said.

Cadoc’s gaze fell once more on *Darsham*. “A game changer.” He glanced back. “I lost four sailors. I want their families provided for.”

“It’s been arranged, sir.”

“And Layton?”

Thackery lifted his eyes to the ceiling in a long-suffering gaze. “She and I have clashed over *Basilisk’s* repairs ever since she returned in command. A month, sir.” He nodded, emphasizing the time. “I’ve endured a month with her.”

Cadoc smirked. “It will take her some time to find her legs,” he said, sitting at the table. “She’s only captained smaller ships with smaller crews and lesser stakes. She’ll find her way. The sailors follow her—I care more about that.”

Thackery sat, too, leaving an empty chair between them. “She has an attitude problem.”

“So do I.”

Thackery smiled. “Touché, sir. But perhaps she needs a reminder of the hierarchy between a captain and the director of the whole damn company?”

Cadoc hummed and nodded. “I’ll speak to her.” He chuckled. “That is, if I can drag her away from the whores and sober her up.”

Thackery leaned forward. “We have bigger problems.”

Cadoc lifted his brow, surprised by the vigor of Thackery’s tone. The man had served his father and his grandfather, perhaps even his great grandfather—he seemed old enough—and little shook him, especially in the luxurious comfort of the boardroom.

Thackery stabbed his index finger on the table. “King Safwyn has doubled the tariff on valsydian imports.”

Cadoc sat back, struck by Thackery’s words. “Doubled?”

“Yes, doubled,” Thackery said, his left eyelid spasming as it did in times of stress.

Cadoc’s thoughts reeled from one line of numbers to another as anger warmed his gut. “The market can’t support

a price increase that high. That destroys our profit margin, and we may not break even.”

“I agree, sir.”

“Is he aware that without profit, I’ll be forced to stop shipping valsydian altogether?” Cadoc said, his voice rising in intensity. “That would disrupt the entire valsydian cycle, and the witches won’t be able to heal anyone! Who gave him this fucking idea?”

Thackery lifted his shoulders. “I’m not certain. It was a sudden move, and we only received word of it this week—but it seems to be the influence of the Council of Norin.”

Cadoc creased his brow. “The ones who blew up the wharf on Lake Iona? Why the hell would they care so much about trade negotiations? Do we even know who’s in the Council of Norin?”

“Not yet, sir. Our spies are still working on it. They have leads but no answers.”

“Fuck,” Cadoc said, disappointed in the eyes and ears he had charged with gleaning information. “What are our options?”

“Few, sir. We can attempt to lobby for a change in the tariffs. We can protest. We can approach it from the legalities of the matter. Safwyn’s move may violate the Valsydian Conventions—”

Cadoc barked a mirthless laugh. “The Valsydian Conventions. ‘For the good of all!’” he quoted. “Psh! No one gives a shit about the Conventions when it comes to their own pockets.”

Thackery wrinkled his lips to the side. “We can strike. Stop shipping valsydian—”

“Knock off the trade commissioner.”

“Always fun, sir,” Thackery said, “but there are about 40 other people we’d need to kill as well, including King Safwyn.”

Cadoc tipped his chair back on two legs and groaned. “This is why I hate land.”

“There is one radical option—”

“Smuggle it.”

Thackery smiled and nodded his head in concession. “All right, sir, there are two radical options. But I’ll remind you that Norin has inventory records going back decades listing how much valsydian we typically ship. Any sharp deviation in our reports will be highly suspicious of smuggling.”

Cadoc dropped the chair legs to the floor. “What is the other option?”

“Safwyn’s rates only apply to this port.”

Cadoc shrugged. “Robynton is the only other port deep enough to accommodate both *Darsham* and *Basilisk*, and it’s barely sufficient to receive valsydian.” He puffed through his nose. “Robynton struggles with row boats.”

“Even so, they can receive it, sir. If we dissolve our holdings here and recharter in Robynton, we would only be responsible for tariffs levied by King Wyclythe—we’d avoid Safwyn altogether. These are not the high king’s tariffs. We can move to a more favorable port.”

Cadoc shook his head. “We’ve been in Tadsyn for five generations. My forefathers would revive and throttle me if we moved.”

“I understand, sir, but we wouldn’t actually leave. Except for valsydian, shipping routes would remain the same. The only major change would be on paper. The Robynton branch would become the main office, and the building here, a branch.”

Cadoc chewed the inside of his cheek. "And nothing would disrupt my mother?"

"She would never even notice, let alone be disturbed."

"What are the risks?" Cadoc asked. "What could go wrong?"

"Few that I see."

"But you do see some."

"Seth Dasveld lives in Robynton, sir."

Cadoc squinted, thinking of the name. "The furniture maker? That idiot who preaches Norinian liberty or some such nonsense?"

"He's branched out from that."

"What do you mean?"

"He's arranged for his adopted son of sorts to be made the chancellor of Wyclythe."

Cadoc stood and walked to the window. "But doesn't Seth already have a son?"

"He does. Erling."

Leaning on the frame, Cadoc looked out over the water. "Why not give his own son that power?"

"I don't know," Thackery said. "Erling is Wyclythe's quartermaster. Perhaps he doesn't show an aptitude for politics."

Cadoc shrugged. "Perhaps."

Thackery lifted his finger. "And he may have a daughter for that."

"Oh?" Cadoc said, glancing back at Thackery.

"She serves as the chancellor's attaché," he said.

"So Seth Dasveld is making vicarious power grabs, possibly through his daughter, but definitely through this other man, this. . ." Cadoc waved his fingers searching for the name.

“Trinan Walyss.”

Cadoc grunted. “Is Seth not traveling the country with his holy message of freedom anymore?”

“He still opposes the Hykosi occupation of Norin.”

Cadoc cast his hands wide. “What occupation? These idiots need to stop losing their fucking minds over a few Hykosi skirmishes. It’s not like they collect tribute.” He paused. “Aside from that allowed by the Conventions. But no more.”

“Of course.”

“I mean, the Hykosi don’t interfere in running the country. They just strut around because they know if we so much as flinch, Gantu will fuck us over. The occupation is a myth—the potential Hykosi-Gantish alliance—that’s the real problem.”

“A fair assessment, sir.” Thackery leaned back again. “Ah, well, Seth will always think differently from the rest of us. He survived the Removal.”

Both men turned their heads and spat.

“May it never happen again,” Thackery said.

“It won’t,” Cadoc said, suddenly irritable. “I have enough ships out there to make damn well certain.” His voyage weighed on him. His eyes burned, and he craved sleep. In such a state, thoughts of the Removal’s horror and carnage was enough to depress his mood. He huffed. “It’s disgusting how it still echoes through the world. I was only a kid—a first-year cadet—when it happened—I wasn’t even there—and I still see the effects.”

Thackery stared at the table, his eyes blank as though deep in his own memories. “They were cowards, sir.”

Cadoc nodded. “But they had the balls to attack 20 years ago. Now they just prance around the countryside in their

sissy scarlet sashes, playing war games that jerk them off enough to pacify themselves.”

“The Hykosi aren’t weak, sir. Underestimating them would be dangerous—your grip on the seaboard is the only thing preventing the full alliance. Without Tadsyn, they can’t connect the final link with Gantu’s army. But they have plenty of able sailors who are well trained on Lake Iona, and if they had access to the sea. . .” He shook his head. “I shudder to think.”

Cadoc stretched as fatigue rolled over him. He rubbed his face, then blinked rapidly, wanting to yawn. “I don’t underestimate them, but I still think today’s Hykosi army is a far cry from that of their fathers. Of course, if Seth Dasveld would leave fucking well enough alone, we’d all be the better for it.”

Thackery nodded. “You see my concern with Robynton.”

Cadoc shrugged. Brigands were problems. Slavers were problems. A raving lunatic was not a problem. “Seth’s a misguided moron. So what? Why should that bother me? I mean, other than the risk he poses to all of us, should he tip Norin into war.”

“He’s a large client, sir. It would not be wise to upset him.”

Cadoc laughed. “I ship his damn black market lumber without any trouble. Smuggling always builds leverage. Dasveld won’t bother me, nor I him. He may have his noble principles, but he also cares how many mynt are in his pocket.”

“Fair point, sir.”

Cadoc yawned, reaching the end of his patience. “What are the chances of changing Safwyn’s mind about the tariffs?”

Thackery shook his head. "My sources are not encouraging."

"Then we don't have a choice. We must move our headquarters to Robynton."

"Very well, sir."

Cadoc walked to the door, anticipating the cool smoothness of his pillow. "When can you have this accomplished?"

"By Harvestide, sir," said Thackery.

Cadoc nodded. "Then I will welcome fall with a new home port."

Chapter 6

BRYNNA

Wyclythe Fortress
Wyclythe Province
Norin

The herald pounded his staff twice. “His Excellency, the Lord Chancellor, Keeper of King Wyclythe’s Seal, Tri-nan Dalby Walyss!” His voice reverberated through the throne room, bouncing off the high vaulted ceiling and the soaring wooden beams. “And the Honorable Brynna Ædmair Dasveld!”

Brynna’s heart jumped into her throat, and her nerves thrummed at this, her formal commissioning. Her two months’ work as the chancellor’s attaché, even with brief moments in the king’s presence, had not prepared her for such a grand ceremony.

The king’s musicians, dressed in emerald-green hangeroks or tunics and trousers, faced the wall and lifted to their lips the lur horns, large, curving instruments of hazelnut wood.

The bold, blood-stirring blasts drew the spectators to their feet. The drums joined, dictating the pulse of the room.

Trinan strode down the flower-strewn aisle a half step ahead of her, his head held high, his jaw clenched, his movements robust and authoritative. She pushed away her own anxiety and matched his motions with her shoulders back and her brow clear, her blue linen hangerok rustling with each firm step. Side by side, they made a formidable couple and swept through the room, past row after row of staff members and community leaders. She read the effect of their powerful display in the impressed expressions that flashed through her peripheral vision.

King Wyclythe stood before his heavy teak throne. His spare figure stooped with age, and his midnight-blue tunic gaped at his neck. His white hair edged his jeweled crown, and his hands displayed an essential tremor. As they approached, he shuffled to the edge of the dais and took one step down at a time, his hand and waist supported by his secretary, a tall man, himself past 60.

The musicians rotated toward the audience, the music crescendoing with the new angle. Trinan and Brynna arrived before the king as the music soared around them. She closed her eyes and imagined the sound swirling around her, lifting her upwards, and floating with her through the air until it faded and set her gently onto her slippered feet.

All was quiet.

Someone coughed.

King Wyclythe smiled out at the room. His wrinkled lids gently hooded his eyes, and his head bobbed ever so slightly. "Please find what comfort you can," he said in his faint voice. The rumble of shifting bodies being seated

followed, but Brynna didn't dare turn to watch. Her every movement would be analyzed by the many eyes behind her and stored for later conversations. She wished to provide as little fodder for gossip as possible.

The king extended his hand. "Trinan."

Trinan bowed and kissed the signet. "My actions for your majesty."

Brynna curtsied deeply, remaining low until the king's hand rested on her head.

"Brynna," he said. "You may rise."

Trinan offered his hand to her, palm down just as the king's had been. She placed her own lightly atop his as she stood.

King Wyclythe furrowed his brow and scrutinized her face. "My dear, have we met before?"

Brynna blinked. "No, Your Majesty, not that I'm aware of."

"I have seen such a face before."

"Your Majesty," Trinan said, "Her brother, Erling, is your quartermaster. Perhaps it is him you have seen?"

"Ah," the king said with understanding. "Indeed! Are they twins?"

"No, Your Majesty," Trinan said. "But it is said they are cut from the same cloth."

The king chuckled and leaned toward Brynna. "Yours is the more delightful pattern."

Brynna ducked her head. "Thank you, Your Majesty."

"I am quite pleased with my quartermaster," he said with a twinkle in his eye. "Can you shoot as well as Erling can?"

Trinan cleared his throat. "Brynnalyn is an account—"

"Better, Your Majesty," she said in a steady tone.

The king nodded. "That will be helpful for holding Walyss, here, in check."

Brynna giggled, then saw Trinan's face. His lips had hardened into a frown. She dropped her gaze to the floor. "I— I'm sure that will hardly be necessary, Your Majesty."

The king's belly jumped with silent laughter. He sighed with mirth. "I'm glad you have joined our staff, Brynna." He raised his right arm, his sleeve falling back.

The incense bearer struck a flint, releasing a shower of sparks, and a lilac-colored plume lifted from the brazier. He swung the chain, spreading the scents of juniper, fir, and thyme, and King Wyclythe slowly nodded his head in approval.

Brynna looked up at Trinan and caught his sidelong glance back at her. The moment had come, and the slight upward curve of his lips brought a smile to her own.

King Wyclythe lifted his other arm, now holding both hands high. "My blessing is upon you as you confront the many challenges we face in the province of my name and the country of Norin and, indeed, all of Gavony. May you embody the Seven Words and display in every deed the essences of truth, stewardship, equality, community, integrity, simplicity," he paused and smiled, "and peace."

Trinan placed his fist on his chest, and Brynna, following his cue, bowed her head and curtsied once more. "Our actions for your majesty," he said.

As Brynna rose, King Wyclythe offered his palm, a simple, genteel gesture, yet one that broke decorum and startled her with its unexpectedness. She smiled, delighted, and accepted, placing her fingers on his. He kissed her hand, then squeezed it as he nodded his approval. Brynna's heart warmed. In that moment, the king had revealed a sweet fondness that endeared him to her even more. She read his

message clearly: rituals and rules could be bent for the sake of kindness.

Trinan's hand pressed insistently against the small of her back and turned her toward the room with him. They faced the crowd, and the people stood, bursting into resounding applause.

Brynna smiled, even as her stomach quaked and her palms turned clammy. She looked out over the cheering crowd and their mixture of suits, gowns, and colorful folk wear. So many people. So many eyes. Most of those who stood before her were the descendants of the old Norinian families, just as the Dasvelds and Walyssees were, many of whom owned large tracts within the province. She recognized most of the faces, especially those in the timber business. Richer skin tones indicated whole or partial ancestry from the varied lands in the southern seas, and the majority numbers of such people in the audience attested to the strength of Norin's shipping industry for the last century and a half.

The lurs trumpeted, and the drums burst forth. Trinan strode back up central. Unfazed, unfaltering, his rugged shoulders ready to bear the province's burdens, he walked as though thunder discharged from his steps. She moved in his wake, unsure whether she propelled herself or was drawn by the current of his tread.

The doors closed behind them, and the sound of their latching echoed through the wide, bare corridor.

Brynna released her breath, thankful the ordeal had ended.

Trinan swung around. "Must you embarrass me in front of the king?"

"I had no idea he would say that," she said.

“You went along with him. You interrupted me.”

“I . . .” She recognized the fault in her behavior and dropped her gaze. “I’m sorry.”

He huffed and pressed his lips together. “What’s done is done.”

The grand atmosphere warped into discomfort. Her skin weighed her down, and she clasped her hands together as though her past words could be obliterated through her current restraint. She swallowed through her tightened throat and looked up at him.

His eyes softened. “Come here,” he said, pulling her into his embrace. He kissed her forehead. “Forget it ever happened.”

She nodded, resting her face on his jacket.

The trumpets ceased. A cacophony of voices rose, and the doors swung open, the first of the audience exiting the hall. Brynna pulled away from Trinan, and they stood together, receiving all who passed, shaking hands and offering nods and smiles and compliments. People hailed one another and chatted. They passed in a dazzling array of silk and lace, cravats and embroidered tunics. Faces interchanged, and names jumbled and mixed in ways she knew she would never remember later. She and Trinan continued to mingle, smile, and nod.

The wife of a lumber exporter clasped Brynna’s hand. “Whatever shall your father do without you?”

“There are other ways to help him,” Brynna said. “Stronger ties between the port and the fortress will benefit everyone.”

Trinan caught Brynna’s elbow and turned her toward a beautiful, young brunette. “Brynnalyn, this is Clara. I’ve decided she will be your assistant.”

Brynna smiled, surprised and pleased, and she held out her hand to shake. Important people had assistants. That she now had one made her feel accomplished. “A pleasure to meet you,” Brynna said with excitement as they clasped hands. “What experience do you have?” she asked, because the young woman didn’t appear old enough to have had much prior training.

Clara mirrored Brynna’s exuberance with an eager smile. “I’ve been a page for a few months.”

“She reads well and learns quickly,” Trinan said. “She’ll be very useful to have around, especially as we prepare to travel to Lonara for Harvestide.”

“I’m looking forward to working with you,” Brynna said. The crowd shifted, forcing Clara to step back and allow others to approach.

Trinan turned to the next person. “Welcome, Brody,” he said, shaking the harbormaster’s hand. “You’ve met my attaché, Brynnalyn Dasveld?”

Brody wiggled his bushy mustache. His shabby suit swallowed his thin body and cast a slight smell of fish about him. “Thank you, my lord,” he said, smiling. “And of course, I have.” He took Brynna’s hand, his tawny skin thick as leather and his palm hard with calluses. “A pleasure to see you again, Brynna. Last time we met, if I recall, you had knocked over a large stack of my crab traps.”

Brynna laughed. “At least they were empty. And once more, I thank you for your patience as I dragged myself out of that mess.”

“Childhood memories?” Trinan asked with a smile.

Brody lifted his caterpillar brows. “Last month.”

Trinan’s smile vanished. He cleared his throat. “Now, Brody,” he said, crossing his arms. “I want to strengthen the

province's economic position in Norin. Our primary industry is the port, so I want to hear some ways we can improve the harbor and increase revenue."

Brody dropped his gaze to the floor, then stared across the corridor to the fortress entryway. His mouth and lips moved as though he were checking for stray bits of food between his teeth. He dragged his fingers through his mustache, then rubbed them together, depositing flakey residue on the floor. "Fine desire, my lord," he said, sniffing through a dry nose. "Fine desire. But with all due respect, you aren't the first chancellor we've ever had, and all the rest had the same goals. 'Course we've got a few things we can cobble together and fix up, but I'll tell you like I told all of them before you—Robynton will always struggle to eke out a living, and that's the truth."

"Nonsense," Trinan said with a weak laugh. "Originality. Innovation. That's what we need. Nothing will limit us."

"Nothing except Cadoc Andersyn," Brody said. "The commodore's got us backed in a corner. Any move we make'll result in deadweight losses for us, not growth." He tightened his shoulders and wrinkled his nose apologetically, his lip revealing his yellow teeth.

Bryinna nodded to reassure him. He met her eyes, then looked away.

Trinan shook Brody's hand once more and patted his shoulder. "We'll have to talk soon. Share ideas."

Brody hummed in a noncommittal manner, nodding to Bryinna before melting back into the dwindling crowd.

A dark cloud rolled over Trinan's demeanor. His eyes dulled. His fingers twitched with irritation. Bryinna caressed his hand, wishing to soothe him. She opened her mouth to speak but paused as she noticed her brother, Erling,

break from his pose where he had been leaning against the far wall.

“I knew I’d get a chance to talk to you if I waited long enough,” Erling said as he sauntered toward her in a simple, yet striking, black suit with a high collar. He had taken the time to dress up for the occasion.

Brynna grinned and fell into his fond embrace. “They let you out of that dungeon!” She kissed his cheek.

“Not for long,” he said, grimacing and rubbing his face. “I need to return before they send the guards to drag me back.” He squeezed her shoulders again. “Proud of you, Tree Rat.”

“Erling,” Trinan said, offering his hand as he towered over her brother’s small, wiry form. “Good to see you.” They shook hands as old friends do, and their rapport filled Brynna with peace. “All is well?”

Erling nodded. “The latest band of slavers has returned to Gantu or at least to Olam Cove. Either way, they’re out of my hair for the time being. And now with Brynna here and Papa. . .?” He looked to Brynna.

She laughed. “Carving! Always carving.”

“And Papa content at his work, there’s nothing more I could ask for.”

“Good man,” Trinan said.

Erling bade farewell to return to the arsenal.

“Come,” Trinan growled, leaving Brynna’s side and crossing to the stairs.

Startled by his abrupt exit, Brynna offered rapid apologies to those still waiting to speak to them and hurried after him, lifting her skirt and taking the stairs two at a time until she caught up.

He pulled at his cravat as they climbed. "I've had enough fake smiles and small talk."

Bryнна followed him into his study. Dark raised-panel wainscoting dimmed the light, and bearskin rugs muted sounds. The still air cloaked her in the fragrances of sandalwood, cypress, and the lingering hint of his favorite Ryntoth tobacco. Riding cloaks and hats hung waiting for fox hunts and state visits. The rich cherry furniture, heavy and dark, had commanded generations of respect and honor. Each low table held a shallow dish of cornflowers she had picked in the courtyard, and his pipe rested near the upholstered chairs that flanked a hearty fire. Decanters of whisky and wine adorned the sideboard, standing ready for rejoicing, relaxation, or fortification. All was lit with beeswax candles in anticipation of the already falling night, and the warm glow extended into their shared bedchamber in the adjoining room.

Trinan took up his pipe and tapped it on the mantle before sitting in his chair by the fire. "Explain this Andersyn bullshit. Dead losses and such."

Bryнна sank into the chair opposite him. "Deadweight losses."

He glanced up with an expression of disdain as he filled his pipe.

Bryнна picked at the cording on the upholstery. "Brody doesn't think you'll be able to improve the port and bring in new revenue without losing more business than you gain."

"Bah!" he said, then lit his pipe and took the first quick puffs. He flicked the match into the fire, then leaned back and crossed his ankle on his knee. "What could a ruddy sea captain do to stop me? I can improve the port at Robynton as well as anyone. We already have a dry dock."

“One,” she said. “Tadsyn has five.”

“It’s a large dry dock.”

“It’s Andersyn’s.”

Trinan continued as if he hadn’t heard her. “We can improve the shore boat services. Increase speed—”

“All of them are Andersyn’s,” Brynna said. “The pilots and tugs are flagged to him, too. And he pays the salaries of most of the longshore workers.”

He pointed his pipe stem at her. “Not everything in that damn harbor is flagged to him!”

“No,” she said, “but most are. Some of the fishing smacks are independent, and some of the ferries.”

“Then we can improve their facilities.”

“Improvements may be nice, but they won’t change anyone’s mind about coming here or not. They won’t increase revenue. People come here because they need Robynton, specifically, not because they are looking for a port. Anyone who wants a port will choose Tadsyn every time. Andersyn’s built ten times over what we could ever attempt—he and his parents and their parents and so forth. We’re five generations too late.”

“Fucking monopoly,” he muttered.

She nodded and watched the fire as he puffed on his pipe. Despite his sullenness, the night was peaceful, and the crackling logs melted away the busyness of the afternoon. Thoughts of supper entered her mind.

“Fiscal policy,” Trinan said, setting the pipe on the table. It clattered against the bowl of flowers.

Brynna looked up. “Pardon?”

“If Andersyn runs everything, and I can’t compete, then I’ll tax the hell out of him.”

Bryнна hesitated. “How? The Andersyn Shipping Company was chartered in Tadsyn. Only King Safwyn can levy provincial taxes against him or the company.”

“Increase tariffs. It’s that simple.”

“That will impact the people of Wyclythe. Andersyn imports little to Robynton—beef from Gantu, essential supplies, a few things from the southern seas—and all of it stays in town and goes straight to the people. Very little of it is traded to other provinces, so any tariffs on these products would be passed directly to our people in the form of higher prices.” She shrugged. “I think my father imports more than anyone else in Robynton. Andersyn brings in all the exotic lumber he sells at the workshop.” She cast him a sly smile. “But I don’t think you want my father to bear the bulk of your tariffs.”

Trinan paused. “Andersyn also carries all the lumber we send out. I’ll lay tariffs on that.”

“Corradh prohibits such policies.”

He dropped his foot to the floor, the tread smacking. He leaned far forward, resting his elbows on his knees. “The high king does not prohibit provincial tariffs.”

“Tariffs on exports, he does!”

A sharp tic of his brow rebuked her tone.

She swallowed with remorse, pushing away her annoyance and searching for milder words with which to explain. “Export tariffs would destroy the entire region. Timber exports alone make up one-sixth of the Wyclythe economy. With export tariffs, sales would plummet. Lumber orders would be refused. Supplies would bottleneck at the dock. It would slow everything in Wyclythe and build a preference for trees from Bryton and Safwyn, pushing all timber exports to—”

“—Tadsyn!” Trinan groaned and held his head in his hands. His shoulders rounded as though bearing the weight of defeat.

A twinge of pity dissipated all the ire she had felt. She gripped the edge of the chair and lowered herself to the floor, pooling her skirts. She crept toward him across the rug and, kneeling at his feet, placed her hands over his. He looked up and furrowed his forehead over his somber blue eyes. She kissed his lips tenderly, then climbed into his lap, laced her arms around his neck, and nestled her head on his shoulder. Resting in the rise and fall of his breath, she listened to the fire.

He reached to the table and chose a cornflower, holding it over the bowl a moment and allowing the water to fall from the stem. He shook it once to remove the last droplets. “I have to find a way to increase revenue,” he said, tucking the flower behind her ear.

She closed her eyes, the trail of his touch lingering on her skin. “We’ll think of something. It’s just a bit more complicated than it seemed at first blush.”

“Can I banish Andersyn to Gantu?”

She giggled and lifted her head. “He’s not your subject. He’s from Safwyn.”

“And you?”

She traced his jaw, running her fingers across his returning beard. She loved him in every moment and always had. When she had first awakened from girlhood, he had been the object of her desire. All others had paled in comparison, in appearance, manners, and stature. In return, he had been the first to make her feel like a woman. She kissed him and met his eyes. “I am yours,” she whispered.

He nodded. “Good.”

Bryнна settled once more, at ease and drowsy in the warmth of the fire and his closeness. His lips would find hers soon, and at any moment, his hands would seek the brooches that fastened her dress. They would fall into passion, and he would carry her to bed. Afterwards, he would pull the bell cord and have supper sent up to them. They would sit on the bed and talk and eat, long into the night. Blissful. The evening would be blissful.

Trinan cleared his throat. "Get up, please."

She lifted her head. "Am I too heavy?"

"No," he said, pressing against her back. "I have things to do."

Confused, Bryнна climbed up. She leaned to kiss him and ran the tip of her tongue over his lips. "I thought we could find something to do here."

He stood. "Later." He straightened his cuffs and walked to the door.

"What about supper?"

He glanced back as his hand rested on the latch. "Have the maid bring you some, if you like. Don't wait up for me." He closed the door behind himself, and Bryнна stood motionless in the middle of the room.

Chapter 7

MEELA

Ladvyl Forest
Ladvyl Province
Norin

Meela stumbled forward and clung to a tree. She slid downward, the bark abrading her skin, and knelt in the leaves, leaning her forehead against the trunk. The sensation of Sol's hands echoed through her mind, and the acrid, throbbing deer ondilska ate away unrelentingly at her soul. Weeks had passed. Weeks of running. Weeks of hiding. Weeks of festering ondilska. Her breath had deteriorated into ragged gasps. Her scalp shed wads of her auburn hair. Her world crumbled around her, yet the final trap had not yet sprung. All that remained was watching and waiting for her disastrous moment of damnation at the hands of the cardinal witches. She grasped a handful of loam and wondered if even the earth would find her wanting.

"Meela?" a feminine voice asked.

Meela gasped. She looked up at the blurry outline of red robes. A cardinal witch. The time had come. Death was at hand.

The woman knelt. “What has happened to you?”

Meela’s vision cleared to reveal Hanáv’s stark white face and fiery red-orange hair. Hanáv, tall, thin, with long fingers and a sharp jawline. Hanáv! The serene cardinal who frequented the forests of Wyclythe and Bryton, who walked the ancient paths and the roads of the Gavony peoples, who had spoken with her in friendly passing on topics both inconsequential and of great importance. Hanáv held great wisdom and strong connections, and she had always offered a calm and authoritative presence.

The possibility of redemption flashed through Meela’s mind, and hope for her salvation glimmered to life even as torment tore her asunder.

“Hanáv,” she said, crawling toward her. With shaking, hooked fingers, she grabbed the cardinal witch’s gown and buried her forehead on Hanáv’s breast. “Hanáv, I’m in trouble.” Driven by desperation and without thought for her future, her life, or Sol’s, Meela spilled forth every word of what had happened, from her passionate afternoon to her weeks of crawling through the forest. Hanáv listened to all without reaction or response, and after Meela finished speaking, she remained silent for many minutes beyond as they sat in the leaves.

“You need purification,” Hanáv said, an answer true to her cardinal nature.

Meela shook with anxiety. “I cannot be purified. Any cardinal will sense Sol’s resonance within me. She’ll feel

the deer ondilska. She must report it all to Nadia—and then Nadia will kill me! She—”

“I will purify you,” Hanáv said, her voice quiet, firm, and confident. “On my own.”

“How?”

“We have an entire month before the harvest moon. No one will miss us before then. We can go to the Circle ourselves at night when no one else is around.”

“But can you?” Meela asked. “Can you purify me? By yourself?”

“Yes,” Hanáv said. “I can do things others cannot.”

A tremor passed through Meela as Hanáv spoke the words. “What if Nadia finds out?”

“She won’t.” Hanáv said, her voice light and certain.

Disturbed and confused, Meela searched for another answer, another way out, but she knew there was none.

“We’ll need raw valsydian,” Hanáv said.

“Don’t you have some?”

Hanáv shook her head. “Other cardinals guard our supply and secure it with charms.”

Meela hadn't the strength to organize her thoughts. The only idea that returned to her was a nursery rhyme from her childhood. She marveled at the ease with which she recalled it.

The Tuli mine,
The Gantish trade,
Norinians sail the sea.
Hykosi hands deliver well
Valsydian to me.

I will heal the Gavony

Of illness and of pain
And take from them infirmity,
Affliction, hurt, and strain.

The cardinals then purify
Ondilska from my veins
And send it to the universe
To cycle through again.

“The Hykosi distribute it to us,” Meela said. “Can we get it from them?”

“They do, but they know who we are. We need to get it from the Norinians—they are foolish, stupid people. They’ll have no idea we even passed their way.”

“We’ll take it from their ships?”

Hanáv shook her head. “We don’t have to go that far. The Norinians drive it up the Niemynyn Road from Tadsyn, and there is a small checkpoint on the other side of the bridge before you get to the border between Norin and Hykos. No one pays much attention to it, because they are so focused on the border. The sun is almost gone, and if we go at night, no one will see us—”

“You mean steal it?”

“Don’t sound so shocked,” Hanáv said, her tone hardening. “You’re the one sneaking around with a man.”

Hanáv had not reminded her of the murder, though from Meela’s canonical perspective, that was the most iniquitous of her sins. As a cardinal, Hanáv would think lightly of such an act. Cardinals had no mandate to preserve and protect life—they only purified canonical witches. Hanáv’s stately brow and the decisive attitude in which she carried herself clearly indicated she was capable of wielding substantial

authority, and in that moment, Meela understood that she was in the presence of the next high priestess.

“Why are you helping me?” Meela asked.

“Nadia is not long for this world. I must build my reign,” she said, brushing Meela’s hair away from her eyes. “I need your power.” Her fingers traced the neckline of Meela’s gown and paused at her throat to lift her necklace’s central gem, a black oval of spent valsydian, which had been highly polished and set in gold. The Myrki Stone marked the chief of the canonical witches.

Meela rested her palms on her knees. “My power...” She shook her head. “What can you possibly gain from my power? I’m broken and impure and sitting in the dirt! I have no power! Not anymore.” Her voice dropped to a whisper. “I don’t want it anymore.”

“Such is the vile nature of your attachment to that man.” Hanáv leaned closer. “I trust you will learn deeply from this, and it will never get the better of you again.” Hanáv touched her forehead against Meela’s, the heat of her breath warming Meela’s lips.

Meela closed her eyes. “I swear it.”

“Stand.”

Meela grasped Hanáv’s forearms, and the cardinal helped her to her feet. Meela’s knees shook from fatigue and fear and the faint stirring within her for the woman who held her hands.

“Look at me,” Hanáv commanded, and hesitantly, Meela met her green eyes. Hanáv leaned forward. “We are witches,” she said, her lips hovering near Meela’s ear, driving Meela’s pulse higher. “Controllers of worlds. The Gavony peoples grovel before us. They plead for our works. Let them. Let

them know who is stronger, who rules them. Our power is for ourselves.”

Hanáv caressed Meela’s cheek, then slid her fingers under Meela’s robe and stroked her breast, pressing the softness, teasing the point. Meela’s breath shook as her desire increased.

Hanáv took Meela’s waist and pressed her leg between Meela’s thighs. “Our power is for our own ends.” Their skirts swayed. Meela whimpered, and she warmed at the slow, pulsing pressure. Hanáv grasped Meela’s head and pressed their lips together. Meela tensed, but Hanáv tightened her hold. Bit by bit, Meela released her tension and fear and pain. She clutched Hanáv. She sought Hanáv. She sought safety, sought trust in someone else’s power, where she would be freed from decisions, freed from the tyranny of choice. Meela touched her tongue to Hanáv’s and wrapped her leg around her, circling her hips. She sank into Hanáv’s embrace as their bodies moved together, slowly at first, with a hint of motion, then building in tandem as their breath combined and drove them both upward.

Hanáv shifted away, and Meela gasped at the interruption, frantic in the throes coursing through her body. Hanáv nodded knowingly, still gripping Meela’s thigh and holding it at her own hip. “Yes,” she said in a breathy tone. “This is our way. This is where you belong. Feel your power rising once again.”

Meela hissed through her teeth, drawing Hanáv closer and kissing her again, her hands pulling at their skirts, searching for the heat between Hanáv’s legs and craving her own release, but Hanáv caught her wrist and shook her head. She moved away, and their skirts fell into place once

again. “Later,” Hanáv said. “Soon. I promise we will taste of each other, but you must first be purified. Follow me.”

Meela’s breath slowed.

Hanáv rested her cool palm on Meela’s inflamed cheek. “Follow.”

Meela wiped saliva from her lips. Swallowed. Nodded. And followed.

They traveled on the ancient paths, crossing the forested country from Wyclythe Province to the Niemynyn Road in a mere fraction of the time it would have taken a citizen of Gavony. They soon crouched on the ground with their backs to a rickety shed that served as an outpost on the final stretch near the border. Snoring rattled the shed walls as the gatekeeper slept inside.

The road ran before them. To the south, it curved back toward the river. To the north, it edged deeper into the foothills of the Padyrn Mountains on its way to the country of Hykos. Stars dotted the sky. The waxing moon granted enough light for them to see, but not so much they feared being easily discovered.

“How do we get it?” Meela whispered.

“We have to wait for a wagon to come through,” Hanáv said. “It’ll stop here, and while they’re paying for passage, we can take some.”

Meela trusted Hanáv—if trust can coexist with fear—but she shifted her feet uneasily, uncertain how this would play out. Perhaps Hanáv had some sort of charm or spell that would block them from being seen.

The creaking of an approaching wagon drove Meela’s heartbeat to a frantic pace, yet Hanáv’s hands remained steady. She motioned for Meela to stand, and they peeked around the corner.

The wagon rolled to a stop. “Hey!” the driver called. “Gatekeeper!”

After a snort and muffled cursing, the door opened, and a man stumbled out, pulling on his trousers and snapping one suspender over his undershirt. The two men spoke, but Meela couldn’t hear the words. Hanáv beckoned to her, and they rushed to the back of the wagon.

Meela lifted the cover, and Hanáv rifled through the contents. The voices shifted. Hanáv seized Meela’s arm and dragged her into the bushes nearby. They dropped to the leaf litter, and Hanáv put her mouth to Meela’s ear. “He’s only carrying food.”

Meela nodded. “This is a better spot to wait.”

Hanáv agreed, and they sat to watch as the fine was paid, and the wagon rolled on its way. The man yawned and walked back to the shack.

Meela rested her head on her arms, and she watched the road with the occasional glance at Hanáv. The cardinal’s posture remained regal. Meela had never seen a more powerful witch, and such a view reinforced her belief that Hanáv would succeed Nadia—and soon. It would be wise to ally herself with such a witch, and she hoped this night would bind them together and establish a basis of their unity.

Rattling wheels disrupted the night, and a new wagon approached and stopped. “Gatekeeper!” The gatekeeper returned, as disheveled as before, and spoke to the driver.

Meela rushed to the wagon and lifted the canvas. Hanáv dug through, sliding a basket to the side. Seconds passed, every moment increasing their chance of discovery. Meela bit her lip and looked back and forth between the men and the cardinal witch. Hanáv straightened, holding a black stone.

“Hey! You!” the gatekeeper shouted.

“Run!” Hanáv cried.

The witches dashed from the wagon, the men after them. Meela’s weakened muscles protested, and the wagon driver quickly seized her shoulders. They fell forward, rolling on the ground. She tried to get away, but he grabbed her arm and hauled her to her feet.

His hands searched her robes. “What’d you take? What’d you get?”

“Nothing!” she pleaded. “I have nothing!”

Hanáv’s scream chilled her blood.

Meela struggled against the driver, trying to see further down the road. Hanáv and the gatekeeper fought in the roadway, a dust cloud forming around their feet. They grappled, first one up and then the other, their combat punctuated with shouts and yelps. Red light sparked and flashed but never developed into a strong beam. The gatekeeper slung his arm over Hanáv’s throat, but she twisted and jabbed his ribs. He buckled and clutched her legs, and they tumbled to the dirt.

Meela watched in terror, the driver’s arms binding her.

Hanáv and the gatekeeper wrestled on the ground. He was twice her size, and once up over her, he pinned her in place.

“Hanáv!” Meela screamed. The driver clapped his hand over her mouth as she struggled against him.

The gatekeeper ripped Hanáv’s robe from her shoulder, exposing her breast. She shrieked and clawed his face. Growling, he drew his Norinian knife and held it to her chest as an artist would a brush. The blade cut her skin. Hanáv screamed, the sound piercing the night as the gatekeeper sliced her flesh.

The driver's hand dropped from Meela's mouth.

"Stop him!" Meela said. "Make him stop!"

"He's a government official!" the driver shouted at her. "What do you expect me to do?"

Hanáv's screams continued, tattered and weakening, and the gatekeeper, unrelenting in his carving, flung blood from his knife before cutting again and eliciting another hoarse scream. Blood ran from Hanáv's shoulder, dripping to the ground, and soaking into the dirt.

With a final rally of all her remaining energy, Meela shoved the driver aside, sprinted across the dirt, and threw herself on the gatekeeper. He grunted, then batted her to the road. Wiped his bloody knife on the opposite shoulder of Hanáv's dress, he stood, sated. "That's what we do to thieves who break the valsydian cycle." He returned his knife to the sheath and slapped his arm around the driver's shoulders. "Back to business, my friend!"

The driver cringed, his face pale. "What of them?"

"Never mind them. Let's discuss your toll."

The driver looked back once again but then walked with the gatekeeper to the wagon.

Hanáv lay on her side, crying weakly, her robes rumped, torn, and dirty. Her tears washed a small path across her face before dropping into her blood on the road. Meela crawled to her side and pulled her into her lap. She brushed Hanáv's sweaty red hair away from her face and the curls clung to her fingers. She slowly kissed her forehead, her cheek, her lips.

"Get me away from here," Hanáv whispered with barely a sound.

Meela pulled Hanáv up with her. The witches leaned upon each other as they struggled down the road and into the forest.

Once they reached a hidden area sheltered by dense firs, they both fell to the moss, breathing hard. Meela dragged herself to where Hanáv lay. She reached to Hanáv's shoulder, peeled back the blood-soaked edge of her robe, and moaned with horror. The gatekeeper had carved a Norinian triquetra below her collarbone.

Meela sobbed. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. This is all my fault."

"Heal me," Hanáv whispered. "Erase it."

Meela sat up on her knees and placed her hands on the wounds. Hanáv winced.

Closing her eyes, Meela summoned the warm, healing stream within her. Her hands glowed with violet light, and the glorious rush of power built and poured through her fingers. A deep and intensely cold sensation splashed across her palms and spread into her arms as the ondilska within Hanáv responded and flooded Meela's consciousness. The blackness built, and she absorbed it, tamping it down into the light, pulling more and more, until at last, every drop had been sponged away. The light faded, and she opened her eyes.

The wound had healed. It bled no more. The skin was clear with no sign of redness or swelling. Yet the marks remained as scars, the triquetra's clear outline still visible on Hanáv's chest. Meela gasped, appalled.

"It's still there," Hanáv whispered. "Isn't it?"

Meela's lips moved without words.

Hanáv nodded. "He used his ceremonial knife. Their magic leaves scars."

“I didn’t know,” Meela said, trying to meet her eyes, but Hanáv only stared blankly at the trees.

The silence took on sacred form, and Meela dared not damage it further. The witches lay on the moss as the dawn broke, and the sun rose without sound, without disruption. No birds sang. No animals chattered. Sunbeams alone sliced the air and touched the ground, dancing in solemnity, illuminating what would not be hidden.

When the sun reached overhead, Hanáv stood.

Startled, Meela climbed up as well.

“We shall go on,” Hanáv said.

“Of course,” Meela said. Tears welled in her eyes. “All of this for nothing.”

Hanáv shook her head. She reached into her pocket and withdrew the black rock. “We have the valsydian we need.”

Meela, unable to rejoice, could only let her tears fall.

They traveled on the ancient paths to the Witches’ Circle near Lonara. As night fell, they stepped within the bounds, the dirt beneath their feet cool and soothing.

Meela shifted her weight from one foot to the other, unsettled to be purified without a circle of canonical witches around her to serve as witnesses. Yet Hanáv’s motions retained their reassuring strength. She faced Meela and stared into her eyes, and Meela stared back, knowing all had been set into motion.

Hanáv chanted the ancient words softly, her lips shaping sounds that ran together and formed the warp and weft of magical force. Meela sank into the phrases as they blotted her vision from her eyes. She floated into oblivion, where darkness flowed like oil, pouring into and around and through her. Pressure built as if her body and organs

swelled for release. Her wrists flexed with slicing pain, and pressure burst from every joint and sinew, releasing into space and dancing on the clouds. Mist and steam enveloped her, cradled her, and carried her to the ground.

As if waking from deliciously restful sleep, Meela blinked and inhaled. Her eyes ranged about the trees surrounding the Circle, and she wondered how much time had passed. Hanáv stood over her, her face twitching, and her brows contracted.

“You have changed,” Meela said, sitting up.

Hanáv’s eyes glinted with malice and resolve as her palm covered the scar on her chest. “Never again will I believe myself in service to them.”

“The Gavony peoples?”

“They are a source of valsydian,” Hanáv said. “Nothing more.” She raised her arm and pointed in the direction of Lonara, the Norinian capital. “Never again will I subjugate myself to their wishes. Norinians are nothing to me. And if they cross me again, their lives are forfeit.” Hanáv offered her hand. “Rise.”

Meela took it and stood.

“It’s a new age,” Hanáv said, embracing Meela. “We are creating a new order. One of power. One of might. One where witches rule Gavony, and the peoples serve us as is the rightful order of the world. And you.” Hanáv smiled at Meela. “You will share this glory. You will lead with splendor.” She kissed Meela’s mouth.

Their eyes met, and Meela understood the ultimatum. She, chief of the canonicals, would ally with Hanáv, the cardinals’ soon-to-be high priestess. A strong, unbreakable bond that would join all witches. No longer would canonicals be seen as mere healers, mere tools of the Gavony

peoples, strange creatures to be called upon and used. No longer would the two weird dynasties conjoin from necessity alone. Instead their synergy would propel them into domination and unquestionable hegemony.

Meela hesitated. Hanáv's hand, once taken, her body, once experienced, would block all other potentialities. There would be no return to the times before. No return to him. Her heart quaked. Her breath shook. But she, chief of the canonicals, must champion for her sisters. She must choose for their sake.

Meela leaned toward Hanáv, rising on her toes. She pressed her lips to hers, and Hanáv seized her and kissed her. Their lips parted, and their tongues met as they dropped to their knees and sank in each other's arms. Within the Circle, in the light of the fire, their passion rose, their sweat mingled, and their cries of ecstasy lifted to the night sky.

Chapter 8

NORA

Nalta
Gantu

Nora clung to Ziri's shoulders as he lifted her down from the wagon seat. The crowd on the wharf jostled around them. She hated being there when the ships came in. So many people. So much movement. She shied away, feeling small, pressing her back against the wooden wagon, as Ziri retrieved the baskets and handed her one. He offered a reassuring nod with kind eyes and a stable hand, and they dove into the throng, Nora clinging to his woven belt as he led her through.

People swarmed around them and across the length of the wharf, forming a sea of pointed gandura hoods and dusty turbans of every color. Bareheaded slaves and citizens carried newly imported wares, fresh from the barges. Stacks of crates and crocks lined the way. Chickens squawked and fluttered as a child herded goats with a stick.

The rich sabhirim strolled in leisurely groups. Some escorted their wives, who were draped in thick orange haiks that completely obscured their forms. Other sabhirim walked with their kvinas, who wore fashionable silk dresses and wispy light-blue veils that fluttered in the sea breeze. Occasionally, a sabhir appeared with both, the women a step behind him, walking side by side, as he toured the busy area.

Enormous warehouses lined the wharf, and stalls huddled against their walls, the blankets that had been strung over the top offering the only shade. Merchants gathered by the unloaded crates, checking their invoices and counting one more time. The businesswomen wore white veils similar to Safiyya's, but Safiyya sent her staff to the wharf in her stead. Nora hated every minute.

The tramp of boots beat through the crowd, and bodies shuffled and pushed to allow a long form of Gantish soldiers, three abreast, to march past in their daily drills. Their sharp, high steps pulsed with the cadence called by the officer, and their arms swung across their chests. The soldiers wore chalwars and short kurtas in black, only black, from their turbans to their boots. They didn't wear taylasans like the other sabhirim. Instead, twin scimitars crossed their backs. The color guard at the lead held the Gantish flag, which displayed a black field with a white fesse, lending the appearance of three broad stripes. A red chevron met the pole with a centered white blaze.

Nora shrank against Ziri as the crowd filled in behind the passing soldiers. A man bumped into her and shouted, "Thief!"

She yelped and stumbled, Ziri catching her by the elbow as the man ran after a child pickpocket.

“Always a circus when the ships arrive!” Ziri called, the excitement brightening his face.

Nora cringed and squeezed the basket’s handle, the wicker creaking and poking into her palm. The people and movement surrounded her, no matter where she looked. The sun glared relentlessly as though unaware it was now autumn. The water shone. The boats sailed by. Her skin tingled. It was too crowded. Too loud. Too bright. Anxiety crawled through her stomach, and her vision fell in and out of focus. She craved the familiar space of the inn where she could escape to a quiet, dark corner and recover in peace.

A cascading crash of pottery turned her head. A large crate lay on its side, holding what once had been many sets of matching pots. Now the pieces lay in the street. A sabhir raised his horse whip over a bareheaded man in a dirty brown gandoura who cowered before him. “You idiot!” he shouted as he brought down the whip. The man screamed. Nora winced, wanting to cover her eyes, to block the sight of the blows and the blood, but was unable to do so. Ziri threw his arm about her shoulders and pulled her away from the area. The crowd continued on as before. No one had paused their activities for the sake of the beaten man.

A sailor in Andersyn blacks walked from a small sloop to the dock. The sloop’s bowsprit extended nearly as long as the hull itself, and the one mast and boom pointed to the sky like a forefinger and thumb.

Ziri pivoted and pulled her toward the sloop. “Come on.”

She groaned and followed him, shuffling slowly as he pressed through the crowd.

“Skipper!” Ziri called, stepping onto the dock. Nora climbed up, too, but stayed at his back, wishing he wouldn’t talk to people. They shouldn’t dally. They should get Safiyya’s wares and go back to the inn. They should return where motion made sense and there was tea.

The skipper lifted his hand to block the sun. His brow flashed with recognition. “Ziri, ye heathen!” he said as they approached. The men heartily shook hands, and the skipper slapped Ziri on the back. “Oh, and who’s this?”

Ziri grinned. “This is Nora. She works at the inn.”

The skipper smiled as though tucking his napkin into his shirt. “Well!” he said, smoothing his uniform over his portly stomach. “Pleasure, miss.”

Nora’s throat tightened. She had seen that look many times from men at the inn who assumed she was one of Safiyya’s women from upstairs. The looks came before the groping.

Ziri shook his head. “She’s a waitress.”

The skipper’s expression fell. “Oh.”

Nora managed a closed-lip smile as she screamed in her thoughts and fought the urge to slap him and flee. She wanted to hide away from these people, and these noises, and the smells of fish and salt and rotting seaweed. She didn’t like the skipper with his beady eyes and Norinian knife that was probably very sharp. She wanted Ziri to stop talking. She wanted to get Safiyya’s wares and leave.

“Where’s Elias?” the skipper asked.

“Back in town,” Ziri said. “He’ll meet us tonight.”

“No good, and ye knows it,” the skipper said. “I got six crates and three cases that go with ‘em. The damn port authority’s breathin’ down my neck. I needs ‘em gone afore I get inspected.”

Ziri kicked his boot on the wooden decking. “Nothing I can do—”

“Ye can take ‘em now.”

Ziri glanced at Nora. “I can’t. Not now.”

“Then I throws ‘em overboard,” the skipper said, crossing his arms.

“You won’t get paid.”

The skipper shrugged and leaned closer, dropping his voice. “Better than going to jail and losing my captaincy. Port authority’s one thing. Facing Cadoc Andersyn for gettin’ caught gun runnin’ is something else entirely.”

Nora shrank, confused and scared.

Ziri rolled his eyes. “Please. Andersyn’s the biggest smuggler of them all. He knows the risk of the business.”

The skipper nodded. “Aye, he knows whats to do when a runner gets caught.” He locked eyes with Nora. “And hows to slit their throats.”

Nora shuddered and stepped closer to Ziri, leaning her cheek against his shoulder. The skipper chuckled.

Ziri sneered. “You aren’t scared of Andersyn, are you, Skipper?”

“Eh, a wise man is always wary of Andersyn,” the skipper said, “and Andersyn’s made it bloody clear he won’t tolerate whos that gets caught. I ain’t gonna be the one to cross him. So’s unless you wants all that at the bottom of the harbor, you needs to get it from my *Signy* now.”

“Shyan shit,” Ziri muttered. “I’ve got a wagon.” He paused. “But to get it where it’s going, I’ve got to drive straight through town! We have to wait for tonight!”

“Ye can’t wait,” the skipper said, then gestured to Nora. “You got duckie here! Jus’ buy up a pile of dainties to put

atop o' them crates and put her up asides you. Ride on through sittin' pretty, and no one will think a thing."

Ziri set his jaw. "I'll get the wagon."

"I'll have 'em unload," the skipper said. He nodded to Nora. "Miss."

The skipper climbed aboard the sloop, and Ziri strode along the wharf. Nora hurried after him, dodging people. "Ziri!" she called as she caught up. "Ziri, what are we doing?"

"You're not doing anything," he said, walking on. "I have some business to attend to as we get Safiyya's things."

Nora skipped a step to keep up with him. "Is this about the letter the Norinian ambassador gave you?"

Ziri stopped as though he had run into a wall. She smacked into him and stumbled back.

He seized her arm. "What did you—" He looked around at the crowd and then dragged her into a shadowy alley. "What did you see?" His hands gripped her shoulders like metal vises, and his gaze bored into hers. For a moment, she thought he would shake her, but as she stared at the deep brown of his eyes, she saw fear instead of anger.

"The ambassador," she said. "The one from Norin. She gave you a note. You acted like you didn't want anyone to know."

"I don't. Did you tell anyone?"

She shook her head. "No one! I wouldn't do that."

Grimacing, he released her, then struck the wall with the flat of his hand. "Fuck!"

Nora flinched. She hated cursing. Those words were harsh and ugly. "Don't say such things," she whispered.

"You're in the middle of it now," he said. "You're going to be hearing a lot of things you'd rather not hear. I didn't

want this for you, but so be it.” He grabbed her arm again and dragged her through the crowd back to the wagon.

Nora gripped the wagon seat with blanched knuckles as they drove in fits and starts to an area of wharf access. Nothing made sense. She didn’t know where he was taking her or why, and all she wanted to do was go back to the inn and serve lunch. White or red. Greens or carrots. Simplicity and order.

Ziri leaped down and tied the reins. “Go get what you can of Safiyya’s items while I do this. Take as many trips as you need, but try to get it all yourself.”

Nora nodded. She despised getting the shipments alone. The hard work of sorting and carrying didn’t faze her, but she hated talking to people she didn’t know, and the noise was giving her a headache. Her body felt heavier than the basket she carried.

With each trip, she hefted a sack into the wagon, and each time, there was another long wooden crate in the wagon bed. Nora wondered what was inside them. The skipper had mentioned guns, but that was an absurd idea. There was no reason why citizens would need guns in Gantu. There were plenty of soldiers to protect the people—plus the Nalta Guards—and the nation was isolated and peaceful. She piled Safiyya’s silks and spices onto the crates until finally, with Ziri sweating and swearing, they were finished and climbed to the seat.

Ziri lifted the reins. “Now the fun begins.”

“Fun?”

“Sarcasm.”

“Oh,” she said. “What do I do?”

“Just sit there, and don’t say anything. Don’t make eye contact with anyone.”

She nodded. "But what if they look at me? What if I see them without meaning to?"

"Then smile," he said. "Give them the biggest, most dazzling smile you can."

She jerked her head back. "That seems forward."

"Then be forward."

Ziri urged the horse into the stream of wagons moving away from the wharf. They drove along the dusty road, past the arid landscape dotted with rocks and sparse shrubs. The outskirts of town between the wharf, and Nalta proper seemed unusually busy to Nora. She wondered why there were so many people, all of whom seemed to stare at her like they knew she was doing something wrong, even if she didn't know exactly what it was she was doing. She wondered what they thought of her as she smiled and whether they were suspicious and would report her to someone who knew how to punish such things. The Guards always had punishments ready for people who needed them. Whips. Fire. Brands. Manacles. Hanging.

Driving slowly, they rode through town. Nora faced the businesses opposite the Nalta Inn, hoping no one behind her would see them and wonder why they drove past the inn without stopping. She wanted to cover her face, but Ziri had said to smile. Her mouth was dry, and her fingers trembled. Her lips stuck to her teeth. He seemed cool and nonchalant as though he had done this a thousand times. She blinked. Maybe he had done this a thousand times.

Ziri's face betrayed no emotion. He held the reins lightly in his hands. His feet rested on the wagon without bouncing or fidgeting. He casually yawned. On the surface, he seemed confident, practiced in this mysterious activity, but he was her best friend, and she saw through the act. He

was scared. It was a strange sight. He had never seemed deceitful before, either.

The buildings spread further out as they reached the far side of town. Fewer buildings, fewer people, less danger. Nora relaxed her shoulders. Ziri had said they only needed to get through town, and now they had. Their journey was at an end, and soon she would be back at the inn where she would unload the supplies and hide in her room with a mug of mint tea and perhaps a cookie.

A group of Nalta Guards gathered by the roadside, attentive to their policing duties. Their chawalars, short kurtas, turbans, and taylasans—all in dark gray—matched in a repeating pattern, soldier after soldier. Only one man was different. The officer wore an unedged burgundy turban and taylasan as well as a hard expression of discontent. He stood to the side with his arms crossed, ready to detain wrongdoers and punish those gone astray.

Nora swallowed hard. “Shyan shit yentera.”

Ziri glanced at her. The corner of his mouth lifted.

A gray guard raised his hand. “Stop. What are you carrying?” His harsh voice chopped his words like a butcher striking a cleaver on a cutting board.

Ziri glanced at the wagon bed. “Grain and...” His voice trailed away. Terror flashed in his eyes. Nora realized he didn’t know what was in the back. He had loaded the crates, but she had retrieved the other items.

The guard squinted. “Don’t you work at the Nalta Inn?”

Ziri pulled on the collar of his work shirt. “I...”

“Yes,” Nora said. “We both do.”

“What’s in the back?”

Nora flashed a big smile with lots of teeth. “10 bolts, silk. Two bolts, chintz. One of organdy. 60 pounds of sugar

—in two types, white and brown—60 pounds of rice. 120 pounds of flour. Camellia tea. Periwinkle tea. Mint. Wild carrot. Coriander. Dill. Thyme. Sassafras. Some dried basil—but I doubt the quality is very good—the Norinian type never is,” she said, rattling off the items and counting on her fingers. “A bolt of linen in sage.” She looked up. “You know, they call it sage, but it’s really an olive color. It has more of a yellow hue than I wanted, and I think I must return it. It’s entirely too—”

“Stop your chatter!” the guard said. “If you work at the Nalta Inn, then why are you on your way out of town?”

Ziri paled.

Nora laughed. “You are so silly! I’ve already told you!”

The guard’s brows met in confusion.

“It’s olive. Not sage!” She laughed again. “If I don’t have more sage, then I obviously can’t finish my dress, and I’m really in such a bind to have it done in time. We’re on our way to find a replacement for it at that little shop just outside of town—you know the one, down by the creek—perhaps in a nice hunter green or a—oh!” She placed her hand on Ziri’s shoulder. “What about lilac? I could alternate the original sage with the lilac and then. . .” She prattled on while Ziri shrugged at the guard.

The guard rolled his eyes. “Move on.”

They drove ahead, and Nora struggled to calm both her heartbeat and the sickening nausea that threatened to dislodge her breakfast. Dark spots floated in her vision. She heard only the plod of the horse’s hooves and the creaking of the wheels, those comforting clops and creaks, the sweet contentment of watching the back end of a horse as it walked away from the Nalta Guards, away, away, away.

Ziri drove to a small cottage outside of town and pulled up by the stable. "Elias!"

A balding, middle-aged man with wide-set eyes walked out of the house in dirt-smeared chwalars and pulled on a patched jacket. "What are you doing? Why so early?" He stopped buttoning. "Who's she?"

Ziri jumped down and walked to the back. "Help me unload. I won't be comfortable until this is hidden."

Nora climbed down from the wagon as the two men transferred the crates to the stable and covered the boxes with straw.

"There," Elias said, rubbing his hands over the stubble on his chin. "Now what do you mean bringing this through town in the middle of the damn day?" His gravelly voice grated her ears. She wished he would clear his throat.

Ziri wiped his brow. "The contact with Andersyn Shipping demanded we move them. The port authority was about to board for inspection."

"How'd you get through town?"

"Guards stopped us on the edge," Ziri said. "Lieutenant Nyok was there."

"Burgundy bastard," Elias grumbled.

Ziri grinned and snatched up Nora's hands. "But this little shortcake sweet-talked her way through!" He swung her around. She laughed despite the dizziness. "Nora, you were brilliant!" He released her, and she leaned on the wagon, blinking as the world spun.

Elias scowled. "And now she knows everything."

"You want more people to join," Ziri said, facing him.

"I want people who will shoot," Elias said, his lip curling. "I want people who will fight. I don't want people who will give us away to the sabhirim!"

“Of all the people at the inn I could have been riding with, I worry about her the least.”

“Hardly a comfort.”

“She’s one of us,” Ziri said. “She notices things. Another set of eyes and ears could be useful.”

Elias lifted his hands. “This is on you. If you tell her, you’re responsible, not me.”

Ziri nodded. “I understand.”

Elias pursed his lips and shook his head, then walked back to the house, his steps forceful from the anger he held. She had caused the tiff between them, and guilt settled in her stomach. She clutched at her apron. “You’re in trouble because of me.”

Ziri shook his head. “No, it’s fine.”

She worried all the same as the cottage door closed.

Ziri leaned on the wagon. “You know what this is then.”

She furrowed her brow. “Not a bit.”

“An underground movement. We’re getting ready. We’re going to rise up. Soon.”

“What does that mean?”

“Rebelling,” he said. “Citizens. Slaves. All of us. We’re going to take the country for the people. No more slavery. Proper wages and labor conditions. Access to witches.”

She blinked, shocked. Slavery had existed since the founding of the country, since the beginning of the world. There was no Gantu without slavery. Being a slave was her place. She didn’t live a grand lifestyle like a sabhira or kvina—but she had enough to eat. She could be burned at the stake or banished to the Tuli camp—but she had lived her entire life without that happening. Her life wasn’t perfect, but nothing in life was perfect.

To rise up, they would have to collect guns and fight. It would be illegal, and they might get caught and go to jail. Visions of guards and soldiers and turbans and guns filled her mind. The guards would kill them. The army would crush them. They would all die. They would be hanged or burned or beaten until they were dead.

“How?” she asked. “How can anyone do that? The Gan-tish army is the strongest in the world, and the Nalta Guards are powerful.” She paused. “Today excepting.”

He faced her. “Today exactly! They have weaknesses we can exploit. They can be manipulated—and broken! We can do it. And we can influence the senate and start passing laws that help everyone, not just the sabhirim.”

The guns and cannon she saw in her mind shifted into documents and scrolls. “This is a voting movement then?” she said. “Representatives and—”

“If we can.”

“And if not?”

He paused. “If not, there are six rifles in each crate. We get more crates as often as we can.”

The booming of cannon returned in her ears and carried with it screams of pain and a rush of red blood before her eyes. Nora shook her head and waved her hands. “No, I don’t want any part in violence.”

“No one wants violence,” he said, “but it’s already here at their hands! You see it every day.” He pushed his hand through his curly hair. “Look. You’re a slave. You of all people should understand. You see the horror—I know you do. Slaves are beaten—you saw that with me today! Women are abused. Dirty children run in the streets with black eyes. Just because Safiyya is kind, doesn’t mean there’s nothing to fight for.”

“It’s our role in life. It’s what we were born to do!” she said, repeating the mottos ingrained within her and feeling tears rise.

“Then why do you dream of becoming something else?”

Nora caught her breath. His ideas scared her. She had seen the blood on the beaten man. She had witnessed too many hangings, burnings, and quarterings in the public square. She had soothed her own bruises and mopped her own blood. She had pushed away sabhiri hands. She had cried out in the night.

A tear trickled down her cheek. “You’re a citizen. Why do you even care about slaves?”

“Because we’re all shoved down. A sabhir will step on my neck just as fast as he’d beat you. We’re in this together. Look.” He pushed up his sleeve. A tattoo of geometric symbols, a row of interlacing triangles, lined his bicep.

Her eyes widened. “You can’t have that! The sabhirim will burn it off you!”

“Our people have created these marks for centuries—before we had slaves and citizens and fucking sabhirim. Who are they to decide what it means to be Gantish? I mean it when I say we’re in this together. No one can tell the difference between you and me. I didn’t even know you were a slave until the night the ambassador came.”

His mention of the ambassador gave her something else to cling to, something that didn’t shake the ground as much, something safer. “Is this what that note was about?”

He nodded. “The Council of Norin supplies arms to us. Kya Evers is a member—a powerful one—so she helps us. That note was about this shipment.”

“Why would Norin care?”

He curled his lip. “The fucking Norries don't give a shit about us. But the Council of Norin is different. They're a group of freedom fighters. They're supplying arms, ammunition—all kinds of supplies—so that we can fight when the time comes.”

Sounds of carnage roared up within her once more, pressing around her. Inevitable. “When is that time?”

“I don't know,” he said. “Soon.”

Soon.

Soon the slaves and citizens would revolt.

“What about the Tuli?” she asked. “Will they be set free?”

Ziri lowered his head. “No one can save the Tuli.” He cleared his throat. “So will you join us?”

She hated the mess of it, the gore and pain it would require. She didn't want any of it. She wanted freedom and dresses and parties and sweet tête-à-têtes with Marcus on sultry summer nights with the fragrance of gardenias in the air.

“Don't you want to be free?” he asked.

Nora jerked back to the moment, indignant. “That's a stupid question!”

He leaned toward her. “Don't you want to be on equal standing with Marcus?”

She closed her eyes. “Also stupid.” She craved such a status. Every nerve hummed as she reached for him in her mind.

“Then join us.”

Confusion crashed over her. Blood and flowers swirled through screams and sighs. Nothing made sense. It hovered over her, and she struggled to comprehend. “I don't know.”

“Nora—”

“I don't know! Take me home. Please just take me home.”

Chapter 9

BRYNNA

Corradh Fortress
Corradh Province
Norin

Brynna wove through the crowded courtyard of the Corradh fortress and paused in the shade of the western tower. Back home, Wyclythe fortress captured her imagination and impressed her with its high walls and elegantly-furnished rooms, but this magnificent structure—the seat of all Norin—dwarfed it in both size and majesty. She shifted her pack on her sore, travel-weary shoulders and gazed in awe at three stories of arched breezeways topped with a covered parapet. Turrets and flanking towers marked each corner and side, and each addition that had been built over the centuries had contributed its own mixture of bartizans and sweeping ramparts. She thrilled to see it once more, and to know she would work and live in it during Harvestide filled her with a sense of pride and importance. She was eager to fulfill her duties to her country.

Clara waved, her brown hair shining in the sunlight. “Brynnal!”

Brynna smiled as she walked toward her, pleased to see her assistant. “The First Breath has blessed us with safe travel.” They embraced. “You had an easy journey?”

“No trouble at all,” Clara said with a joyful spring in her step as they walked along the courtyard’s edge to a wide stone staircase. “We arrived yesterday. It’s so exciting to be here. I haven’t been here for any holidays in the last few years. I had forgotten how busy everything is!”

Brynna nodded, suddenly feeling old in the presence of Clara’s energy. Her own sense of anticipation, while enchanting, was tempered by the looming political significance of such an event. Each province’s sovereigns would be in attendance, and many sent scores of delegates. Meetings would be held and decisions made. “There will be much to see,” she said in a level tone. “Right now, though, there is much to do. Harvestide involves serious work.”

Clara stilled. “Yes, ma’am. I’m ready.”

“Please show me to the Wyclythe wing.”

“Yes, ma’am!” Clara said, her smile returning.

They walked through the fortress, along wide halls crowded with people.

“Are the rooms ready?” Brynna asked.

“Yes, ma’am. I directed the staff last night.”

“When will King Wyclythe arrive?”

Clara took a few steps. “I don’t know.”

Brynna glanced at her. “Where is Chancellor Walyss? He left ahead of me.”

Clara paled. “I’m—I’m not sure,” she stammered. “He arrived last night. I was with him last night. And saw him this morning. I don’t know where he is now.”

Brynna sighed, searching for patience. “Has my father arrived?”

“I don’t know.”

Brynna rounded and opened her mouth to admonish her, but Clara’s wide eyes shone with earnestness. A glimmer of desperation and fear flicked in her features, sinking into an expression of shame. Brynna remembered how confused and overwhelmed she herself had been about so many things. She must teach and lead.

“We’ll figure it out together, all right?” Brynna said.

Clara nodded with a contrite smile.

They arrived at the second floor of the east wing which was shared by the officials of both Wyclythe and Elidel Provinces. The guard nodded to Clara with recognition. Brynna offered the permission papers, signed and sealed by Trinan’s hand, that granted her admittance into the wing. The guard nodded once more, and they passed through the doorway.

Lanterns lit the corridor and gleamed against the dark oak paneling. Brynna’s skilled eye marveled at the quality of the wood and the many detailed carvings of flowers, vines, and ocean waves. She traced the design with her fingers and estimated the age to be within her father’s lifetime, yet it was not his work. She would have to ask him the artist’s name.

“This first door is our sitting room,” Clara said, then pointed across the corridor. “The matching door there is Elidel’s. They control that side of the hallway.”

Clara entered the sitting room. Sunlight spilled through sparkling windows, and a cheery fire burned on the hearth. Chairs and settees sat at cozy angles, perfect for conversation, with tables ready to bear drinks served from a

sideboard covered with an array of bottles. Gold and orange rudbeckia, mums, and dahlias of all sizes and shapes poured from vases and draped in garlands over round pumpkins and squashes.

“How lovely!” Brynna said, prompting Clara’s beaming smile as they returned to the corridor.

“The next room is King Wyclythe’s personal study and bedchamber,” Clara said, gesturing to a closed door.

“But you don’t think he’s here?”

“I haven’t seen him,” she said. “I don’t know where he is.” They approached the third door. “And this is the chancellor’s and your office and bedchambers. I’ve had both bedchambers prepared.”

“Thank you, but we’ll only need one,” Brynna said, opening the door.

The room was not as grand or cheery as the sitting room, but it suited her. The fireplace warmed most of the space, and Trinan’s and her desks stood opposite each other, with shelves and file drawers behind the smaller one. Two doorways led to bedchambers beyond.

“Do you know which room he chose?” Brynna asked.

Clara hung back at the doorway, her hand on the frame and her shoe angled toward the corridor. “The one on the left,” she said, “because it has a window where you can look down and see the courtyard. The lights are pretty at night.”

Brynna stepped into the room on the left. Only daylight lit the area which held a bed, a wardrobe, and a dressing table scattered with various items of Trinan’s toilette. All was as she expected.

“This will do nicely.” Brynna said, returning to Clara. “And that last door?” she asked, pointing to the end of the corridor.

“To the servants’ quarters. My room is there, too.”

Brynna nodded. “Thank you, but now we must find the king. And then arrange for a meeting with Elidel’s chief attaché for. . .oh, sometime tomorrow, at their leisure.” She counted on her fingers. “Then meet with Bryton to discuss the slavers at Olam Cove—”

The main door to the wing opened, and her father stepped inside. A weight fell from her shoulders, and it seemed as though the holidays had truly arrived. “Papa!” Brynna said, hurrying toward him with light, skipping steps and a merry smile.

Seth remained at the door, his face stern. Blue paint lined his left cheek and right eye, and his crisp, dark-blue tunic, trousers, and short cape bore the sharp creases only heavy starch can lend.

Brynna took his hands and bowed over them. “I’m so happy to see you!”

“You’re unkempt.”

She closed her mouth.

Clara cleared her throat. “Is there anything else you need, ma’am?”

“No, Clara, that’s all for now. Start on the first task we spoke of.”

Clara murmured her assent and slipped through the main door. It closed heavily behind her.

“I’ve just arrived,” Brynna said, turning back to her father with a small laugh. “Clara showed me the rooms. I wanted to ask you—”

He pulled his hands away. “I’ve spent the last two hours in a meeting with Trinan. You should have been there.” He glanced at his bronze watch, then tucked it back into his pocket. “You’re shamefully late. Dress quickly.”

She furrowed her brow. "I have nothing yet to change into."

The door swung open with a thud as a porter hauled in two large trunks.

"And there are my dresses now!" she said.

"Where should I take these?" the porter asked, straining, his face red and shiny.

She pointed down the hall. "Third door on the left is my office. Put them in the adjoining chamber on the left. Thank you."

The porter trundled down the hall.

"Good," she said as she watched the porter enter the office. "What excellent timing!"

Seth frowned. "Nothing about this is excellent. You should have been dressed well before now."

Her smile faded. No longer was she the attaché of one of the most powerful men in the country. At that moment, she was a little girl caught in transgression.

Her eyes burned. "Papa, I'm trying."

His expression hardened. "Now is your time to step forward. There is turmoil. Trouble."

"Trouble? With the Hykosi? Is it finally happening? Are they invading?"

He frowned. "Those who are important—those with influence, power—they are here now. Alliances are forming and changing—"

"I'll do my best, Papa."

He held up his index finger. "What Trinan instructs you to do is best. The future of Norin—all of Gavony—will be in his control, and you must be at his side."

She nodded.

He took her shoulders. “You complete him. His vision, your details. Do all he asks. Obey him without question, without hesitation. Remember your duty as his attaché, your duty as a woman.”

“Yes, Papa.”

He kissed her forehead, and she closed her eyes, longing for his love.

“Don’t ruin this,” he whispered.

Chapter 10

ERLING

Lonara
Corradh Province
Norin

Erling gripped the ball to his chest and raced across the muddy field, shoving aside a burly man with a wart on his nose. With a brief glance back, Erling sprinted further, barrelled into a hulking form, and slammed to the dirt, stars bursting in front of his eyes. The man who had blocked him laughed and offered his hand. Erling grinned and took it, climbed to his feet, and with a nod of sportsmanship, oriented himself for the next round of play.

His three teammates lined up shoulder to shoulder. The crowd from Wyclythe Province, a sea of young men and women in dark-blue tunics and trousers or swirling woolen hangeroks, clapped and shouted encouragement. Blue paint curved across each face, and dots lined their foreheads. Their shouts were more boisterous than the burgundy side of the field.

Erling joined his team, his lean shoulders significantly shorter than the others. What he lacked in size, he made up for in speed. He nodded at Ian, the captain, and Ian tossed the ball into the air, smacked it with the heel of his hand, and sent it down field. Erling and his teammates sprinted once more, hoping to kick the ball over a red rope strung up at the end of the field before the other team seized it.

Dodging an opponent in burgundy and gold, Erling side-stepped and scanned the field, looking for the ball. He loved playing fyos, loved the excitement and challenge of it. Mud and sweat covered his face and blue clothes. His ribs and left knee didn't hurt so bad—nothing he couldn't handle. Spying the ball, he dashed forward, darting one way, then another. He planted his foot and kicked, sending the ball sailing over the rope and into the crowd of cheering blue spectators beyond.

Erling's teammates pelted him with high fives and victory slaps before lining up for the next round. He glanced at the crowd where a young woman stood speaking to her companions. Her blue and green hangerok fit her luscious figure, and her hair, the color of artillery-grade gunpowder, twisted in a thick braid down her back. Even in full Wyclythe paint, her cheeks held a pink blush just like the tiny shells on Robynton beach. She met his eyes and smiled. He glanced around, wondering if she meant her smile for someone else. No one was near. Only him. She was smiling at him, and a grin spread across his face. He swore to the First Breath her team would win.

They lined up once more, and Erling narrowed his eyes with new focus. The Lincanly team captain hit the ball into play. Erling jumped, blocking the ball with his chest. In the scramble, he rammed his shoulder into a burgundy player's

stomach. The jab was returned in kind, and Erling stumbled back, watching the ball sail over his head and beyond the rope.

The Lincanly crowd cheered.

Erling clapped his hands as he lined up with his team again. "We can do this! Waryn, play outside."

Waryn nodded and moved to the end of the line.

Ian whacked the ball into play. Immediately, the ball rebounded—hit by Lincanly—and sailed into the air. Erling ran and launched himself after it, leaping high. His fingers brushed the surface, but the ball flew over the rope once more. He crashed into the mud with a heavy grunt and slid across the ground.

Waryn kicked the dirt. "Damn!"

"Good run!" Ian called, pulling Erling to his feet. "Huddle up!"

The four men grabbed shoulders and leaned into the circle.

"We've been neck-and-neck this whole game," Ian said, puffing for breath. "Tied again. Our ball. Last round. What's the call, Sasha?"

"They're quick," Sasha said, blinking rapidly without his spectacles. "You know, Lincanly always is, but they don't think fast—"

"If you don't talk fast," Waryn grumbled. "It won't matter at all."

Sasha wrinkled his nose. "Ian—you hit it to the right. Erling—you go to the right, too, and be ready to catch it. I'll dive in the middle and try to get it to you."

"What do I do?" Waryn asked.

"Since you think you're so fast, you go to the left and try to block them before they can kick past you."

“But I—”

“Shut up, and do it!” Ian said. “Let’s go!”

They lined up as the crowd cheered at a fevered pitch not heard before in the entire game. Erling shook out his feet and slid his jaw from side to side. He glanced at the sidelines. She was watching, though he couldn’t tell whether she was watching the game or was watching him. He was going to win it for her—that much he knew—he just prayed he wouldn’t look stupid as he did so. He jerked his head to clear the hair away from his face and hoped that move looked confident or at least not spasmodic.

Ian hit the ball.

Erling dashed to the left of the field, dodging around one man then another. He shouldered a third and, when he could not get by, wrestled him to the ground. The ball rose in the air, and Erling shoved the man away. Erling jumped up, his fingers batting the ball down, and he kicked it toward their end of the field. They bolted across the grass and mud. Erling darted through the players—being small had its advantages—but a tall man in burgundy arrived first. Erling tackled him. The ball shot back to the other side of the field.

They ran again, both teams as one group. A burgundy player arrived first and, with a swift kick, punted the ball over the rope.

The Lincanly crowd roared and surged onto the field, lifting their players onto their shoulders.

Erling swore. The muddy men in blue quietly watched the raucous celebration around them, Ian leaning his elbow on Sasha’s shoulder, and Waryn propping his hands on his knees to catch his breath.

Erling looked for her.

She was gone.

He turned in place, scanning the crowd.

“Shit!” he said, wiping the mud from his face.

“So what,” Ian said. “We’ll get them at Carthasach.”

“No,” Erling said. “Something else. I gotta run.” He waved to his teammates and pushed through the crowd. He was losing daylight, and though he tried to search every face, it was soon too dark to distinguish easily between them.

Muttering obscenities, he jogged back to his tent, washed as best he could, and dressed in appropriate wear for the Life Fire. He carefully repainted the lines on his cheek and dots on his forehead. When he emerged, the torches had been lit and now cast flashes of light over the camp.

Erling walked between the tents, identifying the provincial flags of each site. He saw the leaping hart of Niemynyn and the lightning representing Amiman. He glared at the Lincanly flags with their stupid ram’s horns. He sighed. No sign of her.

He trudged to the Life Fire and heard the sounds of children laughing and singing. People gathered, crowding up to the edge of the Great Circle. The huge bonfire roared with flames that reached high into the night sky.

Arriving at the edge, Erling saw people shepherding their barefooted children onto the sacred sand. A large group stood hand in hand around the flames to block the small ones from getting too close. Many of the children held flags and ribbon timbrels which they swung and waved with the occasional whack against the head of the child next to them. They sang an old song he knew from childhood about summer nights and playing games. As a child, he had relished the chorus of pops and snaps that mimicked the

crackling of a fire, and judging from the cacophony, this next generation did as well. The song ended, and parents scooped up their children for one last walk past the harvest displays before bedtime.

The path extended from the edge of the Great Circle, through the camp, and connected to the road that ran up to the fortress. The way was marked with decorative mounds of crops and vegetables, wheat sheaves, cabbage pyramids, beets, pumpkins, and peas, all tied with ribbons and lit with merry torches. Erling gazed at the cheery glow as it wound its way up the hill, over the bridge, and up to the fortress, where the torches changed to braziers on the ramparts. The fortress's large stained-glass windows blazed into the night, lit for the parties that would be attended by the sovereigns, aristocrats, and his father and kid sister. Even the smaller windows glowed, row upon row, dotting the darkness like stars. Light. Strength. Majesty. It made one proud to be Norinian.

A light breeze lifted, fluttering a nearby flag that displayed a sailboat. Wyclythe Province. He smiled. With a deep sigh, he allowed the evening's disappointment to fall away and welcomed holiday peace and nostalgia in its place.

A small figure stood at the base of the flag.

He recognized her. His stomach flipped, and his spirit lifted. He rubbed his nose and checked his breath in his palm, then walked toward her. She smiled.

"Erling," he said, breaking into a cold sweat. "I'm Erling."

"Yes," she said. "You play fyos."

"Yeah, I—what's your name?"

"Kayla."

He nodded. "That's pretty."

She ducked her chin.

He pointed to the flag. "You're from Wyclythe," he said. "I am, too."

She giggled. "I know."

Panic rose in his stomach. "The paint. Right." He swallowed through a dry throat, desperate for fancy words. "I live in Robynton, but I haven't seen you there." He shook his head. "I mean, I used to. I work for the king. I used to live there—in Robynton—and I didn't see you there now, because I'm gone." He cringed. Words were difficult around pretty women.

She smiled. "I live in Dabrash on the coast. Nearly to Bryton. We don't make it to town often."

"That's probably why we've never met."

"Probably."

He stared at her. The torch lights reflected in her eyes. He knew he was staring and knew it was rude. Yet he wondered how anyone could be in her presence and not stare at her.

A mother carried a screaming child away from an overturned and scattered bushel basket of potatoes. They watched them pass, Erling thankful for the moment's reprieve.

He gestured to the path. "Will you walk with me?"

Kayla nodded. "I'd like to."

Erling wanted to jig. He offered his arm, and when she took it, he thrilled to her touch. "You look beautiful."

"Thank you," she said, touching her skirt. "I got it at the Circle from a weaver. He's from Lincanly."

Erling cringed, certain she must be thinking of his poor fyos performance. "It was a tough game."

"Game?"

"The Wyclythe-Lincanly fyos game."

“Oh,” she said. “Yes. It was exciting.”

“I wanted to win for you.”

She smiled again. “I enjoyed watching you play.”

Erling tugged at his neckline. There wasn’t enough air on the path. He led her further, higher, toward the fortress.

“What do you do for the king?” she asked in a soft, musical tone.

“I’m the quartermaster,” he said.

“Quartermaster!” she said, sounding impressed. He hoped she was impressed.

She pushed her hair behind her ear. “I help my father raise snails.”

Erling blinked. “Snails?”

She nodded. “For dye.” She motioned to her skirt. “Wyclythe blue.”

“I’d heard it was made from snails,” he said. “I never really thought about someone needing to raise them. You . . . feed them?”

“Sort of,” she said. “We maintain the grasses and throw fish chum into the water. And chase the crabs away.”

“That’s amazing!” he said.

“You think so?”

“I do,” he said, placing his hand over hers, where she held his arm.

The breeze swirled along the path, chasing dried leaves and lifting the ribbons from the displays. Erling watched as Kayla viewed the splendor. Her lips parted in a sweet smile, her eyes wide and sparkling. He had never seen any expression as lovely. He swore he would move mountains to ensure it never left her face again.

Chapter 11

MEELA

Corradh Fortress
Corradh Province
Norin

Meela stood in the shadows, and Lonara, the Norinian capital, spread before her. The town had settled for the night with streets empty. Cooking fires and candles winked through the darkness. Her witches would be at their work, tending colicky babies and healing the fevers that always seemed to peak at night.

She was not there to heal.

The river valley below gleamed, bedecked in the regalia of Harvestide. To celebrate their holiday, the Norinians had piled trees in the center of a wide expanse of sand and built what they called their Life Fire. It was only a corrupted copy of the Circle the witches used for their rituals. As the wind changed, music and laughter floated in the air, and figures danced in the flickering light. Crowds surrounded the circle and moved between the rows of tents that had been set up

for celebrants and sutlers. Less sleep would be had in camp than in the town proper.

Corradh Fortress loomed atop a high plateau overlooking the circle. The stones had aged to a murky black, now speckled with the light of braziers and torches. The darkness, powerful and strong, formed a foundation for highlighting the stunning bursts of color from three enormous stained-glass windows. She recognized its beauty, even as she seethed.

With anger pulsing in her veins, Meela crushed a letter in her hand and walked toward the fortress. She passed Norinians traveling toward the circle, and they averted their eyes from her. Parents pulled their children away. It was best they fear her. It kept them separate. She mounted the fortress steps and crossed the grand stone terrace to the front entrance. A soldier in the navy blue of the Norinian army guarded the entryway.

Meela lifted her chin as she glared at the guard. He was tall and fierce and stern, but she was chief of the canonical witches. "I'm here to see the chancellor of Wyclythe," she said in an even tone.

"On whose authority?"

She held out the letter. "His own."

He inspected the paper, observed the seal, then nodded to another soldier. Meela snatched the paper back from his hand and strode inside, expecting to see light and opulence and state officials who would resist her presence. Instead, administrators and representatives from every province bustled through the halls without so much as a catch in their step at the sight of her. She followed the soldier.

She was shown to a cramped sitting room on the main floor. No one met her. No one announced her presence.

Only the clock responded, ticking incessantly, reminding her of the time she was wasting.

The door finally opened, and Trinan entered the room with his gold chain of office across his chest and over his shoulders.

Meela huffed and remained at her full height, her jaw tight. "How dare you send me such a letter," she said, churning with anger. "I am not your servant to be ordered about."

His mouth twisted into a condescending smile. "Yet here you are at my command."

Meela lost her breath, stunned. He had no right to summon her outside of healing. She should turn on her heel and march from the room. She should ban him from canonical ministry. Yet his written words compelled her to stay. She clenched the letter in her hand. "Speak."

He crossed his arms. "A friend of mine requested my help to harvest a red oak on the Wyclythe-Bryton border, and on my way to assist him, I saw a canonical witch in the arms of a huntsman."

Her stomach dropped.

"I continued to watch," he said. "There were flashes of light. A dead man. A powerful earthquake. It was quite a show."

Suffocation pressed down upon her.

"Helping Seth Dasveld is always a beneficial experience," he said. "But seeing what transpired beforehand may be worth even more."

"I don't understand."

"Yes, you do," he said, moving closer. "You're foolhardy, perhaps, but not stupid. I know what you did. I know whom you killed. And what's more, I know why you did it."

She stared at him.

He bent his head near hers. "What would the Norinian people say if they knew a canonical witch had murdered one of them?"

"I—"

"And what would Nadia say if she knew that one of her canonicals had seduced a man?"

She turned away.

His hand shot out and gripped her arm. "Nadia would turn your every nerve to fire and melt your organs within you," he said. "She would kill you, slowly and painfully. But only after the rest of her cardinal witches killed Sol Frontyn first."

Meela's strength flagged. Nadia would forgive the murder, just as Hanáv had done. But she wouldn't overlook how Meela had sullied herself and violated the canonical rules. "What do you want from me?"

"That's more like it," he said, releasing her arm.

She met his gaze. His small sneer nauseated her. The thought of killing him flitted through her mind, but she didn't understand how she had killed the poacher, and another killing would only escalate her personal troubles into war between the witches and the Norinians.

The chancellor tipped back on his heels. "We will come to an understanding."

"An understanding?" She furrowed her brow. "What kind of understanding?"

He folded his arms, his shoulders loose and relaxed. "I'll keep your precious secret safe on the understanding that you owe me for my troubles."

"Owe you what?"

"That remains to be seen."

“If I refuse...”

He shrugged. “You don’t have that choice.”

“I am chief of the canonicals,” she said, touching the gem at her throat. A muscle in his forehead twitched. “I will post myself near you and be ready to heal your high officials.”

“I expect that,” he said. “Healing is your nature. That is not the sort of service I wish. I care more about your abnormal ability to kill. You will remain in Lonara while we are here, and you will travel to Wyclythe Province when we leave. You will be available to me should I need you.”

She clenched her teeth. “Until when?”

“Until you want people to know about your actions. Now be gone,” he said. “You have interrupted enough of my evening’s pleasures.”

Meela’s face burned with anger. She swallowed through her tightened throat, then heaved the door open and left the room, flinging her hands to the sides. Her robe billowed behind her and glistened in her wake.

Chapter 12

BRYNNA

Corradh Fortress
Corradh Province
Norin

Brynna dug through her trunk and lifted out a new woolen hangerok in Wyclythe blue, which was lined with small shells attached with golden thread. She dressed carefully, cautiously, with attention to each detail, and stood before the mirror as she buckled her ceremonial knife in place.

She brushed her hair, rolling the sides and then braiding it into a long plait that she wound at the nape of her neck. She tucked in four cornflowers she had found in a bouquet in the sitting room, then stepped back and smoothed her skirt, turning one way and then the other. Satisfied, she pulled a stool in front of the mirror and sat, holding a pot of blue paint. She closed her eyes, calming her nerves and stilling her hands.

Brynna dipped her three middle fingers into the cool paint. Crossing her hand over to her left eye, she pulled the paint down her cheek and curved the lines toward the corner of her mouth. Again, she touched her index finger to the paint. "Truth, stewardship," she murmured, touching a drop of the paint to her forehead, near her hair line, with each word. "Equality, community, integrity, simplicity." Again, she dotted the paint. "Peace." Each, a dot of paint. The Seven Words.

Brynna smiled at the guard as she left the Wyclythe wing. With no time to delay, she ran down the stairs to the first floor. Her tardiness would irritate Trinan. She flew down the corridor, past the torches that lined the walls, and soon arrived, gasping for breath, outside the open door of the grand hall. As she leaned against a pillar, sounds of small talk floated past her.

A shadow broke the light as it spilled from the doorway of a nearby sitting room, and Trinan stood before her in a fine blue suit from the southern seas. His chain of office emphasized his broad shoulders, and his cravat guided her eye to his handsome face. "I've been waiting for you," he said, taking her hand and lifting it. "Let me look at you."

She lowered her shoulders and lifted her chin, trying to attain a look of regal disaffection. Her cheeks warmed as his eyes roved over her. "It's not silk or imported," she said. "I'll look dowdy next to you."

"You don't need silk," he said, taking a flower from her hair and tucking it into his lapel. "You're perfect. Dressed in the manner of our people. An elegant image that will remind everyone of whom they represent. I'm proud to have you on my arm."

She tipped her head upward, and he pressed his lips to hers, careful to avoid smearing the paint. She smiled, basking in his warmth as he tucked her arm into his. “Can we walk to the Great Circle tonight? And dance?”

He patted her hand and chuckled. “Perhaps. There are many people I would like you to meet first.”

Trinan led her into the grand hall. The ceilings soared above them, lit with huge candelabras made of wooden rings held by heavy chains. Torches lined the walls, and the two fireplaces on either end of the hall burned large, thick logs. The expansive windows, now dark, reflected the light back into the room as it swirled with imported silk gowns, bare shoulders, and lace. Brynna gasped at the splendor as Trinan guided her through the room. He nodded at various people, and she walked with him in awe.

Brynna recognized several sovereigns of various provinces. The friendly queen of Lincanly bounced a baby on her hip as she stood near her husband. Beautiful Queen Gara of Elidel, in a well-fitting sky-blue gown, floated through the room with a greeting for each person she met. Her blonde hair shone, her cheeks glowed, and her blue eyes sparkled. Every masculine eye followed her, and she rewarded each by touching her long fingers to a shoulder or placing her hand on a strong arm. Brynna couldn't compete with such beauty and elegance. She felt invisible and shabby in her folk wear, awkward at every move.

“Walyss! I want to speak with you,” a man called.

Trinan wheeled Brynna around to see the kings of Bryton and Ladvyl Provinces standing with the elderly queen of Ryntoth, who leaned on her cane. Unlike the others in their imported suits or silk gowns, Queen Ryntoth wore a

stunning red hangerok lined with white fur. Brynna tried not to stare at the two red lines that had been painted across the queen's cheeks and nose. The queen, though stooped and aged and deeply wrinkled, seemed sharp and fierce.

King Bryton stood taller than his companions and rested his fingers on the edge of his imported jacket in a casual, aloof manner. His dark eyes darted quickly, and his white hair offered the impression that he understood everything he saw.

King Ladvyl's ruddy complexion betrayed his overindulgence in the wine in which his province specialized, but his congenial smile made one forget any faults he may have.

"Ever at your service, Your Majesty," Trinan said, bowing his head toward the King of Ladvyl Province. Brynna followed his lead and curtsied.

Queen Ryntoth's hand shot forward and pinched Brynna's cheek. "Who is this?"

Brynna started, surprised at the quick motion.

Trinan dipped his head toward the queen. "May I present Brynnalyn Dasveld."

"Dasveld, eh?" the queen said, squinting over the tops of her spectacles.

"She is Seth Dasveld's daughter," Trinan said.

The queen nodded. "Perfect resemblance. With that narrow nose and those high cheekbones, she could be the daughter of no one else—though he is the burly sort, and she looks like a stiff wind might waft her over the mountains."

A footman approached with a tray of wine glasses, and the cut crystal sparkled in the torchlight. Brynna reached for a glass at the same moment King Bryton did. Their hands touched, and Brynna drew back, ducking her head

apologetically and staring abashed at his waistcoat. Bryton chuckled and presented her with a glass. His gaze and that of King Ladvyl lingered on her in the same way she had seen others watching the queen of Elidel. Once more, she looked away demurely, proud to have captured the attention of kings. Her own beauty had shown past her awkward fashion. Femininity seemed as strong a power as the knife she wore at her side.

“I believe her height comes from her mother,” Trinan continued. “Erling has the same build.”

“Who is Erling?” Queen Ryntoth asked.

“The brother,” Trinan said. “Wyclythe’s quartermaster.” She hummed with disapproval. “Scrawny, then.”

Trinan’s brow furrowed. “He—”

“Enough of this,” King Ladvyl said. “You two sound like Gantish slavers. Next, you’ll want to peel back her lips and look at her teeth. Trinan, what do you know about this upstart in Lincanly? Luuk. I think that’s his name.”

“Rand Luuk,” Trinan confirmed, nodding. “He’s from the island of Talahm and has no Norinian blood.”

King Bryton nodded. “Less of a risk,” he said in a slow drawl. “He can never be king.”

“No, he’s not eligible for full sovereignty,” Trinan said, “but he’s garnered enough power—and money—to make a stir.”

“Does he stand with our causes?”

Trinan lifted his shoulders. “He seems reliable enough for a northerner. Lincanly needs to realize that if this Luuk holds more land, more resources, and more wealth than he himself does, then he must accommodate him. In a way, wealth determines royalty.”

“Or tax them hand over fist!” King Ladvyl said. “Then royalty determines wealth!” He chortled. “There is more to being king,” he held up his glass, “than Gantish crystal and white wine.” As the others nodded and drank, he leaned toward Brynna. “And I always make sure the wine is from my own vineyards.” He winked at her, and her cheeks warmed.

King Bryton shook his head. “Just don’t be an idiot like Safwyn when it comes to fiscal policy. Did you hear what’s going on in Tadsyn? At the port?”

The rest shook their heads.

Bryton leaned forward, lowering his voice. “Safwyn increased the tariffs on valsydian.”

Ladvyl sloshed his wine. “On valsydian? Is he insane? Is that even legal in the Conventions?”

“I don’t understand it at all,” Bryton said. “He nearly doubled the amount. I was shocked when I heard.”

Queen Ryntoth wrinkled her nose. “As am I.”

Ladvyl chuckled. “I bet Andersyn blew his top! I would’ve paid good money to see that.”

“Precisely,” King Bryton said. “He moved out of the province. Just up and left!” He gestured to Trinan. “And now Old Wyclythe is the winner.”

All turned to Trinan and Brynna. She avoided their eyes by looking up at him.

Trinan nodded in assent. “The shipping company has chartered and now bases itself in Robynton. A wise move given the circumstances.”

“Only thing Andersyn could do,” King Bryton said.

Queen Ryntoth nodded slowly with a shrewd gleam in her eye. “A tremendous opportunity for your province.”

Brynna smiled. “Yes! The shipping routes won’t change significantly, but such a business increases our net—”

“The move will be beneficial for us,” Trinan interrupted with a slight tug on her arm. She closed her mouth as he continued. “And we will continue to build strong ties with them.”

Brynna slouched with a frustrated sigh, then noticed Queen Ryntoth watching her. She looked away.

“That said,” King Bryton added, “I’ve heard rumors Safwyn didn’t have a choice.”

Trinan’s brows met. “What do you mean?”

King Bryton glanced at the room, then said, “I hear the Council of Norin pressured him. Threatened to blow something up.”

Brynna’s heart beat faster.

“Blow what up? The port? Like they did to that wharf in Hykos?” asked Ladvyl, his face creased with concern.

King Bryton shrugged. “I don’t know.”

“I doubt he would fold to terrorists,” Trinan said with a dismissive shake of his head.

Brynna scowled with indignation, righteous anger rising within her. “If it had been terrorists,” she said, “he could have called on us. We would have helped him, fought them. Let Hykos bend their knees. We cannot ever bow to such, not in Norin.”

The group laughed, not unkindly, but with true amusement. Brynna’s cheeks burned, and she looked to Trinan only to see his disappointed frown.

Queen Ryntoth chuckled. “She’s a true copy of Seth. Off to fight for Norin!”

A hush fell over the room.

Three enormous men stood in the doorway, all three in green tunics draped with black fur. Black triangles had been painted across their faces. A heavy, jewel-encrusted crown

rested on the man in the middle. As a unit, they strode forward.

Bryнна leaned against Trinan. He stood immovable, his face impassive.

The queen of Ryntoth straightened as high as her aged form would allow. She stomped her cane on the floor. "About damn time you showed up, Amiman!"

A wide, toothy grin spread across the king's face as he walked toward her. "Anika Ryntoth! You old bat! Why are you still alive?"

"To kick you in the pants when you need it, boy!" she said, laughing.

He bent over her, and she planted a loud kiss on one of his cheeks before pinching the other. He gently hugged her, then straightened and looked at the group, instantly serious and stern. He nodded to each of the other sovereigns in turn.

"Good Harvestide," Ladvyl said.

Amiman nodded. "And to you." He turned to Trinan. "What's the word on the international front?" he asked in his booming bass voice.

Trinan withdrew his pocket watch. "Kya Evers should be here soon with plenty of answers."

Bryнна pricked her ears. Kya Evers, the grand ambassador, traveled around the entire Gavony peninsula, improving Norin's diplomatic relationships with the other countries. Bryнна was intensely curious about a woman who would do such things.

"And there she is," Trinan said, sliding his watch back into his pocket.

A stout middle-aged woman swept into the room. Kya's teal silk gown rustled with her quick, tapping footsteps.

“Welcome, Grand Ambassador,” Trinan said, his deep voice carrying over the din of the room. “We were just talking about you. King Amiman would like an update.”

She approached the group and curtsied. “An update from me? What tremendous fun you have at parties.” The sovereigns laughed, and Brynna smiled, dazzled by Kya’s breezy confidence.

“I visited Sitilia in the summer,” she said. “But I know none of you care about that.”

They chuckled.

“They were their usual changeable selves,” she continued, “ready and willing to serve as impotent negotiators whenever we decide we need horseshit in our lives.”

A few sovereigns laughed. Several other kings had moved to stand behind Bryton, Ladvyl, and Amiman in order to hear. The queen of Elidel stood at the edge and adjusted the flowers on her bosom.

“Gantu is still on its high horse,” Kya said, “but the slaves are a fractious mess.”

“Any chance they’ll revolt?”

Kya lifted her hands. “By the First Breath, I hope not. A slave revolt might spread to the Tuli, and any interruption in valsydian mining would be dangerous. Breath forbid, if they were to stop altogether. The Tuli must be kept at work and the valsydian brought to the Gantish port at Nalta, or it will mean the death of us. No valsydian, no healing from the witches. Our trade agreement stipulates—”

“We should not have a trade agreement with Gantu!” the queen of Grimsyn called out to the groans of the other sovereigns. She pushed her way to the front. Three blue lines of paint trailed down from the queen’s mouth to her chin, and her large nose had flushed red. “They are vile

slavers!" the queen continued to shout. "Bigamists! A cruel and primitive nation!"

"And the Hykosi?" King Ladvyl asked, pointedly changing the subject.

A chill fell over the group at the mention of the country that occupied their land.

King Amiman puffed his giant chest, and Queen Ryntoth rested her hands on her cane, one atop the other. They formed an odd pair, the huge, strong king, and the small, elderly queen joined in ferocity. Brynna scanned the faces around them and saw many that read concern, perhaps anger, perhaps fear, but she looked up at Trinan and saw only firm resolve. His demeanor reassured her.

Kya nodded, oozing confidence. "I'll state the obvious. There are Hykosi soldiers and outposts in every province except this one. We are occupied."

"It means nothing," King Amiman growled.

King Bryton stepped toward him. "We have enemy soldiers within our borders, accosting our people! That's hardly nothing!"

"My people are at peace, which allows them to prosper," Amiman said. "War would destroy my province. I am on the border with Hykos as is Queen Ryntoth. We stand together with Niemynyn—wherever he is tonight—to form the boundary that protects your soft ass from the entire Hykosi army. Trust me when I say that a few Hykosi are bearable if it means peace."

"Your Majesties," Kya said. "In their capital of Shalash, the Hykosi officials, including the so-called Viceroy Serban, are open to discussing this with us. Perhaps by the time we meet for Carthasach this winter, we will have an arrangement that all will find agreeable."

“You see then,” Amiman called to the sovereigns while gesturing to Kya. “War is not inevitable. Patience.”

King Bryton grunted and stepped away.

Kya laughed. “And now, if I may, I would like some of this Ladvyl wine I’ve been hearing so much about. Do notice the Gantish crystal! It was a gift from the lord mayor of Nalta. I have reciprocated with Lincanly wool.”

The group broke into small clumps of people.

“Your thoughts, Trinan,” King Bryton said as King Ladvyl and Queen Ryntoth gathered around.

Trinan shrugged. “Nothing new. The Hykosi are a menace that should be removed.”

“Hear! Hear!” Ladvyl said, raising his glass.

“We are strong,” Trinan said. “We can drive them from the country.”

“But—” Brynna said, then paused, unsure of herself.

“There’s no reason to think,” Trinan continued, “that because—”

Queen Ryntoth pounded her cane on the floor, blocking Trinan’s words. “But what? Speak up, girl!”

Brynna wet her lips as she rallied her courage. “But how would we drive them away? They require little of us, true enough, but they did force us to disband most of our army when the occupation began. We have only a handful of soldiers and officers now.”

Queen Ryntoth nodded at her. Her approval rushed through Brynna, reviving her confidence. It surprised her to realize how much she desired support from the feisty older woman.

“Even if we desired to build a new army,” Brynna said, speaking rapidly, “we lack both the capital and the fiscal underpinnings to support such an endeavor—”

“We would find the money,” Trinan said with terse finality, his lips pursed with disapproval. He pinched her elbow where it hid in the bend of his arm. She had overstepped. She had forgotten her place, abandoned her duty to him. She bowed her head. She was an attaché, not a queen.

He laughed. “Accountants. Always stacking mynt on imaginary ledgers!”

The others smiled politely.

A sly grin slid onto Ladvyl’s face as he swallowed the last of his wine. He leaned toward Brynna. “Maybe you are afraid to fight them? Do the Hykosi frighten you?” He held up his bent fingers and wriggled them. “Ooo! Are they going to snatch you away?”

Brynna gasped, shocked and offended.

Queen Ryntoth smacked her cane across both of King Ladvyl’s shins. He yelped and jumped, holding first one leg, then the other.

“They are from Robynton, you clod!” the queen said. “How dare you say such things! These are children of the Removal!”

The group turned their heads as one body and spat.

Ladvyl hopped in place, rubbing his leg. “May it—never—happen—again.” He hobbled toward a bench.

“And don’t you dare get a witch to heal that for you!” Queen Ryntoth called after him.

King Ladvyl rubbed his shins.

Brynna wrinkled her nose. She hoped he would bruise.

King Brynton placed his empty glass on the tray of a passing footman. “Children of the Removal. First Breath, are you really?” He crossed his arms.

Trinan nodded and patted Brynna's hand on his arm. "Both of my parents were killed, and Brynna lost her mother."

Bryton's brow creased into deep lines. "I'm so very sorry to hear that. Your loss is mine."

Chapter 13

NORA

Tadsyn
Gantu

Of the many times Nora had served him before, Marcus had never once sat outside on the porch like this. It was a fair omen. The breeze off the distant harbor freshened the air yet failed to stir the dust. The evening chill had fallen, and the full moon lit the streets as bright as daylight. The inn's expansive porch was a prime location for enjoying the evening meal. Oil lanterns glowed at every table. A few sabhirim sipped wine and watched the market close, and citizens relaxed and ate after the full day.

Nora walked with heartened steps to pour his wine. "Beef stew for you, sir? Light on the vegetables?"

"I'd like beef st—" He looked up and met her eyes.

He saw her.

She caught her breath.

"Yes. Indeed," he said, his brow wrinkling. "You've served me before."

Her heart quivered in her chest. “Yes, sir,” she said. “I have.” He had seen her. Noticed her. Marcus Regá, Grand Sabhir of Gantu, had noticed her. She could die happy.

“What’s your name?” he asked, crossing his ankle on his knee as though settling in for a chat. She could sing a thousand songs and never tire.

“Nora, sir,” she said, her mouth dry.

He smiled. “I’m Marcus.”

“Yes, sir,” she said, every nerve tingling.

A buckboard wagon turned the corner, rumbling slowly toward the dry goods store. A bareheaded, emaciated man held the reins, and a skeletal woman in a ragged shawl sat in the wagon seat beside him. Several others in a similar condition plodded at the side of and behind the wagon, dragging their feet as they trudged forward. Their dirty and patched clothes hung on their bony figures. Their eyes sank deep into hollows, and each weathered cheek bore the black scars of the Tuli branding iron.

Nora shuddered as she watched them drive into the far alley, towards the back of the store.

“Tuli,” Marcus said.

Nora nodded, too disturbed by their presence to be bothered by the interruption of their conversation.

“Yes, sir,” she whispered. “They come for supplies at times.”

He nodded. “We all must eat,” he said. “Tell me, Nora, are you a slave?”

She met his eyes. Had any other sabhir asked her the same question, she would have thought him preparing to mock her or worse. Yet Marcus seemed in earnest, wanting an answer. She had long yearned to speak with him, and in that time, she had played out this very question over

and over in her mind and watched the outcomes. Sometimes he would seem indifferent. Mostly he would brush the answer aside without care and speak words as smooth as velvet, reassuring her that it made no difference. Once she saw him leap to his feet with indignation and demand to pay Safiyya for her freedom. On a tearful, anxious night, she had clung to her pillow as he sent her away, disgraced. That vision stood alone, for it defied her understanding of his character. He was different from the other sabhirim. He would never treat a slave so callously. Even so, the answer pained her.

“Yes, sir, I am,” she said, dropping her gaze to the floor.

“I see. Safiyya is your mistress?”

“Yes, sir.”

“And is she kind to you?”

Nora fought back tears as a wave of emotion crested over her. This handsome, talented sabhir, who could snap his fingers and have anything in the world he wanted, cared enough about her, a slave, to ask whether she was treated with kindness. Slaves were unseen and unthought of, yet he asked to know more.

He straightened in his chair. She had allowed the pause to continue too long.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I should not have asked such a bold question, one that could have only one possible answer from you, whether or not that answer was truthful. I apologize.”

Nora gaped. No one had ever apologized to her before, for wrongs could never be committed against a slave. “Sir, she is kind to me. In truth, she is.”

He smiled. “I’m glad to hear it. Too many masters are not.”

His glass was not empty, nor even at the halfway mark, but she filled it to the brim, the bottle tinkling against the glass as her fingers trembled. She set the bottle down before she dropped it.

He rested his hand on hers. The heavy weight of his palm calmed her tremor, yet his touch, their first touch, sent wild exhilaration coursing through her. She closed her eyes. A whimper escaped her throat, and warmth spread throughout her body.

“No need for fear,” he said. “I would never mean you any harm.”

“No, sir,” she said, her breath quickening. She begged for his touch to never end. She studied his face in the soft lantern light. She noted each line, each small scar, hoping to imprint it upon her mind forever.

The bell rang at the temple, informing all that it was time for evening prayer. Marcus withdrew his hand from hers and placed it on the table, laying the fingers of one hand over the fingers of the other. His thumbs aligned and formed a triangle of empty space. The sabhirim around them did the same, and Nora bowed her head.

“I magnify the mighty God,” Marcus murmured.

“Who sustains the order of life:

Sabhir, matim, kadim—

Ruler, citizen, slave—

And grants me strength, wisdom, and power

To rule over all.

So may it be

In the glory of heaven,

In the fires of hell,

And in this world between. Amen.”

“Amen,” Nora repeated, then lifted her head slowly, sad their conversation had ended, and she would need to return to the kitchen.

Marcus looked up at her. “Do you think a sabhir and a slave can be friends?”

“Yes,” she mouthed without sound, astounded as much by his renewal of conversation as by the words themselves. “Yes, sir,” she repeated.

He lifted his brow. “Even with such different lives, different classes, different experiences?”

She nodded, words impossible. She tried to meet his eyes, but the strength of his gaze overpowered her, and she escaped his hold to look back out at the square.

The Tuli had returned and were trudging along the road behind their wagon, traveling back the opposite way. She wasn’t surprised by their quick return. Storekeepers would prepare the Tuli orders beforehand to ensure they loaded and left as quickly as possible. Tuli presence wasn’t good for business.

Marcus, too, watched the wagon as he said, “Do you think their friendship could ever be something more? The sabhir and the slave? That they might stand on equal footing and love each other beyond the boundaries?”

Nora gripped her skirt in her hands. “Yes, sir. It’s possible, sir.”

“You really believe so?”

She leaned forward, clasping her hands to her chest. “With all my heart!”

He chuckled. “I suppose that’s revolutionary talk.”

“Perhaps, sir,” she said.

He smiled. "For now, I'm hungry."

"Yes, sir," she said, readily returning his smile. "Right away."

She floated to the kitchen, her feet never touching the floor. Every trouble she had ever experienced rolled away from her. Life was perfect. Magnificent. Astounding. Marcus knew she existed. He had spoken to her and treated her kindly. Everything she had ever dreamed was now possible. She wanted more. More time with him. More words with him. More touching. Much more. He had called it revolutionary. So be it. If she needed revolution to have him in her life, then revolution there would be. She would gladly shoot the first bullet.

She passed by the food and the plates in the kitchen and continued on to the backroom where Ziri sat at a table, decanting wine.

Nora leaned both hands on the table and looked him in the eye. "I want to join the uprising."

He considered her, then nodded. "Good."

It was enough. Enough for now.

Returning to the porch, Nora set Marcus's plate before him.

He laughed. "You always give me extra potatoes. Safiyya never serves nearly as much."

"I know you like them," Nora said. "Sir," she added quickly.

He picked up his fork. "Now I think we were discussing revolutionary thoughts."

Nora's heart soared. Here he was, making talk, not about her tasks, but about ideas, as though she had opinions he valued.

"Yes—"

“We had a deal!” a man shouted, leaping up from the next table.

The sabhir at the table dropped his napkin on his plate. “And you failed to deliver.”

Marcus clasped Nora’s arm, warning her to be still. She marveled at the ease with which he touched her and then stared at the faint shadows and contours of his strong hand.

“It didn’t arrive on the ship!” the first man said, desperation in his tone. “What do you expect me to do!”

The sabhir stood, his back to Marcus. “It was your own choice to leverage your savings on this venture.”

Marcus stood as well, his posture stiff. He held his arm out, blocking Nora, and though she fleetingly admired how his golden-edged taylasan draped over his arm, it was tempered with her growing concern of violence. She resented the men for interrupting them.

The first man clenched his fist. “You’ll ruin me!”

“You’ve ruined yourself,” the sabhir said, sneering.

A cry ripped from the first man’s throat. He jerked a pistol from his jacket. In one movement, he aimed at the sabhir, gritting his teeth. The sabhir’s eyes widened, and his mouth opened in a wordless shout as he lifted his hands.

The gun fired, and Marcus slung Nora aside. She screamed and held her ears, trembling, his arms tight around her as she listened to a scuffle, shouts all around, and then silence. The pressure of his arms lessened, but she remained against him, her cheek on the softness of his taylasan shawl, and the cold clasp touching her forehead.

Marcus held her at arm’s length. “Are you all right?”

Only then did she see the sabhir’s body as it lay on the other table, his turbaned head in a mess of greens, and

potatoes dripping from a tipped plate. A circle of blood had soaked into his shirt. He was dead. Nora gasped.

“Nora,” Marcus said, ducking to align his face with hers. “Are you all right?”

She nodded.

“Come here,” he said, leading her to the other side of the porch. “Sit down over here.”

She nodded again and allowed him to guide her to a chair.

Safiyya dashed onto the porch. “What on earth!”

“There was an argument,” Marcus said.

“Is that Udad Corti?” a sabhir asked.

“Yes, that’s him,” came an answer from the other side of the porch.

“Who shot him?” Safiyya asked.

The guests all pointed to the square. From her seat, Nora leaned forward to see over the side, and on the ground, held down by three men, was the writhing, spitting man who had shot the gun.

A group of sabhirim hurried across the square toward the inn, the lord mayor among them. “What’s all the commotion?” he demanded, his golden-edged taylasan swinging erratically with his movements. “Regá, what happened?”

Marcus shook his head. “It was an argument of some kind. They shouted, and then he shot him.”

The lord mayor marched up to the man and grabbed him by the shirt. “Citizen or slave?”

Nora stood to hear his response.

He shook the man. “Give me your answer!”

“You see,” said another sabhir, “we cannot tell. We need some way to know who these people are! At a glance!”

“Does anyone know who he is?” the lord mayor called.

Nora avoided his gaze. Slaves did not betray other slaves.

Four Nalta Guards approached on horseback, three in gray, one in burgundy. They approached and dismounted. Nora's stomach clenched with anxiety.

"Lieutenant Nyok!" the lord mayor called. "Arrest this man for murder."

The guards seized the man as Nyok asked, "Slave or citizen?"

The man refused to answer, and sabhirim yelled among themselves once more about their need to identify slaves.

Light fell across the man's face as he was lifted. He was certainly the cooper's slave. He had a wife and children. Trouble like this would destroy them. He would be killed, probably in public, so that Nora and the other slaves would be taught a lesson about not following his path. His wife would be left to fend for the family's survival, but she would fail. One woman's slave wages could barely support herself, let alone a child, and they had three. The children, born citizens, would be sold as slaves like their parents, either to someone in town or sent out into the countryside to the surrounding estates and ranches. Some mothers could not bear the strain and would go to the cliffs south of town and throw themselves into the ocean or throw their children into the ocean or all would go in together.

Marcus glanced between the prisoner and her, and she knew it was written on her face. She set her jaw. She would not tell. What would play out would be inevitable, but she would not hurry it along. Marcus nodded slightly, such that only she could see, communicating his understanding and sympathy. Even in her horror at the trouble in the street, her adoration of him grew.

“We must have this out once and for all!” a sabhir shouted as Lieutenant Nyok dragged the man away. “Tonight! Tonight, we decide our course of action, and tomorrow, we will introduce legislation to the senate!”

Safiyya raised her hand. “Gentlemen, my private rooms are available for your meeting.” She motioned toward the door.

“Very well!” the lord mayor said. “All who would care to input their opinions—opinions on this issue at hand—should make their way upstairs immediately!” The sabhirim noisily climbed the porch stairs and entered the inn.

Marcus squeezed Nora’s shoulder. “Excuse me. I must attend as well. Someone must be the voice of reason in this pack of jackals.”

Nora watched him join the group. Impulsively, she seized a water pitcher and followed up the stairs, slipping inside the sumptuous private room, just as the door was closing.

The men sat around the large table, their turbans bobbing with the discussion. The lord mayor stood at its head, and Marcus sat near the foot. He crossed his arms, but his eyes roamed from face to face with steely determination.

“It’s past time to have this measure in place,” said Brahim Salisa in his blue turban. “We cannot tell which among them are slaves and which are citizens. It’s dangerous! We should label our slaves like we label our women. Had any of the rest of us known there was a slave on the porch, we might have been able to stop this before Udad’s life was lost.”

The men murmured in agreement.

Marcus shook his head. “I don’t see how knowing he was a slave would have helped at all. I still wouldn’t have known his intentions. There are slaves around us all the time. They are harmless, and there is nothing to fear.”

“Say that to Udad!” Brahim said.

“Hear! Hear!” the lord mayor said. “Senator Regá—who will be here soon—is a long-time proponent of slave identification. When he arrives, let us all be in one accord!”

“Vote now, then!” Brahim called.

“Yes!” the lord mayor said. “All in favor of drafting slave identification legislation, raise your hands and say ‘aye.’”

“Aye!” The room shook with the call.

“And those opposed?”

Marcus raised his hand. “Nay.”

The lord mayor laughed. “And so it passes!”

Nora stifled a gasp, astonished the move had been so simple, so quick. In one moment, slave identification had taken the first step toward becoming law, and everyone present understood that nothing would stop it now. It was as good as passed, signed, sealed, and enacted. She was the first to know, the first of her class to stand in the new world. Nora’s lip quivered. Her hands tingled with fear. There would be no escape.

The sabhirim identified the Tuli by cuffing them to a table and pressing a hot branding iron to their faces, scorching their status into place while they screamed. The shackles would scrape her wrists and ankles. The table, stained with the blood of her friends, would feel hard on her back and pinch her shoulder blades. She would hear the bellows blowing the fire to a frenzy and see the white-hot iron as it filled her vision. The pain would consume her existence. It would claw at her face and her throat as she screamed and screamed for relief that would not come, even with the lifting of the branding iron.

The men applauded, pleased with their progress.

Nora looked to Marcus, who briefly met her eyes then looked away. Even he, a grand sabhir, the son of a senator, could not help her.

“There are more details to discuss,” Marcus called over the congratulatory chatter.

“Indeed!” the lord mayor said. He chuckled. “Now we have Marcus’s attention.”

Brahim leaned forward. “I think a brand would work. It does for the Tuli. Perhaps a unique design for slaves.”

Nora whimpered.

“What should we put on the design?” the lord mayor asked.

Marcus lay his hands flat on the table. “What are our other options? Gentlemen, let’s discuss all aspects of this.” He motioned to Brahim. “You had mentioned marking them like the women. What about green? What if the slaves wore green? Or. . .or. . .or a band? Some kind of ankle cuff?”

Brahim scoffed. “No one would see it on the ankle.”

“The wrist, then,” Marcus said. “A simple cuff. On the wrist. It can even be engraved with the owner’s information.”

A glimmer of hope.

“But then those will need to be made,” the lord mayor said. “It will need to be fitted— customized. We’ll have to have different sizes! It’ll be a whole complicated process. The brand is simple. One for all.”

Marcus shook his head. “The brand is also permanent, just as Tuli status is permanent. But slaves can buy their freedom and become citizens. Some go into business. Some are granted veils. Slavery is not always permanent, but a brand is. A brand cannot be removed like a cuff.”

Brahim lifted his hand. "If we design a new brand, then we can—"

Marcus slammed his fist on the table. "Will you still want to bed your slaves if their faces are scarred with a brand?"

The men shifted their eyes from one to another in awkward silence.

"A cuff would be sufficient, I think," Brahim said.

"On the wrist," the lord mayor said. "With the owner's information engraved."

The others nodded.

The lord mayor cleared his throat. "Let us vote, then, and draft the legislation for Senator Regá."

Chapter 14

BRYNNA

Corradh Fortress
Corradh Province
Norin

Brynna's shoes echoed through the corridor as she walked at Trinan's side. On their return to the Wyclythe wing after the party, they passed many dark windows, and for each one, she leaned closer, hoping for a glimpse of the festivities at the Great Circle. She heard the music as it shifted on the wind. She bounced on her toes in those moments, longing to dance, to move, to turn, to feel arms and hands and bodies around her doing the same.

"Where's Wyclythe?" Trinan asked. "He should have been there."

"One of Ladvyl's attachés saw him in the library," she said, "but I haven't seen any sign of him. I'm concerned. He had that meeting with Safwyn and then was to join us with the other sovereigns. Perhaps they're still meeting?"

“Three hours later?” Trinan said, incredulous. “Have you ever known him to pass up Ladvyl wine?”

“Safwyn wasn’t at the party either.”

“That means nothing,” he said with a wave of his hand.

Another window. The Circle called to her soul. “Once we find him, can we go to the Circle?”

He grunted. “Maybe.”

She smiled, pleased by the possibility. He nodded to the guard as he held the door of the wing open. They entered the sitting room and were startled to see King Wyclythe standing in the very center, still as though stunned, swaying slightly. His face, even painted, appeared a ghastly white and glistened with sweat.

Brynna plunged into cold concern and hurried to his side. “Your Majesty! Are you ill?” She took his arm and guided him toward a chair.

“Some pain. In my chest,” he whispered. “Just a little tired is all. I’ve been resting. Hasn’t helped.”

Trinan supported him as well and lowered him into an armchair by the fire. “Sit here.” He loosened Wyclythe’s cravat and called over his shoulder to the footman, “Go for a witch! Now! Hurry!”

The king leaned forward, breathing noisily.

Brynna dabbed her handkerchief on Wyclythe’s face and worried the witch wouldn’t arrive in time. Canonicals could heal, but no one could raise the dead.

Trinan knelt before the king. “Your Majesty, did you speak with Safwyn?”

The king puffed but nodded. “All. . .is. . .arranged. . .The tariff rates. . .match. . . It. . . is. . .done.”

Trinan nodded.

The footman returned, followed by a canonical witch with a regal gait. Her long auburn hair flowed in gentle waves, and her fair skin showed no sign of excitement. The bodice of her purple robe wrapped over her chest, fitting her figure and flaring at her hips before trailing to the floor. The fabric held a sheen that glistened in the light and guided the eye first one way, then another with disorienting sparkle.

Trinan straightened. "King Wyclythe needs your attention."

Bryнна stepped back to allow her access.

The witch nodded and, kneeling next to the king, placed both hands on his chest. Her fingers glowed with violet light, softly at first, but then brighter and brighter until the room filled with light, so much that Bryнна squinted. The witch threw her head back, her hair trailing loose and wild toward the floor. The moment swelled in violet radiance, until with a cracking sound, the light vanished.

Bryнна stared at the king with curiosity.

King Wyclythe took a deep breath and smiled, to the relief of all. "I feel like a new man," he said in his normal, soft voice.

The witch stumbled back, panting as though she had run for miles. The room remained still as she slowed her breathing. Soon, she straightened her shoulders and regained her aloof demeanor. Bryнна watched her, wary, for this woman, though she had healed the king, was still a witch.

"Thank you," the king said. "What's your name?"

"Meela."

He nodded. "Meela. I have been healed many times in my long years. None as resplendent and vigorous as that. Truly, yours is a powerful magic."

Meela did not bow to him nor thank him. Kings bore no authority over witches. “Is that all you require?” she asked.

“Yes,” he said. “I am content.”

“Very well.” She left the room without farewell.

Trinan crossed his arms. “I’m thankful for your healing, Your Majesty. What brought this on?”

King Wyclythe shook his head. “I’m not sure. My chest had a squeezing pressure in it, the likes of which I’ve never felt before.”

Brynna rubbed her hand on his arm and was surprised by his lack of muscle. “You should be careful. Rest.”

King Wyclythe smiled and patted her hand. “Oh, it’s nothing to worry about. All I needed was the witch, nothing more.”

“I agree with her, Your Majesty,” Trinan said. “No sense in taking chances. Tonight’s schedule includes only mindless chatter. You can rest now and be fresh for meetings in the morning.”

King Wyclythe nodded. “Perhaps you’re right.”

“Brynnalyn can read to you until you’re drowsy.”

She lifted her head with a slight shake, trying to remind him of the Circle and the dancing. “We were going—”

“Yes, that would be nice,” King Wyclythe said. He patted her hand again as Trinan left the sitting room.

Brynna slumped her shoulders. Disappointment welled within her. She wished for reels and jigs, yet her duty was to her king and chancellor. If she were pleased with the assignment, it would be her own will she was following, not Trinan’s. To follow her own whims was not duty. Duty implied a level of resistance, a change of course, a resignation of one’s own desires, and she was proud to be dutiful. With

a silent sigh, she rose and walked to her office to search the shelves for an interesting book to read.

She found Trinan writing a letter at his desk, the footman by his side. He sealed the envelope with wax and handed it to him. "Take this to the messengers," he said. "Have the swiftest rider deliver it to the port authority in Robynton. I want it there before dawn. Am I clear?"

"Yes, my lord," the footman said with a curt nod.

Bryнна watched him leave. "What was that about?"

"Notification to Commodore Andersyn that our valsydian tariffs have increased," he said. "We now match Safwyn's rates."

Bryнна gaped, shocked. "Match them! Why? He's moving his headquarters to Robynton as we speak, because of our lower rates, and it will bring a tremendous amount of needed business to our port. Revenue! Isn't that what you wanted?"

Trinan returned his pen to the holder. "I have decided, moving forward, that this is the best rate. He has no other choice but to pay it." He carried the candle to their bedchamber.

"But we talked about this," she said to his back. "About why tariff changes are a bad idea."

"And you said that import tariffs would be passed to the citizens when they buy the products," he called from within, then returned to the doorway as he threaded his arms into a different jacket. "This is valsydian. Our citizens don't buy it. It's sent up the Niemynyn road to Hykos. Problem solved." He stepped back within the room, out of her sight.

"Rather, that magnifies the problem on an international scale!" She crossed the office to stand at the doorway. "You'll throw the entire valsydian trade into crisis."

He stood at the mirror with his feet wide apart, lowering his head enough that he could see to retie his cravat. “You don’t understand what you’re talking about.”

“Andersyn may not be able to pay it at all,” she said. “He won’t make a profit, especially considering the extra transport costs of moving it from Robynton to the Neimynyn Road. You’ll kill any incentive for valsydian importation.”

“He’ll pay.”

She lifted her hand and dropped it with a huff. “He may strike. He can shut it all down. What then? If you’re set on the idea, we can look at small changes, small increases that will supplement—”

“This will optimize revenue,” he said, standing to his full height once again and straightening his cuffs.

“His new routes with us would optimize your revenue. Tariff manipulation is foolish!”

He rounded on her. “Are you calling me a fool?”

She shrank back and dropped her eyes away from his glare. “No.”

After a long moment of silence, Trinan turned back to the mirror, ducking slightly to brush his hair with his fingers. “Two can play this monopoly game. Valsydian is life. Andersyn will pay the new rates because he doesn’t want to die. If he wants to live to a ripe old age and not die of injury or illness, then the witches need their damn valsydian. Even if he has some kind of death wish—which I wouldn’t put past him—the man’s insane—the entire world will turn against him if he so much as slows down the process.”

“Or the world will turn against you for causing it.”

He huffed. “Hardly. The Valsydian Conventions recognize my right to make money from the cycle, to recoup our efforts. Everyone takes their bit. The Gantish use the Tuli

in the mines and take a cut at Nalta. We ship it and take our cut in tariffs. The Hykosi are compensated through the Conventions' contributions. No one can blame me for wanting my full amount." He adjusted the belt that held his ceremonial knife. The Walyss crest that embellished the handle reflected the candlelight.

"This is more than your full amount!" she said, her voice rising in pitch and volume. "Much more. This is detrimental to the entire balance. To the province! To the economy! Rate changes of this magnitude may even violate the Conventions."

"It is not your decision to make!" he roared. Brynna flinched and shied away. "It is mine! And I have made it!"

Brynna rubbed her elbow as she thought back to the conversation with the sovereigns concerning King Safwyn and his tariff rate choices. They had mused over the concept of terrorist threats. Perhaps Trinan was the one being threatened. The Council of Norin might have said they would blow up the port or Wyclythe Fortress. They might have threatened to kill him. She lurched toward him and seized his sleeve. "Are you being pressured? Is it this Council of Norin? Are we being threatened?"

Trinan ripped his arm from her grip. His nostrils flared. "That is none of your concern. Go read to Wyclythe. I have business to manage."

He strode from their chamber, and she hurried after him. "Trinan!"

He opened the main door and turned back. "Don't wait up for me." The door closed behind him.

She gritted her teeth. She deserved to know. If terrorists were threatening her province, the entire world deserved to

know. Brynna returned to the king, book in hand. Wyclythe outranked Trinan. He could fix this.

She entered the sitting room to see King Wyclythe in a chair by the fire, his blue blanket on his lap, his feet in slippers. His hands lay in his lap on the fuzzy folds and patted together expectantly as he waited for his bedtime story. She slowed her steps as she realized that he would be no help. He would not save her. He would not override Trinan's tariffs. No one would. She released her angry breath. The battle was over, and she had lost.

She smiled at the king's expectant face, though she felt no gladness. Sitting primly beside him, she turned to the first page of the long saga of the early settlers of Gavony. She struggled to focus her thoughts, but after a while, she fell into a rhythm and managed to read aloud the first dozen pages of the book before hearing the king's soft snores. She quietly closed the cover, and setting the book aside, she roused him and encouraged him to bed. With him thus settled, she closed the door to his rooms and went to her own.

Standing at the window in her chamber, Brynna looked out over the grounds to the Great Circle. A wistful sadness settled in her belly. The festival was over, and she had missed it. The Life Fire burned low, now absent of dancers and musicians. One by one, the many torches lining the harvest displays were extinguished.

She took a cornflower from her hair and stared at it on her palm. It drooped and languished, its single day of glory having passed. She held it to her nose and smelled the sweet pungency of wilting petals. Her thoughts turned to precious days and nights with Trinan, and she wondered if those, too, had quickly withered beyond repair. With a

heavy sigh, she dressed for bed and lay on her pillow to stare at the darkness.

The bed shifted and creaked. Brynna blinked into wakefulness, disoriented until she saw the shape of the window and remembered Harvestide. A chilling draft brushed past her, and she clutched the blanket to her chin as Trinan settled next to her. She rolled to her side and closed her eyes.

Trinan's hands pulled up the hem of her nightgown.

She cringed. "Trinan. Please."

He kissed her neck, his hand fondling her breast.

"Not now," she said. "I'm tired. Tomorrow."

A rumble emanated from his throat as he rolled her onto her back and climbed onto her, centering himself. She winced and looked to the side, to the window. She knew her duty to him, her duty as a woman. The bedframe creaked with each of his grunts as she imagined the music and revelry at the Circle. She could fly over them, watching the people dance and sing and play, soaring above the Life Fire as it burned below.

As he groaned, Trinan's grip tightened on her hips, then his weight lifted, and she could breathe freely again. He turned to his side, sliding away from her, and the silence and chill returned.

She remembered nights in his arms. She remembered sleeping on his chest with his arms around her and his fingers tracing through her hair. She swallowed the lump in her throat, wanting those nights again. Cautiously, she wriggled close to him and nestled her forehead on his back, the top of her bare foot resting against his warm leg.

"What are you doing?" he muttered.

"I'm cold."

“There’s a blanket on the chair.”

Brynna shrank back and rolled over to stare at the window until she faded into dreamless sleep.

Chapter 15

CADOC

Robynton
Wyclythe Province
Norin

On the Robynton beach, Cadoc Andersyn basked in the glow of a Harvestide bonfire. Behind him, the full moon lit *Darsham* as she rested on the gentle waves. The music, singing, and laughter of the dancing villagers lifted into the night and would until the first rays of dawn. His body ached with the fatigue of having moved furniture, safes, and stacks and stacks of records into his new office, but his brain was abuzz with holiday spirit and copious amounts of quality mead.

Bright eyes in a pretty face appeared at his shoulder. A woman's hand took his and tugged him back towards the dancing. He laughed and joined hands, circling around and weaving in and out, over and under, as the musicians played a bounding jig. Dancing livened his spirit. He had danced in many places throughout Gavony and the nations of the

southern seas, from crowded roadside pubs to glittering royal ballrooms, but nothing lifted his soul like the simple festival dances of home. At the end of the set, he tumbled to the sand along with the others and laughed as he caught his breath.

A dark figure approached, and even with his mead-addled brain, Cadoc recognized Thackery and knew something was afoot. He brushed the sand from his clothes, then met him on the shadows' edge.

"What happened to your complaints over being a decrepit, old man and needing sleep before an early start in the morning?" Cadoc asked.

Thackery chuckled. "I'm not here for the dancing," he said, looking out at the fire, "though the flowers are tempting."

Cadoc smiled and glanced back at the women. "They are." Mead had offered him one type of warmth, the fire and dancing another. He intended to find yet a third before dawn. He lifted a silent prayer thanking the First Breath for Norin's lax mores prior to Teerlagee. He could pair with anyone who both desired him and had not yet participated in the marriage dance, no matter their gender or whether they were courting another. It certainly made the holidays a lot more fun for those who had yet to swap knives and settle down. He pitied the nations he had encountered that held to more rigid traditions.

Thackery held up a paper with a broken seal. "Just arrived by special messenger. Chancellor Walyss has made his move."

"On Harvestide? He must be the life of the party." Cadoc tipped the paper to the light to read it. The new tariff rates appeared, and anger blazed in his belly. "He's either a

fucking madman or a revolting coward! Back to the office! This changes everything.”

They tramped through the sand, and after resurrecting the office fire, Cadoc wiped the indigo and green paint from his face. He settled at his desk, askew as it was in the disarray of moving, and read the note once more as Thackery lit the lamps. The numbers angered him more the second time. “The rates match Safwyn. Moving our headquarters accomplished nothing.”

“I may have a hernia to show for it,” Thackery said, leaning on the clerk’s desk.

“Find a witch tomorrow. Do we move back?”

“I don’t see a reason to,” Thackery said. “There would be no financial benefit. Just extra work.”

Cadoc flung the paper onto his desk. “I can’t import valsydian at that rate. They must see that.”

“I don’t know how it would miss their notice.”

“I, for one, would prefer to not die of a lack of valsydian,” Cadoc said.

Thackery’s eyelid twitched. “Is this the work of the Council of Norin again?”

“No idea,” Cadoc said. “What do we know of Walyss?”

“Nothing of substance. No family to speak of. His only known connection is to Seth Dasveld and his daughter.”

Cadoc shrugged. “So we don’t know whether he’s contrived this himself, or if he’s joined Safwyn in being pressured by some rag-tag group of backwater ruffians.”

“I wouldn’t call the Council of Norin that, sir,” Thackery said. “They’re powerful and deadly and somehow influence the most powerful people in Norin.”

Cadoc rested his hands on top of his head, his elbows wide. “Valsydian must continue to move, for the sake of all

of our lives, but I must gain enough in return to at least cover my expenses and some of the lost opportunity costs—and these fucking tariffs prevent that. I'd take a significant loss! I have no choice but to conceal the true amount of cargo and sell it to my own sources."

"They have records, sir. They know what your normal supply is, and they'll be searching for signs of smuggling."

"But *Darsham* is a new ship. I've never put valsydian on her, and there are no records, historical or otherwise. They don't yet know what she can carry."

Thackery furrowed his brow.

Cadoc held up his finger. "They know our valsydian stores will increase with the addition of *Darsham* to my fleet—they just don't know by how much. I can start moving a reasonable amount of valsydian through regular channels—that will reassure everyone and stabilize the market—and then we can move more without their knowledge, enough to recoup the losses and build a profit. The official inventories would show nothing amiss. The actual weights would only be listed on my personal manifest."

Thackery rubbed his chin. "That might work."

"It must work," Cadoc said. "We have no choice."

Chapter 16

BRYNNA

Wyclythe Fortress
Wyclythe Province
Norin

Papers lay strewn haphazardly across the conference room table at the Wyclythe Fortress. Brynna looked back and forth between them and Trinan's face.

He lifted another paper and furrowed his brow once again. "And revenue?"

"A dramatic increase."

With a nod, he tossed the paper away and took yet another. "Did the tariffs play into it?"

She shuffled a few papers around. "As you anticipated," she said, handing him the chart. "Andersyn's valsydian tonnage into Robynnton is comparable to what he delivered to Tadsyn under King Safwyn. The revenue from the Andersyn Shipping Company alone has our coffers overflowing. This'll promote tremendous growth. In a year's time, Robynnton will be unrecognizable."

Trinan hummed and rubbed his chin. Brynna waited, and while he read, her eyes wandered to the window, her favorite in the fortress. Though not nearly as magnificent as the stained glass in Corradh Fortress's grand hall, this plain window's northeastern view offered diffuse, gentle lighting, perfect for work, collaboration, or surreptitious novel reading in the rare moment she could slip away from her tasks. On a clear day, she could climb onto the wide stone sill and look across the fields, over the town of Robynton, and imagine she could see the top of the poplar tree behind her father's workshop. With Trinan's spyglass, she could watch ships sailing to and from the harbor.

Trinan tapped the page. "He's eating the extra cost."

"Yes, he is," she said. She lifted her shoulders. "Despite my doubts he would."

"And the new ship? *Darsham*? How has that impacted his importation?"

"*Darsham*'s specifics are a bit murkier, um. . ." She flipped through a stack of portfolios. "I have past records—none of *Darsham*, of course, but the others—here." She offered the folder to him. "You can see the increase in valsydian. I'm no judge of shipping capacity, so I can only guess that's the right amount. It makes sense though. If I extrapolate the numbers based upon the other—"

A knock sounded, and Clara entered with hesitant movements.

"The harbormaster dropped this by," she said, offering a stack of papers. "He said you had requested it."

Brynna took the papers and read the first few lines. "This is the inventory Andersyn filed for *Darsham*'s last shipment, itemized by commodity and order. We can compare—"

The door closed, and Brynna looked up, surprised that Clara had left the room without direction first. Such behavior broke protocol. Clara should have remained until she was dismissed, instead of running away. One more thing to address.

She handed the inventory to Trinan and crossed her arms as he read.

“Silk, spices, timber, copper, iron,” Trinan said. “All seems in order. Certainly extensive.”

She nodded. “Only his personal manifest would be more accurate. It certainly emphasizes the extent to which Norin relies upon imports from the southern seas.”

Trinan grunted and handed it back to her. Brynna turned the pages and lingered over the timber section, noting the various exotic woods, most of which were allotted to her father. Acacia, balsa, ebony, hickory, ash. Her thoughts turned to the workshop where it was all stacked, bamboo, mahogany, and more. Mahogany. It wasn’t listed.

She squinted. “Isn’t everything supposed to be on this list? Truly everything?”

Trinan leaned on the table, examining a graph. “If it’s not,” he said with a distracted air, “they can’t calculate the charges. And if the charges aren’t paid, then it’s been smuggled.”

She searched the list again. The mahogany that had been delivered to her father was clearly not listed on the page. She chewed her cheek, her stomach knotting. “We have a problem.”

Trinan lifted a page from the table, then took the inventory from her again. He laid both side by side. “I’ll say.”

“The timber?”

“No, the valsydian.”

She moved next to him. “What do you see?”

“*Basilisk’s* numbers haven’t changed,” he said. “That’s to be expected. But the new *Darsham* numbers. . .” He shook his head. “They’re simply not high enough to account for the current drop in market prices.”

“What do you mean?”

“Prices have dropped as the market has stabilized,” he said. “There’s more supply in play—which is to be expected with the *Darsham* acquisition—yet the valsydian tonnage listed here is barely higher than that of *Basilisk*. It’s higher, mind you, but not nearly high enough. The numbers can’t be right. The market is flush with more valsydian than we’ve seen in years, but the inventory doesn’t reflect that.”

“I noticed something else.”

He glanced at her. “Oh?”

“My father imports large quantities of exotic timber. Some he uses in his own shop, and the rest he distributes throughout Norin. I maintain those accounts for him.”

“And?”

“Some of it isn’t listed here on the inventory.”

He creased his brow and picked up the timber page. “Show me.”

“One small example,” she said, leaning over his arm to point. “He just received a fair amount of mahogany from Andersyn, but it’s not listed here.” She handed him the *Basilisk* inventory. “Nor here. I would need to check the dates of other deliveries, but I believe there are more instances.”

He read the pages. “He’s smuggling. And if he’s smuggling timber and valsydian, then who knows what else he’s bringing in.” He tossed the papers aside. “We need the manifest. Then we’d have proof and could take him to court.”

“You can’t use this?” she asked while straightening his papers into piles. “The inventory isn’t enough?”

He shook his head. “No, I need to compare the two. The captain’s manifest is the final word—the captain’s official statement in their own hand. It demonstrates knowledge of any smuggled cargo. I’ll have Andersyn submit a copy.”

“That may not work.”

“Why not?” He picked up his pen and slid toward him a blank sheet of paper. “A subpoena is simple enough.”

“A manifest is a proprietary document,” she said. “A matter of honor. I’ve lived my whole life in Robynton, and I’ve never seen one. There’s no captain alive who’d let that paper leave his hands, subpoena or no.”

Trinan slowly straightened. “I am the chancellor of Wyclythe. He wouldn’t dare disregard—”

“He might.”

“Then I’ll arrest him for contempt. And obstruction. And—”

“—disrupt the entire port, possibly without reason.”

Trinan growled and dropped the pen to the table.

Bryнна gathered another stack of the papers and tapped the edges on the table to align them. “What happens to a smuggler?”

He shrugged. “Depends on the charges. For a man like Andersyn, there are probably capital crimes involved.”

Her eyes widened. “That bad?”

“It never stops at just smuggling. Piracy, murder, theft. Gunrunning. Fomenting rebellion. Cadoc Andersyn is a dangerous man. It can be more difficult to find solid evidence and testimony for those other crimes, but smuggling is cut and dry. We can use it to place him in custody while

we investigate the rest.” He paused. “I wonder if your father might try to get that manifest.”

“My father?”

“You just said he ordered a lot of timber. He may be able to use that as a way to see the manifest. Claim some kind of mistake was made or something.”

“Papa doesn’t talk to them.”

“What do you mean?”

“I still manage the accounts and place the orders,” she said. “I’m the one who meets with Victor—he’s Andersyn’s branch secretary here in town. My father doesn’t know much about that side of the business, nothing that would involve paperwork.”

“I can think of nothing else to do but to ask him.”

She hesitated. “I could try.”

Trinan wrinkled his forehead. “Andersyn is a vile, wicked man. He would cut your throat as soon as look at you.”

She smiled, incredulous. “An attaché of the king? And bring all of Norin down upon himself? I doubt it. Besides, I’m not anyone whom Andersyn would suspect. And I’m familiar with his office. Victor would think nothing of my presence there.”

Trinan hesitated, mixed emotions playing across his face. He nodded, a slight movement at first that then grew. “All right. Get the *Darsham* manifest. Do whatever you have to do.”

She quickly gathered her papers.

“I didn’t mean right this minute,” he said, pulling on her waist.

She offered her cheek for his kiss. “I have several things to tie up here and in town. I probably won’t be able to start on the manifest until tomorrow afternoon.”

“I see,” he muttered. “Send Clara to me, then. I need to speak with her.”

“Yes, of course,” she said. “Can you address her exit behavior please? She needs to wait until she’s dismissed.”

He nodded. “As you like.”

Chapter 17

NORA

Nalta
Gantu

Nora trembled against the wall. Dim, gray light filtered into the inn's back hallway, and spiderwebs cloaked the dusty corners. She huddled as far from the front door as she could. Her breath came in gasps, and she pressed her hands over her stomach as she tried to calm the churning and knotting within.

Light burst from the far doorway, and Ziri stepped in, closing the door to the dining room behind him. She didn't want to see him, yet his presence calmed her—it always did.

He approached slowly. "Do you know what time they will come for y—"

"No," she said, the word jumping from her mouth.

Nodding, he stepped closer and squeezed her shoulder. "I wish I could stop this."

She shook her head. "No one can stop this." She inhaled a deep breath and cleared her throat, being sensible, getting

herself together. "It's nothing." She lifted her chin and avoided his eyes.

"It's not nothing."

The ceiling joists receded into the darkness, one after another. She, too, wished to disappear. "A cuff is not a brand," she said. "He saved me from that."

Ziri nodded.

"So it shouldn't bother me."

"It's understandable that it does," he said.

She closed her eyes. "Will it hurt? Will it burn?"

"I don't know."

"What does it mean?" she said, opening and closing her hands. "Everyone will know I'm a slave. How will they treat me?" A tear traced down her cheek. "Will Safiyya change? Will the customers see me as less than I was before? Will I be able to walk through town without being bothered?"

"You will never be less to me."

The far door opened again, a beam of light streaming in. A woman entered, a woman from upstairs. The beads on her lustrous silk gown winked in the light until she walked deeper into the shadows. As she passed by, her elegant, lined eyes examined Nora as one would a smudge on glass. Her powdered nose wrinkled, and she tossed her perfect curls, flipping them to her other shoulder. They bounced with the motion, then draped across her ample, shapely bosom, which was revealed by her scandalously low neckline.

Nora shrank further against the wall and listened to the woman's receding steps. She watched the light flare as another door was opened and sighed as the darkness returned once more. She had always been friends with the women upstairs, had been seen as a compatriot of sorts, but now

they knew her to be a slave. She was now a detestable bug, worthy only of being trampled.

Nora inhaled a shaking breath and craved comfort.

Ziri stood close. "I will go with you and—"

"They're soldiers. They won't let you."

"Then I will be as near to you as I can." He leaned forward, his mussy hair falling across his olive brow. "I promise you," he said, "you will not be alone."

She raised her eyes, looked into his, and saw his gentle earnestness. She leaned against him, and he held her in his arms and pressed her head against his shoulder.

The door at the far end opened once more. Safiyya appeared in the light, her motions slow, unlike her usual brusque demeanor. "The soldiers are here," she murmured.

Nora shuddered, fearing she would melt into a puddle of hysterics, and yet the wave failed to crest. Knowing the moment no longer loomed over her, that it had finally arrived, built within her a strange sense of resolve. Hopelessness brought its own strength. She nodded, then walked with Safiyya to the porch.

There stood two soldiers, members of the Gantish army, scimitars and all. Never before had she stood so close to Gantish soldiers. They were leagues more frightening than the guards in gray, and the blood drained from her face.

"It takes two of them?" Ziri grumbled behind her.

"Nora Jlassi?" one said.

She nodded.

"Papers?" he said, holding his palm to Safiyya.

Safiyya withdrew a folded paper from her pocket and placed it in his hand. Nora fought a moment's bitterness at Safiyya's obedience. She didn't blame Safiyya, yet a part of her begrudged her quiet compliance.

“Let’s go,” the soldier said, waiting for Nora to walk to the street. She stepped down to walk ahead of him.

“Keep back!” the soldier behind her shouted.

She tried to turn, but the first soldier grabbed her arm. “Keep walking,” he growled at her.

“I’m just walking down the street,” Ziri’s voice said. “Or are citizens not allowed in the street anymore?”

She heard a scuffle and shouts. Straining over her shoulder, she saw Ziri grappling with the other soldier. The soldier at her side pulled her onward.

Under a strong sun, he ushered her through the dusty streets, past stores and stables and fruit stands. The orange tile roofs reflected the light, casting color on nearby walls, and lent the sensation of walking alongside the stratified umber cliffs of the Ruvoq desert. Or so she’d heard the inn’s customers say. She’d never been, herself. Slaves didn’t take such journeys, except to bear burdens. Nora, instead, picked customers’ words like berries—each was worth the sting of the thorns—then hid in the dark to roll the stories on her tongue, letting the juices drip from her mouth as she imagined herself wrapped in sweetness and tantalized with tart sensations. She could step to the crumbling edges of the cliffs, sail across the stormy ocean, run beneath the leafy trees of faraway Norin. Songs would lift from her, her melodic imaginings painted on air as she washed floors, or dishes, or tables.

As she walked, pulled by the soldier, no songs rose within her. Citizens stopped their work as she passed. Sabhirim paused their conversations and stared. A kvina crossed to the other side of the street. Nora’s face flushed and warmed, but whether from shame or the midday warmth, she didn’t

know. She only wished to be away from it all. In the darkness, safe.

They passed into the deep shade cast by the Ganstag, an immense and imposing building constructed of heavy stonework, where the government offices were housed. She looked up to the third and top floor. It was there, in the large assembly hall, the senate had placed their votes and decided to band the slaves. Nora knew those men. All of them. They spent much of their time in the upper rooms of the inn. She had waited on each and every one during formal meals with their wives and kvinas, and afterwards, with their protected women safely returned home, she had seen the men partaking in sweaty escapades, nights of debauchery with the unveiled women Safiyya provided.

Safiyya's beautiful and literate women smelled of flowers instead of the rank bodily odors and rotten fish that would cling to the damp skin of the men who sampled the desperate girls on the wharf. Safiyya's women could elevate a conversation and distract a man from the truth that he was no different from his fellow grunting under the dock.

Such were the sabirhim in their turbans and taylasans, the grand sabhirim with their gold embroidery. They were the men who gave orders, the elite of the elite. Nora had always followed their directives to the letter, ensured their every comfort, anticipated their whims, yet the walk she took now was her reward. She struggled to squelch her thoughts. Thinking would only lead to rage.

A bearded man sat in the shade of a tree, a bowl at his side. He wrung out a cloth and wrapped the strip around his blistered and banded wrist, grimacing with each movement. Nora's steps slowed, and her eyes widened, wondering if it was a sight foretold for her. There was no witch

to heal his wounds, nor would there be for her. Witches, scarce in Gantu, were only called as a last resort to preserve an investment—never for something as frivolous as relieving pain. Slaves did not deserve such luxuries. The soldier dragged her onward, even as her vision blurred, and the world seemed to spin.

The smithy's shop on the edge of town abutted his small house, and his wife stood in the yard shaking out a towel. Nora stared at her, seeking a connection, some kind of compassionate expression or perhaps even a protest against what was about to occur, but the woman looked away and went back into the house, closing her eyes, closing the door.

"Sit there," the soldier said, pointing to a bench.

A moment later, the second soldier rejoined him. His lip had been split, and blood caked at the corner of his mouth, but he had no prisoner in tow. Nora smiled to herself, glad that Ziri had escaped him.

The smithy held out his hand. "Do you have the paperwork?"

The soldier handed it over. Nora clasped her hands together and stared at the lines on her wrist. She wondered if those lines told the future or if only palms did so.

"Who is your mistress?" the smithy asked.

"Safiyya Gil."

He checked the paper. "And you are Nora Jlassi?"

She nodded.

The smithy sat at his bench and set a strip of thin metal before him. Using his hammer and letters, he imprinted both names on the band.

A face appeared at the window above the smithy's head, with the unmistakable outline of Ziri's mussy hair. He nodded to her, sporting a puffy eye. The sight comforted her.

She blinked away tears. She was not alone. He had promised her that.

As the smithy handed the band to the soldier, he said, "Check that this is correct."

The soldier compared the band with the paper and nodded, handing it back.

The smithy pulled his stool close to Nora and sat with his knees touching hers. He leaned close. "The metal will be heated, and the flux is also hot. I will do my best to not let it touch you. If you hold still, it will be less difficult. If you move or fight, it will burn you. Badly." He glanced at the soldier, then looked back at her. He lowered his voice. "There is a time to fight. This is not it. I am not your enemy. Do you understand?"

She nodded.

The smithy stoked the flames, heating the metal until he could bend it into shape. The flux shimmered like water, and the face in the window remained. When the smithy took her arm, she closed her eyes and braced herself for the heat. His grip tightened. She cried out as it burned, but when the smithy released her, she saw only one area of bubbled skin on her arm. It throbbed, and she hissed through her teeth, but she had once received worse from the inn's baking oven.

The smithy stood. "That should heal quickly. If it doesn't, you can ask your mistress for a witch. Sometimes. . .sometimes they'll call them."

With the deed complete, the soldiers shoved her into the street, then moved on to collect the next slave. Ziri crept around the corner.

"They're gone," Nora said.

He approached with cautious steps, his brow furrowed. Gently, he took her hand. He examined the metal band and touched the letters, then turned her arm over and saw the burn.

“I had feared it would be worse,” he said.

Nora nodded. “He was careful.”

“I’m grateful,” he said, producing his handkerchief and wrapping it around her wound.

She surveyed the street, wanting to avoid the Ganstag. “Let’s go back a different way.” He nodded, and Nora rested in his companionship as they walked toward the inn through the center of town and past the temple with its bell tower. Buildings crowded the street, and innumerable stalls lined the way, each covered with colorful awnings. Pottery, jewelry, vegetables, and other goods spilled toward the street to tempt passersby. Two bareheaded girls in matching green gandouras sat in the dirt, slapping their hands together and chanting songs that winked at inappropriate language. A man called out to Nora and Ziri, encouraging them to peruse his Norinian wines. Nora shook her head while Ziri waved him away. The crowd grew thicker, and the voices louder. Bareheaded men huddled together, each one either in heavy discussion or listening intently.

“What’s going on?” she asked. “Is the banding upsetting people?”

Ziri shook his head. “No, no one seems to care about that,” he said in a bitter tone. “It’s the execution.”

“That’s today?”

He nodded, and as they moved through the gathering crowd, the wooden gallows and the hangman’s noose rose high over the people.

The gates of the Nalta Guard compound opened, and the crowd erupted into cries and shouts, rushing forward, pushing and jostling to get closer.

“They’re bringing him out now,” Ziri said. He had leaned close to her, yet still needed to shout over the noise. “Looks like Nyok will oversee the execution himself.”

Nora couldn’t see anything through the dense and shifting crowd. Their angry shouts hurt her ears, and their contorted faces frightened her. The cries increased, aligned, and turned into chants, calling over and over for, “Death to him!” Turbans separated to the edges of the square as bare heads and pointed hoods shoved forward and seethed with aggression.

Ziri threw his arm around Nora, and she leaned against him. “I didn’t expect this much of a reaction,” he shouted. “I don’t understand it.”

Nora knew why. Each raised fist bore a metal bracelet and burns. Her wrist throbbed in sync with the chanting.

Two guards in gray appeared on the scaffold, a bound and bareheaded man between them. The man stumbled to the center of the gallows and stood with his shoulders hunched. Lieutenant Nyok walked to the edge, lifted a long page of parchment and read the death proclamation. No one heard his words over the shouting.

The noose was fitted; the lever, pulled.

Done.

Deafening shouts lifted. The moment itself melted into the midst, lost in the cheering turmoil, an afterthought of collective release.

Nora grabbed Ziri’s kurta near his neck, pulling him closer to her. “They think they’ve killed the man who caused this,”

she said to his ear. "And now they feel better. As though justice has been done."

The cheers continued, building in strength.

"This means nothing," Ziri said, pushing by an old man who cheered with hands raised to heaven. "They're wasting their power. Power they could use to free themselves. That man didn't cause this. He didn't pass the order. It's a distraction, and they're falling for it."

Nora huffed. "And the Ganstag rejoices with a double victory. We'll serve triple cask whisky tonight."

The crowd shifted, and Ziri stumbled. Nora pulled him up by his arm. He grimaced and wiped dirt from his clothes. "And in the morning," he said, "we'll work all the harder to fight them. For ourselves. For freedom."

Fire flashed in his eyes, yet she wondered if he was as delusional and misguided as the crowd was.

The crowd thinned as they turned a corner. "What about his children?" she asked, wishing to press him toward something more practical.

"His wife is owned by the tannery," he said, "but the children have been sold to the Luna Estate. He'll take possession of them in six weeks. The court estimated she had that long before her food stores would run out. It's all the time they could give her."

"Could we donate more food to her? To extend the time?"

"No," he said. "The judge inventoried everything and set the possession date. It's already done."

Nora's breath failed. Winsen Luna. He owned a large ranch to the northeast of the Regá holdings. Safiyya had suspended him from the inn several times for leaving marks on the women upstairs. He was always allowed back,

though, because a price can be put on anything. Even if Luna minded his manners in town, on his own estate, his will was law. Rumors swirled of women and children who were never seen again, tales of ghosts and demons, and graphic tales of sexual deviance that nauseated Nora's stomach, tales which she had little reason to doubt.

Nora closed her eyes, horrified at the children's fate. "I'd rather be eaten by panthers than be sent there. Of all the places they could be sold—"

"That's the worst," he said, his arm slipping away from her shoulder. "But Luna was the highest bidder."

"Can't Lieutenant Nyok stop him?"

Ziri guided her out of the way of a passing wagon. "He says he doesn't have enough evidence that Luna has broken any laws."

"Luna is too smart and too rich to leave evidence."

"I know. But Nyok abides by the absolute letter of the law, and the laws were written to protect the likes of Luna. The power structures are working precisely how they were designed to work," he said, then leaned his head closer to her, "and that's why we must remove those structures."

They moved past the last of the crowd and on toward the inn.

Nora paused in the yard and cast him a sidelong glance. "So what are we doing about it?" she asked in a low voice.

He glanced over his shoulder and crossed his arms. "You sure you want in?"

"Yes," she said. "Even more so now."

"We must get the children out of the country. To Hykos. It's the only way they'll be safe."

"How?"

“Just be ready to ride with me to Elias’s tomorrow morning.”

Chapter 18

BRYNNA

Robynton
Wyclythe Province
Norin

To obtain the manifest, Brynna first wanted information on Andersyn's habits, and there was no better source than his own secretary. Her blue hangerok looked fresh and clean and feminine, perfect for disarming a man like Victor. She leaned her shoulder into the heavy door of the Andersyn Shipping Company, which left a walnut oil smudge on her sleeve.

The doorway opened to the familiar office of polish and brass. The floors, walls, and ceilings, slatted and varnished, claimed classic quality and success. The air held the scent of lemon oil, lending depth to the rich gleam and glow. As the door closed behind her, it blocked the sounds of the busy Robynton wharf.

The office held two desks, both piled high with papers. The first, grand and heavy, ruled the room. The other, light

and minimal, sat near the back wall. A heavy rifle safe lurked in the corner, next to the backroom doorway.

A middle-aged man with russet-brown skin and graying temples rose behind the smaller desk. "Brynn! Welcome!" he said, removing his spectacles. His eyes twice squinted and released as he adjusted to the change.

"Good afternoon, Victor," she said, frowning at the oil on her sleeve.

"Are you here to place an order or to pick up today's goods?"

She glanced up. "Is *Darsham* coming in today?"

"Yes, any moment," he said, examining his pocket watch. "But it will be a while before everything is unloaded and hours before an order can be pulled. If you like, I can have someone deliver your goods to the workshop tomorrow."

"That's very kind of you," she said. "And yes, I'm here to place an order."

His eyes brightened. "Please! Will you have a seat?" He pulled a chair beside his small desk.

"Thank you," she said, sitting lightly on the chair's edge. "Is Andersyn, himself, sailing *Darsham*?"

Victor chuckled. "Yes, though I'm sure the board would rather he settle down and run the company from Tadsyn. They haven't yet won that battle against any of the Andersyns in 150 years, and I doubt Cadoc will grant them victory now."

"Is he neglectful of administration, then?"

He waved his hand. "Oh, no, I jest. He's attentive enough when the need arises. Both the office whisky and the lamp oil will run low by morning's light!"

"How long will he be in port?"

“Not long, I’m sure. He prefers a speedy cargo exchange and a swift return to sea. Now that said,” he rested his elbow on the desktop and lifted his fingers, “I’ve heard rumors he’s preparing for another journey to the southern seas. If that’s the case, he’ll be in port for a while.”

“Oh?” she said, tracing her fingers along the edge of the desk and watching his eyes follow. “Why is that?”

“To prepare. He needs a proper crew and good supplies—it’s a long way, that first leg.” He leaned forward, his eyes sparkling with the singular delight an aging man has in explaining something to a young woman. “You see, he sails straight across the entire southern sea, through hurricanes, past coral reefs and sandbars, all the way to the cattle markets on Tivix, the furthest island.”

“That seems very far,” she said, attempting to look doe-eyed. “It must take a long time.”

“45 days without seeing land—and could be close to 50. Then he’ll hop from island to island. Shialor, Tahlam, Frelun, Bardoon, Pola. All of them—well, the important ones, that is. The ones with deepwater ports.”

“Of course, and then?”

“He sails the final leg back to Gavony, loaded with treasures.”

“Impressive!” she said, beaming. “There must be a lot of work for you, too.”

“Indeed,” he said, tenting his fingers. “I’ve kept this branch running for 25 years.”

“25 years! 25 years of inventories, and orders, and manifests, and—”

“I don’t handle the manifests,” Victor said, lifting his index finger, “but the rest, yes.”

Her eye fell once more on the safe in the corner.

He lifted his pen. "Now what shall I put you down for?"

"More of the rosewood I ordered last month."

"Rosewood, again! A new commission?"

She smiled and stood. "A project of sorts, yes."

He continued writing. "I'll send the invoice to your father's workshop with the order tomorrow, if that's acceptable."

"No, please send it to the chancellor's office instead."

He looked up. "Will do."

She bade farewell and returned to the wharf as cries lifted around her. People pointed and ran to the railings as *Darsham* appeared on the horizon, sails shining in the late-afternoon sun. As it grew larger, she watched the sails pivot and change. Specks of sailors moved about the rigging and deck. The needed manifest had arrived, and she would await its disembarkation.

With time to spare, Brynna walked down the stairs to the beach. The tide ran high, and she stepped unevenly through the mounds of sand. Fiddler crabs ran before her, darting around the reeds, and the waves roared in her ears. As she rambled, she picked up shells, studied them, then tossed them away into the water. Near the water's edge, her boots left dents in the wet sand, marking where she had been until the gentle waves washed them away.

The ocean beckoned. She hesitated a moment with a glance down at her blue hangerok, but the primness of starched linen paled in comparison with the ocean's playful touch. She threw the last shell to the waves and raced through the foam at the water's edge. She ran, faster, faster still, her lungs bursting, her muscles burning, her boots splashing, the water soaking her hem and spattering her dress. As she veered back to the loose sand, her skirt

snapped about her knees, wet and cold, and her breath gasped only when she paused her laughter. The wind snatched at her chignon, so she plucked the errant pins and released her hair to its fingers.

Brynna arrived at the rocks that formed the harbor's western breakwater, a high stone wall that shielded the harbor from the scourge of the ocean waves. She and Erling had attempted to climb it many times as children but had never succeeded. Curiosity rose within her again. She wanted to see the view from the top.

After gathering her skirts and tucking them into the belt that held her ceremonial knife, she kicked her boots against the wall to remove small bits of debris. She covered her hands with sand, then rubbed them on her clothes to remove the sweat that clung to her skin. Her blood hummed with excitement as she gazed at the top, and the wind sang as she found her first handholds and climbed. The pull on her muscles invigorated her. Her arms and legs and belly burned with exertion as she moved across the wall face. It forced her to concentrate. Her cares melted from her consciousness to be replaced with a conversation between herself, the wall, and the wind. She needed nothing else in the world.

She found a gentler slope than she had remembered, but few viable handholds were in reach. She climbed to the right where the slope decreased even further but soon found herself in an area with a sheer cut and nothing to hold on to. She glanced at the ground, dizzily far below her, and decided to retrace her movements and try a new route to the left. She picked her way across the small rifts in the rock until, with shaking arms, she pulled herself onto the ledge.

Boulders covered the top of the breakwater. She scrambled onto one and looked out over the harbor, the wharf, the piers, the small boats and vessels. *Darsham*, poised and regal, dwarfed everything near. Brynna's hair whipped in tandem with the skirts she had loosed from her belt. Wild and free, she could jump into the sky and be held by the air alone. Gamboling from rock to rock, she bounded toward the deep ocean waves, trusting herself to keep her footing, exhilarated by the chance she might not.

At the end, Brynna gazed out across the open ocean, her view composed only of sea and sky, her spirit enlivened and teased by each gust. The wind roared in her ears, soothed her mind, and cleansed the core of her being. She sat, leaning in its arms, and breathed the salty air as she watched the harbor.

Darsham's crew unloaded large crates from the ship to the dock. Some of the crates probably held smuggled items, and the manifest hid somewhere in the midst. She would find it, and Trinan would be pleased.

Lichen spotted the stones. She picked at the plaques and tossed the bits and pieces into the water. Pebbles she dug from between the larger rocks and threw further into the waves. Finally, tired and hungry, she stood and threw one last pebble at the ocean. With a stretch and a sigh, she bouldered back along the wall and lowered herself over the edge.

Her descent had its own challenges, but she met each with strength and vigor, finding footholds and handholds and then dropping the final section to fall into the sand. She lay back and closed her eyes, enjoying her idleness, then brushed the sand from her clothes and shook it from

her hair. She crossed the beach and climbed the wharf stairs once more.

A man in Andersyn blacks, his golden-brown face worn and weathered, climbed the stairs from a jetty to the wharf, a small sloop with one mast floating nearby. "How she cuttin', duckie?"

"Best kind, sir," she answered.

He grinned. "Go on with your 'sir'! Call me Skipper. That's what I be. Just an old Andersyn skipper."

"Which ship do you sail?"

"Me? I sail the sloop, *Signy*, most days. Sometimes I sail barges to Gantu when they needs me." He motioned toward her. "You feeling right? You're looking all mops and brooms about ye."

Her cheeks warmed as she examined her sullied dress and gathered her windblown hair. "Yes. Just hungry."

"Aye, from being out there scuffing on the damn rocks. I saws you. I swear you're touched in the head going on out there. 'Tis dangerous." He shook his head. "Who knit you, duckie?"

She bowed her head at his chastisement. "I'm a Dasveld."

"Norin Å Sdolevy! That's what I's be thinkin'."

A loud crash startled her as an exceptionally large crate dropped to the dock. Sailors and longshorewomen and men shouted to one another. "They're certainly busy," she said.

Skipper pulled his beard. "*Darsham* always brings in quite the ree-raw. The Dusty Toad will hop tonight. And for a while, for sure."

"Oh? Why is that?"

"Repairs." He pointed behind her. "That dry dock there's been flooded. They'll be gravin' her soon as she's unloaded."

She turned to see the dry dock. "Is that serious?"

“Nah, part and parcel.”

“And then on to Jarta?”

Skipper laughed. “*Darsham*, she ain’t going to Jarta, not no way, no how. Port’s not deep enough. *Darsham* and *Basilisk* only sail to Robynton and Tadsyn and the southern seas. Now, any sloop, or barge, or smack can wander up to Jarta. My *Signy* will take you there no way to holler. You just say th’ word.”

She smiled. “Thank you. I was only curious. I have no need to travel, though Jarta is a lovely town.”

“So’s Queen Gara,” he said, waggling his brows. “I bet Andersyn’d like to give her a good randy, if you knows what I mean.”

Bryнна paused. “She’s beautiful. And rich. And has a port. I can see why he’d be attracted to her.”

“I’d wager fine money they’re set to dance.”

“And what a Teerlagee that would be!” Bryнна said, laughing. She bade him farewell with a hearty wave and continued across the wharf.

The sun slid toward the breakwater as the evening breezes fluttered the sails of the returning fishing vessels. Bryнна walked toward the far eastern side, organizing her thoughts. Andersyn had the manifest aboard *Darsham* but would bring it ashore and store it in the safe. There it would remain as long as *Darsham* was in port, and that seemed likely to be for a long while, even if Andersyn traveled to Jarta to see the queen. Bryнна didn’t have the manifest to deliver yet, but she was confident Trinan would be pleased with her progress.

As the sky grew dusky, she stood at the wharf’s railing and rested her hand on the support post that held the sign proclaiming, “Robynton.” She craved the wind on her face,

and on an impulse, she climbed the railing to teeter on the very top, looping her arm around the post to hold herself steady. The sky reddened, streaked with glowing clouds. She basked in the beauty of it.

Out in the harbor, a bosun's whistle piped the side, and a figure climbed down *Darsham's* ropes to a waiting shore boat. Brynna returned her attention to the sky until the boat knocked against the pier, and Andersyn's footsteps echoed on the wooden planks. He was easily thirty years old, though the effects of the sun may have prematurely aged his chestnut skin. His stern expression pressed his lips into a grim frown. His peaked cap hid his hair, except along the edges where strands as black as his uniform reflected the ruby sunset. His leather baldric crossed his chest, the sword catching the light with every other step, and he carried a hard-sided case. The commodore continued on the wharf, but his steps slowed until he stopped and looked up at her.

Motionless, they watched each other.

Her hair and skirts rustled in the wind.

"Commodore," she said.

He dipped his head in greeting.

A seagull called, laughing as it swooped by.

"You are the butterfly from the rocks," he said, "flitting about from one side to the other."

She glanced at the breakwater. "Brynna Dasveld."

"Perhaps to others," he said.

"Not to you?"

"As I said."

The waves splashed against the wharf. He walked to the railing and set the case down. Brynna eyed it, knowing it must hold the manifest. She couldn't seize it and run. She

must bide her time carefully. Coolly turning away from him, she returned her gaze to the harbor. The sun sank close to the breakwater rocks.

Bending slightly at the waist, Cadoc leaned his fore-arms on the rail, which shook it enough that she tightened her grip on the post to balance herself. He remained still, crossing one ankle behind the other with an air of total tranquility. Looking out at the water once more, she relaxed her hand.

The gentle waves in the harbor absorbed the colors above. Brynna and Cadoc, strange companions stilled by natural beauty, watched the sky slip from burgundy to indigo. This man, this representation of lawlessness, was sharing this time with her as amicably as a dear friend, yet he had rejected both her name and the viewpoints of others and had seen her as something else, something new.

“Are the others wrong?” she asked.

“That’s not uncommon.”

The sun touched the rocks, and in moments that seemed both endless and insufficient, it melted and disappeared behind the crags. The desire rose within her to snatch it back and cling to it, to clutch it to her chest. It had disappeared and taken her light and safety. It had left her in the dark with him. The wharf was empty, and she wondered who would hear her if she screamed.

With the spectacle of the sunset past, Andersyn turned around to lean against the railing. His shifting jolted her, and once more, she clung to the post with both hands to keep from falling.

He folded his arms. “Your father is a carver. Your brother is quartermaster. If you are this Brynna Dasveld you claim to be, then what are you?”

"I'm an attaché," she said. The wind slung her hair across her face, and she brushed it away, cursing her disheveled state.

"An attaché," he repeated. "To attach or fasten." He rubbed his chin. "To live as a pawn ever connected to someone else."

She narrowed her eyes, insulted. "What do you mean?"

"An attaché is a counterpart, a reaction. For a pittance of a salary, your work, your art—" He looked up at her. "—and your body are for your master's pleasure alone."

She wrinkled her nose. "You forget to whom you speak."

He grinned and held his arms wide. "I don't know to whom I speak!"

"I am the attaché of the Chancellor of Wyclythe!" she declared. Trinan held great power. With the king's permission, he could sit in the Grand Assembly with the sovereigns of Norin. At a word from the king, he could call forth and command armies, pass any law, issue any decree. At the sound of his title, she expected this disrespectful sailor's immediate deference and apology.

"Ah, yes," he said in a mocking tone, "the lofty and exalted Trinan Walyss makes his appearance. Even now, you defend yourself by invoking the name of another."

She stared at him, stunned.

He chuckled. "You can glare at me all you want, little butterfly, but you know I'm right." He didn't wait for an answer. Instead, he picked up the case. Their eyes met. "Bryнна Dasveld, do you know who you are?"

He turned away and walked toward the new headquarters of the Andersyn Shipping Company.

Chapter 19

ERLING

Fromyn Beach
Wyclythe Province
Norin

The rank odor of putrefied fish filled Erling's nostrils, and he blinked rapidly, trying not to vomit. The bucket of week-old chum sloshed with a sound as sickening as the smell as he and Kayla walked through the shallows toward the salt marshes. Kayla prattled on about the feeding habits of carnivorous snails, and he knew their love would last forever. If he could tolerate decaying slop, he could endure anything.

With sea water splashing around them, they walked into the marshes, and the cordgrass whipped at his legs with every step.

Kayla pointed. "There they are!"

He looked closer and realized he was surrounded by large snails half the size of his hand. They clung to the tall grass, two or three to a blade, throughout the marsh ahead of

him. It was an astounding sight in its own right, but as she bubbled over with the joy of sharing it with him, it grew into its own magnificence.

“Amazing!” he said. “They’re huge! They just hang onto the grass like that?”

She nodded. “They like the grass, and when the tide is right, they eat whatever’s floating in the water.”

“So this here,” he said, lifting the bucket.

“Yes. You can dump it in.”

“All right,” he said, then paused. Kayla had tucked the edges of her skirts into the belt of her ceremonial knife, leaving her shapely legs bare to the water, and he had rolled his trousers above his knees. If he poured the chum into the water, they would both be covered in it.

“Go on,” she said, with an encouraging smile.

He glanced at her, then back at the slop. “I don’t want to get you messy.”

She laughed. “I’ve had my share of it. The water will wash it off quickly. As we walk back, you won’t even notice it.”

He pursed his lips and poured it into the water.

“Just like that!” she said. “A feast for them! Rinse out the bucket.”

Erling dragged the bucket around in the yellowish water and poured it out a few times. “That it?”

“For now,” she said. “Tide’s coming in, and it’ll wash this all over the snails. Big fat snails mean lots of dye!” She picked a snail from the grass and sloshed toward him. “Hold out your hand.”

He did so, and she placed the snail on his palm. It felt cold and slimy and heavier than he had expected. As the foot of it rippled across his skin, it tickled. “It’s not blue.”

She tilted her head. "Pardon?"

"The snail," he said, pointing to it. "It's not blue, but you make blue dye."

She nodded. "The sun does that. We crush the shell and take out the part that we use to make the dye. Once it's dried in the sun, it turns blue."

He held the snail up to her face. "You're going to crush this? You?"

"Not today, but yes. Does that bother you?" She giggled and pushed the snail back toward him. "Are you squeamish?"

He threw her a roguish grin as he returned the snail to the grass. It attached itself, and he released it. "Still smells like chum."

"It will for a while. We can walk back and get away from it."

Erling looked out at the shoreline. A house stood in the far distance. "What's that over there?"

"The Dennysyn farm," she said as they walked back through the water. "They have the best snails around. Their dye is so dark, it's almost purple. We hope their snails will breed with ours enough that our stock will improve."

Erling took her hand as they walked. The warmth in his chest overwhelmed him. He wanted more of her. He needed her beside him every day. His steps slowed, and she looked back at him.

He took her other hand as well. The tide was coming in fast, and even rolled, his trousers dragged in the water. He didn't care. He gazed into her eyes. He would have kissed her, but even with fire and passion, a kiss would have fallen short of what he felt. He stepped closer and wrapped

his arms around her, pulling her to his chest, pulling her against him as tightly as he could. The force of the waves shifted them, but he would never let her go. Never.

“I love you,” he whispered.

She rubbed her face on his chest and pushed her nose into the crease of his neck. “I love you, too.”

He pulled away and held her shoulders. “Will you dance Teerlagee with me at Carthasach?”

Her eyes widened.

“There’s still time to have knives made, and I—I am—I—” He stopped, unable to find words to express the torrent of emotions he felt. “I love you.” His heart had never beat so loudly in his ears.

She smiled. “Yes, I will.”

“You will,” he repeated. “You will!” He grabbed her and kissed her, pulling her close so that her body wrapped in a perfect fit around his. Her mouth tasted of salt, and she smelled of chum, but he didn’t care. She was going to be his forever. Nothing else mattered.

Chapter 20

BRYNNA

Wyclythe Fortress
Wyclythe Province
Norin

Brynna wrote the final sentence of her report on Andersyn's timber smuggling. The information painted a damning picture of a business placing profit over law. Slipping the pages into a portfolio, she returned to Trinan's study. He would read it and take pride in her ability, perhaps even refer her for a commendation. She liked the idea of standing before the king and listening to Trinan explain her achievements, but more than that, she sought one of his smiles, the kind where his eyes crinkled, a moment where she knew he longed for her as much as she for him. Then he would love her like he had before.

She knocked, and he called for her entry. "This is for you," she said.

He opened the portfolio. "What is it?"

“My report on Andersyn’s smuggling. It’s quite an extensive operation.”

He lowered the papers and met her eyes. “I don’t want this.”

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t need any more reports,” he said. “I don’t want you to add up any more numbers. I have everything in order for his arrest. All I need is the manifest. Get that for me, not some report.” He tossed the portfolio on his desk.

“*Darsham* is in dry dock for maintenance,” she said. “I go to the wharf as often as I can. I’ve spoken to both Victor and Andersyn, himself, and I—”

“I’m aware of that. I’ve been aware of that for weeks now. I need solid progress.”

“It won’t be long now,” she said. “He’s protective of that paper. This is a difficult task!”

“You’re either incapable of doing this, or you’re dragging it out.”

With a pang of guilt, she looked away. “The situation is delicate.”

“I don’t care how delicate it is,” he said. “I want that paper in my hand!”

“I’ll get it! I need more time!”

He held his index finger in her face. “One week. In my hand. Do anything you have to do. Anything!” He stepped nearer, his face close to hers. “Do not fail me,” he growled.

She closed her eyes.

“Am I clear?”

“Yes,” she said. “I’ll get it.”

Brynna left the study and stood in the hallway, worried she wouldn’t be able to retrieve the manifest from the safe at all. No matter how she had pressed, cajoled, or batted her

eyes, she had not been able to convince them to open it or even determine where the key to the safe was kept. She had tried over and over, through short chats and long conversations, over tea, on walks, during lunches and harbor-side suppers. She had returned to Cadoc repeatedly, morning, noon, and night, to listen to his words, to hear his stories, to laugh—to find the manifest.

Trinan had grown more impatient with each passing day. The stress was draining his energy and disturbing his sleep. He had started napping during the day. When she returned from Robynton, she often found him in their room, their bed disturbed with sheets thrown back, and him dressing with a sense of haste, always explaining that he had only felt fatigued and denying the need for a witch to be summoned. Guilt would claw within her, and she would serve him in every way, then leave all the earlier the next morning, hoping to make more progress and spare him such agony.

Clara carried the workload she neglected in her absence, and Brynna was thankful for her help. Clara had grown quiet and serious in her new position. She walked silently with cautious movements and careful words. Even her complexion had calmed from flushed hues to a more subdued pallor. She rarely made eye contact with Brynna, but she kept Trinan's study in good order. Despite Clara's valuable assistance, the situation was untenable. Trinan demanded the manifest, and Brynna would have to deliver it.

The door at the far end of the corridor opened.

A tall man entered, darkening the area as though stealing the surrounding light. He was clothed as a huntsman, and his long black hair and thick dark furs draped his body, inflating him to an even more intimidating size. His deep-set eyes were as black as the aura he carried. He walked with

a warrior's stride, a quiver of arrows and a longbow thrown over his shoulder. His ceremonial knife shone at his belt, and a second hunting knife had been strapped to his thigh. The smell of pine, loam, and blood wafted through the hall as the intensity of his presence overwhelmed her.

Shrinking back, she touched the stone walls, not to steady herself, but to seek reassurance that other strength remained outside of the man in front of her. She averted her gaze, angling toward the wall until he swept past her and continued along the corridor into the darkness beyond. She remained still, staring at the void where he had disappeared and waiting for her heart to slow.

She scrambled back to Trinan's study and threw the door open.

Trinan looked up from his papers. "You will never—"

"There's a man here," she said, looking back over her shoulder. "In black. A huntsman. In the fortress."

Trinan's forehead smoothed. "Sol."

"You know him then!"

"Did he say anything to you?"

She hesitated, then shook her head. "No, he only walked past me."

"Good." He picked up his pen.

She hated his nonchalance. "Is he dangerous?"

"More than you can imagine," he said while writing.

"Then why—"

He looked up. "Stay away from him, and if he bothers you, tell me immediately."

"First Breath!" She placed a hand on her forehead. "If he's so dangerous, then why is he allowed here? These are secured corridors for government—"

“You have work to do at the wharf,” he said, returning to his writing.

“But—”

“Go on.”

Bryнна watched him a moment longer, then reluctantly left the room.

Chapter 21

NORA

Nalta
Gantu

With timid steps, Nora followed Ziri into Elias's one-room house. Two bread ovens in the far corner radiated warmth. Shutters dimmed the light, casting lines and shadows across the dried herbs that hung from the rafters and scented the air. Rugs lined the floor, and a long, low table sat near the hearth.

"Nora's in," Ziri said, stepping out of his shoes.

As Nora, too, removed her shoes, she recognized Elias but not the middle-aged woman who stood near him. The woman's rough bronze skin revealed that her life had not been an easy one. Bags hung under her eyes, and the veins in her neck distended under a weak chin. Her tight mouth lent a fierce air. Her unremarkable striped gandoura could have been worn by any poor Gantish woman, and her long black hair, streaked with gray, hung straight and smooth,

the ends frizzled and snarled. Nora's often did the same after a long day of work.

"I can stay until the lunch rush," Nora said, dipping in a small curtsy. She cringed and wondered if her curtsy had seemed polite or whether it emphasized that she was a slave. Their wrists do not have bands.

"We have a lot to do," Elias said, sitting at the low table. They all joined him, Nora sitting by Ziri and tucking her legs under herself.

"Where are the children now?" Ziri asked.

"Still with their mother in town," Elias said. "Luna takes possession in six weeks, but we should get them out of the country as soon as we can."

"Do we have contacts?"

A knock sounded at the door. Everyone started, and the men jumped to their feet. Nora's heart galloped. If they were caught planning to free slaves, they would be shot or worse. Spots flashed at the edge of her vision, and she blinked rapidly, begging herself not to faint.

At a nod from Elias, Ziri crept to the door and cracked it open, peering outside. His shoulders dropped, and he opened the door wider. Marcus Regá entered, ducking his turbaned head through the doorway.

Nora gasped.

"What do you want?" Elias demanded.

Marcus pressed his palms together and bowed slightly. "To help."

"Help with what?"

Marcus's eyes shifted to each of the faces. "Eh, help with the slaves, with—with freedom."

"To turn us in?" Elias asked, his fist raised in challenge.

Marcus spread his fingers and slowly lowered his hands to his side. “No. I’ve seen the evils perpetrated on the Tuli and the slaves. And—and the citizens, too. I want to help.” He met Nora’s eyes. “I must help.”

She smiled, not a big smile that would call attention to herself, but a small encouraging one for him alone.

“Oh, you must?” Elias said, his tone harsh. “You must help? You felt the slightest twinge of remorse over your crimes, and now you must be released from that minor discomfort by forcing your way to my table?”

Marcus shook his head. “No, I didn’t mean it like that. I do not seek a costless absolution or one at your expense. I feel a command within myself—upon myself—to help right these many wrongs. Only because of that do I say that I must help. It is my duty.”

“Your duty.” Elias sneered. “Is it also your duty to turn us in when you tire of us? See what we’re doing and then run off to Nyok and hand us over? How much has he offered you?”

Marcus straightened his posture. His forehead smoothed. “I wouldn’t do that. You can trust me.”

“We can never trust you.”

Marcus placed his fist on his chest. “I give you my word.”

Elias huffed. “The word of a sabhir means nothing to me.”

Nora’s heart plummeted as the men stared at each other. She wanted to argue and change Elias’s mind, to shout that Marcus was a kind, benevolent man of integrity, but the tension between the men silenced her voice. She swallowed hard.

Marcus nodded with resignation. “If I am not welcome here, I will find another way. I apologize for taking your time.” He bowed again and turned to the door.

“Wait!” Nora called.

Marcus paused.

“I believe him,” she said to the others. “He and I have talked about such things—revolutionary things. He protected me during the shooting. Me! A slave! And then he stood up for—for all slaves—during the debate over the banding legislation.”

“Which still passed!” Elias said.

“But without his vote,” Nora said. “He voted against it. He fought it every step of the way, and when they wanted to brand our faces, he convinced them not to.” She looked at each of the others. “Please. I know he’s a sabhir. But we should not send him away.”

Elias looked at Ziri. “Your call,” he growled.

Ziri glanced at Marcus before resting his gaze on Nora. She pleaded with her eyes. He pressed his lips together, then sighed. “Have a seat,” he said, motioning for Marcus to join them at the table. “I’m Ziri. This is Elias and his wife, Sunna.”

“I’m Marcus,” he said, removing his shoes.

They returned to the table, and Sunna set out cups. She only had three fingers on her left hand, and Nora averted her eyes rather than stare at them. Sunna must have found trouble with the Nalta Guards—more than once. Losing a finger was a standard punishment for lying.

As he knelt to sit at the table, Marcus awkwardly managed the fabric of his finely woven sherwani and the golden-edged taylasan that draped over his arms. Nora slid to his side, thrilled by his nearness. She leaned toward him. “We’re discussing the children.”

He furrowed his brow. “Children?”

“Of the man who was just executed,” she said. “He had three children who were sold to Winsen Luna.”

A pained expression wrinkled his forehead and tightened his lips.

She nodded. “We have six weeks to get them out of the country.”

“How old are they?” he asked.

Sunna poured mead in his cup. “Six, ten, and thirteen.”

Marcus sighed and shook his head.

“Can we get the mother out, too?” Nora asked.

“Three is hard enough,” Sunna said, firmly setting the pitcher down. The slosh inside ended further questioning.

Elias motioned with his cup. “I have contacts within the Andersyn Shipping Company. They can transport all three to Tadsyn, but it’s pricey. Once there, they will need some kind of conveyance to Hykos.”

“Up the Niemynyn Road?” Ziri asked.

Elias nodded. “Yeah. Exactly.”

“Will the Council of Norin help?” Nora asked.

Elias shook his head. “They don’t help with slave transportation, because we work with Hykos.”

Marcus touched her arm and leaned closer as Elias continued speaking. “Who is that?” he whispered. “The Council of Norin?”

Nora stared at his fingers, warmth blossoming under his touch. “Powerful Norinians who want to help us against the sabhirim,” she said. “They provide lots of weapons and supplies.”

He nodded.

“. . .it’s expensive,” Elias continued, “and we have no funding.”

Marcus placed his hand on the table. "I would like to pay for their passage."

They stared at him.

Elias set down his mug. "It's a sizable sum."

Marcus nodded. "It's the least I can do."

Elias, Ziri, and Sunna exchanged glances.

Sunna shrugged. "He's got that damn estate. Let him pay."

Marcus shook his head. "The estate is my father's and will go to my elder brother, Lor. I own no stake in it. But I have income from my glass and crystal, and I'm more than happy to give to this cause."

"It's 75,000 brek sterling," Elias said.

Marcus blinked several times. "All the same."

Ziri whistled through his teeth and chuckled. "How soon can you get it?" he asked with a hint of eagerness.

"As soon as we can ride into Nalta to the bank," Marcus said.

"Today?"

Marcus nodded. "This very hour."

Elias leaned back. "Well, if that's the case, then we can use the next departure. Andersyn's eastern fleet will arrive tomorrow by noon. The children can shelter in an abandoned warehouse in the wee hours tonight so they are ready to move when the time comes. We could have the children on a barge to Tadsyn tomorrow evening."

"Someone will have to stay with the children at the warehouse," Sunna said.

"I can," Nora said. "No one pays much attention to me after midnight, and tomorrow is my day off."

Sunna shook her head. "You'd still have to walk through town."

"Where do they live?" Ziri asked.

"Eighth Street, tenth one down," Sunna said.

"It won't take me long to get there," Nora said, leaning forward. "I can do it."

Elias pursed his lips. "And someone will have to extinguish all the lights they can," he said in his scratchy voice. "It would look suspicious if several people were seen walking there in the middle of the night."

"I can do that," Marcus said.

Nora's stomach jumped.

Sunna nodded, her lips resting in her normal frown. "I'll be there earlier in the evening to prepare the children, and I'll remain with the mother when you're gone. We can't have her screeching and squalling about their leaving. Then Marcus, you come at midnight. Put out any torches or lanterns. If there's a candle by an open window, blow it out."

"I understand."

Ziri leaned toward him. "Do you have a sidearm?"

Marcus nodded. "I do."

"Do you know how to use it?"

"All gentlemen do," Marcus said in a level tone.

Sunna slid her unmarred hand toward Nora but stopped short of touching her. "You leave the inn at two," she said with cold, calculating eyes. "When you get to Eighth Street, it should be dark—if Marcus has been successful. Go to the tenth house. We will give you the children, and you will take them to the warehouse Ziri shows you."

Nora nodded.

"It can't just be her," Ziri said. "I have to pay off the long-shoremen. Someone needs to go with her, in case something happens. And at least then they would look like a

traveling family from outside of town. An excuse could be crafted.”

“I can go,” Marcus said. “I’ll already be there for the lights.”

Nora held her breath, begging for Ziri to approve him.

Ziri nodded. “All right. I’ll make the payoff. Elias will handle everything with Andersyn’s crew.”

Elias nodded. “I’ll pay *Signy*’s skipper. We’ve worked with him before.”

“Last time, he wanted to dump the rifles into the harbor,” Ziri muttered.

Elias shrugged. “So he hates gun running. This is different. He’s got a soft spot for slaves, especially children. He’ll take them. Most of the barge captains will. Hell, Andersyn, himself, has transported his share of runaway slaves of all kinds.”

“Knowingly?” Ziri asked.

Sunna nodded, her frown fading. “Nothing gets past the commodore without his notice,” she said with an emphasis bordering on pride.

Elias rolled his eyes.

Ziri turned to Nora. “I’ll be on the dock, so I’ll tell you when it’s time to go to the barge. The ships should arrive a little before noon and leave around sundown.”

Sunna looked at each face. “Everyone understand?”

They nodded.

Elias stood. “We’ll go to town, withdraw the funds, and then meet with the mother.” He offered his hand to Marcus. “An admirable contribution.”

Nora’s heart soared as Marcus stood and shook hands with Elias and Ziri after him. They all put on their shoes

and walked outside where stood the wagon and Marcus's horse. Nora's stomach fluttered to stand next to Marcus as she watched Elias and Ziri walk on to the stable. She and Marcus were far enough from the others that their words would not be overheard. It was as though she were alone with him.

"This is a fine thing you've agreed to," Nora said, feeling her cheeks blush.

Marcus shook his head. "It's truly the least I can do. Though—you mentioned inside that tomorrow is your day off. Forgive me, I didn't know slaves had days off."

She nodded. "I get paid, too. But it will take me 27 years and three months more to earn my freedom."

"You can't leave then."

"Or quit or marry outside of the pairings chosen for us. Even our belongings are not our own." She looked back at the cabin. "Nor our children, if a judge believes we cannot provide for them. They are born free but rarely remain so."

"And now you wear a band."

In shame, she looked at the ground, searching for words but finding none to say. He had protected her, saved her from branding, and now worked to free others. She dared to entertain the idea that perhaps his drive to make such noble sacrifices originated in devotion to her. She would not have thought such an attachment possible, yet he had said himself that he thought sabhirim and slaves might find connections strong enough.

Marcus touched her banded arm, then paused. Catching her breath, Nora met his eyes, granting him permission. He grasped her wrist gently, lifting and turning it, until the burn, now only a crust and scar, came into view. He placed his other hand over it and brushed it with his thumb,

sending waves of heat through her. "I'm deeply sorry," he said. "Please know I tried everything in my power to prevent this."

She nodded, hoping he would never let go. "I know you did."

"It wasn't enough," he said, his eyes glistening with earnestness.

"You did what you could in the moment, and now we are working for more."

He nodded. "Yes, but Nora, I will do whatever is in my power to be of service to you. Here, or in town, or at the inn. Anywhere. At any time."

Nora's lips parted. His hand still held on to her. She loved him, and every moment, she loved him more. If she could have stopped time, she would have preserved that single moment for eternity, only releasing it in favor of a vision of herself in an orange veil, gliding across a bright ballroom in his embrace. Despite her wishes, the moment passed, and he released her arm.

"I will remember," she said.

Chapter 22

BRYNNA

Robynton
Wyclythe Province
Norin

Brynna waved to the sailors casting off in their fishing smack. She recognized so many of them now. They waved back, calling their friendly halloos, and she continued her walk along the busy wharf, watching as a double-masted whaling vessel entered the harbor mouth. Ships of all kinds filled the harbor, loading and unloading cargo, while others sailed on to other destinations.

Darsham's masts and rigging seemed out of place on land as it sat in dry dock. A row of equidistant boards on either side of the hull propped it in place between the granite walls. Over the last few weeks, Brynna had watched as sailors perched precariously on scaffolds to clean and tar the hull while others had worked on deck, making repairs. She had stared for hours, fascinated, as sailors scraped and brushed, balanced in the rigging, clambered from rope to

rope, and swung between shrouds. Now the hull had been abandoned, and as she walked alongside the pit, the sailors only dabbled on deck.

One man on the opposite side of the dry dock stood motionless.

Brynna shaded her eyes from the sun and saw Cadoc more clearly. She knew he saw her. He saw everyone and everything. She held her picnic basket aloft in his direction, and he spoke to someone unseen nearby. A moment later, the bosun called for mess.

She waited, smiling and speaking pleasantries with the sailors as they left to scrounge food from vendors on the wharf, and Cadoc soon arrived at her side, shrugging on his black jacket over his sweat-soaked work shirt. Together, they walked to their usual lunch spot at the far end of the wharf, away from the crowds. They sat between the pylons, dangling their boots over the water, and he pushed the basket closer to her.

She selected a piece of sourdough and a few crumbles of ewe's milk cheese. "The work looks nearly complete."

He made a sandwich from the sourdough and a bit of mutton, then scooped mustard from a small crock. "There are only a few items left on my task list. I normally despise the time I spend in dry dock, but this has been a pleasant rest."

"Why is this time different?"

He took a bite of his sandwich, answering with a smile. She pretended the flutter within her didn't exist. They ate in comfortable silence, watching the choppy waves and a line of pelicans that swooped across the harbor. She wished time would pass more slowly.

He finished eating before her. "I reviewed your accounts."

Brynna stopped chewing. Her mouth grew dry. "Oh?"

"You've ordered nearly six times as much lumber in the last month as you normally would."

She swallowed hard. "Prosperous times."

"Your father's business is doing well then."

"Oh, yes," she said with a nervous laugh. "Very well. Business is booming! Thanks to *Darsham* bringing—"

"Then why has all the funding come from the Wyclythe administration?"

She rested the bread in her lap, wondering how much he knew. "They are ... collaborating."

"Collaborating," he repeated.

"On a project."

He broke into a smile. "Oh, working on a project together!"

She laughed. "Yes! A pro—"

"What kind of project?" he asked, deep lines creasing his forehead.

Seeing the danger in his face, she grew still. "It's. . .well. . .there's. . ."

He ducked closer to stare into her eyes, but she swiftly looked away. Her throat constricted. Unable to eat, she tossed the rest of her bread into the waves.

Cadoc shifted further back on the decking and stretched out his long legs, crossing them at the ankle. "I think you enjoy our conversations." She could no longer see his face, nor did she want to for fear he would see the truth within her. He continued, "You've been here nearly every day, despite the long walk from the fortress. We've had many lunches. Many suppers."

She looked up at the puffy clouds. "I have much to do here," she said. "Lumber to order—"

“For the project?”

“Yes,” she said. “The project.”

“I see.” He wobbled his foot. “And what does our illustrious chancellor think about your spending so much time with me?”

She closed her eyes. “He sends me.”

“Sends you!” he said, sitting straighter with astonishment. “To me?”

“To Robynnton. To your office. For supplies. For arrangements—”

“For the project?”

“Yes! The project!”

He chuckled.

Seagulls fought over Brynna’s bread as it floated on the water’s surface.

“That’s not why you’re here,” he said, his voice heavy and significant.

She looked back at him, alarmed. “What do you mean?”

“Calm yourself, little butterfly,” he said, shifting closer. “I won’t tell him where you flit about. If he wants to think you’re buying supplies, let him think that.”

She furrowed her brow. “Why do you think I’m here?”

He dug through the picnic basket. “Not for the food since you chucked it all in the harbor.”

She weighed his words and cautiously accepted that he didn’t understand her true purpose. Even through the blundering of the last exchange, she continued to deceive him.

He chose a cinnamon roll and peeled off the outer layer. “I love these,” he said, stuffing it in his mouth. He paused. “Are there raisins?”

“Yes.”

“Unfortunate.” He finished chewing. “What else does Trinan ask of you? When he isn’t sending you to me for the mysterious project?”

“Bookkeeping, mostly,” she said. “Reports. Arranging his schedule. Meeting with people he doesn’t have time to see.”

“And how long did you work for him before he fucked you?”

Her breath left her chest as her eyes flew to his. She inhaled with indignation and a stronger, surprising sense of shame. “It’s—It’s not like that.”

He nodded. “I thought so,” he said in a gentle tone. “And who else has taken liberties?”

Hot tears formed in her eyes. “How dare you! I am not some tart passed around at court.” She shifted up onto her knees as though raising her head above his would rebuild her standing in his mind.

His hands stilled, holding the roll. “I’m not judging you,” he said in a level tone without looking at her. “I’m only speaking to the realities someone in your position would face. You are surrounded by powerful people who are used to getting what they want, including the ministrations of the staff.” He returned to his roll.

She sat and blinked back her tears, confused why she even cared what he thought about her. She needed the manifest. That’s it. She didn’t value his feelings or whether he respected her. His opinion meant nothing to her.

Cadoc ate bits of frosting from his fingers. “So you’re only entangled with Trinan then?” He raised his brow. “I’m actually surprised at that. He must have gained power faster than I thought he did.” He tipped his head in consideration. “That or he has your name signed and sealed on paper.”

“That’s absurd,” she said through gritted teeth.

He shrugged, eating the last bite. “There are others more powerful than he.”

“Scant few.”

“Regardless, there are. So be glad something stayed their hands—whether that was Trinan or...some other arrangement.” He reached into the basket for a napkin. His arm brushed against hers once, then again. He met her eyes. “Whatever it was, I’m relieved. I wouldn’t like to hear that the little butterfly had been mistreated.”

She looked away, perplexed and fluttery. “How do you even know what they’re like?”

“I move in many circles, and I see the dynamics playing out around you. You must pay more attention to such things.”

She frowned. “I can handle myself.”

“No doubt,” he said, grinning. “You climbed the damn breakwater.” His smile faded. “But a fist can crush a butterfly and leave only powder on the palm.”

She lowered her shoulders. “I’m a powerful woman in my own right. As the Chancellor’s attaché, I command—”

“Yes, you think you’re a powerful woman, and that’s your primary problem.”

She gaped.

He shifted toward her. “You think you’re a powerful woman, but you’re only a respectable woman who follows the rules and does what she’s told. You believe good behavior will grant you power and autonomy, but it doesn’t. The rules don’t protect you. No, those holding real power are the ones protecting you—or controlling you, depending on their motives. And they demand a high price—your unquestioning obedience and passivity. When that—”

“Rules and laws grant authority and maintain order—”

"Drop your propaganda," he said. "It doesn't work on me. Rules are made by people who don't believe in them for those too scared to believe in anything else."

"You act as though there is another way."

"You act as though you don't understand what I'm saying and then lie to my face about why you're here."

She stared out at the ocean.

Cadoc shoved the basket aside and moved closer to her. "You follow the rules to the smallest detail, and you believe it is good and right and that because you do those things, the powers-that-be will reward you and protect you from harm."

"Are you saying they won't?"

He shook his head. "I'm saying that those who hold true power will get what they want regardless. With or without rules. And with or without you. And when you understand that, you will see that their rules only limit you, not them. You will see the true game they play. You must see it for what it is. For if you constrict yourself under their limitations at the wrong moment, those who are limitless will hurt you."

She clenched her jaw and raised one brow in challenge. "And just who is limitless? You? Is that why they say you are dangerous?"

"Sometimes I abide by the rules. Sometimes I don't. But either way, I don't deceive myself. I do things in my own power and through my own choices. I don't do something merely because someone who claims authority over me wishes it."

Brynna's heart galloped as if she had uncovered a crime, or treason, or a corpse. Cadoc was lawless and dangerous.

In her increasing familiarity, she had forgotten the risk he posed. "You admit to breaking the rules," she said.

"I admit to not using them as an excuse for my actions."

She met his brown eyes. "You're no privateer. You're a pirate."

A sly grin spread across his face. "So are you."

"I've never been a sailor!"

"Yet every day, the sharp lines of right and wrong that you claim exist blur within the context of what you want and think you can accomplish. Your fancy morals never seem to work like your beloved numbers on the page. They overlap and combine, and you understand just how easy it would be to disregard them altogether. In those pressured moments, you make your choices while giving no thought to your precious, respectable, prim-and-proper rules. In those moments, you recognize that rules do not exist."

"You condemn me."

"No, my little butterfly," he said as a smile twitched at the corner of his mouth. "I only see you for what you are, and I would pry your hands from your eyes so that you would see yourself. Acknowledge your choices. Own them. That is your true power, just as it is mine. You're as much a pirate as I am, but at least I admit it!"

Bryнна shuddered, yet Cadoc's eyes gleamed with merriment, and his expression approved of her as though congenial laughter bubbled just below the surface. Without malice, he had melted her delusions of grandeur and offered a different, genuine understanding of herself, one saturated with rich colors, harsh and full, which she could nevermore unsee.

"You don't know me," she said, refusing him victory.

He shook his head. "I don't claim to." He laughed. "I barely know myself."

"Then what would you have me do?"

He smirked. "Stand above the rules and acknowledge your power—the power I see in you. Seize it for yourself."

"How? By leaving my position?"

He shrugged. "Tolerate Trinan if you wish, but never think for a single moment that he owns you." He covered her hand with his. "And then finally admit to yourself precisely why you are sitting here with me."

Her breath quickened as his hand remained, and their eyes locked. The danger looming in her mind changed in quality. Her terror of being discovered performing Trinan's bidding gave way to a new fear, one she dared not name, for doing so would force her to define the nature of her feelings for the one who sat so near.

Brynna tore her gaze away, unable to bear his eyes any longer. She wondered how this man could see her so plainly yet remain so misled. Guilt from her deception tore at her. She didn't want to conceal anything from him. She didn't want to steal from him. She wished to reveal all and to be, at once, free of this damn assignment and no longer bound by Trinan's order.

Trembling, she pulled her hand away, her wrist scraping against the sailor's knot bracelet on his wrist. She seized the canteen and drank, washing away the dryness. Refitting the top, she searched her mind for another topic, any topic. "Tell me about Gantu."

He glanced at her. "Ever been?"

She shook her head.

"I'll take you there someday," he said.

"Why? It's a horrible place."

He huffed through his nose. “No, it’s not. You’ve never seen a true city until you’ve been to Nalta. Buildings as far as you can see. And no rickety wooden ones at that. Solid adobe walls, stone blocks, and red tiles or slate for the roofs—no thatching. They herd their cattle and use their riches to import fine fabrics, wines, spices, and jewels from the southern seas for their lavish balls and parties. They are a refined people.”

“I’ve never heard such things,” she said. “They are said to be harsh. And dirty.”

He laughed. “They aren’t dirty.” He paused. “Some are dirty. Most aren’t. As for harsh, yes, the sabhirim are harsh. Even cruelty can be refined.”

“They are cruel, then.”

He furrowed his brow. “The Gantish are people, like people everywhere. Some good, some bad. And the ruling class is different from the rank and file—again, just like everywhere else. The sabhirim have power, and they misuse it. Slavery. Torture. It’s an art form to them.”

“Some say we’ll go to war against Gantu.”

He hummed. “Not likely. I have too many ships patrolling these waters. They’ll never get a foothold, nor the Hykosi, either—they can’t go to war if they can’t move their army. That’s another reason why I’m never in port long. Even now, I’m preparing *Darsham* to leave.”

“To leave!” she said, sitting up straight, panic surrounding her. “Where are you going?”

He grinned. “The butterfly is disturbed!”

The bosun’s whistle floated across the wharf, and Cadoc glanced behind him. “I need to run along the coast a bit,” he said. “Remind some people who’s boss. Then on to the southern seas, transporting cargo to several ports of call. All

of those niceties must come from somewhere, and I make certain they do—for a price.” He climbed to his feet. “I must return. I’m flooding the dry dock this afternoon.”

He offered his hand.

She took it and stood, intending to bid farewell and walk along the wharf, but he gripped her hand and closed the distance between them, his leg pressing against hers, his arm bumping his jacket sleeve against her cheek. She started, surprised. He remained still. His shadow covered her, and his hand enveloped hers, but he touched her no further.

“I am drawn to you,” he said in a low voice.

She could not see his face. She dared not move.

“You hold the power to be my ruin, yet still I am drawn to you. I would kiss you. I would feel your lips on mine and the rise of your body against me. I would have you, if I could, and I swear to you I am searching for my opportunity. If it ever comes, flitting by me and dancing across the rocks, I assure you,” he tightened his grip upon her hand, “I will take it.”

Brynna stared at the water, breathless.

He released her.

She fled across the wharf, desperate to end the tension within her. She ran away from him, ran from her confusion. She had no choice. She must seize the manifest before the morning’s light.

Chapter 23

CADOC

Robynton
Wyclythe Province
Norin

Cadoc rubbed a towel on his wet hair as he entered the Robynton office.

Victor lowered his pen. “Enjoy your swim, sir?”

“I did,” he said, dropping his boots by the desk. “The sunset here will never be as magnificent as Jarta’s, but it was quite nice.”

“I agree with you there, sir. Western waters glory at sunset. Though if my wife heard me—good Wyclythe woman that she is—she’d box my ears.”

Cadoc chuckled and walked into the small back room that served as his living quarters. “Your secret is safe with me,” he called, stripping naked and toweling dry. “I returned *Darsham* to the harbor today.” He opened the wardrobe, pulled on drawers and trousers, and chose a shirt, only to see a large hole that had been chewed into the sleeve.

Rats. He growled and grabbed another. "The light spars are in need of scraping, but it's too soon with the tarring I just did."

"When will you set to sea, sir?"

"Day after tomorrow at the earliest. Depends on provisioning." He lathered his shaving soap. "I need to make a sharp run to Bryton and scare off the slavers at Olam Cove before putting in at Tadsyn and loading for Tivix. I'd like to speak to Thackery about the Council of Norin before the eastern barge fleet leaves for Nalta."

"I believe you will narrowly miss him, sir. I'll check again."

Cadoc touched the straight razor to his face as he listened to Victor shuffle papers.

"Yes, here," Victor said. "They are scheduled to leave tomorrow morning, so he'll be in Nalta when you arrive in Tadsyn."

Cadoc huffed and shook foam from the razor. "I'll have to meet with him on his return then. But I don't want to postpone sailing to the southern sea any longer than that."

"A few days' delay is harmless."

"I'll probably need that time anyway to finish provisioning and finalize the crew. But the corrals in Tadsyn should be full of Gantish cattle by now. Once loaded, I have no desire to sit and wait."

Victor shuffled his papers. "Well, at any rate, Brynna Dasveld will be glad to hear you're not postponing procurement of her order. It's quite large."

Cadoc paused his shaving. "I examined her account yesterday. The order seems abnormal."

"I wouldn't say that, sir. There have been several times in the last few years that she has placed extensive orders

—when Seth carved the altarpiece in Lonara, the Grimsyn commission, the throne of Amiman, the—”

“She handled all of those projects? Not Seth?”

“Aye, sir. Always Brynna. I only speak to Seth if he needs something outside the regular bounds of business. Other than that, she still manages his accounts, despite her role at the fortress.” Victor chuckled. “And she drives a bargain, too. Asks myriad questions about paperwork and management. She’s sharp with the numbers—no one gets away with cheating her!”

Cadoc leaned into the doorway. “When have you cheated her?”

“Oh, not me, sir,” Victor said, eyeing the razor. “Just a, uh, figure of speech.”

Cadoc returned to the mirror. “What is this latest project of hers?”

“Couldn’t say, sir. She won’t give me the slightest hint, even with all of her chatter. She’s a lively young woman, quite lovely.”

Cadoc smiled at the image of her in his mind, her bright, blue eyes that would catch a sparkle off the ocean and shine with an aqua radiance, her smattering of light-brown freckles that peppered her cheeks and crossed the bridge of her button nose, her clothes that never seemed to stay clean. He slowly lowered the razor to the washstand. He revered her with an intensity that startled him. Brynna was a woman of beauty with porcelain skin made for his touch and smiling lips curved for his kisses. Her laughter and picnic baskets had brought a novel sense of permanence and stability into his life, a sensation at once light as air and heavy as lead. The great sonnets seemed less inane and

vacuous than he had once thought. Yet she was the chancellor's attaché and consort, and danger crackled around her. Those same poets offered plenty of advice concerning the blade of a rival, yet he remembered none that addressed the balance of a lover's devotion with the tariff table and provincial tax rates.

Even his dreams sought to dissuade him. Every night, he would taste her passion in his bed, only to be dragged to the top of the Robynton breakwater and shot by Trinan as Gara of Elidel mocked him and shouted, "There's no financial benefit!" He rinsed the razor. He loved Brynna despite the risk, or perhaps his feelings were enhanced because of it.

"If I may, sir," Victor said. "Perhaps you should ask her what it's for? You seem to spend more time in her presence than I."

Cadoc splashed water on his face, the cold water bracing his skin. He puffed his cheeks. "Perhaps."

"She may be a valuable contact," Victor said. "And I wonder what sway she has over Walyss. A woman often has more influence than her position dictates on the surface."

Cadoc raised his brow. "You think that extends to valsydian tariff rates?"

"Depends on how close she is to Walyss. And how close you are to her. The more he depends on her, the more powerful she becomes in matters of state. And the more familiar you are to her, the more pressure you can use to guide her."

"What do you recommend?"

"Oh, I don't have any recommendations, sir. You know best. She's an odd one."

Cadoc grinned and dried his face. “She climbed the fucking breakwater when we first arrived in port,” he said through the towel.

“Impressive feat, sir, but then she was a rough-and-tumble child. Understandable, since her mother was killed in the Removal.”

“May it never happen again,” Cadoc said, curious what more he could dig up. “I assume then, growing up, she spent a lot of time with Trinan Walyss?”

“Not that I saw, sir. Erling was the one always running about with him. The two were inseparable, fishing or hunting with their falcons until Trinan reached the age to make more of himself. Couldn’t be helped—children grow—but in those first few years of adulthood, he left Erling behind.”

Cadoc sat at his desk chair and leaned back to prop up his bare feet. “And about that time, Trinan noticed Brynna?” He crumpled a torn bit of paper and tossed it at the small strongbox sitting on the edge, trying to hit the lock at the front. It missed, so he tore another and tried again.

Victor chuckled. “About that time, every man in Robyn-ton noticed Brynna. She rebuffed them all in favor of Trinan, and it’s no surprise to see them together. The Walyss and Dasveld families have been allied for generations. I suspect Seth guided the match. Trinan was close enough to be first, and I suppose Brynna never strayed.”

Cadoc nodded, now understanding Brynna’s indignation at his suggestion of her being involved with others. He also had not realized how much Victor knew about the people in town. He threw another paper ball and hit the lock. “How long have you worked for the company?”

“43 years in total,” Victor said. “I sailed with your grandfather on *Reliance*—”

"*Reliance*! That's a name I haven't heard in a while."

Victor nodded. "Aye, sir. I was second officer on *Reliance* until this position opened. My wife was with child, and I wanted to settle down a bit. I've been here for 25 years."

"You were here during the Removal," Cadoc said.

"I was in Tadsyn that night, and my wife and children were in the countryside visiting her sister. We were spared by chance, and I am grateful. When we rebuilt, I laid much of the shiplap in this room."

Cadoc gazed at the walls. "And well done."

"Thank you, sir."

A black shadow scuttled along the wall. Cadoc lunged for his boot and hurled it at the rat. "I've had enough of these fucking things!" The rat disappeared into a hole in the corner. "When I come ashore, I want free of them."

"Wharf rats?" Victor said. "Typical Robynton, sir."

Cadoc stalked to his room and slung on his knife belt, then returned to tie on his boots. "I need a cat or something."

"I once saw a man who kept a harpoon handy."

"Not a bad idea," Cadoc said, walking to the door.

"I'd not recommend wandering about much at night, sir. The Hykosi patrols will be out by now, and the damn rebels to skirmish with them. I stay on the livery road to get home just to avoid the mess."

"I'd rather soldiers than wharf rats," Cadoc said. "Soldiers don't eat my clothes." He donned his hat. "I won't be long." He stepped outside, and after closing the door, nodded to the huntsman who stood leaning against the building across the street. The huntsman slowly nodded back, and Cadoc went in search of a cat.

Chapter 24

BRYNNA

Robynton
Wyclythe Province
Norin

Brynna pinched her cheeks to a blush as she stood before the door of the Andersyn Shipping Company. She wrapped a stray lock around her finger until it held a curl, then rubbed her hands together, wishing to wipe the sweat away but not daring to risk marring her silk skirt. The time had come. *Darsham* had left dry dock. Cadoc would sail within days. She must seize the manifest or admit defeat, but either way, she couldn't bear any more time in his presence. She was the attaché of the chancellor of Wyclythe. She had a task to perform. It was her duty.

Brynna straightened the neckline of her bodice and pushed open the door. The polished walnut smeared a mark on her sleeve.

Victor stood. "Brynna! Good to see you this evening!"

Brynna scowled at her sleeve and attempted to rub away the oil. "Likewise." The oil remained.

He pulled a chair around for her, the legs squealing as they slid across the floor. "Take a seat?"

She shook her head. "Oh, no, not tonight. I haven't the time. It's so very late." Her spirit lifted as she realized Victor was alone—all the easier to manipulate the key from him. She wouldn't have to interact with Cadoc at all.

"My dear, there's always time," he insisted, guiding her to the chair. "I was about to lock up, but I have time for you." Victor returned to his seat and tented his fingertips together. "What can I help you with? An order, I hope?"

Brynna smiled in return as the door flung open.

Cadoc appeared carrying a harpoon. "I got a tabby cat."

Her stomach jolted.

He stopped short and met her eyes. "Not—not with the harpoon. To eat rats. The cat, I mean."

She lifted her chin with prim coolness. "Commodore," she said, nodding in formal greeting.

He mastered himself and straightened his posture. "Brynna Dasveld." He cleared his throat. "A fine evening." His deep voice resonated through the room.

She pushed a wispy flyaway behind her ear. "Yes, it is."

"Pardon me," he said, stepping past her, taking the harpoon to the back room.

"An order, Brynna?" Victor pressed. "Teak? Spruce?"

She blinked, returning her attention to Victor. "No, something from the warehouse. I'm looking for mahogany."

Victor's brow lifted. "Mahogany! What brings this on?"

"A commission," she said.

"A high honor!"

“Indeed!” Cadoc said, returning. He sat casually on the edge of his desk and crossed his arms. “Sounds like an impressive. . .project.” His eyes glittered mischievously.

Her cheeks warmed, and sweat prickled down her back. She struggled to focus on her task.

Victor picked up his pen. “What’s the project?”

“Ah!” she said, wagging her finger. “You would try to drag secrets from me!” She laughed. “Victor, you know better!”

“Very well!” he said, cheerfully. “Don’t tell! But I have some bad news.” He grimaced and held out his palms. “No mahogany. I can—”

“None? But you had some this week!”

He shook his head. “I don’t think so. That was a while back.”

“No, I’m sure it was Monday,” she said, leaning toward the desk. “It’s probably just misplaced.”

Victor flipped through the papers. “Did it come in on *Basilisk*?”

“Certainly not,” she said. “Captain Layton doesn’t sail to those ports. It came in on *Darsham* weeks ago. You’ve had a store of it for a while.”

Victor laughed. “You know our schedules and inventory better than I do!”

She giggled. “Check *Darsham*’s manifest.” She touched his arm. “Please.”

Muttering under his breath, Victor cracked his knuckles and shifted in his chair. “I don’t have access to the manifest proper, but I have a list of the warehouse inventory here somewhere.” He searched through the papers on his desk, stacking and restacking. “I think it—”

“If you believe you are out of mahogany,” she said, running her thumb down the edge of a paper stack such

that each corner appeared, “then any little inventory list is flawed. *Darsham’s* full manifest will clear up the confusion.” She surreptitiously scanned the titles on every page.

Cadoc shifted. “My manifest wouldn’t differ significantly from Victor’s working inventories. The weights may fluctuate, but little else does. It’s locked away.”

Inside her boots, her toes curled. “Shall we look at it? Surely, you believe me when I say it must have been this week.”

He smiled. “Without doubt. But it changes nothing. I have no mahogany now.”

She looked at Victor. “You’re certain? It’s not misplaced? In a warehouse? Check the—”

“I can look again,” Victor said with renewed energy. “I’ll go to the warehouse myself. Then we’ll know for sure!”

“No,” she sighed, sinking back, losing hope of success. “No, I’ll just have to order some to arrive on the next shipment.”

Victor smiled and lifted his pen. “What dimensions? And how many board feet? And will you be paying today?”

Cadoc stood. “Victor, I’ll take this order. It’s late, and I’m sure your wife wants you home.”

“It’s not a problem, sir. I’ll—”

“You should hurry home,” he repeated firmly.

She watched her hands in her lap as her nerves crawled.

Victor tapped his pen on the paper a few times then put it down. “Of course, sir.” He moved around his desk and picked up his cape and hat. “A pleasant evening to you both.” He opened the heavy door and glanced back. “A pleasant evening,” he repeated, tucking his head into his hat and closing the door behind himself.

Bryнна held her breath.

Cadoc walked to the window. After a moment, he drew the drapes and turned back. The corner of his mouth twitched. "The butterfly returns. An unexpected pleasure."

Their eyes met. Conflict burned within her. All other routes had failed. To get to the manifest, she must go through him, yet he had made his own intentions clear. She understood the stakes. She must convince him to open the safe and hand her the document, and yet she trembled, knowing she must play to his assumptions.

She moved closer, to stand within inches of him. He remained still, watching, his breath slow, controlled, and even. She settled her hand on his chest, his muscles solid beneath his clean work shirt, and with the other, she touched his face, the tips of her fingers smoothing lightly across his freshly shaved skin.

He bent his head. She sought his mouth, and his lips touched hers in a resolute kiss that he held for an extended moment. Then one kiss became two. He slipped his tongue past her lips, touching off a cascade of intensity as he pressed through her tremulous restraint. He seized her, pulling her tightly against him, kissing her over and over, his kisses strengthening and arching her backward until he pressed her head over his arm and revealed her neck. She sank into the helpless sensation of his tongue on her throat, a slow, delicious upward motion that drew from her a shuddering whimper and sent fire surging through her body and between her thighs.

With a final kiss to dot her chin, he relaxed his grip. She dropped against him and lay her head on his chest, her breath escaping in quick gasps she clamored to slow. He rested his hand on her head and playfully picked at a hair pin with his fingernail.

"I had to see you," she said.

He pulled back and lifted her chin with one finger. "Be honest with me."

Her stomach tightened.

"Do you really need mahogany?" he asked. "Or is that a ruse? I'm less than convinced."

"I do need mahogany," she insisted, pulling away. "For a project! If I could see the manifest, then—"

He laughed heartily. "You're clever." He caught her waist and bent his head to her ear, where he nipped the lobe and ran his tongue along the edge. "You're beautiful," he whispered in a low, needful tone that ran down her spine. As he breathed across her ear, he traced his finger along the neckline of her dress to the ridge of her collarbone. She closed her eyes and leaned into him, but he suddenly pulled away. She lurched forward and caught herself on the desk.

"And you're in way over your head," he said with a smug grin.

Confusion and desperation flared within her. "What do you mean?" she demanded, sharply brushing the rumples from her skirt. This wasn't going as she'd hoped.

"Do you really expect me to believe your following me around, being constantly underfoot, and chatting up a storm, is for some kind of carving project? That Trinan—who is neither a carver nor an artisan nor an aficionado of any of the fine arts—sent you away from the safety of Wyclythe's fortress, in the evening, past Hykosi soldiers, rebels, and slavers, just to ask if I had mahogany available, not for him, but for your father? Especially when you then fall into my arms and greet me like that?"

Her heart pounded. She wet her lips. "Yes." Her thoughts raced for another explanation, something that would make

sense to him, but her mind echoed as though hollow. "It's true."

"No." He moved closer again. "Trinan never did that." He rested a hand at her waist, and the other cupped her breast. As he rubbed his thumb across the fabric, circling the nub, she closed her eyes. Her lips parted with her breath. "We both know you've come here of your own accord," he murmured. "You're here for something else, something you don't want him to know about."

The heady sensation of his hands on her body melded with her fear and coursed through her veins. His soft lips kissed the line of her jaw, and even as she canted her head to allow him further, she fought to rule her responses and force her thoughts into order.

He released her and sauntered across the room. "Why do you put up with that bastard?"

She puffed her breath in her cheeks before facing him. "I'm bound to the king's service."

Cadoc opened a cupboard. "You can do that without blowing him at night." He lifted out a dark-green bottle and two shot glasses. "Kick off your shoes and have a drink." Stabbing his ceremonial knife into the cork, he withdrew it with a pop and poured out a green liquid, a small amount in one glass, the other nearly full.

She furrowed her brow. "What is that?" she asked, sitting in the chair by Victor's desk and removing her boots and stockings.

"A delight from an island in the southern sea. I guarantee you've never tasted anything like it." He handed her the glass with the smaller amount and thumped his knuckle on her nose. "Don't drink it too fast." He lifted his glass. "To discoveries."

Brynna lifted her glass and sipped. With the taste of a spring meadow, the draught burned all the way to her stomach, and she blinked rapidly as sparkling heat sizzled through her.

“Too strong?” He laughed.

Her face flushed. “No, no.” She coughed. “It’s fine,” she said, her voice cracking. She sipped the rest, coughing after each swallow and blinking to clear the blur in her eyes.

He kicked back his drink and firmly returned his empty glass to the table.

A small picture frame displaying a woman’s silhouette leaned at the corner of his desk. She picked it up and looked closer. “Who is this?”

“My mother.”

“Is she living?”

He nodded. “In Tadsyn. I visit when I’m in port.”

Brynna smiled and returned the frame to the desk, but then her smile faded. “I don’t remember my mother.”

“In the Removal,” he said, twisting his head to the side but omitting the spit.

She nodded.

He corked the bottle. “May it never happen again.”

After replacing the bottle in the cupboard, Cadoc clasped her hand and guided her to stand. She smiled shyly and yearned for some kind of plan as his cheeks glowed, ruddy with alcohol and arousal. His handsome, ardent eyes dropped briefly to her lips, then returned to stare into hers. She lost herself in their depths, in the darkness of his vigor and virility. Her smile faded as she understood herself once more as the object of his powerful desire. He stepped toward her. She stepped back with a soft, absurd, nervous giggle.

Undaunted, he moved his hand to her waist to arrest her escape, then dipped his mouth to hers. His lips felt strange—narrower than Trinan’s—and he moved in different ways from the only man she had ever kissed. His tongue found hers again, and it, too, felt peculiar, with smooth, curved movements so foreign when compared to Trinan’s darting ways. It had never occurred to her that such things would vary so widely from person to person.

Curiosity piqued, Brynna entwined her arms about his neck, a motion which, as he straightened and lifted her to her tiptoes, stretched her ribs and pressed their bellies firmly together with his hands supporting her waist. They kissed with growing fervor, his hands roving, and she leaned entirely upon him, trusting his strength.

He took a quick step, and they tumbled against the wall, her back on the ship lap and his body aligned with hers, pressing against her, his hungry kisses never ceasing, his tongue deep within her mouth. A desperate, fiery passion ignited within her that drove her wild toward some frantic end. She reveled in the frustration of wanting both release and eternity.

He gripped her thigh and drew it upward, then wedged himself between her legs. A moan escaped her throat at the splendid pressure, and her neck curved backward, her head hitting against the wall. He trailed his tongue down her throat as his hands stroked the swell of her bodice. She arched, pushed her breasts against his palms, as waves of pleasure pulsed through her, and her breath played to the rhythm.

She needed his skin on hers.

She needed him.

The stark inescapability of that realization shocked her out of her trance.

Duty could not be denied. Her intelligence mission burst into her fore thoughts, breaking through liquid fog, the manifest manifesting. She must stop. She must retreat.

Her head fuzzy with liquor, she shoved his hands away. "I need to leave," she said and swallowed hard. "My shoes..."

"My butterfly," he whispered into her hair. "Flitting all about." He chuckled. "Why? Why leave now?"

"I must. I'll be missed."

He paused, still, calm, granting a moment's reprieve, then kissed her mouth again, her chin, her neck, and down onto her bodice, bowing before her, almost on his knees, until his lips parted around the pebbled bump of her nipple. She gasped, so sensitive was she to his hot breath as it seeped through layers of silk and linen.

"But you want to stay," he murmured.

Brynna closed her eyes. "Yes." She ached for him, yet she belonged in a room of sandalwood and cypress, gazing into a different set of eyes. Her thoughts clogged as she struggled with the harsh mechanics of deception and reality, of changing situations. Trinan had warned her not to trust him.

She shook her head and cleared her throat. "I'm expected to return. I must leave. Now."

"Here and there," he said. "Flit, flit, flit. Dancing around the truth." He stepped back, ending the tension, and she sighed with relief. Soon she would be up the hill in the fortress, and things would be as they should.

He took her hand. "Come here." He picked up the oil lamp and guided her toward the back room. She tripped on the tilting floor, but he held her upright.

The lamplight revealed his sparse bedchamber. Rough-hewn paneling surrounded the simple furniture. A patchwork quilt covered the bed. A leather-bound book and a revolver lay on the desk, and a simple wardrobe stood opposite. His sword hung by its baldric on a hook on the wall. The harpoon leaned in the corner, and a small window looked out to the alley.

He placed the lamp on the desk, then pulled her further into the room, closing the door and locking it.

Bryнна froze. "What are you doing?"

He smiled and cupped her face in his hands to kiss her.

She shied away. "Cadoc."

"You're only nervous." He grasped her shoulders and turned her around. "Nervous and naïve."

She blinked, disoriented, as the room spun well beyond the turn he had given her. His fingers worked through her hair, withdrawing the pins, and her hair fell in waves down her back. He gathered it together and wound it around his hand, then slowly, he pulled, forcing her head backward, controlling her position. His teeth nicked her throat. "I want you."

His voice stole the air from her lungs. She couldn't do this. She was drowning, without air, without buoyancy. Her feet floundered but could not touch sand. She flailed, and he released her.

He laughed and shrugged. "Unless, of course, you want to go back to him." He pulled his shirt over his head, revealing a long red scar on his left arm that ran in a jagged line from his sailor's knot to his elbow. Silvery lash marks crisscrossed his back. He threw the shirt to the desk. "You're welcome to leave," he said. "What do you want?" He faced

her, smugly propping his hands on his hips as though challenging her with his shirtless body.

The key hung from his neck, centered on his bare chest.

Brynna shook her head. Her double vision cleared, and the key still shone before her, twine entwined. Her body blazed, but she wrestled within her sluggish mind. If she left this room, he might sail before she could take that key, yet if she stayed, he might uncover her deception. Trust the future or trust the moment. Wariness had two faces.

Her courage wavered, yet each heaving breath moved her forward, fortifying her will, until, once more, she lifted her hands to Cadoc's face. She glimpsed his surprised expression and felt the jolt of his muscles as she brought his lips to her mouth and sought his tongue with the tip of her own. Trinan would understand. He had said to do anything necessary. This was part of the task. It was her duty.

Cadoc ran the backs of his fingers across her cheek, then stepped behind her. She remained motionless, resolved even, as he unbuckled her knife belt and unclasped her skirts, dropping them to the floor. He offered his steadying hand. Amused by his gallantry, she placed her fingers on his palm, and he helped her out of the silken pile. He returned to his work, unfastening her bodice, and when it released, he tossed it with her skirts.

She remained facing the wall, away from him, unsure what to do. His hands, large and heavy, smoothed across the linen straps of her stays, and as heat surged within her again, she closed her eyes, her breath shaking through parted lips. He tugged lightly on one strap and brushed it off her shoulder.

And then nothing. His hands had evaporated. She couldn't hear him. Unsettled, she opened her eyes the very

moment his lips touched her bare shoulder. The warm and impossibly gentle sensation drove her desire to new heights. She inhaled sharply, and he kissed again, moving closer to her neck, then again. She whimpered, and at the sound, he grasped her waist and crushed her to himself, his bare chest on her back, his need grinding against her. She lifted her arms and plunged her hands into his black hair. He groaned with frustration and stepped away.

He unbuckled his knife belt, the buckle jingling as he set it on the desk. He pulled the key from around his neck, tossing it down as well, and it skittered across the desk, knocked into the wall, and fell behind.

Brynna's thoughts fractured. All passion quelled. Her reward ran free, and only sleight of hands remained. She must get the key. Suddenly conscious of being clad only in pantalets and short stays, her skin broke into gooseflesh, and she covered her stays with her hands.

He laughed. "First Breath, Brynna," he said. "I swear you're a virgin. All nerves and fear." He grasped her hands and extended her arms to each side. "Does Trinan not court you? Is it just carry these papers and lift your skirt?"

"I—" She ducked from his arms and stepped toward the desk.

He caught her back against his chest again, his arms tight. His hand rubbed across her bare midriff with his finger tips tucked under the delicate scalloped edge of her pantalets. She tensed, and in response, he lifted his hand and placed his palm atop the fabric instead. He slid down to her mound, and she shuddered as her resistance ebbed. She tipped her head back to his chest as his fingers stroked her. He rubbed his nose in her hair. "Does he even touch you before he fucks you?"

Her fuzzy mind perceived only pleasure. Her body knew only heat. Yet when she opened her eyes, she saw the gleam of the key embedded in the dust between the desk and the wall. She struggled against herself and him until he released her, and she moved freely. She stepped away, toward the desk. "I don't want to talk about—"

"Of course not." He caught her hand and forced her to face him. "He doesn't matter here." He rested his hands on her shoulders. "What matters is what you feel." His voice dropped low and stern. "And I will make you feel."

With a heavy grip, he pressed her shoulders until she sank to her knees. "Unlace my boots," he commanded.

Brynna reached her trembling fingers to the laces of one and pulled, loosing the knots and freeing his foot. She pulled off his sock.

"The other."

She did the same to the other side.

"Look at me."

She raised her eyes as he towered over her. It was a familiar position, wooden planks beneath her knees instead of stone. There, familiarity ended. He unfastened and dropped his trousers. He brushed her hair away from her face, running his hand through the strands to hold the nape of her neck. His movements, again, seemed strange, so smooth and slow and gentle, almost soothing, and so unlike the domineering motions she knew.

A heavy thump and rattle sounded from the roof. Brynna started and pulled away. Cadoc looked up and growled, grabbing his trousers and buttoning the top button. He lunged for the harpoon in the corner, and Brynna scrambled across the floor away from him, eyes wide.

“Ag! Ya damn wharf rats!” Cadoc yelled. “Ya none but got me drovel!” He banged the harpoon against the roof.

A series of thumps ran from the ridge pole down the roof as a dark form scuttled from the thatching. With another blow from the harpoon, a massive gray rat slapped onto the floor. Brynna shrieked and scrambled onto the bed, standing on the mattress and pressing herself against the wall over the headboard.

Cadoc attempted to draw his knife, but it was on the desk. “—the fucking knife when I need it!” he muttered and snatched it up. Turning back, he glanced one way and then the other. “It’s gone.”

“Where’d it go?” Brynna asked, not moving from her spot.

“Through the floor. Back down to the dock, probably.” He laughed. “Unless it’s under the bed.” He returned his knife to the sheath and the harpoon to the corner. “Not what you expected tonight, eh?”

Brynna slid down the wall to the pillow and crawled to the edge of the bed. Her vision blurred again, thicker this time, blinding her, and she gripped the quilt in her fist to steady herself. Dizzying green delight from the southern sea crested over her, activating through her body. She inhaled deeply, and it washed away from shore, only to return and bathe her again in another intoxicating wave. She buried her fingers in the white sand and tipped her face to the sun’s burning heat as he stripped and sank beside her and consumed her lips and tongue, stroking her body with boiling rays.

Sensual waves moved their hands, touching, exploring. Sweat broke and beaded on her back as she, too, shed her clothes and bared her skin to the golden glow, seeking

relief from the throbbing ache as she rolled in the surf. His lips caressed her breast, his tongue laving and teasing her nipple, and she moaned as waves broke on the beach. She floated above him, the water under her, supportive and smooth, slow and gentle, rocking and liltng.

Storm clouds drifted across the rafters, hovering above misty depths. A growling gale gripped her hair and cast her downward into the sea, and he rolled atop her, stealing her breath. The tide ran high and low, and she squeezed her thighs against his ears, arching her back, pressing against his mouth as he dragged his tongue upward. She gritted her teeth as the tension built, and for a moment, her vision cleared—but the shore and sanity was only a line in the distance. It was too late. It was too far.

The sky shattered around her, wave upon wave. She cried out as she slipped beneath the surface, and he moved atop her, filling her completely, sweeping her out to sea, his breath matching her own. She clambered for the surface, reaching upward, and he seized her wrists and pressed her downward, deeper and deeper. She struggled for air, gasping through another release. The waves crashed unabated, one atop another, rising, cresting, breaking, and then washing away, finally drifting out to a smooth and calm sea.

Only the soft and soothing sounds of the distant ocean filled the night.

Brynna lay still, her head nestled on Cadoc's shoulder, his arm draped snugly around her nude form, cradling her against him. Her fingers lay lightly on the hair of his bare chest. His bedsheets lay lightly across her bare shoulders. She listened to him breathe and counted his soft snores.

She did not sleep.

The lamp burned softly, glowing from the desk. Moonlight fell through the thin white curtain and spilled across the patchwork quilt, an ebbing glow across a swathe of blue. The moon seemed cold. The air, too. Though his naked body radiated warmth, she shivered.

She stared at the patterns on the quilt. Her eyes followed one seam until it ended in another. Moonlight lit one. A wrinkle dipped another into shadow. The lines diverged, then drew together, forming shapes. She counted triangles in starbursts, eight forming each. In the wrinkles and tumbled folds, they morphed into unintended curves and shapes, incidental forms and displays beyond the pattern, beyond the plan. More than what she had ever imagined. She could hide in the shadow of a wrinkle. She could hide and never leave the darkness. He could hide her, and she would never have to leave him.

It wasn't too late. She had yet to take the key. She could awaken him and confess and beg his mercy. He would help her and shield her from Trinan's wrath, which was sure to fall like iron. In return, she could adjust his books—the tariff discrepancies were certainly mere mistakes, and she could right them. Numbers listened to her, marching in their tidy rows and lining up for sums. She could warn him.

Bryнна lifted her hand to shake him awake.

A bell cracked the silence, clanging without cadence.

Cadoc sat up on his elbows. "Huh? Wha?"

She pulled away. The clanging continued. Her heart pounded.

"Shit!" Cadoc breathed. He shoved back the covers and leapt from the bed, grabbing his clothes from the floor. Bryнна pulled the blankets over her breasts and watched him dress.

"I swear," he said, "if that fucking jackass of a bosun's mate burns through my decking one, more, time," he hopped as he pulled on his boots, "I'll keelhaul him from here to Tadsyn!" He shoved his other foot into his boot and crossed the room to seize his shirt.

The clanging continued.

Cadoc stuffed his arms into the sleeves. "I apologize for leaving, little butterfly, but this can't be helped," he said, slinging his knife belt around his waist and holstering his revolver. He ducked into his baldric and pulled the sword into place. After unlocking the door, he hesitated and looked back at her, his eyes moving over her, but after a fleeting moment, resolve flashed over his face. He hurried through the doorway. She heard the front door slam shut.

The clanging continued.

And stopped.

The night was still.

Brynna's heart pounded. It was time. She had to move. She had to find it. Now. Now!

She searched through the covers and found her stays, then jumped out of bed. The world tilted. Sparks flashed before her eyes. Nausea surged, and she leaned on the wall to steady herself, her hand pressed over her mouth in caution as her stomach churned. She blinked until her vision cleared. She found her pantalets, and after pulling them on and tying her stays in place, she dropped to the floor, crawling along the planks, reaching under the desk, swinging her arm back and forth until her fingers touched twine. Closing her eyes in gratitude, she pulled back the cord with the key.

She climbed to her bare feet, picked up the lamp, and scurried into the office where she set it atop the rifle safe and fumbled with the key. Her breath and fingers and body

shook as she attempted to insert the key into the lock. It slid in. She pressed to turn the key. It held firm. She tried again. Again.

It wouldn't budge.

She leaned her forehead against the cold metal, willing the key to turn, yet it remained in place.

She withdrew the key, and it slipped from her fingers, clattering on the floor. Her breath grew audible, panting into panic. She grabbed her hair, pulling in desperation, tears wetting her face. The room closed in upon her.

Frantic, she scanned the office. There was nowhere else the key might fit.

A blocky shape on Cadoc's desk caught her eye. His strongbox. She fished up the key and, with shaking fingers, inserted it in the lock. It turned and clicked. She groaned with relief.

She moved the lamp to the desk and brushed away a scattered pile of little crumpled balls of paper. She lifted a stack of documents from the box and flipped through them. Three pages down, she found a long sheet with hundreds of entries in tiny rows, written in a blocky hand.

The *Darsham* manifest.

She folded the paper and tucked it into her stays. A smile playing at her lips, she closed and locked the strongbox and carried the lamp back to Cadoc's bedchamber. She gathered her clothes and hastily dressed, buckling on her knife and twisting up her hair.

She left the lamp in the bedroom.

She left his key on his desk.

And the door she closed quietly behind herself.

Chapter 25

NORA

Nalta
Gantu

With a final glance at the inn, Nora walked into the street at a quick pace, refusing to look at the shadows so she wouldn't lose her nerve. The town slept, windows dark. Only the occasional cricket chirped before it was shushed by the wind. She turned down one street, then another, this one lined with houses. A baby cried, the sound lifting through an open window, accompanied by the creak of a rocking chair. Nora pulled her cloak around her and walked on.

A woman in a purple cloak walked ahead of her, and Nora recognized her as a canonical witch. Someone important must be sick—witches were rare in Gantu. Though valsydian was mined in the mountains, there were no ancient circles where cardinals could purify the canonicals of gathered ondilska. There were no ancient paths that crossed

either the oceans or the craggy Padyn mountains. Witches had to sail to Gantu to heal and then sail back to Norin for purification. Such an arduous service was precious and reserved only for those who were privileged enough to access precious things.

The witch arrived at the front gate of the street's most prominent house. The black wrought iron fence encircled a small garden, and the gate emitted a low creak as the witch opened it and closed it behind her once more. The house's adobe walls led Nora's eye upward from story to story, past brass lanterns and shining windows, to the red tiled roof. Such elegance seemed a world away, even as it stood before her.

A bareheaded footman opened the door, the light within slicing the night. The witch entered, and the door closed with a formidable thud, leaving Nora in the dark, wondering both what was wrong and what it was like to be healed by a witch.

Nora plucked a flower from one of the bushes that grew through the fence, a souvenir for her thoughts. She twirled it under her nose as she walked, the petals brushing on her lips.

Shadows moved around a campfire in an open yard. Low voices grumbled. She stiffened, and her breath shortened, for her unveiled head identified her as a target for the riff-raff. She hurried past them.

"Sweet pretty!" one called.

"Come back!"

She swallowed and continued on, so focused on escaping them, she didn't see the man before she ran into him. She bounced off his round belly.

"I'm sorry," she muttered, continuing forward.

He caught her shoulder. "Oh, now, don't hurry away." He reeked of the cheap ale that slurred his voice. "You Tuli? Lemme see your face."

She pushed his hand away, her band glinting in the firelight. "Leave me alone."

He chuckled. "Slave, then. Come and sit on my lap," he said, catching her waist. "Let's have a drink together."

She struggled against his tightening grip. The flower fell. "Please! Let go!" She couldn't scream. A commotion would prevent her from reaching the children's house entirely.

A pistol cocked.

They both froze.

"Release her," a firm voice commanded.

The man's grip slackened, and Nora pulled away, turning to see the guard in the burgundy taylasan, his pistol in his hand.

The drunken man smiled, showing two teeth and a string of spittle. "Lieutenant Nyok, sir. The girl is my disobedient daughter. Send her home with me. She might protest and say outlandish things. Rebellious one, she is."

Nyok's nostrils flared. "Kol, you no more have a daughter than I do. Go on. No more bothering women in the street."

Kol made a huge sweep of his arm as he bowed. "As you say, sir." He touched his hat and nodded to Nora. "Good night, sweet."

Nora shivered as he stumbled away, and though her accoster sank into the shadows, her shivering continued. She trembled as she stood before Nyok.

He holstered his pistol. "Slave or citizen?"

"Slave, sir," she answered, not daring to look into his face.

“Show me your band.”

She held out her left hand. He gripped her arm and pulled her toward an area of better light, then held her arm closer to his eyes. He smelled of mint.

“Nora Jlassi. Safiyya Gil,” he read. “You belong at the inn.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Why are you out this late?”

She didn’t have an answer. He would arrest her and throw her in jail. She would fail the others. They would be discovered and executed. Hanged. Or sent to the Tuli camp, their faces branded, doomed to mine valsydian and die the horrible, disfiguring death that came from touching raw stone. Tears ran down her cheeks. “Errands, sir,” she said, her voice cracking.

“Errands? At two in the morning?”

She nodded, a sob escaping her control.

His face twitched, and he cleared his throat. “There is no law against your being out this late, but it is unwise. Go straight to the inn. Don’t let me catch you again.”

She looked up into his face, expecting condemnation. She saw only stern authority and disimpassioned judgment. “Thank you, sir.”

“Go on.”

With a burst of relief, she rushed down the street and turned in the direction of the inn, but once out of his sight, she ducked back into the shadows and crept to another street where she circled back and hurried toward the house on Eighth Street, tenth from the corner.

Eighth Street, a blackened abyss devoid of light, seemed an alien world, yet the abnormal darkness comforted her,

whispering of Marcus's success in extinguishing all flames. The moon cast the outlines of houses, and she counted the front steps of each until she reached the tenth in line.

As she climbed onto the porch, the door opened, and she stepped inside without lingering.

Marcus closed the door and smiled in greeting. She smiled in return as she slipped her shoes from her feet. Her heart continued to pound, but the reason had shifted from fear to anticipation.

Sunna rose from a chair by the fire. The matching chair held a woman whom Nora assumed was the mother. The woman stared at the fire, her hands clasped tightly in her lap. She did not greet Nora or even acknowledge her, and Nora pitied her, for she had lost her husband and would never see her children again. They would sail to Norin and ride to Hykos and somehow find their own way in the world. Perhaps the mother would cry. Perhaps she would scream. Maybe the world would fade into subdued hues and muffled sounds until she, herself, lost form and substance. She wouldn't be good for work then. They would brand her face and send her to die. Perhaps she was already dead.

"Any problems?" Sunna asked.

"Nyok stopped me," Nora said.

Sunna stomped her bare foot. "Shyan shit yentera! What does he know?"

"Asa Nyok?" Marcus asked. "Commander of the Nalta Guard?"

Nora nodded and explained what had happened.

Marcus's brows met. "Why would he be out in the middle of the night? His job is primarily administrative, I thought."

Sunna scoffed. "Asa fancies himself a leader of men. Psh! He's a weak boy with a weak stomach. He chews those

damn mint sprigs and struts about with the Guard instead of keeping to his office. Says he doesn't want to lose his edge." She stepped close to Nora, her face dark. "You need to watch out," she said. "He knows you now. He'll be watching to see if you're a troublemaker. If he sees you again, you can bet he won't have mercy." She held up her three-fingered hand. "He doesn't know what mercy is."

Nora looked away. "Where are the children?"

"In the loft, asleep," Sunna said. "It's time to wake them."

"I'll go," Nora said.

She climbed the ladder into the loft. On three pallets lay three children. Nora gazed at them. The smallest, a boy, lay curled next to his brother. His elder sister lay with her hands behind her head, her eyes open.

"Is it time?" the girl asked.

Nora nodded.

The girl shook her younger brothers, and they blinked sleepily at her. "Let's go," she said. "They're here."

Nora backed down the ladder as the children climbed down after her. They clumped together in the center of the room, already dressed.

"I'm Ilara," the girl said. "This is Dario." She pointed to the next in their line by height. "And Rezki."

Nora smiled. "It's nice to meet you. My name's Nora."

"Where are their bags?" Marcus asked.

"Don't have any," Sunna said. "What would they take?"

"Do, too, has something!" Rezki said, his little voice loud. "I'm taking Tafu." He rubbed a fist across his nose and clutched a stuffed cow to his chest.

Marcus crouched before him and lifted Tafu's hoof. "On my father's ranch, I have met thousands of cows," he said. "And I have never seen a finer one than Tafu."

Nora's heart warmed as Marcus picked up the child. He would be a wonderful father someday. She imagined evenings around the fireplace, playing games and telling stories. He would wrestle with the boys and teach the girls to dance. She would sit at her needlework and smile.

"Shall we go then?" he asked.

Nora nodded and offered a small, closed lip smile to Ilara. They all moved to the door and put on their shoes.

Ilara turned back and stepped to the fire where her mother still sat staring into the flames, her hands clenched in her lap. Ilara kissed her cheek to no response and then joined them all at the door.

Marcus, with Rezki in his arms, stepped to the porch, then motioned for them to follow. Nora took Ilara's and Dario's hands, and together, they hurried down the dark street. After a brief stop to check for guards, they moved on to the next street and the next. She should have been terrified. She should have frozen in place and not been able to move or speak. Yet with Marcus there, she felt safe, as though nothing in the world could harm her or disrupt their plans.

Several times, they ducked into the shadows, whether to avoid drunken citizens stumbling home or sailors moving on the wharf. In time, they reached the warehouse and crept inside. Marcus pointed to the stairs and led them up to the second floor where a wide area opened before them. Empty of inventory, only a few crates and a stack of shipping blankets occupied the room.

"Here we are," Nora said to the children. "This is where we'll wait."

"And then we'll ride a ship to Norin?" Dario asked. "On the ocean?"

“Yes,” Nora said. “We’ll help you hide in the boat, and then they’ll take you to Norin. But for now, it’s time to sleep.”

Rezki shook his head. “Not tired.”

“Go to sleep anyway,” Ilara said.

Marcus chuckled as he laid the blankets on the floor.

The children settled onto the layers of blankets, and Marcus spread the last one over them. Three little heads, all in a row, peeked out at them.

“Momma always sings,” Rezki said, snuggling his cow.

Nora blinked. “Oh, um. All right.” She sat on the edge of the pallet and brushed his hair with her fingers. Marcus sat on the floor a little ways away, near the window. As the quiet settled around them, she sang the lullaby her mother had sung to her.

“An ivory blossom,
 Her ladies near,
 Dancing in velvet,
 Proclaiming the year.
 Dream, my precious one.
 Now I am here
 Upon the feathering grass.

“The warm sand remembers
 The bright day before
 And offers you warmth
 As you rest on the shore.
 Dream, my precious one.
 Now I am here
 Upon the feathering grass.

“The fire is crackling,
Sparking nearby.
Slowly it shrinks,
And soon it will die.
Dream, my precious one.
Now I am here
Upon the feathering grass.

“Close your sweet eyes, child,
And sleep all the night.
There’s nothing to fear.
Everything will be right.
Dream, my precious one.
Now I am here
Upon the feathering grass.”

Visions of stars filled her mind as she remembered the deep peacefulness of sun-bleached mattress ticking and the coolness of the underside of the freshly-flipped pillow. As she sang the final notes, the children’s calm, slow breathing was the only sound in the room.

Nora stood carefully so as not to wake them with her stirring. She tiptoed to Marcus, and he held out his arm, gesturing to a spot next to him. She sat and arranged the skirt of her gandoura.

“You have a beautiful voice,” he said.

Her face flushed. “Don’t tease me, sir. I’m sure you’ve heard the very best singers. Sometimes they stay at the inn.”

“I have,” he said. “Even so. There’s something elegant and haunting about a lullaby from a sweet, unassuming voice.”

She shivered with delight.

“Are you cold?” he asked.

“A little,” she said, rubbing her arms. “But it’s nothing, really.”

“I’m glad we’re able to help them,” he said. “I want to do more after this. I want to help more slaves escape, and I want to change the laws.”

She smiled. “It’s good of you. You are risking much to do this.”

“I’m not concerned. But I do want to help the Tuli. There must be something we can do.”

Revulsion swept over her. She thought of the Tuli slaves she and Marcus had seen before the shooting, their withered bodies, their hollow eyes. Tuli slaves filled her nightmares, and she feared even thinking of them.

“No, sir,” she said. “Nothing can be done for them.” She cleared her throat, desperate for another topic. “Do you have cattle?”

“No,” he said. “They’re all Lor’s. He manages them while my father spends his days in the senate and visiting his friends.”

“And you make crystal.”

He nodded. “Crystal, glass, lenses, yes.”

“Everyone admires your crystal,” she said. “It glitters so when on the table. I could stare at the sparkles forever.”

He smiled. “I’m glad you enjoy using it.”

“Oh, I don’t use it,” she said. “It’s not my place. But I get to see it, and that’s enough to make me happy.”

He shifted his foot.

Nora waited for his response, but he remained quiet. She soon wondered what she had said wrong. But it was only natural that he wouldn’t want to talk to her. She was just a slave. She was bothering him.

“You serve it to others but never get to use it?” he asked.

“Of course not. Safiyya keeps it locked up, except for the best guests. Dignitaries, mostly.”

He shook his head. “That frustrates me. I want everyone to enjoy my work.”

Nora glanced at him, trying to see his features in the dark. She wanted to tell him how much she appreciated his art, even without using it, and how she dreamed in sparkles.

“Have you ever been to my showroom?” he asked. She shook her head. “There’s too much risk of breakage to have a storefront in town, but I display my items in a showroom at my workshop near my father’s estate. There, people can see everything I and my workers make, from crystal goblets to telescopes and spectacles, vases and prisms and figurines.”

“It must be magical!” she breathed. To know such a place existed ruined her for all other thoughts. She imagined a room full of sparkling lights and beauty and soon her mind’s eye filled with color upon color.

He shifted, facing her. “Why is there such a distance between us?”

Her heart jumped. She searched the air around her for words to give him. She would tell him there needn’t be any distance. He would kiss her, and she would press her cheek to his.

He took her hand and placed his palm over the band. “Are the differences between sabhirim and slaves so numerous they are insurmountable?”

She paused, thinking of her words carefully. “I don’t think so, sir.” She paused, arranging and rearranging her words. She met his eyes, mere shadows in the dim light. The connection stole her breath. She threw away her thoughts

and ran forward. "But it must be difficult for a sabhir to love a slave."

Her words lingered, and she stood on the precipice, slowly tipping over the edge, as gravity toyed with her. She would fall and smash on the rocks below, and he would never allow her to speak to him again.

"No," he said. "It isn't difficult for a sabhir to love a slave."

She did not tumble into the canyon. She did not fall into the abyss. She broke the bonds that ensnared her and soared into the sky, laughing at the rocks below. Her heart sang, filling her with zest. She would have thrown herself into his arms, but one of the children snorted in their sleep and rolled over, distracting her momentarily, enough to calm her spirit.

"And you and Ziri?" he asked. "Are you two. . ."

"Are we what?"

"A couple?"

"No," she said, pleased that Marcus wanted to know if she was tied to someone. "Ziri's not into that sort of thing. That's why Safiyya lets him work at the inn."

"He's castrated, then?"

Nora blushed. "No." Her bashful smile faded as she thought further. "Well, I wouldn't know. He might be. No, I don't think so. Besides, he's a citizen, so Safiyya wouldn't have the power to order that. And I'd be too embarrassed to ask him." Her cheeks burned. "He says he sees people without the distraction of romance. He prefers things that way. It's the way he is."

"You're still shivering," he said, shifting. She heard a little metal clink as he moved closer to her. He lifted his beige golden-edged taylasan from his shoulders and draped it around her, cloaking her in softness and warmth that

had been his, surrounding her with the smell of smoke and vetiver. She imagined he was holding her, wrapping her in his arms, even as he sat back on his heels.

“Better?” he asked.

Words impossible, she nodded. He smiled and leaned against the wall again. Garnering every ounce of courage within her, she moved to sit next to him, their shoulders touching. She would not sleep, could not sleep, wouldn't dare miss a moment. She looked around her, cataloging every detail in her mind, every sound, every scent. The night passed, marked only with cricket song, as she reveled in the perfect life she lived.

Chapter 26

BRYNNA

Wyclythe Fortress
Wyclythe Province
Norin

Brynna rested her hand on the latch to Trinan's study. Her moment of truth. The moon had set, and the night was nearly spent. She had walked back to the fortress, stumbling in places from dizziness and nausea. Her head pounded with both exhaustion and the ill effects of the green bottle, but with her victory to come in the next few moments, when she would gently awaken Trinan in their bed and hand him the paper, she couldn't help but smile. He would laugh with relief and commend her for her work. He would wave his hand and shake his head, dismissing as nothing whatever she had had to do to get the manifest, then together, they would celebrate the momentous milestone and plan their next move. All the while, his eyes would sparkle, and his hands would reach for hers, and she would bask in his unshakeable love for her.

She tiptoed in, quietly closing the door behind her. Her eyes adjusted to the dim light. The chairs, the low fire. His pipe on the table. All seemed peaceful and as it should be as she surveyed the room. The doorway to their bedchamber was dark.

Trinan sat behind his desk.

His hands rested on the arms of his chair.

Their eyes locked.

She stood isolated in the middle of the room, petrified by the fury she saw in his eyes. The flagstones beneath her feet remained firm and unyielding even as she wished to sink into them.

Brynna rallied, reminding herself she was no thief under cover of night, no wayward child to be chastised. She had power of her own and stood poised to play the winning card, the one he knew not of. Her rare moment of anticipatory triumph overshadowed her fear, and a smile flickered on her lips.

"I didn't expect you to be awake so early," she said, approaching.

"I've not yet been to bed." His voice was measured.

Her smile faded.

She had labored to bring him what he wanted, had trudged miles from town, yet he was angry.

"It's almost dawn," she said in a soft tone, attempting to show him care and concern.

"I'm aware."

She dropped in a chair near the fire and untied her boots. His silent, piercing glare unnerved her. She dropped one boot to the floor, then the other, and leaned back, unsure of her next move. She wanted him to trust her, wanted him to display relief at her return, her safety, her comfort. Instead,

his attitude trampled her anticipated moment of joy and called forth the specters of Cadoc's dangerous, subversive ideas within her mind.

"Where have you been?" Trinan demanded.

"In town."

"At Andersyn's?"

"Yes."

His displeasure infused their silence. Brynna's eyes stung and blurred, and fatigue and disappointment ate away at her patience. Her head throbbed at her temples. Intense nausea crested in waves, breaking in cold sweat across her body. She stood slowly, holding onto the chair and allowing time for the tilting room to stop spinning. She collected a candle from his desk and padded in her stockinged feet to the doorway leading to their bedchamber. Her pillow called. She longed for sleep. He could wait. The manifest could wait.

After setting the candle on the large bureau, she unfastened her knife belt and skirts. They fell in a puff around her legs, and she stepped free in her pantalets and bodice.

Trinan stood in the doorway.

"At Andersyn's," he repeated.

"Yes," she said, separating her skirt from her petticoats. "We knew this would take time."

"All night?"

Brynna looked up at him. "Trinan."

His lips pressed into a thin line.

She opened the cedar chest and placed her skirt inside. "Yes, I was there all night."

"Alone. With him."

Brynna let the lid fall with a bang before swinging around and propping her hands on her hips. "So what? What are you accusing me of?"

He crossed his arms. "Why do you feel accused?"

Brynna faced away and unfastened her bodice. "You're the only person who knows why I was there."

"None of that involved visiting him at night."

She shrugged. "Yet it did. Dynamics change. Situations develop in ways that cannot be foreseen, but the goal must still be achieved. That's what you charged me with. Getting this done." She pulled her bodice off and tossed it on the bed.

"Brynnalyn," Trinan growled, "you've never done intelligence work before. I hesitated to send you at all. Now you've shown me you can't handle this. Andersyn's a philandering, pompous, arrogant womanizer with money to burn and no fear of the law. He's a man of the world in the most depraved sense. You're an untried—"

"Do you want the manifest or not?" she said, pulling the crumpled paper from inside her stays.

Silence hung in the air.

Trinan motioned to the paper. "Is that it?"

"Yes."

He snatched it from her and read it. "It's all here. In his hand. Just as I suspected." He glanced back at her. "Where did you get this?"

"From Andersyn."

"He gave it to you?"

"I took it," she said.

"How?"

She met his eyes.

"Tell me," he demanded.

Her heart pounded, but she held his gaze without flinching. "Why isn't it enough that you have it?"

Trinan shook the paper at her. "This is a critical piece. This is information I could not obtain—without ordering someone to steal it outright—and now you've handed it to me like biscuits at tea. If you were proud of this work, you'd tell me how you got it—if this was honorably obtained, at least. One last time, Brynnalyn, how did you get this?"

"I've left my boots by the fire," she said, walking through the doorway.

Trinan caught her arm in a tight grip. "You slept with him." His voice was low and terrible.

"Let go!" Brynna cried, struggling in his grasp.

"You slept with him!" he shouted and forced her back against the wall.

She shoved him. "You and I have not danced Teerlagee! We have not swapped knives! I am not bound to you. Nor did I even say that's what happened! You sent me there, and I did what you ordered me to do—I got the manifest! We can talk about this, and I can explain everything, but trust me first! Trust me! Trust that I did what you wanted in the only way I knew—"

"You are not worthy of my trust!"

Stung by his words, Brynna relaxed her muscles and submitted to his grip on her shoulders. Trinan breathed through his teeth. Spittle wet her face. She turned her head and stared through the doorway at the hearth beyond. Her boots rested at odd angles on the stones. "When he discovers it's gone," she said quietly, "he'll know I took it, and I don't know what the consequences will be. Send the information to your troops. Destroy him quickly so I will be protected."

Trinan released her with a shove. "You don't deserve my protection."

“You sent me to him!”

He grabbed her bodice from the bed and flung it at her. “Go!” he shouted. “Take your clothes and go!” He opened the chest, slamming the top against the wall, and dug out all of her dresses and petticoats. He threw them at her. “Get the hell out of here!”

Brynna sobbed as she picked up her clothes and fled the bedchamber. She ran across the study and grabbed at her boots, dropping one and scooping it up again.

“Go!” he shouted, lunging toward her.

She stumbled into the hall and pulled the heavy door closed, dropping several articles that she slid out of the way with her feet. The latch clicked, secure. Her muscles shook as she stared at the door and struggled to catch her breath. She leaned her forehead on the wood.

Her breath calmed, and she turned around.

Sol stood before her, blocking her way.

The clothes in her arms muffled her scream.

His hand rested on the hilt of his ceremonial knife. His eyes revealed nothing of his intent. There, he stood. Unmoving. Blocking her way. She felt trapped and trapped forever. There was no escape past his entrenched, impenetrable form. Here she would die. She lifted her trembling hand to the latch.

His gaze shifted from her eyes to the door.

Her hand remained in place. She didn't try the latch. She didn't want to know if it was locked, if Trinan had abandoned her to whatever fate Sol intended for her. The answer wasn't certain in her mind. The door remained closed.

Sol stepped back and turned away. He left the hall. No words. No sounds.

Tears ran down Brynna's cheeks as she dropped her clothing, slid to the floor, and wept, every bit of her night running down her face and over her arms.

Her cries slowed. Her tears dried. Cold seeped into her body as all hope melted away. Dawn smudged the window, yet still the door to Trinan's study remained closed. Sniffing, Brynna wiped her nose, dressed in the hall, and crept through the quiet fortress, her belongings in her arms, until she reached a dank and dark lower hallway and a guard in a midnight-blue uniform standing before a reinforced doorway.

She squeezed her clothes to her chest. "I'd like to speak to Erling Dasveld," she said in a low voice to his expressionless face.

"It's not yet six, ma'am."

"I'm his sister. Please wake him."

He hesitated, then pulled his lips to the side. "Wait here." Withdrawing a large key from the ring in his pocket, he unlocked the door and entered, the door closing behind him with a clang. She rubbed her boot on the dirty floor and watched the torch shine onto the wall. The light shimmered where moisture dribbled across the stones.

The latch clattered, and the door slowly swung open, wider than it had before. The guard held out his arm. "You may enter."

"Thank you," she said, tucking her head as she walked by. He returned to his post outside.

The arsenal opened before her, a large, cold room where weaponry covered every bit of wall space. Rifles hung on boards that lined the walls. Innumerable pistols hung below them. Crossbows dangled from the ceiling joists, and

pikes were displayed around several sets of mounted antlers. Tools for adjustments and repair lay scattered across a long table. The light from the single candle failed to fill the room, and the corners retreated into darkness.

Erling approached from the shadows in trousers and a loose tunic, rubbing his face and blinking. "What's wrong?" He yawned.

Brynna set her clothes on a table, then leaned on the edge, her belly cramping from hours of anxiety. "I don't know what to do," she said. "Trinan kicked me out." With shaking hands, she pushed her hair out of her face. "I've been up all night. He's so angry."

"Did he hurt you?"

She shook her head. "No, but everything is ruined." Panic built again as she wondered what would become of her position. Her tears returned, and for several moments, she cried. Erling embraced her and patted her back as her thoughts jumped from scene to scene, from Cadoc to the key to Trinan's livid face.

Erling pulled back. "What started all this?"

"We had a fight," she said with a sniff. "I can't speak on much of it. He got angry and told me to leave."

"He's hot headed. Always has been. How many times have you seen him mouth off? And you're pretty high-strung yourself. Give him time to cool down."

"You didn't see him this time. He's furious. I've never seen him so angry. I don't think he'll change his mind." Brynna noticed a knapsack under the table and pointed at it. "Can I have that?"

"Yeah," he said with a dismissive shrug. "Did he expel you from service?"

"He didn't say, just told me to get out."

Erling sighed. "Go to Papa's. I'll try to figure out if you've been expelled." He shoved his hands in his pockets. "Kayla's coming into town this afternoon, so I'll be there for supper. I can tell you what I've found out then."

"Why is she coming to town?"

"We have an appointment at the cutler," he said. The corner of his mouth lifted in a lopsided smile.

Brynna covered her mouth to contain her squeal. "Are you dancing?"

He grinned. "At Carthasach."

Brynna laughed and hugged him. "That's wonderful!"

He brushed her off even as he smiled. "Go home first and get some sleep," he said. "I'll see what I can figure out, and we'll go over it later."

She squeezed his hand again and turned to the door.

"Tree Rat," he called.

She looked back.

"I wouldn't worry too much," he said. "It's just a spat."

She nodded and left.

Chapter 27

NORA

Nalta
Gantu

In the abandoned warehouse where they waited, Nora held her finger to her lips, reminding the children once again to be silent. If someone discovered them, they would be taken to the Luna Estate immediately. The children nodded and sat willingly enough, but their little legs twitched to run and play. Nora wished she could take them out to the wharf and show them the boats. They would watch the seagulls and the pelicans and play in the sand.

Marcus sat near the window at an angle. He reached into his jacket and withdrew an item which he held to his face.

“Is that a telescope?” she whispered.

He lowered it. “Field glasses. Have you ever used some?”

She shook her head.

“Come here,” he said.

She walked to him, trying to calm her movements so she would not appear so eager.

He pointed them at the wall and adjusted the dial before handing them to her. "Look at the fixture there on the wall."

She held the glasses to her eyes. The fixture sprang into her vision, larger than it seemed in life. She gasped and lowered it. He chuckled. She raised it again. "It's huge."

He took them from her and looked through them out the window, adjusting the dial, then handed them back. "Now try looking at the harbor."

She blinked rapidly, then held the glasses to her eyes. She saw only blue. "I don't see anything." His hands covered hers and guided the glasses downward. The harbor burst into view, and she saw individual sailors walking about. "I see them!" she said, struggling to maintain her whisper as her hands tingled from his touch. "That's amazing!"

"I'm still perfecting the lenses," he said, "but they're handy enough." She offered them back. He took them, looked again, then shook his head. "I don't see any barges."

She shrugged. "It's early yet."

Footsteps sounded on the stairs. The children's eyes widened, and they rushed to cling to Nora's gandoura. She dropped beside them and held them all in her arms. Marcus stepped forward, slowly and cautiously. He drew his revolver and stood ready to shoot, one foot in front of the other, his arms extended, his finger on the trigger. Nora held her breath and listened to the tread. The rhythm was familiar.

"That's Ziri," she said. "I know that sound."

Marcus glanced at her. His arms remained in place, but he moved his finger off the trigger.

Ziri entered, and all relaxed.

"It's time to move," he said.

Nora sighed, relieved, yet sad, that her time in the warehouse with Marcus was over. She pulled his taylasan tighter around herself.

"I've paid the longshoremen," Ziri said. "They won't bother us if we stay on the far dock and keep low behind the crates."

Marcus nodded, holstering his weapon. "We still expect them soon?"

"Yes," Ziri said. "Anytime now, really. You won't—" He stumbled on his words. Nora looked up to see him peering at her through the dim light, his eyes on the taylasan about her shoulders, his expression inscrutable. "You won't be able to load immediately," he continued, slowly at first, then his words picked up speed again, "but you must be ready. Elias will arrange everything with the skipper and get word to you. We don't know when the moment will come. Follow me."

The children stood solemn and silent, with Tafu held by a leg. Nora shepherded them across the floor and followed Ziri and Marcus down the stairs. Ziri lagged and caught her arm. "His taylasan?"

"I was cold."

"You can't be seen with that."

She shrugged. "We can't be seen at all. Why does it matter?"

"I'm not debating the holiness of the taylasan while smuggling three children. Take it off."

She screwed up her face. Had she acted on her impulses, she would have stomped her foot and howled. Instead, she slid it from her shoulders, held it to her face for one last caress, one last sniff of him, and tapped Marcus's shoulder as he whispered to Dario.

“Oh, thank you!” Marcus said with a quiet laugh. “I almost went outside without it. Can’t have that.”

“No,” Nora said, wistfully. “Not at all.”

Marcus fastened his taylasan brooch in place as Ziri opened the door, and they waited a moment as he looked one way and then the other. After his nod, they scrambled to the corner of the warehouse wall and paused once again.

The sun, bright and warm, filled the clear sky with haze. Heat rising off the wooden wharf washed over her face. People and wagons moved about in anticipation of the day’s arrivals, and Nora shrank back. She had never liked a crowd, and now she saw malice on every distant face. Any person could raise an alarm. Anyone could recognize them. Anyone could call for Nyok.

Marcus seemed to share her concern. He wet his lips and looked about, moving his head from side to side, the tail of his turban flipping about. Dario tugged at Marcus’s sleeve, and Marcus placed his hand on the boy’s head, using a quick shake of his own to remind him to be quiet.

Ziri slouched against the wall with his hands in pockets as if he hadn’t a care in the world. Nora remembered his demeanor in the wagon as they had delivered the guns. He was unshakeable, and she was now certain that he had completed many missions like this. His eyes flitted more rapidly than they would have at the inn, but she only knew that because they had been friends for so long. Anyone else would only see a citizen hanging about the wharf, perhaps looking for work or watching for an expected ship.

“Follow,” Ziri said, stepping into the open. They hurried behind him, walking as quickly as they dared, then when Ziri pointed, dashed behind a large stack of crates. Marcus and Ziri worked together to heave them into a position

that hid everyone from the dock. With a final nod, Ziri disappeared back to the wharf. Nora settled the children, and Marcus positioned his glasses between the crates and stared through them.

“Is it busy?” Nora asked.

“Fairly,” he said. “People preparing to receive supplies.” She nodded.

He started. “Tuli,” he said with a strange tightness in his tone. “It’s the Tuli group that passes through my father’s estate.”

Nora leaned back against a crate, glad it was between her and the group. She wouldn’t have to see their gaunt bodies and disfigured faces. She wouldn’t see them flinch with the pain they felt from their frequent contact with raw valsydian.

“Why are they here?” she asked.

“Delivering valsydian bound for Norin.”

She nodded, acquiescing that they must deliver the valsydian at some point—there were laws about that.

“They follow the wagons,” he said, “and walk through my father’s westernmost lands near the Niq Niq Bog to get to town. It’s more arduous than taking the road, but they find it safer.”

She knew his meaning. People would throw rocks at the Tuli to keep them away. She wasn’t sure she believed the stories that if they touched you, you would die, but they were horrifying to look at, and that was enough to incur the wrath of those around them. She leaned toward the children. “You must be very careful on board the barge that you do not touch any valsydian you may see. It will hurt you.”

“It’ll make our arms and legs and noses falls off!” Rezki said.

Marcus shook his head. “No, that would take a long time. But you are not a witch, so it would hurt for you to touch it.”

“Mama said that’s why we have Tuli,” Dario said. “They touch it, and that’s why they look so scary.”

Marcus sighed deeply. “Yes,” he said. “But they don’t have a choice. They’re slaves.”

His hand that held the glasses slowly sank. His brow bore deep creases as though he were fighting tears. Nora admired the deep compassion he held for slaves and knew it would not be long before he revealed the depth of his feelings for her. She smiled to herself and kissed the top of Rezki’s head.

Chapter 28

BRYNNA

Robynton
Wyclythe Province
Norin

Brynna's back ached, and her stomach churned with worry. Erling's knapsack had rubbed a raw area on her neck as she had trudged back to Robynton for the third time since she had last slept. The sky dared to gleam in vivid, hazy blue, and the boisterous sea breeze lured her to the beach and away from an impending and uncomfortable conversation with her father.

The gulls played in the air over the clipper, *Darsham*. Moored, she dominated the water, her hull black with tar, her bowsprit fierce. Her three masts stood tall, the middle one bedecked with a wildly flapping flag bearing the golden "A." The rigging ran in dark webs, and the sails were tightly furled. The sheets hung loose for inspection, ropes waving like wriggling feelers, ready to entrap the hapless.

Other ships ranged throughout the harbor, setting sail, loading, unloading. Most were cutters, sloops, and schooners flagged to Andersyn Shipping, the rest flagged to Norin alone. Smaller fishing smacks zipped around Cadoc's fleet, and ferries traversed the harbor. *Darsham* ruled them all.

Darsham's deck ran awash with activity. From her place on the beach, Brynna couldn't hear the commands, but she observed a sense of urgency among the crew as they preened their ship and prepared for their soon departure.

Her intense anxiety and deep exhaustion clotted within her. *Darsham* filled her with anger. Her entire world had fallen in one night, and Cadoc was responsible. He had done this. He was, indeed, a dangerous man, a lawless pirate, a brutal outlaw, just as everyone said. He had to be, for his evil effects were readily apparent. He had destroyed her place in Trinan's heart, and her position in the Wyclythe administration as well. He had left her with nothing but a pack on her back and fear for the future. Dastardly man!

But she had played the last move. She had bested him in the dance. Unbeknownst to him, powerful jaws now stood open, primed to snap shut on his empire. He deserved whatever would soon annihilate him, for she had done what was right. She had acted for the good of Norin. She had followed orders and completed her mission, done her duty for king and country—and chancellor. As she gazed at *Darsham*, a peculiar pride swelled her heart, one of gall, one of spite. Justice would not forget her. Her lips curved in an acidic smile.

The white sand lay before her, unsullied save the long trails of seagull prints and tiny sand clumps constructed by crabs. She walked toward the wharf, unpinning her hair and

shaking it loose, casting away her tension with it, mops and brooms be damned. The crash of waves renewed her breath and lightened her steps as the acrid scent of the marshes tumbled with the smell of salt. She climbed the stairs to the wharf. The brightly colored shanties, blue, green, red, dazzled in the sun like stained-glass windows buttressed with crab traps and nets.

An old sailor in Andersyn blacks with grizzled hair and deep ochre skin leaned on the railing, smoking his pipe. "How are ya, Brynna?" he said, in a low, gravelly grumble.

"Best kind, sir," she said.

"The fish are eatin' the rocks, they are."

Brynna smiled. "Fine day for fishing."

The sailor lowered his pipe and motioned toward her. "You best watch your step, girl. Strange things afoot. Quite the kerfuffle last night."

"What do you mean?"

"Some fool rang the fire bell," he said. "Woke the whole damn wharf. And wasn't no fire."

"No fire? At all?"

"None. Don't even know who rang th' bell."

Brynna blessed the unknown soul. Without the bell, Cadoc would not have left, and she would not have found the manifest.

The man leaned closer, putting his mouth at Brynna's ear. His breath fell across her face, tinged with tobacco and maple syrup. "And then I heard..." His voice trailed away as his eyes twitched, and Brynna turned to follow his gaze across the wharf.

A soldier approached, tall and thin with beige skin, wearing a dark-blue uniform with a red trim stripe. Brynna stared at him. A Norinian soldier was a rare sight in Wyclythe

Province. The soldier stopped, clicking his heels in tandem with a curt bow. "Brynna Dasveld?"

Brynna's nerves tensed. "Yes?"

"Private Lios," he said, withdrawing documents from his jacket. "I have permission papers and a protection order for you to present to any Norinian or Hykosi officer, if required."

"A protection order!" she repeated, taking the paper. "On whose authority?"

"Chancellor Walyss's, ma'am."

Brynna noted Trinan's seal. Despite his threat to leave her unprotected, he had followed through with an order. She smiled and nearly laughed, her every muscle relaxing, knowing this must mean a change of heart for him and forgiveness for her. Trinan had calmed his temper and was making amends. All was well. Of course, it was. She crossed her arms, hugging herself slightly. "Thank you."

The sailor grunted and wrinkled his nose. "If th' girl here needs protection, a lot of bloody good those stacks of paper's gonna do."

The soldier disregarded the sailor. "The chancellor has also requested your presence. You are to come with me."

"Strange happenin's," the sailor muttered, chewing on the stem of his pipe.

Brynna gave her farewell and followed the soldier. His news emboldened her. The sun shone stronger. Trinan loved her and trusted her, and her work in his service would continue.

Private Lios led her to the Custom House, an overly grand name for the old building that it was. It had been painted red with white trim many storm seasons ago. Now the colors were faded and peeling, though the panels and

the foundation stood solid and secure. The soldier opened the door and held it for her. The first floor, full of desks and papers, reminded her of the shipping company's office, yet it looked abandoned, dark and still and dusty. Only the sound of many boots moving around on the second floor gave any indication of life.

"Follow me," he said.

Brynna obeyed and walked up the stairs behind him. A large room spread before her with a bank of open windows overlooking the harbor. Soldiers in blue packed the area. Some clustered around a central table while others stood at the window with spyglasses. Private Lios moved in their direction, Brynna trailing behind. She ran a hand through her loose, windblown hair and wished she had taken a moment to fix it.

Trinan was speaking with a tall woman in an army uniform, a calf-length dark-blue dress of sturdy fabric. Her graying hair trailed down her back in a thick braid. She carried no emotion in her face. Brynna recognized her as General Rhetty, the most-decorated warrior in the army. She had built her skill and reputation repelling the Hykosi from the northern territories. If she was present, then whatever the purpose of this gathering, it carried the utmost importance.

A woman in Andersyn blacks strutted toward Brynna.

Brynna tightened her shoulders. "Captain Layton."

"Brynna," Captain Layton said, nodding.

"I must say," Brynna said, "I'm surprised to see you here."

Captain Layton tilted her head, her gaze lazy on Brynna's figure. "I could say the same."

Brynna rubbed her arm, uncomfortable being ogled. "I didn't see *Basilisk* in port."

“Arrived by smack moments ago.”

Bryinna furrowed her brow. Though curious as to Layton’s purpose for being in Robynton, she held her tongue, not wanting to encourage her conversation. Layton’s reputation for lewdness and public drunkenness, as well as her explosive temper, was well known to both sailor and landsman. Cadoc had verified the stories and contributed a few of his own, tales not only of carousing, but of battles and hurricanes, told in an admiring tone and infused with his laughter.

“Shall we?” Captain Layton said, gesturing toward the window.

Confused and curious, Bryinna acquiesced and stood shoulder to shoulder at the window with Captain Layton and another soldier. Trinan leaned on the frame on the opposite side, having never once met her eyes.

She observed the entire harbor with *Darsham* moored to her left. The wharf circled back around to her right, where the beach led to the breakwater. The harbor mouth opened in the far distance in front of her, sparkling in the sun.

Four flat whaleboats left the pier, oars in the water. All held Norinian soldiers to capacity.

Bryinna’s throat tightened. “They’re seizing her. They’re seizing *Darsham!*”

Captain Layton chuckled. “Aye, cuttin’ her out and arresting tha’ pompous shitdick.” She rubbed her hands together. “Chancellor Walyss’ll run things now.” She leaned closer. “He ordered me here, hisself.” Pride filled her voice.

Bryinna crossed her arms. “And why are you here?”

Layton jabbed her chest with her thumb. “When ya seize a ship, ya needs a captain.”

Stunned, Brynna delayed her response by withdrawing her hair pins from her pocket and twisting up her hair, buying herself time to understand what now seemed obvious. The only natural end was Cadoc's arrest, and to arrest him, they would have to take the ship. "That doesn't bother you?" she asked as she fumbled with a pin. "You're his second in command, the only other clipper captain he has."

Layton grinned. "Who better than me to master *Darsham*?"

"And what about *Basilisk*?" Brynna asked.

Layton shrugged. "I gave her over to authorities in Tadsyn this morning. The whole port's in an uproar there. You shoulda seen it! People shoutin', runnin' about, a whole fleet o' barges 'amoored with no captains. Like they thought it the end of th' world that Andersyn Shipping would be no more. But me's, I'm glad! *Basilisk*, she were never mine, only Andersyn's. And Thackery never let me forget it, neither. All talk of master, this, and commander, that. But *Darsham*," she nodded, "she be mine now. Now who's master and commander!"

"You'll need a willing crew," Brynna said as if reminding her of things she had not considered.

Layton nodded. "Aye, the crew'll follow me well enough." She laughed. "They have to if Andersyn's in jail."

Brynna pinned the last section of hair. "Isn't that mutiny?"

"Nay, missie," Layton said as though Brynna were a small, foolish child. "A simple change o' command, it is." She faced the window and muttered, "An' about damn time for one, too."

Brynna's resolve faltered still more, staggered by the intensity of the betrayal playing out before her. The extreme

consequences of her own actions arose before her with black lines and color. The commodore, with his confidence, his ambition, and his easy smile, would lose his crew, his ships, his company, and his livelihood. All in one day. In one moment. He had been double-crossed by his captain, and all had been set into motion by the manifest. Because of her. Brynna's shoulders sank. Justice waxed cruel. She wanted to leave the room, to walk in the wind again, unburdened.

"He trusted you," Brynna said to Layton's back.

Captain Layton swung around and closed the distance between them, standing so close that Brynna could see the red vessels in her eyes. "I'll take no fuckin' cheek from you, Dasveld. Ye played yer own part." Her voice dropped to a hissing whisper. "I knowed where that key was. An' I've a fair idea of how ya got it."

Brynna struggled to hold her expression impassive as her face flushed with heat.

"Aye," Layton said with a smirk. "Yer cheeks are burnin' like your pussy was. I thought as much. A right dangerous cunt, you are. All to spread yer legs and fuck yer way to the manifest. You ain't better than me. Yer just a slut with connections." She shook her head. "Nah, worse than one. Even a whore would have the decency to take her pay in coin."

Brynna trembled but could not make sense of what she felt. She grasped for any retort. "Maybe he won't give her up. Maybe he'll just sink her."

Layton laughed. "Never. *Darsham* means more to Cadoc Andersyn than his own scrubby life." She clasped her hands together at her chin and jutted her lower lip, bringing a mocking tone to her voice. "He loves her almost as much as he loves hims dear, dear mummy." She wrinkled her nose

and straightened her jacket about her shoulders. “That ship goes down—he’ll go down with her.”

Brynna’s stomach twisted, and she glanced back at the window.

“Colonel Jerynt!” Trinan said, crossing the room to shake the hand of a soldier who had just arrived.

As the officers all greeted one another, Brynna remained at the side. She reeled from Captain Layton’s words and suddenly couldn’t find the damaged pride she had clung to on the beach. She lost her vindictive fervor, her satisfaction and hope for justice. The stark repulsiveness of Layton’s treachery quelled her anger and left her lost and adrift.

Brynna pulled back her shoulders and straightened her posture. Layton shouldn’t have spoken to her so freely. She was the chancellor’s attaché—as far as she knew—and as an agent of the crown she was deserving of a certain level of decorum. Trinan would be furious if he knew of Layton’s behavior. Brynna tried to catch his attention, but he ignored her again, turning away from her as he involved himself in discussion with Colonel Jerynt.

Rejected once more.

Perhaps she had misjudged the meaning of his protective order. Perhaps it aligned only with formality and meant nothing as to a restoration between them. With a pang in her chest, she leaned on the window frame and gripped the sill as if it alone could prevent the destruction of her life. Cadoc’s world tipped at the brink of destruction, framed neatly by the Custom House window, yet hers even now plummeted toward the depths.

“Officers,” Jerynt announced. “Your attention to the window, please. We are about to board.” The atmosphere thickened as seasoned officers prepared for victory.

Chapter 29

CADOC

Robynton Harbor
Wyclythe Province
Norin

Aboard *Darsham*, Cadoc crouched beside the ship's wheel with a crock of neatsfoot oil. He dipped a cloth, wrung it once, allowing the oil to soak into the fibers, then dipped again, the yellow fluid coating his hand. With the cloth on his palm, he gripped the wheel rope, a long strip of ox-hide cording that spiraled around the wheel axle and ran to the tiller deck. He slid his hand downward, covering the cord. It was one of the few chores he insisted on performing himself. Ensuring the steering mechanisms were in good working order was a responsibility he took seriously. The job was simple enough, but today, it annoyed him.

He had raced to the dock and searched for the fire alongside a crowd of villagers. Finding no sign of smoke on shore and no one who could explain the ringing bell, he had scrounged up a shore boat to row him out to *Darsham*.

Oskar, his second officer and the officer on watch, had been just as befuddled as Cadoc. Charged with the safety of the vessel, Oskar had enthusiastically embarked upon a full inspection, rousing all hands. Cadoc had begrudgingly attended—he couldn't leave with the ship in such a state of excitement—and he had struggled to put aside his visions of the little butterfly waiting for him in his bed. His thoughts had returned over and over to his final glance at her. Her blue eyes wide with concern. The quilt pulled up over her white, naked breasts. Her long brown hair falling over her shoulder and draping down to where she sat on the ticking.

His gut tightened. He had yearned to lie down with her once more, to hold her in his arms, bury his face in her hair, and feel her legs around him. But it had not come to pass. The inspection had turned into a question and answer session on the morning star sightings that then led into the hoisting of colors. Being the third Friday, there were extra chores to be done, and before he knew it, he was oiling wheel ropes, irritated over lost opportunities, and cursing a ship so needy of his time that he would abandon such a treasure on shore. His only consolation was the rapid approach of dinner, which offered the possibility of a picnic basket on the wharf. Or perhaps she still awaited him in bed.

Cadoc sampled women the way some men tasted wine. He commenced with a visual assessment as though holding the glass to the light, but appearances were only one facet and hardly a reason to reject an opportunity. If he only chose the attractive, he might miss out on a hearty fuck that would leave him sweaty and satisfied enough to sleep well into the next day. Some of the best fucks came from plain women forced to resort to skill to attain their men.

The next step, that of conversation, was a match of wits. He enjoyed throwing riddles about, using cryptic speech to test their reactions, to challenge them, question them, and catch them off guard. The ones he confused, he reassured and laughed with and fucked and left, pleasant diversions usually not worth repeating. The ones who rose to the challenge, who trusted their own intelligence enough to clash with him, were few and far between and well worth his full attention. And then the taste. The texture. The richness. The notes on the palette of clove and ginger and intriguing intensity between the sheets. Those were the women he cherished. To those he raised his glass. Amelia of Shialor. Ju of Frelun. Casia of East Tadsyn. Queen Gara of Elidel.

Brynna of Wyclythe.

From her first visits on the wharf, her attraction to him had been obvious, a classic mark of one inexperienced. Her flushing cheeks, the way she would bite her lip and blink her lashes, the slight shake of her fingers as she pushed her hair behind her ear explained more to him than her words ever could.

She had exchanged her picnic baskets for his stories, both real and embellished, and he had used those opportunities to provoke her and goad her toward new ideas while he observed her reactions. To his delight, she had sparred with him, viciously at times, never backing away from a verbal row, even as he had chipped at her understanding of life. Their talks had become a nexus, grounding them in their dance, and yet even in those moments, there was another purpose about her, one he couldn't quite put his finger on. The mystery of it intrigued him.

He rotated the wheel, exposing another section of cord, and dipped his cloth once more.

She had caught him off guard by arriving at the office the evening prior, but in that she had shown her hand. Her excuses had been too absurd, the risks she had taken too great, for her to be acting solely from that tyrannical bastard's directions. Their first kiss had confirmed everything to him, and he was slightly ashamed he had still resorted to Frelunian Vegetable Elixir to ensure the outcome he had desired. Even without the influence of high-proof alcohol and hallucinogenic herbs, she had been his for the taking.

And his desires were far from sated. He was a man obsessed. Never before had a woman weakened his knees. Never before had he felt crazed at being apart. Never before had tenderness and affection interwound with his passions as they did at the thought of her smile.

Birger, his First Officer, climbed to the quarterdeck. Cadoc was tall by most standards and muscular from his work aboard ship, but Birger dwarfed him in comparison, and the deck shook with the vibrations from his steps. Birger had originated on the island of Bardoon, which held a reputation of being a land of giants. "If all 's well with you, I'll call for the decks t' be swept," he said in a low and gravelly voice, choppy and short on vowels. "It's almost time f'r dinner."

"Shore boats ahoy!" a voice called from midship. "Shore boats to larboard!"

Cadoc turned the wheel again as he refreshed his cloth. "Decks can—"

"Boats ahoy, sir!" Njala called, repeating the lookout's alert, her voice ringing over the sounds of the ship at work. "Port side!" Anxiety filled her tone.

Cadoc's brow wrinkled at the absurdity of her repeated call. He exchanged with Birger a glance of incredulity. Njala

was his third mate, officer of the forenoon watch. It was a training position, arranged in the daytime so that senior officers would be available to help should she need it. But this was a bit much.

“We’re in a fucking harbor, sailor!” Birger shouted. “Shore boats are to be expected!”

Cadoc returned to his oiling, a faint smile of amusement at his lips. “Decks can—”

“That’s true, sir,” Njala said, climbing the ladder to the quarterdeck, her Andersyn blacks swelling around her pregnant abdomen. “But I really think you should see this.” She offered her glass.

Birger shrugged her away, withdrawing his own glass from his pocket. He lifted it to his eye, then lowered it again. “Commodore.”

Cadoc stood, his knees protesting after the long crouch. He flicked his glass open but paused with it halfway to his eye.

Four whaleboats rowed toward them across the harbor, two by two, their oars extending like the legs of centipedes.

He looked through the glass. Each boat was loaded with Norinian soldiers armed with rifles and sporting grim expressions. He lowered the glass for a quick glance at the harbor around them—empty with the exception of a few cutters and smacks along the edges—then returned it to his eye. Built for a crew of six, the whaleboats were overloaded. He counted at least 15 soldiers in each one. Over 60 soldiers, ready for a fight and coming for him.

Black market goods. Smuggled valsydian. And he had just fucked the chancellor’s consort. Any one of those or more could be the reason for this assault, but the cause mattered little compared to his need for a quick response.

He lowered his glass. "All hands on deck."

His orders were shouted by Birger and others, repeated over and over through the ranks. A general din grew as sailors ran to the rails to see their attackers. Two sailors, a man and woman, arrived on the quarterdeck to tend the wheel.

Cadoc stepped aside, allowing them to pass, as he calculated his next steps.

Fight or flee.

He looked over his crew. It was a transitory group, half of them intending to sail with him to the southern seas and half who only sailed merchant missions around Gavony. In Tadsyn, the mild commercial sailors intended to disembark, and he would establish his full crew for the long journey to Tivix.

On the high sea, he ruled with an iron fist and tempted souls onward with dreams of riches, but within sight of land, crew management required a different strategy. These were sailors with options. Plentiful jobs on land. Families nearby. Houses within sight of the docks. Wives and children on the beaches. He governed these sailors with compassion and kindness, transparency and profit-sharing, as well as a clear understanding that any sailing trip offered minimal danger.

He trusted the fighting ability of the salts who would sail southward. Most were proven in battle already, many by his side. These others, his merchants, remained questionable and untested. Many would be completely useless in action.

He couldn't fight with such a crew. Not only would he probably lose, but he would violate the understanding and trust he had built with his merchant sailors. It would ruin him.

Flee, then.

But with no tug, they would have to fly under their own power.

“Slip the anchor,” he said. “Stand by to set sail.” It was rude and dangerous to set sail so close to the wharf and risk damaging the Robynton infrastructure, but Norin’s attack on his ship was a dick move that demanded such an action.

“Aye, aye, sir,” Birger said, stepping forward and calling the commands.

The crowded deck ran wild with activity. Sailors spun the anchor’s windlass, removing the chain that held the anchor to the ship. The chain clanked and splashed as the crew allowed it to fall completely into the water where it was held by a buoy. Cadoc pressed his lips together over the loss of his anchor. It was expensive, but with any luck, he could pick it up later.

Darsham was free.

She moved at the whims of the wind and the water, traveling astern from the area of her former mooring. Cadoc turned to the helmspeople. “Left rudder.”

“Aye, aye, sir,” the woman said.

The ship turned with the guiding of the rudder, backing in a slow, gentle arc toward the wharf. Cadoc needed to harness the wind—and quickly—or *Darsham* would soon collide with the pier.

The whaleboats drew closer and separated. Two moved toward the bow, the others to midship.

“Fucking hell,” Cadoc muttered. They were actually going to try to cut him out. Assholes. He crossed his arms over his chest and cleared his mind. “Beat the call. Aloft sail losers.”

“Aloft sail losers!” Birger shouted, and sailors climbed upward into the rigging, one after another after another,

hand over fist. They mounted all three masts, spreading higher as each moment passed, and moved into place, equally spaced across the spars.

A rifle volley sounded from the whaleboats, and a man fell from the rigging, dropping straight down until he struck a spar and cartwheeled to the deck. His fall was seen by every soul standing, the impact heard by all. Screams lifted from the wharf, and Njala called for sailors to carry the broken body below deck. The sailors stared at Cadoc. He saw the terror in their pale faces and the whites encircling their eyes.

Birger swung around. "Sir, we have rifles!"

"Do not return fire," Cadoc said. They could not lose focus. They must set sail. "Stand by to let fall the sails."

The remaining sailors manning the spars shifted their spacing to fill the gap left by their fallen brother.

"Let fall the sails," Cadoc said to Birger sooner than he would have liked, but the Norinian rifles would not take long to reload.

"Let fall! Haul out! Hoist away!" Birger called.

Perching on foot ropes, the sailors released the sails. Canvas loosed and fell, hanging limply. Sailors clambered back to the deck. Those who recognized the danger climbed down with vigor, sliding or dropping, some landing on others. Commands lifted, and soon lines of sailors pulled in tandem to set the sails. Fore-and-aft, jib and spanker, lower topsails.

The next volley lifted from only a smattering of rifles. The soldiers must be climbing the hull. "Prepare to repel boarders," he said.

"Prepare to repel boarders!"

A commotion at the bow caught his attention. Two sailors and punching fists. A Norinian soldier wheeled his arms and fell back to the water.

“Pikes only,” Cadoc added.

“Sir!”

Cadoc continued to watch, unfazed. “Pikes only. Do not return fire.”

Birger relayed Cadoc’s orders, and Cadoc nodded his head in approval. Sailors seized pikes from their storage brackets on the masts and returned to the edges. Voices grew louder, and crowded bodies shoved against each other. Grappling increased as soldiers were met by the sailors fighting with fists and pikes. Both sides soon resorted to ceremonial knives, and army pistols fired.

Njala’s cry lifted over the tumult. A Norinian soldier clung to *Darsham’s* rail with both arms over. Bracing her boot, Njala jabbed her pike into his chest with a solid blow, and he fell away.

Cadoc watched, planted on the quarterdeck, his stance wide. “Set upper topsails.” His commands were echoed by other voices.

Sheets were hauled, and sails took form, tightening into place. “On the main! Haul the halyards!” Birger called. Step by step, upper topsails opened, followed by topgallants hoisted into place with sweat from the deck. Birger, shouting commands in his powerful voice, kept the women and men in motion until every bit of appropriate canvas was open to the wind.

“Right rudder to meet her,” Cadoc said, ready to turn toward the harbor mouth.

“Aye, aye, sir.”

The ship paused its progression, countered by the rudder, whispering to the wind. The bow commenced its turn.

Wings filled, swelling with a roar like thunder.

Darsham burst to life in splendid glory, surging forward, sails full and drawing. Straightening toward the harbor's mouth, the wind, fresh and hearty, was in Cadoc's favor, blowing at them from the side, near beam reach. "Rudder amidship and steady."

Darsham ran toward the safety of open seas.

The soldiers in whaleboats dropped behind, further and further, then fired a final volley and fell silent, lamely rowing across the water, scooping up those who had dropped into the waves. The sailors cheered, climbing onto the railings and into the rigging, waving their arms and their pikes. They sang and shouted as *Darsham* increased her speed, racing to escape.

"Under weigh, and none can stop us!
Under weigh, and none can board!
Under weigh! Heave ya, saltie!
Fear nobody! Fear no law!

"All at sea, and none can drag us!
All at sea, and none can war!
All at sea! Heave ya, saltie!
Fear nobody! Fear no law!

"Under sail, and wind at favor!
Under sail to ports of call!
Under sail! Heave ya, saltie!
Fear nobody! Fear no law!"

Cadoc remained still and silent on the quarterdeck. He didn't smile nor join in their singing, though his shoulders released much of the tension he had been holding. Relief filled him. He would sail to Tadsyn and, from there, figure out what the hell had just happened.

"Ship ahoy! Starboard!"

"Ship ahoy! Port side!"

With the songs of his sailors in his ears, Cadoc snapped up his glass. Two cutters approached the harbor mouth from either side. Following the trajectories of all three ships, he realized the cutters would reach the mouth before *Darsham*.

A heavy weight settled in his stomach. "Beat to quarters."

Chapter 30

NORA

Nalta
Gantu

A brisk and cool fall breeze blew across the harbor, but without shade, the unrelenting sun beat down on Nora and the children, making the heat unbearable. Her tongue stuck to the roof of her mouth, and her throat ached for water as the smell of rotting, sun-warmed seaweed cast waves of nausea through her. The children lay on the wooden slats, long past complaining of hunger. The sound of approaching boots roused her, and she lifted her head.

Marcus returned to them, ducking behind the crates and carrying a canteen and a handful of rolls. “This is all I could find for now.” He opened the canteen and helped Rezki to drink. Nora divided the rolls between the three children, leaving none for herself or Marcus. Marcus nodded in approval.

“What did you hear?” she asked.

"The fleet is late. None of the Andersyn ships arrived today, not even the little fishing boats."

"Is there a storm?"

Marcus shook his head. "We're close enough to Norin that we would see signs of the same storm." He looked up. "The delay isn't due to the weather."

"What do we do?"

"I don't know. Some Gantish barges are due back from Tadsyn this evening. I hope they'll have news."

She nodded.

"I'm going back out to see if I can hear something," he said.

"I have to be back at the inn by nightfall," Nora said.

"If we don't hear by then, we have bigger problems." He peered between the crates, then stepped out and disappeared.

The children devoured their rolls and lay down again, resting more comfortably than they had before. Nora leaned her head back on the crate.

Boots clumped again, and Ziri stepped behind the crates, his face dark, his mouth grim. "No one's coming," he said, squatting beside her.

She sat straight. "At all?"

"At all. The Andersyn Shipping Company collapsed this morning."

"How?" she exclaimed. "What happened?"

"We don't know, but all of the eastern fleet out of Tadsyn is now under the control of the Norinian government, and the lady captain of *Basilisk* turned her ship over before dawn."

Nora wound her fingers into Rezki's hair. "So what do we do with the children?"

"They'll have to go back to their mother."

Ilara sat up on her knees. "But how will we get out of here?" she asked, distress rising in her tone.

Ziri held out his palm to calm her. "We'll find another way, but it'll be after we've raised more funds. I can't get back what I've already paid, and I don't have enough to try again."

Nora's lips parted. "But they didn't do what we asked. All that money!"

He lifted his shoulders. "What can I do? Take them to court for messing up our illegal activity?"

She lowered her head.

"Where's Marcus?" he asked.

"He went to find more information."

Ziri nodded. "I've got things I need to do. You go find him, then get the children home as quickly as you can. Don't worry about walking through town. Everything's chaotic, and no one will be paying attention."

Nora nodded and instructed the children to sit still and be quiet. She followed Ziri around the crates, and he hurried into the crowd. She scanned the wharf, wondering where Marcus was. Plenty of turbans floated through the crowd, but none of them beige. The people seemed frantic, running from one shouting group to the next. Horses pulled empty wagons, and the Tuli lurked with their valsydian.

Anxiety rising, Nora turned down an alley between the custom house and the exchange. She wrung her hands as she walked, nervous about the children and wondering how anyone would get supplies without the Andersyn Shipping Company.

Low voices met her ears, and she slowed her steps, fearful of getting caught. She crept forward and peered around a retaining wall.

Marcus stood with a young woman. Her clothes hung on her bony shoulders and a ragged shawl covered her head. He held both of her hands in his as he spoke to her. The woman nodded, and her shawl slipped from her head, revealing the dark brand that covered her cheek. Nora gasped. Marcus was touching a Tuli woman. He may have been drawn to help them, but this action violated not only common sense but Gantish law.

Marcus's hand brushed the Tuli woman's lanky hair away from her face as he leaned close to her. He touched her cheek and kissed her. She placed her arms around his neck, and he pulled her closer, kissing her again and again until they nuzzled their noses and smiled.

Nora stared without blinking, her breath interrupted. Ice flashed through her veins. Every muscle tensed. Darkness ringed her vision, and she clutched her throat, either to retain life or to stop it. Her knees buckled, and she sank to the ground. She denied what she had seen, but every time she closed her eyes, she saw it again. Her body retched and diffuse tremors shook her. She wanted to run, to hide, to throw herself off the dock. She attempted to run away, yet with the first step, she stumbled, knocking into a row of empty milk cans which clattered and rolled through the alleyway.

"Nora?" Marcus said.

Somehow, he was by her side. Somehow, the arms she craved were around her. Yet the Tuli woman stood near, real and living, her head tilted as though confused by the commotion.

Marcus furrowed his brow. "You're not well."

"I feel faint," she whispered.

"Of course. This has been too much for you. Sit here." He helped her to sit against the wall, then smiled as he crouched next to her. "I want you to meet someone." He took the woman's hand and drew her down beside him. "This is Ingrid."

Nora studied Ingrid's face. The woman was beautiful or could have been. Her eyes were clear, bright, and expressive, yet they were surrounded with haunting, gray circles. Her olive skin was smooth and held a soft blush, but the Tuli brand had deformed her cheek with raised black ridges and scars. She moved with nimble grace, yet her spare figure spoke of starvation and illness. Even so there was no mistaking the pride and love in Marcus's face. He rested his hand on Ingrid's shoulder, and she allowed it to remain without reaction as though it were normal and expected, as though she were accustomed to his touch.

"It is no more," Nora said, her gaze never leaving his hand.

"What was that?" Marcus said, leaning his head closer.

She cleared her throat and shifted, trying to sit up straighter so as to capture his full attention. "The Andersyn Shipping Company has collapsed."

Marcus laughed. "Impossible! How would such a thing happen?"

"It's true," she insisted. "Ziri said the ships were seized by the Norinians."

"That can't be. Andersyn, himself, is Norinian."

"By their government."

His expression sank, and his brow creased. "You said Ziri told you this?"

She nodded. "The entire wharf is panicking."

His face paled. "This is a disaster."

Nora nodded as he helped her to stand. She stared at his hand on her arm as she said, "I don't know what we will do about the chil—" She glared at Ingrid, then stepped closer to Marcus. "About the mission."

He stared down the alleyway, remaining still so long she wondered if he had heard her at all. "No," he said finally. "More than that. This will immobilize all trade between our countries and the southern seas." Blinking, he sighed, looked to Ingrid, and reached to squeeze her hand. "Gantu will suffer. All of us will."

Chapter 31

CADOC

Robynton Harbor
Wyclythe
Norin

As *Darsham* sailed across the harbor, sails full and gaining speed, Cadoc peered through his glass at the two Norinian-flagged cutters racing toward the mouth ahead of them. The crew around him shouted and hooted and sang until his last order reached their ears.

“Can you see the house flag?” Cadoc asked, looking for the owner’s mark.

“Ain’t none,” Birger said. “And that’s a skeletal crew.”

“Commandeered.”

“Prob’ly. They trying t’ block us?”

“It’s a bluff,” Cadoc said, lowering his glass. “They wouldn’t risk it.”

“Aye, sir. *Darsham* can mop the floor with ‘m and head to sea without so much as trippin’.”

Cadoc wet his lips. "Raise signal flags. Tell them to keep clear. Warn them of the danger they're in."

Birger called the orders, and the last of the singing dropped away midverse. Waving arms lowered. Feet shifted. The flags were quickly raised, but the Norinian cutters continued on their track, rotated, and dropped anchor at the mouth of the harbor.

"Absurd," Cadoc muttered.

"Aye, sir," said Birger. "That's su'cide, sir."

Cadoc crossed his arms. "Bring up the chaser cannon."

"Aye, aye, sir!"

"Warning shot," he said. "Aim short."

At the bow, sailors adjusted the cannon.

Cadoc nodded. "Fire."

"Fire!" Birger shouted.

The thunder of cannon rolled through the harbor. Water burst into the air near one of the cutters.

"Again," Cadoc said. "Fire."

"Fire!"

Still the cutters remained at anchor, and the sailors aboard them scrambled across the two decks, cutting lines. The sails luffed, wild and free as flags.

It didn't make sense. Cadoc couldn't explain their actions, other than to serve as impotent, sacrificial barricades. *Darsham* dwarfed the other boats. The battle would be no contest. To insist on fruitless destruction, to risk the sailors' lives, was ludicrous, and it bothered him. He feared they knew something he did not. Some threat he had overlooked. Some weakness of his he had not yet noticed.

Cadoc revealed none of the anxiety that crawled through his chest. His sailors must see no cracks in his façade. They

must know nothing of his fears, nothing of his questions. He would communicate only confidence. Only cool determination. His mother had taught him well the posture of the quarterdeck.

“Hold steady,” he said, eliciting nods from his officers. *Darsham* continued her course, still gathering speed. With a large stretch of harbor yet to cross, her movement seemed painfully slow. The collision was inevitable, unstoppable, and yet many minutes would pass before it would occur.

Cadoc raised his glass once more. A coracle dropped over the side of one of the far cutters. The three sailors climbed down, abandoning ship, and commenced rowing toward the wharf. Soon another coracle followed from the other cutter, this one rowing toward the breakwater. He was glad. The imminent collision would be minor, and his sailors would bear little risk. No need for those others to die.

On the far cutter, a flicker caught his eye.

Terror flashed through his limbs.

Fire. There was nothing he feared more. Nothing.

Birger gaped. “What in—”

A flame ran across the deck of the first cutter and licked up the rigging to the sails which burst into blazing, roaring flames. The second ignited, and both cutters smoked and burned. Plumes of black clouds rose high over the harbor, and a slick of burning tar dripped from both hulls and spread across the water, extending the flames from shore to shore, blocking the escape route to the sea.

Darsham must turn back.

“Hard right rudder,” Cadoc said, his throat tight.

“Aye, aye, sir,” both helmspeople said in tandem, turning the wheel sharply.

The rudder alone wouldn't be enough to turn a ship that large, moving that quickly, in that short a distance. In an instant, he sensed the wind and prepared his plan. The harbor wasn't big enough to piss in, and the fucking break-water was made of granite. To swing the ship around would be some crooked move. It would be the sharpest, fastest, riskiest turn he had ever attempted. He had no choice.

Oskar launched himself onto the quarterdeck, followed closely by Njala. "Fire boats!" he blurted, his eyes bugging. "Fire! Sir! Fire!"

"Silence on the quarterdeck," Cadoc said. "Stand by to wear ship."

Oskar moaned as he climbed the ladder to the poop deck. Njala sank down the ladder to midship, her eyes wide, her face grim and pale.

"Stand by to wear ship!" Birger shouted. "Man the main clew-garnets and buntlines! Spanker brails!" The melody of his commands held true with no sign of fear. Cadoc approved.

Darsham glided toward the inferno, still propelled by her powerful initial run from the pier. The sailors were not yet in place, but there was no time. He must push them. They must act. "Wear away," Cadoc said, dangerously prematurely, hoping they would move with synchronicity.

"Wear away!" Birger called, holding out the last syllable as though infusing them all with fury. "Haul taut! Up mainsail! Brail up!"

Sailors swarmed over the deck and into the rigging, spilling the wind from the spanker and mainsails and guiding its full force against the foresails.

Cadoc rested his hand on the front rail of the quarter-deck. He would need to brace himself soon. "Shiver the mizzen topsail."

Birger called, and as sails rattled and snapped, *Darsham* commenced in earnest her turn away from the fire. The sailors responded, rotating the trembling forward stack, keeping the sails square to the wind. In her arc, *Darsham* moaned and heeled, tipping sideways into the turn further and further to starboard at a strong, unnatural angle, her rails nearly in the water. She shuddered, shaking from stem to stern as she rolled. Sailors slid across the planks, a tumult of bodies, clinging to ropes and climbing up the deck as though it were a wall.

"Can't hold it!" the helmsman yelled. Birger lumbered to the wheel, and the three held it in place, their knuckles white and their faces red.

Cadoc gripped the front rail of the quarterdeck, leaning into the obscene angle of the ship. He could see nothing of the harbor mouth, only the deck and the water rising on the starboard side as *Darsham* slid, hull first, toward the fire, her body lamenting in deep groans and pops. She would not come through without damage of some kind.

He held his breath as the wind shifted ever more aft, wishing for the moment it would push her fully from behind and luff the jib. In that moment, she would change her trajectory. In that moment, she would stop her advance. Instead, the seconds stretched as they skimmed across the water, helpless and blind to their fate, closing in on a fiery death.

The jibs flogged, rippling as the wind arrived astern.

Cadoc heaved himself around, looping his arm over the railing to hold himself in place. Birger and the helmspeople

endured in their battle with the rudder, but Birger could no longer relay calls.

“Head braces!” Cadoc shouted.

A faint, “Aye, aye, sir!” was quickly swallowed by the wind.

“Rise fore tack and sheet!” Cadoc called. “Set the spanker!”

His sailors rallied, and the boom swung across the deck, threatening to behead anyone in the way. Soon the spanker was hauled out. The wind caught it, swinging the back end of the ship around, aiming her away from the fire as she righted herself. *Darsham* shivered as her sails filled, swelling with bold new life. Moving toward the wharf, she lifted and quaked and stepped out, a queen newly crowned, claiming glory and homage from her subjects. She seized the wind, kicking up spray, and escaped the fire under her own power.

As the crackling diminished with increasing distance from the harbor mouth, Cadoc climbed to his feet. He faced the stern and the fire beyond and swallowed through a dry throat as he watched the cutters burn. Lifting his glass, he examined his ship, scanning for broken yardarms and snarled rigging. Birger returned to his side. Cadoc glanced at him and nodded before returning to his glass.

“Man main tack and sheet,” Cadoc said.

“Man main tack and sheet!”

Having found nothing wrong with *Darsham* that couldn't be easily put to rights, Cadoc rubbed his face and ordered a new, gentle course toward the wharf. They dropped anchor and came to rest on the opposite side of the harbor from where they had begun.

The sailors stood silent and still on the deck.

Cadoc's officers, disheveled, returned to the quarterdeck, their hair plastered to their faces with sweat.

“Now what?” Birger asked.

Cadoc looked over his shoulder at the wharf. Every crew of every boat in the harbor stood on their decks or in the rigging, craning to see what would happen next. Villagers crowded on the piers, some climbing atop the railings, just as his butterfly had once done. As the wind shifted and danced, their voices grew and faded in his ears. Mourning cries lifted from somewhere among them, no doubt for the man who lay dead below deck. He looked away towards the breakwater as it rose over the water, stalwart, unaffected, bleak, and empty.

Cadoc faced his crew. "I suspect they will attempt to cut us out again."

"And we will defeat them again!" Njala said, holding out her fist.

He shook his head. "For how long?"

"Long as it takes," Birger growled.

Oskar shifted his spectacles. "With the supplies already loaded for the southern seas, I calculate we can maintain ourselves on half rations for—"

"No," Cadoc said. "Your devotion is admirable. It is more than I deserve. But I will not command you to live as captives within arm's reach of your families, nor will I see you killed before their eyes. We've lost one sailor—even now they are wailing for him—and that's more than I was willing to pay."

"But sir—"

"I don't know what they're after," Cadoc said. "But I'm certain it's something I can smooth over. I'll row to the pier and handle this."

"No, sir," Birger said. "You—"

"You will not stop me," Cadoc said, resting his hand on his sword.

Birger's lips tightened. "Aye, aye, sir."

Chapter 32

BRYNNA

Robynton
Wyclythe Province
Norin

Brynna stepped back from the window, stunned by what she had just witnessed in the harbor. Around her, soldiers gathered their belongings and papers in a rush to move out to the wharf and intercept the soon-to-be prisoner. Orders were given to arrest him immediately, but she doubted they would be able to do so. Cadoc would have another plan in store. He would never surrender willingly.

The group thumped down the stairs, but she hung back. She didn't want to see him. She didn't want to be seen by him.

Trinan approached her. "You will stand at my side as an attaché should."

She examined his tone, its tremor and cadence. She searched for softness, a hint of affection, but found only

professional austerity. Nothing remained for her but to nod, to play the part. He went downstairs.

She followed, her boots dragging on the stair treads, her fingers sliding on the rail. Her confusion gave way, crumbling to reveal a root of regret. She wished the manifest would return to her. She wished to rend it into pieces and throw it into the sea. She wished she had never taken the key, never opened the strongbox, never placed that damn paper into Trinan's hands.

The crowds that had gathered to watch *Darsham* now pressed closer to see Cadoc arrive.

Cadoc climbed onto the wharf and was met by two Norinian soldiers. He didn't argue or fight as they disarmed him of his sword, revolver, and knife and hustled him across the wharf toward the officers. He walked willingly enough but shrugged them off when he arrived at the group.

Brynna dropped her gaze, avoiding his eyes. Visions of their long hours together on that very wharf flashed through her mind. She had sat on the dock with her picnic basket, swinging her boots and listening to his stories and laughing at his jokes. She felt his hand on hers, his lips on hers, his body on hers, and she shook.

Trinan had used her. Though she had willingly complied and freely done her duty, he had manipulated the outcomes. She wasn't Trinan's instrument of justice. Rather, she had been crafted into one of destruction. She wasn't a sword of enforcement. She was a knife in Cadoc's back.

Trinan flipped through a stack of papers. "Cadoc Andersyn, you are under arrest for smuggling, trafficking illicit substances, failure to report and pay customs duties and tariffs, tax evasion, and piracy."

“Piracy!” Cadoc spat. “That’s rich, Walyss! You know full well I have a letter of marque signed by Corradh himself!”

“Do you deny the rest?”

Cadoc laughed. “What evidence do you have for any of that shit?”

“*Darsham’s* current cargo, your warehouse’s current inventory, testimony of captain and crew, and Norinian port authority logs.”

“My company is the largest in Norin,” Cadoc said. “I employ over 300 people from here to Gantu to ports in the southern seas. You can’t pin any of that on me.”

Trinan held up the manifest. “I also have *Darsham’s* manifest, written in your hand, detailing certain sensitive items currently in your inventory. This proves knowledge and intent.”

Cadoc’s fingers reached to his neck as he attempted to hook them around an absent string.

His eyes flew to Brynna’s. His face darkened with rage.

Overcome with shame, Brynna flushed, and tears spilled from her eyes. She shuddered, choking back a sob. She had accused Captain Layton of betrayal, but her own treachery hung on her neck, slowly sinking on a tightening band.

Words continued, none spoken by Cadoc. As the chancellor read aloud the legal paperwork, the soldiers took him into custody and bound him tightly. After several minutes of the reading, Brynna hazarded a glance at Cadoc’s face. He continued to stare at her, his jaw clenched. She avoided his gaze, but every time she looked up, he remained staring, his glare boring into her.

“...resulting in asset seizure of company real estate, buildings, the eastern barge fleet, the ship called *Darsham...*”

Cadoc snapped his head to Trinan. “Where the fuck do you get off seizing *Darsham*!”

Trinan lowered the paper and smiled. “Necessary for the investigation, and of course, if contraband is found, then it’s been involved in a crime. So then asset forfeiture—”

“And just who is going to sail her?”

Captain Layton strutted forward. “Aye, that’d be me, Comm’dore. Or shall I say Cadoc? ‘Cause you ain’t got a fleet no more, does ya?”

“Damn you, Cecily!” Cadoc lunged against his bonds, but they held fast, and the soldiers easily restrained him. The crowd around him exclaimed and gossiped and chattered. Trinan read on, and Captain Layton gloated. Cadoc’s shoulders drooped, and sorrow smothered Brynna’s breath. She hated what was happening, hated the manifest, hated herself and what she had done.

Cadoc faced the water and gazed at *Darsham*. He puffed his chest and swung back, gritting his teeth. “How long, Walyss? How long before you sell Norin to the highest bidder? Tonight? At my trial? How long?”

Trinan shuffled his papers and closed the portfolio. “I’m sure I don’t know what you mean.”

Cadoc turned. “Layton lacks the skill to hold the ship. And you lack the skill to hold these waters. You think you’ve seized *Darsham*, but the Hykosi will rip her from you, and any others of my ships in your control. The Hykosi are landlocked! They’ve drooled over this water for centuries—since the settling of our territories! To control the seas, you must patrol at the right times, in the right ways, with the right ships and the right guns. No one knows that system but me. No one! Not Layton, and certainly not any of your

stiff-necked officers. Hykos has no ports. Norin has no navy. We live at peace because I'm your fucking navy! I fight for you on the sea so you don't have to fight on land!"

Trinan sniffed. "I'm sure—"

"I'll tell you what will happen. Do you want to hear?" Cadoc called to the crowd. "Do you want to know what this traitor has enacted this very day?" He faced Trinan. "You'll seize my ships, and my sailors will sail with you. What other option would they have in order to support their families? I don't condemn them for that. While you attempt to raise that new wreckage out there and restore the harbor, there will be no one holding the Hykosi in check. No one patrolling. No one limiting passage for ships flagged from other countries. No one blocking brigands and slavers and hostile forces. The Hykosi will slowly pick off the smaller ships. When they feel powerful enough, they'll cut out the larger ones. Piece by piece, they'll build their navy. They'll seize *Basilisk*. And once that's done, they'll take down *Darsham* and fit her for war."

The crowd murmured.

"But that's not the worst," Cadoc continued. "With a warship in their hands, they'll itch to pick a fight. Maybe they'll hit Tadsyn. Or maybe they'll hit here." He stared at Brynna, and her gut contracted with the punch of his words.

"Rubbish!" the Chancellor yelled. "Take him away!"

"Remember what I've said!" Cadoc shouted to the crowd. "When Norin is in flames, remember what I've told you!"

The soldiers on either side pulled him down the wharf. Brynna watched Cadoc's back until she could no longer see him. With the spectacle over, the crowd dispersed. Officers spoke quietly. The shore boat, with a new, smaller occupant,

rowed back toward *Darsham*, and Captain Cecily Layton assumed command.

Brynna remained alone on the wharf as the mourning cries for the dead sailor echoed across the harbor. She swayed and reached to the railing, utterly wretched. She couldn't change the past, couldn't exchange her actions. She could only sink under the weight of her guilt.

Trinan approached. "Go to your father's house and sleep," he said. "Return to my study in the morning. You have work to do." He donned his hat and walked away.

Chapter 33

CADOC

Wyclythe Fortress
Wyclythe Province
Norin

Cadoc sat in a rickety wooden chair and crossed his arms gingerly over his chest. His shoulders ached from a month in shackles, and his many injuries throbbed, a continuous reminder of the guards' frustrations with his sustained lack of cooperation. He stared at the empty table before him, waiting. The key jangled in the cell door, and he took a slow breath, entering the same mental state of high control he used aboard ship.

Trinan Walyss strode into the cell and sat across from him, placing his portfolio on the table and clasping his hands on top of it. The bailiff secured the door once again.

Their eyes locked.

Trinan smiled, the corners of his mouth lifting slowly.

Cadoc stared, willing himself impassive such that not even a twitch was visible in his face. Hatred swirled within

him at an intensity he had never before experienced. He wanted to gut him, twist and tear his intestines, then hold them before his eyes and shove them down his throat until his fist disappeared in his gullet. Yet even with such a storm within, he mastered himself. He had once remained calm in the face of a hurricane on a lee shore—he wouldn't give a bastard like Trinan the pleasure of controlling him.

Trinan's smile twisted into a smirk. "I'm told you're finally ready to discuss your settlement."

Cadoc decided that slicing each cheek from the lip commissure to the ear would prevent the bloody mongrel from ever smiling again, and his ceremonial knife would ensure the scarring remained, even after a witch's healing. He only lacked the knife.

Opening the portfolio, Trinan took out a packet of papers and placed them on the table. He paused, presumably waiting for Cadoc to speak. Instead, Cadoc continued to stare straight into his eyes until he saw a small jerk of Trinan's finger and knew the chancellor was rattled. Only then did Cadoc lean forward and turn the papers, orienting them for reading.

Trinan tapped the table. "You'll find everything the same as we discussed last month upon your arrest. You'll plead guilty to smuggling, trafficking illicit substances, failure to report and pay customs duties and tariffs, tax evasion, and piracy. Your letter of marque is rescinded. All company real estate, offices, dry docks, and warehouses, including those in Siramy, Jarta, Robynton, Tadsyn, and Nalta, become property of Wyclythe Province. All boats and ships, including the clippers, *Basilisk* and *Darsham*, are forfeited. All barges, sloops, cutters, tugs, ferries, smacks,

and accompanying vessels, including all shore boats, are surrendered to Wyclythe Province, as well as any—”

“Except *Signy* and barge number 38,” Cadoc said.

Trinan’s nose wrinkled. “Yes. Only those—empty—ships will be retained. All barges, sloops, cutters, tugs, ferries, smacks, and accompanying vessels, including all shore boats, are surrendered to Wyclythe Province, as well as any and all cargo. This will discharge all monies owed.” He slid the papers aside, making the final page visible. “And you will sign this letter to your sailors which informs them of your acknowledged guilt and sincere repentance. In it, you apologize to Norin for your crimes and encourage them to continue their work on the ships now flagged only for Norin.”

Trinan held out a pen.

Cadoc determined which angle he could use to snap the bones in the chancellor's wrist.

“Sign,” Trinan said.

Cadoc took the pen. “And I shall be free.”

“Yes.”

Cadoc nodded. “I only sign because I must ensure the safety and comfort of my mother. She is worth far more than any business venture.”

“I don’t care.”

“Also, I need to check on my cat,” Cadoc said as he signed the property transfer.

Trinan snatched the pages back and pushed the last one forward. “And the letter.”

Cadoc signed again.

Chuckling, Trinan picked up the papers and tapped them together before placing them in the portfolio. He stood and

snapped the folder shut, then leaned toward him. “I won.” He knocked his fist on the door for the bailiff.

Cadoc settled back and crossed his ankle on his knee, determined to see the chancellor squirm. “How’s Brynna?”

Trinan’s face darkened, and his lip curled. “She is none of your concern.”

“She was my concern when you sent her to steal from me. When is that crime going to be addressed?”

“She’s an agent of the crown. She’s committed no offense.”

“No offense?” Cadoc said with a sly grin. “Word has it, she no longer shares your bed. Either she committed a grave offense, or I was so good she won’t have you anymore.”

Trinan scowled. “She never slept with you. By her own words.”

Cadoc’s retort died on his tongue.

For weeks, he had gleefully anticipated rubbing the escape in Trinan’s face and then laughing until the chancellor ran humiliated from the cell. It had been the only thing he had looked forward to about the meeting. He had not anticipated Brynna’s denial.

She was unbound by Teerlagee. Even as Trinan’s consort, she was free to do as she pleased and sleep with whomever she liked. She had done nothing wrong in sleeping with him, except for intending to steal the manifest at Trinan’s order. Their evening had been no different from a tryst at the Harvestide fire. That she had lied about it—and been so bold as to deny it completely—astonished him. That Trinan had sent her away flummoxed him even more. His mind raced to understand why she would hide the truth and why Trinan would overreact.

Trinan's eyes shifted, and his hand holding the portfolio twitched. Cadoc recognized that movement. The chancellor was angry.

With a flash of comprehension, Cadoc understood. Brynna must have been backed into a corner and finally checked Trinan on his ridiculous, power-hungry behavior in the only way she could. It was far from ideal that she had chosen a lie on which to stake her claim—that was shaky ground. And it was too bad that the lie had been about him. Even worse that it had been about their night together—he did take some pride in his performance.

If he aligned his testimony with her lie, Trinan would be faced with more evidence of Brynna's story. It might even be enough to make Trinan doubt his hasty judgment and regret his decision to send her away. Cadoc relished the thought of Trinan wallowing in doubt and remorse—hopefully humiliation as well—and several times over if possible.

Cadoc shrugged. "It pains me to say it, but she speaks the truth. I tried to seduce her, but she is devoted to you. In the end, I didn't bed her. Any rumors are just idle talk."

Trinan's nostrils flared. He rocked his jaw from side to side, his eyes flitting back and forth, and his face twitching with a cascade of understandings. He closed his eyes and clenched his fist, then returned to the table and leaned toward Cadoc's face. "Then I have tasted what you crave. She is mine."

Cadoc chuckled. "No. She's not yours anymore. And she never will be again. You sent her away for nothing. I didn't sleep with her, and now, because you would not listen to her, because you cared more about controlling her than you did about her welfare, neither will you."

Trinan's face flashed scarlet. He bared his teeth and seized Cadoc by the shirt. Had the door not opened and revealed the bailiff and a cadre of soldiers, Cadoc would have ended him in that moment. Instead, he watched as a strange light entered the chancellor's eyes, one of self-assurance and confidence, as if he somehow held the winning card and had suddenly reminded himself of such.

"No matter what she says or where she goes," Trinan said, "Brynnalyn is mine."

At the sound of Brynna's sacred name, white-hot rage flashed through Cadoc's vision. "You have no right to that name!" he shouted, swinging his fist, only to be tackled by three soldiers who pummeled him until they could drag him to the floor. Cadoc grunted as a boot kicked his ribs. Another boot pressed his head to the hard-packed dirt, and his arms were jerked behind his back.

Trinan straightened his cravat and laughed. "Brynnalyn is mine forever," he repeated. "No force in Gavony can change that. Certainly, not you."

Chapter 34

MARCUS

Nalta
Gantu

Marcus gestured to the table on the inn's porch. "This one?" His brother, Lor, nodded, and they sat and shifted their chairs to comfort. "You must meet a little friend of mine," Marcus said, lifting his hand high and catching Nora's attention. She picked her way across the porch toward them.

"She's banded," Lor said. "You need to stop fraternizing with slaves."

Marcus wrinkled his brow. "I don't fraternize with them. You make them seem like enemies. They're my friends."

"Even worse."

Nora approached with small, slow steps. Her face was drawn and pale, and dark circles had settled below her eyes. Marcus waited expectantly, but she neither greeted him nor

met his gaze. Her posture, bent and downtrodden, appeared so different from how he remembered. So strange.

“Are you ill?” Marcus asked.

“No, sir,” she said.

He nodded, somewhat reassured. “Lor, this is Nora. Nora, this is my brother, Lor. He’s an attorney and manages my father’s land.”

Nora stared at the floor.

Lor leaned toward her. “Will you ensure that Marcus and I each have a glass of house red while we attend the meeting upstairs?”

“Yes, sir,” she said.

“That is all,” Lor said, dismissing her with a wave of his hand. The gold bands on his third and fourth fingers, symbols of his marriage and his bond to his kvina, caught the light.

Marcus stared after her, confused. “She didn’t ask if I wanted beef stew.”

“Why would she?”

“She always does,” Marcus said. “It’s a little joke we have.”

“You shouldn’t joke with slaves.”

“She seemed ill.”

Lor lifted his brow. “Haunted, I’d say. You need to forget about her and all the other slaves you mess around with. Especially the Tuli.”

Marcus grunted, frustrated that Lor still did not understand him. “If I can’t emancipate them, at least I can be their friends.”

A group of sabhirim approached the inn. Lor stood and muttered, “Stop your talk before you get us both arrested.”

Marcus sighed as Lor pressed his palms together and said, "Father! Good to see you."

Akawel Regá, in his senator's white taylasan with gold edging, climbed the inn's stairs. "And you, Lor. Marcus! I'm glad to see you taking an interest in our country's welfare."

Marcus blinked. "I've always taken an interest. I, too, own a business—a profitable one." He looked to Lor, who only lifted his shoulders as if to apologize for their father's words.

"Lor, you remember Brahim Salisa and Winsen Luna," Akawel said, gesturing to the two men who had walked with him.

Lor pressed his palms together. "Nice to see you, Brahim," he said. "Winsen."

Marcus hoped his father wouldn't direct him to greet Winsen Luna. He hated the sight of that man, with his beady eyes and runny nose that he always wiped with a black handkerchief. The man was brutal. He kept his cattle in abysmal conditions, abused his slaves, and used small children as workers in his fields and barns. And if the rumors were true, he had other reasons for keeping the children. The stories turned his stomach. Knowing there were three more such children now hiding from Luna's clutches filled him with desperation to save them. He clenched his fists and begged for a reprieve from the bastard's presence, not knowing how long he could restrain himself from striking him.

"Always a pleasure to see the Regá family," Winsen Luna said, pressing his palms together. "You know, I said the other day to my cousin, Senator Iero—do you know him? Yes?—that we must all consider meeting more frequently."

“Perhaps this will be the start,” Brahim said.

“And there’s the man of the hour now,” Akawel said.

Cadoc Andersyn approached wearing an indigo Norinian tunic and trousers that Marcus found exceedingly out of character. He had only seen Andersyn in his black uniform with an impressive sword to match his cocky attitude. This new look of peasantry sealed his impression that they were entering a new era, and he feared it would be one of poverty and want. At least Andersyn still sported that impressive knife. That always lent Norinians an edge in negotiations, and Marcus admired that.

Andersyn shook hands with the men. “Thank you for inviting me.”

As Marcus clasped Andersyn’s hand, he noticed fading bruises on his face. The marks of prison took a while to fade.

“We need answers! Solutions!” Brahim said.

Andersyn nodded. “I will answer any questions you have. As for solutions, we will need to build those together.”

Safiyya stood in the doorway with Nora in her shadow. “Gentlemen, your meeting room is ready.”

The men exclaimed their approval, and Akawel led the way. Marcus followed Winsen Luna who leered at Nora as they passed.

“A nice figure on that one,” he said, smacking his lips. “I’ll never understand why Safiyya doesn’t work her upstairs.”

“She serves upstairs frequently,” Marcus said. “She’ll probably follow us.” He wished his words were untrue. He didn’t want her in the same room as Winsen.

They reached the top landing, and Winsen turned back, smirking. “That’s not what I meant.”

“Oh, that sort of service,” Marcus said, blinking through the terrible mental images he now had. “She’s a waitress, not a—”

“Whore?” Winsen chuckled. “She’s a slave. That’s all that matters. Listen here—there are no virgins in slavery, my boy. They’re all fair game—and I make game of the fair! Now that they’re banded, we don’t even have to ask if they’re citizens. We can move on them as the desire strikes!” He chuckled. “I would like to buy a drink for whoever devised that banding idea!”

Marcus’s stomach turned.

They entered the meeting room, and all found their seats. Winsen and Brahim sat on one side, and Marcus and his father and brother on the other. Andersyn sat at the head of the table, relaxed, especially given the circumstances, but the captains of ships were always calm and collected.

Akawel leaned forward. “Well, Andersyn, give it to us straight.”

Andersyn nodded and looked at each of them. “The situation is bleak as I’m sure all of you realize. I have lost everything. I retain only two ships, and I have a total of three sailors in my employ. I can haul goods back and forth between Nalta and Tadsyn, but as of now, it is impossible for me to sail to the southern seas.”

The door opened, and Nora slipped inside with several bottles of wine. Marcus tried to smile at her, but she never looked his way. Her face tilted downward, and her shoulders rounded forward. He frowned. Something was wrong with her.

Winsen slammed his fist on the table. Nora started, clinking the bottles. “Who has done this?” he shouted. “Who is responsible?”

"I won't venture into responsibility," Andersyn said. "The assets were seized by Norin through the Wyclythe Province."

Brahim shook his head. "Which one is that?"

"Wyclythe is on the cape in the far southwest. Robynton is the seat."

"That's a large port?" Brahim asked.

Andersyn nodded. "Relatively. Gavony only has two deepwater ports, both in Norin. Tadsyn and Robynton. Tadsyn is much larger than Robynton, but Robynton suffices to receive clippers and valsydian in accordance with the Conventions."

"That's where the clippers are now? Robynton?" asked Akawel.

"*Darsham*, yes," Andersyn said. "Two cutters were wrecked at the mouth of the harbor, and until they are raised, *Darsham* is trapped—as are all other ships in that harbor. I had to travel to Tadsyn on horseback to take command of *Signy*. They are obviously under much pressure to reopen. The work has quickly progressed and should be complete soon—within days, I assume, if it's not already open as we speak. As for *Basilisk*, she's in port in Tadsyn."

Akawel nodded. "Once the harbor is open, then *Darsham* can sail to the southern seas?"

"Well, there are other problems," Andersyn said. "Cecily Layton captains *Darsham*. She has sailed from the atolls, but she lacks the expertise needed for direct passage across the southern seas. She could reach the outlying islands and hop from port to port, but she cannot make the straight shot that is needed in transporting cattle to the profitable far markets, Tivix, Talahm, and the like. So if she took the risk, some trading is possible, but not for cattle."

“And *Basilisk*?” Brahim asked. “Who sails that?”

“Victor Timda, a long-time employee of Andersyn Shipping. He was second officer on *Reliance* decades ago and now has been impressed to sail for Norin. That said, the ship remained in dock when I left Tadsyn this morning.”

“Can he use *Basilisk* to transport cattle?”

Andersyn paused. “I don’t doubt his skill. But Victor hasn’t sailed in 25 years. I suspect he will refuse to attempt it until he feels comfortable in command. He may insist only on atoll routes, like Layton, at least for the next year. After that, it’s possible.”

“Is there no one else?” Akawel asked. “Norin is supposed to be a land filled with sailors!”

Andersyn nodded patiently. “Sailing in Gavony’s waters, Norin rises to the challenge—I could give you an extensive list of candidates—but for passage to the southern seas, there are many more difficulties. It’s a separate skill set, one of speed and maneuverability and crew management. One must work the wind to their advantage without running aground on the innumerable reefs. In other areas, squalls arise swiftly and unexpectedly. Not to mention hostile forces as the ship enters southern waters. I can count on one hand those I would trust with the journey, and even then it would take time and training to build their confidence in themselves. I know of only one other captain who would be immediately fit for the journey, other than myself.”

“And who is that?”

Andersyn smiled. “My mother. But as she is an Andersyn, the officials are not likely to consider her fit for duty.”

Muffled groans sounded around the table.

“You sailed here from Tadsyn,” Winsen said, waving his hands. “Why can’t you just go to the southern seas?”

“I have only one barge and the sloop, *Signy*. She’s tiny. Single mast. She lacks both the speed and the cargo space I would need for a voyage that far. I wouldn’t have enough space for proper provisions, let alone trading goods. And the barge is only good for hauling between Nalta and Tadsyn.”

Winsen puffed his jowls and grunted, rubbing the enormous emerald ring that encircled his finger. “And what am I to do if I cannot take my cattle to market?”

Lor nodded. “I’m short of everything. Hay not being the least. I only have Norinian silage of the worst quality. What do you propose we do?”

Andersyn leaned forward. “I have a sloop and a barge. I’ll carry what I can from around Gavony. But you need ships, and I don’t have them—Norin does, and they’re likely to work with you. Your country has a trade agreement with Norin, and every clause should be squeezed for whatever value you can get from it. You’ll need to structure your tariffs and regulations in their favor to ensure their continued interest and cooperation. Most importantly, interactions between the countries must remain peaceful. I cannot emphasize that enough—peace is essential. Otherwise, Norin will easily cut off your access to all transportation, save mine, and that would spark a humanitarian disaster the size of which I shudder to think about.”

Nora distributed glasses of wine. Marcus took his and thanked her. She moved on to the next person without responding.

Andersyn clasped his hands. “I have rechartered the Andersyn Shipping Company, starting over with these two ships.”

“Where did you charter?” Lor asked.

“Safwyn Province—Tadsyn—once again.”

Lor’s brows met. “Would it not be better to base yourself in Gantu?”

Andersyn’s brow twitched. “Let me be clear.” He drew his knife and placed it on the table. It sounded heavy against the wood. Several men leaned back, glancing around uneasily. “I am Norinian,” he said. “As long as I wear this, my allegiance lies with them.”

Marcus stared at the knife. The handle had been carved to show a whale swimming alongside a clipper ship in full glory. As an artist himself, he recognized quality, and this craftsmanship was exquisite.

Lor nodded. “Seems fair. I appreciate your transparency.”

Andersyn resheathed his knife. “Now that we understand each other, I am willing to devote the majority of my schedule to Gantu with certain conditions met.”

Akawel leaned on the arm of his chair. “What are those conditions?”

“That you extend me a loan with favorable interest for the construction of five cutters.”

“Why not build clippers?” Akawel asked. “It seems like those are the ships we need!”

Andersyn counted on his fingers. “Time, proper facilities, and expertise. We lack it all and always have. That is why every clipper ever sailed by Andersyn Shipping has come to us from the south through other means. We cannot build them here. Even cutters will be difficult to build because Norin controls the shipyards—and the builders. Before we can build, we will have to modify the independent yards here in Gantu. Then ship lumber from Norin via barge—”

“A loan is nothing!” Winsen said. “Take the loan! Take all the loans! But that still doesn’t get my cattle to the islands! You said yourself the cutters can’t sail there.”

“Cutters will allow for a decent amount of trade to return between Gantu and the rest of Gavony,” Andersyn said. “But all of Gavony is cut off from the southern seas, and we will remain cut off as long as Norin retains control of the clippers.”

Winsen sneered. “Then Norin should not be allowed to retain control of the clippers.”

The others nodded and agreed.

Nora placed a glass of wine at Andersyn’s elbow. He nodded in thanks, sipped his wine, then clasped his hands once more. “Now we come to your other options.”

Akawel puffed his chest. “Indeed! We can take the ships! We have the greatest army in Gavony!”

Andersyn shrugged. “Perhaps, but you have no way to get them to a battlefield. Your army is useless.”

The men looked stumped.

“Hykos is closer to Norin,” Andersyn said. “They are on the same side of the Padyn Mountains, and they already quasi-occupy Norin, enough that they could leverage their position if they organized. What’s more, they have wanted the port at Tadsyn as far back as anyone can remember. They have well-trained, fresh-water sailors. They have a pressing interest in ocean shipping and could be persuaded to interfere, especially if they knew Gantu would ally with them should Norin become aggressive.”

“Is that a possibility?” Lor asked. “That Norin would fight?”

Andersyn lifted his shoulders. “Norin doesn’t want war. If they did, they would have risen up against the Hykosi long

ago. That has never come to pass, aside from the occasional skirmish with countryside rebels. The Hykosi are clumsy at times, and our small bands fight back, often doing more harm than good and gumming up diplomacy along the way. If Hykos focuses solely on taking the ships, without attacking anything on land, then only Wyclythe Province, the current owners of the ships, will care. The rest of Norin, having lost nothing and not having been attacked, will sleep.”

“Then Hykos would control the ships!” Akawel said. “All of them! How does that help us?”

Andersyn lifted his finger. “Because they will have the same trouble the Norinians have—even with their fresh-water sailors, they lack the expertise to sail south. But under your influence—Gantish influence—the Hykosi will turn the control of those ships over to me. And I,” he sipped his wine, “will work with you. You need me in control, and the Hykosi can make that happen if they know you—and your army—have their back.”

“And if anything goes wrong,” Akawel said, waving his hand, “you will have the entire peninsula embroiled in war! Why should we trust you?”

Andersyn leveled his gaze. “Because I want to sail. And if you deem to survive, you need me to sail. Hykos won’t fight you—they aren’t stupid. If they believe great economic gain will come from their owning the ships and that they will finally control the port they have always wanted, then they will not want to fight the Norinians. What would it gain them? This venture will benefit you and pacify them. It will distract them from any fool ideas they may have of provoking Norin unnecessarily.”

Lor rubbed his chin. “But are we so sure they won’t attack Norin? If I recall, the last time Hykos managed to seize a ship, they massacred a town.”

Andersyn pressed his lips together. “The Removal.” He turned his head and spat. “May it never happen again.”

Marcus’s eyes widened at such a disgusting display. From the shocked faces around him, he was not alone in his revulsion.

“Gentlemen,” Andersyn continued, “As Lor pointed out, I have been transparent in revealing my motivations and limitations. I pray you meet me in kind. Let us not mince words. I know the role Gantu played in the Removal. And I know you know, too.”

The men shifted uncomfortably and cast glances at each other.

“Yes, Hykos seized a ship and wanted a port,” Cadoc said, “but your country was pressuring them to provide more slaves for the Tuli camps, just as you fund the slavers at Olam Cove today. The Gantish senate—your senate—pressured the Hykosi toward inexcusable actions in order to gain the spoils. Once you had those slaves in your possession, you backtracked from the extreme political disaster the Removal was and, only then, moved to prevent the Hykosi from repeating their raid—a wise choice following such a monstrous event, but an action that came too late for the people of Robynton.”

Andersyn paused and stared into each face.

Akawel picked at his senator’s taylasan. “You are correct,” he muttered. “The Norinian slaves seized were sent to the Tuli encampment. Just as all captured slaves are.”

“Forgive me,” Lor said, “but this is precisely my point. Hykos has a history of attacking Norin. How do we know

Hykos won't repeat their attack once they control even more ships than before?"

"I admit it's dicey," Andersyn said. "But Gantu pushed them to enact the Removal by hanging its purse over the Hykosi heads, and likewise, Gantu can prevent further such actions by showing them the economic benefits of focusing on trade. That will distract them from fitting the ships for war." He paused. "And, most importantly, your country can accomplish this by not demanding slaves."

Marcus looked up.

"Ban the importation of slaves," Andersyn continued, "and you will stabilize Hykosi shipping into legitimate trade channels. By giving them economic opportunity, you distract them from arming themselves. By not allowing them a slave market, you prevent them from going to war."

Marcus slapped his hand on the table. "Hear! Hear! Well said!" He could have jumped up and cheered.

"Ban the import of slaves!" Winsen shouted. "You're insane!"

"It's not insane," Marcus said. "It's brilliant!"

Akawel cleared his throat. "Realistically, Andersyn, I'm not sure banning slavery is possible. Tuli lifespan is averaging only 15 years after the start of work with raw valsydian. They begin work at 12 years old—barely old enough to allow for puberty and child-bearing potential, but young enough to yield as much work as possible. A 27-year lifespan naturally forces them to mate early—they figure that out themselves—but with the effects of the valsydian, each dam still only produces two or at most three children, many of whom die in childhood. We struggle to maintain the population—much less increase it—without introducing fresh stock from time to time, men for work, women for breeding.

Not all of those can come from our aberrant slaves in Nalta. Besides, the valsydian cycle exists throughout Gavony. It wouldn't be fair for Gantu to bear the sole burden. Other countries must contribute to the Tuli population, whether voluntarily or by force."

"Valsydian!" Winsen said, laughing. "As important as that is, it's not the only purpose of slavery!" He lifted his empty glass toward Nora. She slowly stepped forward to refill it, serving as his object lesson. "I see no reason to end something so beneficial to us," he said. "Either because of the valsydian cycle, or profit, or because of the pleasures it brings."

Marcus narrowed his eyes, hating the man who would treat his friend in such a way and knowing that if Winsen were left to his devices, she would be treated far worse.

Andersyn lifted his hand. "If you are not willing to remove their strongest motivation for war, then you must rely on economic pressures alone."

"Economic pressure is not as strong as a slave ban," Lor said.

"No, it's not," Andersyn said, his agreement clear. "The Hykosi present a real risk. They want the ships. They want the ports. And they know the trouble the collapse of my company has created. Even if we do nothing, the Hykosi may—of their own accord—take the ships away from the Norinian authorities and choose hostilities. They play at war enough as it is. It's not beyond them to be unilaterally aggressive as you have observed."

Brahim nodded. "It seems we have no other options, though. We must pressure them to accumulate the ships in order to get you to the southern seas."

Andersyn nodded. "Then at a minimum, you must reward them enough that they will not use them for war."

Silence settled over the room as each man studied the table in front of him.

"As there is no more discussion and no dissent, it is decided," Akawel said. "I will address the senate with this information, but I see no reason why it would not be agreed upon. You have your loan, Andersyn, even if I have to personally guarantee it. And I will write to Viceroy Serban in Shalash and inform him of our desire to see the Norinian ships in Hykosi control—captained by you."

"And our slaves!" Winsen said. "Mention those!"

Akawel nodded. "I will also emphasize to them that we do not wish to see the slave trade disrupted in any way, especially by violence. That way, they will maintain our slave lines but not feel compelled to take any action that will disrupt our political connections with Norin."

As the men stood and shook hands, Marcus's gaze drifted from Winsen to Nora, who remained near the door, wine bottle in hand, her face blank and her eyes unfocused. He despised whoever it was who had harmed her, whoever had stolen her lively happiness. He needed to talk to her as soon as he could.

Chapter 35

MEELA

Cardinal Territory
Corradh Province
Norin

As clouds gathered and rain threatened, Meela stepped from the ancient path into the glen. The Myrki Stone at her throat continued to pulse with the summoning signal. Sissel approached, her hands outstretched, and Meela embraced her.

“I’m so relieved you’re here,” Sissel said, her canonical robe drenched with sweat. “We can’t break through the ondilska.”

“Where is she?”

“Come.”

Sissel pulled Meela toward the harsh violet glow and the mass of canonical witches in the throes of healing. Sounds of chanting filled her ears. Violet light flashed and sparked, bright enough to cast twitching shadows upon the trees. Cardinal witches in red surrounded the canonicals and lay

hands on their shoulders. They channeled the ondilska to the gray sky even as it was gathered. Spent valsydian littered the ground in piles.

Meela pressed closer, the witches yielding their positions to allow her to move to the high priestess. Nadia lay on a thin mat. Her strawberry-blond hair, drenched and stringy, lay loose around her head. Her blanched skin glistened with sweat. Foam caked on her blue lips, and her chest barely rose with breath. The red Coryn Stone, wrapped in gold and surrounded by bits of aquamarine, held only the faintest of lights within. The mark of the high priestess faded with her life.

Crouching, Meela placed her hands on Nadia's chest and closed her eyes. Her healing flow poured from the top of her head, down her shoulders, through her arms and fingers where the violet light flared and grew, increasing in brilliance. Instantly, an icy tentacle of ondilska wound around her fingers, its frigid mire engulfing her hands and creeping upward. Meela flinched at the strength, the power of the hatred within it. Never had she fought such resistance against her ability. She ducked her head, focusing, breathing into the torrent within her. Pressure built, and heat increased within her fingers and traveled through her body. Every moment heightened the burning within her, pushing her away. She forced herself to maintain contact, to keep the flow open.

An image flashed in her mind. A cardinal witch. One with an air of power. One she knew. Hanáv. The figment of Hanáv walked toward Nadia, and then both disappeared as the ondilska crested, squeezing, twisting, forcing Meela away. She fought back, leaning into the motion, pushing her

feet against the ground, tensing her thighs, and driving her shoulder into the flow.

A cracking explosion threw every witch backward and extinguished every light. Meela hit the ground, the breath knocked from within her, and she stared at the gray clouds that blanketed the sky. Around her, the witches gasped for breath, exhausted from the expenditure of energy. The heavy breaths turned to cries and sobs as all understood the battle had been lost.

A gust blew through the trees, bringing with it a cold mist.

The witches stood, leaning upon one another. They cried and threw their arms around each others' necks, clinging together in their grief, regardless of order.

Meela knelt next to Nadia's body, confused, wondering what she could have done differently, how she could have saved her. It had been too strong, too strange, too powerful.

She lifted her eyes to Hanáv.

The cardinal witch stood straight, her green eyes flashing. Meela rose, a curious combination of fear and fury stirring within her. She approached, leveling her gaze. "You resonated within the ondilska."

"Seen by the others?"

"No."

Hanáv's brow twitched dismissively.

"Only a refined poison could reach that intensity," Meela said.

"Talahmese oleander."

Meela gasped with horror. "Why?"

"It's time."

"She deserved a natural end."

Hanáv scoffed. "She deserved to be mauled by wolves, but I allowed her to die without pain."

“You have violated our laws.”

“No one will know.”

Meela stepped closer. “You need my power.”

“You won’t risk his life.”

Meela closed her eyes and thought of Sol’s face. Reluctantly, she allowed Hanáv to pass.

The cardinal witch knelt and removed the necklace from Nadia’s body. The Coryn Stone flared at her touch and glimmered in her hands, red light shining on her face. The witches fell silent and still, watching with wide eyes. Hanáv strode to the center of the clearing and pointed at the sky. A jet of red light shot into the clouds and established her reign.

Chapter 36

BRYNNA

Wyclythe Fortress
Wyclythe Province
Norin

Brynna touched the nib of her pen to each line as she added the numbers. Writing the sum at the bottom, she sat back, shocked. Her first run of the calculations, which had seemed so unreasonable at the time, had been correct. And the second run of the same. And the third. And now the fourth. She dragged another sheet of paper toward her and started writing her report.

Trinan entered the study, his hat and cloak dripping with water. “Did you see the lights in the sky?” he asked, tossing his cloak onto the rack.

She turned around to see the window. The rain continued to pour, washing out her view. “I’ve seen nothing. Did you ride through lightning?”

“Not lightning. The cardinal witches’ signal. A red beam straight into the sky.”

A weight settled in her stomach. "What does that mean?"

"I can think of only one reason the cardinals would call each other," he said, sitting by the fire with a cloth and his boot brush.

"Transfer of power?"

He nodded as he wiped the mud from his boots. "Nadia is dead. There is a new head priestess."

"You had anticipated that. Who will succeed her?"

He dropped one boot and picked up the other. "I'd place a large wager on Hanáv. No other cardinal has the power and following she does."

"Will this affect us?"

"Not unless we cross her."

She nodded and leaned back in her chair, her anxiety prickling despite his words. Cardinal witches always made her nervous. They were the embodiment of power, yet devoid of mercy.

As a child, she had seen their dark magic. During one of the holidays, Harvestide or perhaps Carthasach, a for-ester had trespassed on cardinal land. He had claimed he was lost, the idiot. The cardinal witches had bound him in chains of light and paraded him through Lonara. The man's feet had dangled over the street, she remembered, walking on air like a puppet in a roadside show. Sit down, children, watch and learn.

They had marched straight to the high priestess—the one before Nadia—in the middle of the town square, but she didn't need them to tell her anything about their captive. She already knew, had already judged, had already decreed his sentence. Her face never changed. Her dark eyes never wavered. She lifted her arm, pointed at him, and red light burst from her hand, striking him in the chest. Even now,

Bryнна remembered the screams. Forever and always, she would see the man's skin dry and crack and shrivel into dust from fingertips to arms to chest, screaming as he saw and understood the process of his own death until all that remained was a pile of ash even the rats shunned. She had learned to look away when cardinal witches passed on the street. Cross to the other side. Close the door. Hide.

“—rained all the way from Robynton,” Trinan said, and Bryнна blinked and looked up, realizing he was still talking.

His speech paused. She knew she should make conversation, but even after so many weeks since that day on the docks, she felt stiff and wounded. She forced her words. “How was the ribbon cutting?”

“Cold, miserable, and perfunctory. And a damn fishwife spat on me.”

She wrinkled her brow. “What? Why?”

He huffed. “Because her son is one of the impressed sailors.”

“Oh,” she said, her stomach sinking.

“Nothing I can do about it. Norin must have sailors. I don't see why they aren't willing. But the harbor is open. That's what matters.” He glanced at her as he put his boots back on. “What are you working on?”

She pulled her papers before her. “If my Andersyn asset valuation assessment is correct and the provincial tax revenue is as I understand it...” She shook her head. “King Wyclythe's administration now controls more wealth than all of Norin in its entirety. And that includes High King Corradh's fortunes. It's the largest transfer of wealth in the history of Gavony.”

Trinan grinned as he strutted across the room. “Justice has its payoffs.” He looked over her shoulder at the

numbers. "General Hepsath is downstairs. I'd like to introduce you."

She nodded and replaced her pen in the holder.

He offered his hand. "Come. Let me look at you."

Brynna hesitated, disdaining his touch, then slipped her fingers to his as she stood. He gazed at her with a sad smile and offered a small bouquet of rain-dappled blue and white cornflowers.

Brynna took a breath. Her mind returned to the times before, when he had loved her. "What are these for?"

"For you," he said, his voice low and smooth. "I have thought about much these last few days, about our fall out and how distant we are. I behaved badly."

A glimmer of hope sparkled in her heart, but only dimly so. She tread with caution, knowing how deep and wide was the chasm between them. "What do you mean?"

He cleared his throat as though the words pained him. "The night I sent you away. I should not have. . .shouted at you."

She took the flowers and touched the petals as he brushed a stray lock at her temple. His hand rested on her cheek, and he bent to kiss her.

"Do you trust me?" she asked, before their lips touched.

He met her eyes.

Her question hung in the silence.

Too much time passed.

Her heart sank.

She turned away from him and dropped the flowers on her desk. Blinking through tears, she left the room, her steps quickening as she walked along the corridor. He did not call her name or follow after her. Her eyes burned, and her limbs moved with her gait as though she were slogging

through mud. No surface would hold her. She continued toward the front of the fortress.

Below her in the entryway stood a Norinian soldier with graying hair that was nearly white. He carried his jacket draped over his arm, and his dark-blue trousers bore a red stripe.

“General Hepsath,” she said, walking down the stairs toward him, her silk skirt billowing behind her.

He bowed. “At your service, ma’am.”

She offered her hand which he shook. “Brynna Dasveld.”

“Without a doubt,” he said. “I know your father well.”

She smiled. “I’ve heard he will join us today.”

Trinan’s footsteps announced his presence as he descended the stairs. She avoided looking up at him. “Yes,” he said. “Seth should arrive soon.”

Brynna smiled at the general. “We shall see him together.”

The heavy door opened, and Seth Dasveld entered.

“Papa!” Brynna said, hurrying to take his hands and bow over them.

“Brynnalyn,” he said, smiling. He freed his hand and offered it to General Hepsath. “Erik, it’s been too long.”

Hepsath nodded and shook his hand. “Agreed.”

Seth addressed the group. “I saw Kya outside. She will be in shortly.”

“The Grand Ambassador?” Brynna asked. Her father leveled a stern glare at her ignorant display, and she bit her tongue. Yet her curiosity soared, and she marveled at a meeting that would hold the Chancellor of Wyclythe, the Grand Ambassador of Norin, an admired general, and her father. She walked among greatness.

The door opened once more, and Kya Evers appeared with brisk steps and a swishing gown. With her commanding

presence, she ruled the room, embodying power. The men straightened their shoulders and greeted her in turn. Brynna envied her aplomb. Perhaps some day she, too, could hold such power.

Trinan motioned to the doorway of the front drawing room. "Shall we?"

Hepsath paused, a look of concern on his face. "First, I have some troubling news."

"Go on," Trinan said.

"I've received word that *Basilisk* has been captured by Hykosi sailors," Hepsath said.

Trinan's face darkened. "When? How?"

"They seized three cutters in Jarta last week and cut out *Basilisk* this morning. It was last seen at anchor off the coast of Bryton Province in the area of Olam Cove. The cutters were maintaining Hykosi security of the area."

Trinan clenched his fists. "Damn!"

"Does this place *Darsham* in danger?" Brynna asked. "Olam Cove isn't far from here."

Hepsath nodded. "All ships are now at risk. *Darsham* will set sail for Tadsyn this evening. With *Basilisk* and the battle group of cutters besides, the Hykosi have a formidable flotilla against her."

Trinan motioned again to the front drawing room. "We will need to discuss this further."

Hepsath nodded. "I assumed as much. This will influence our other plans."

The group walked toward the room. Brynna slipped her hand into her father's, and he squeezed her fingers in return. General Hepsath and Kya entered, but Trinan turned back to Brynna. "You will not be needed," he said.

She stopped, stunned. "I attend all of your meetings."

He withdrew from his pocket a wilted and drooping cornflower and dangled it in front of her face. A petal dropped. He tucked the stem behind her ear. "Not anymore. I'm limiting your tasks to accounting. That's it." He turned away and entered the drawing room, closing the door behind him.

Seth faced her, his eyes narrow. "What have you done?" he growled.

Her blood turned to ice. "I don't know."

"He told me at the ribbon cutting that he was offering himself to you again."

She stared at her father.

He snarled and flicked the flower off of her ear. "You have rejected him!" He seized her shoulders. "Unruly, ungrateful, disobedient girl!" He shook her. "He is the chancellor! He will be king! You are ruining everything!"

"Papa, please!"

The voices in the room laughed in conversation, and he stopped, distracted, his breath heavy. He scowled and released her, then straightened his tunic with two sharp tugs. With a final glare at her, he opened the door and joined the meeting.

Brynna trembled, tears wetting her cheeks.

The fortress door opened once more, the sound echoing through the hall. The huntsman entered, his face dark and stern, his eyes brooding.

She gasped and stepped back.

With silent, fluid movements, he stalked past without acknowledging her. She knew he saw her, for the look in his eyes made her feel as though he had observed more about the room in seconds than she had understood in years. He entered the drawing room and closed the door.

She stood alone in the empty hall.

Chapter 37

CADOC

Nalta
Gantu

As the setting sun dipped Nalta into shadows, Cadoc rode outside of town to a small cottage. He tied his horse in the empty stable and knocked on the front door.

Sunna answered and grinned. “My, my! If it isn’t Cadoc Andersyn!”

“Sunna!” he said, scooping her up in his arms. “How I have missed you!” Sunna squealed and giggled. He kissed her blushing bronze cheek. “I’ve come to rest my knife on Elias’s shoulder and steal you away!”

Sunna laughed. “You vile tease! Get in here, and let me feed you.”

He ducked his head and stepped into the cabin, untying his boots and slipping them off at the door. His feet touched the woven carpets, and he found himself surrounded by warm air, dried herbs, and smoke. It smelled of friendship,

and he savored the experience as he sat on the floor at the low table.

“What would you like?” she asked with a wink.

“You know what I want,” he said.

She placed a mug on the table. “Sack mead,” she said, pouring. “And...” She turned back to the oven. “Cinnamon rolls. No raisins.” She set a basket piled high with cinnamon rolls right in front of him.

“By the fucking Breath, Sunna,” he said, taking a roll. “If I die tonight, I will be content and ten pounds heavier.”

She swatted him with a cloth. “I’ll fatten you up yet.” She sat across from him. He grinned, feeling a sense of happiness he had not known for weeks. His friendship with Sunna and Elias transcended every hardship as friendships built on scars and lost fingers often do.

He peeled the outside layer of the roll and shoved it in his mouth. With a groan, he slumped. “That is so good.”

She smiled. “You keep bringing me cinnamon, and I’ll keep making rolls.”

He glanced at her and took another bite. “That was a sly way to bring up shipping. I guess you heard then.”

“Something that big, everyone hears.”

“I’m a failure,” he said bitterly, eating the center and grabbing another roll.

“Aw, now,” she said. “Everyone gets laid low. You’ll get back up. You’ve got the know-how.”

“I’ve got two boats and a loan for five cutters.”

“See? Already getting on your feet. I knew you would. You had to.”

“Oh? Why’s that?”

“So you can sail me to Norin to watch you dance your fancy Teerlageel!” She laughed and poured out more mead.

His mind flashed to the Robynton wharf. He saw a picnic basket and a pair of blue eyes. Sweet laughter filled his ears. His hand, holding his next bite, sank back to the table.

“You promised me you’d find someone,” she said, wagging her finger.

He smiled with closed lips. “Not any time soon.” He took the bite and chewed slowly.

Sunna squinted. “What is this?” She drank from her own mug. “There was someone.”

He took a third roll and allowed the moment to extend.

Sunna propped her elbow on the table and leaned her face on her palm. “Queen Gara of Elivel, eh?”

“Elidel,” he said and shook his head. “No.”

“You said she’s the most beautiful woman in Norin. And I say you deserve the best.”

He peeled the outside of the roll, and it curled on his hand. “Gara is the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen. She’s accomplished, a delightful lover, and she controls a profitable shallow water port.”

“Perfect for y—”

“But she falls short of being the best.”

Sunna slapped the table. “There was someone else!”

“Perhaps.” He saw her gamboling atop the breakwater. He heard her lilting chatter. He felt her lips on his and remembered the softness of her shoulder, the curve of her breast.

Sunna raised her brow. “I’ve never seen you stricken like this. She must be spectacular.”

He straightened his back and bit straight into the roll. “I’m a spectacular idiot,” he said, talking through his food. He swallowed. “I fancied that I loved her, and I was wrong.”

“You did not love her?”

“She was a mistake that cost me dearly,” he said, emphasizing his words with the roll he held.

Sunna reached across the table and rested her hand on his. “But do you love her?”

“Does it even matter?”

Someone rapped on the door, and Sunna walked to open it. “Come in,” she said, widening the door for the new arrivals. “Elias will be here soon.”

A man and woman entered and removed their shoes. The man was young, and he moved as though springs were tightly coiled within him. When he dropped the hood of his gandoura, he revealed a shock of mussy brown hair. No turban, no slave band. A Gantish citizen, then. The woman he recognized as the banded slave who had served in the meeting at the inn. She was even younger than her companion, certainly not yet twenty years old, and she moved slowly, cautiously, as though prepared to be trampled upon. Her olive skin shone a sickly yellow in the firelight.

Cadoc stood in greeting, wary of knocking his head on the ceiling.

“Have you met Commodore Andersyn?” Sunna said. “Cadoc, this is Ziri and Nora.”

Cadoc offered his hand to Ziri and looked back at Sunna. “I’m hardly a commodore at the moment.”

“Seven ships, love. I’d call that a fleet.”

Cadoc scoffed. “That’s a stretch.”

“An honor, sir,” Ziri said, vigorously shaking Cadoc’s hand. “You’re legendary.”

Cadoc laughed. “Only to those who don’t know me. I think I’ve seen you at the inn?”

Ziri nodded. "I'm first footman." He gestured to the slave. "This is Nora. She's a waitress."

Cadoc's smile faded. "You were in the meeting. By the Breath, I wish you didn't have to hear such disgusting things." He took her hand and then placed his other hand on top. "I am ever at your service."

She nodded but said nothing.

They all sat at the table. Cadoc took three rolls, hesitated, then took a fourth before passing the basket on to the others.

"Do you know why we requested you to come?" Ziri asked Cadoc.

"Listen." Cadoc held up a cinnamon roll. "This is all I need offered in order to be here."

Sunna gasped. "I thought you came for me!"

Cadoc leaned across the table to kiss her cheek. "You're my best girl!" Sunna giggled, and he sat again and glanced at Ziri. "But, no, I have no idea why you want me here."

Ziri leaned on the table. "Winsen Luna—"

"May my knife rest on his shoulder," Cadoc growled. "I've wanted to slit his throat for years."

Ziri nodded. "He's bought three children. We only have two days left to get them out of the country and on their way to Hykos."

Cadoc unrolled the next layer of his cinnamon roll. "And you need me to take them."

"Yes," Ziri said.

"And I suppose that means you want me to set sail tonight without filing papers with the port authority."

"Yes."

"And then sneak them ashore and drop them off at the house on Cedar Street in West Tadsyn where someone will

assure me that my payment will arrive soon. And then it won't."

Ziri hesitated. "Yes."

Cadoc shrugged. "Sure."

The door opened, and Elias entered with one of the Regá sons, the one from the meeting who hadn't paid attention until the mention of slavery. The little slave at the table shuddered, and Cadoc instantly understood that something existed between the two of them. With the man being a grand sabhir and her a slave, it took little imagination to realize what that something must be—despite his outburst at the meeting. Cadoc had long suspected Akawel Regá of fucking slaves. This Marcus must take after the father.

Sunna stood. "Come in, Marcus." She kissed Elias and took his coat.

The men stood in greeting.

"Cadoc!" Elias said in a loud and boisterous voice. "You've finally come to steal my Sunna away!"

"You caught us before we could leave!" Cadoc said, shaking hands with him and then returning to the table, leaving Marcus's extended hand unshaken.

Marcus awkwardly lowered his hand.

"Have you met Marcus?" Elias asked.

"We met earlier," Cadoc said, his tone dismissive.

Marcus nodded, sitting at the table. "Yes. It was an important meeting."

"Let's get started," Elias said. "Cadoc, you know the situation?"

"I do," he said. "Three children, bought by Luna. We're getting them out on *Signy* tonight, and I'll deliver them through the usual channels in Tadsyn."

“Yes, we’ll go about this the same way as before. Marcus and Nora will wait with the children until Cadoc can take them.”

The little slave’s shoulders dropped. She seemed to sink into herself, scared. Cadoc bristled. “I don’t think it’s a good idea for Marcus and Nora to work together. Can someone else wait with her or can she wait with them alone?”

“She can’t wait alone,” Sunna said. “What’s wrong with Marcus?”

“I want her to be safe,” Cadoc said.

Several voices spoke at once.

“Why wouldn’t she be safe with me?” Marcus asked.

“I am safe with him,” Nora said. She glanced at Marcus before adding, “I have no fear at all when I am with him!”

Cadoc leaned on the table, allowing his silence to hold his position. He didn’t believe her words, especially not in Marcus’s presence. He had seen too many victims deny abuse when in the presence of their abusers.

“Is her own statement acceptable to you?” Ziri said with a tone of annoyance.

Marcus creased his brow. “I would still like to know why you think she would not be safe with me. I am a gentleman!”

Elias held out his palms. “Cadoc, what time will you set sail?”

Cadoc cast a final glare at Marcus, then addressed Elias. “When do they change the guard now?”

“Midnight.”

“Three, then. Have them at the dock just before three.”

Elias nodded. “Our funds are low. We—”

“I don’t care about my fee,” Cadoc said. “Just get them to the dock.”

Sunna leaned toward Ziri. “You said the Council of Norin won’t work with slave transport to Hykos, but do you think they’d fund the leg from here to Tadsyn? It’s money spent in Gantu and Norin.”

Cadoc prickled at the mention of the Council of Norin. Sunna was treating Ziri like some kind of expert on them.

“I don’t think they want a part of it at all,” Ziri said.

Cadoc waved his hand. “What’s this? What’s your involvement with the Council of Norin?”

Sunna exchanged a glance with Ziri. “They’ve funded a considerable supply of armaments,” she said.

“Armaments?” Cadoc repeated. “For what?”

“Rebellion. Against the sabhirim.”

Cadoc leaned back. He looked to Marcus, then back to Sunna. “The Council of Norin. You’re certain?”

They nodded.

“Dead certain,” Ziri said.

Sunna shifted to her knees. “Does everyone know what to do—”

“Wait, wait, wait,” Cadoc said, lifting his hand. “This Council of Norin. Do they do anything else? What are their goals?”

“No one’s really sure,” she said. “But they support our movement for equality for all people in Gantu. And as long as they are giving us support, we don’t ask questions.”

Ziri nodded. “I think they want to see Norinian ideals spread. Equality is one of your key principles, right?”

Cadoc nodded slowly. Equality was one of the Seven Words, but meddling in tariff rates sure as hell wasn’t. He wasn’t impressed by idealistic rhetoric—he wanted to know how the money flowed. “Where are they based? Who is your contact?”

Marcus shook his head. "I'm not sure we should tell you—"

Cadoc emitted a low growl. He was tiring of this grand sabhir who now held himself as the gatekeeper of secrets. Cadoc unbuttoned his sleeve, rolling it back past his sailor's knot to reveal the large red scar that traced the muscle of his forearm. He had a stronger tie to Sunna and Elias than the others could ever imagine, and he didn't mind revealing it, especially to Marcus's confusion.

Sunna glanced at Elias. He nodded.

"The Grand Ambassador of Norin," she said. "Kya Evers. We send information through her."

"So she's a member?" Cadoc asked.

"We don't know," Ziri said. "I only know that she has information. Based on stationery watermarks, most of the messages appear to come from somewhere in Robynton."

"Robynton!" Cadoc said. "From whom?"

Sunna shook her head. "We don't know that either. They're hiding there somewhere."

Cadoc tapped on the table. "You're certain about Robynton? In Wyclythe Province? On the cape?"

Ziri nodded. "Or somewhere nearby."

Cadoc squinted, struggling to make sense of it all. "Have you ever heard the name Trinan Walyss mentioned?"

They shook their heads.

"Kya is the only one I exchange information with," Ziri said.

"And supplies?" Cadoc asked. "How are the supplies delivered? The armaments?"

Ziri hesitated, and Sunna cringed.

All became clear. "My ships," he said. "My captains were gunrunning for you, weren't they?"

Sunna nodded, her eyes downcast.

She seemed embarrassed, but an ache rose in his chest—it was he who felt shame. The collapse of his company had had effects far beyond what he had already seen. It had affected his friends' struggle for freedom and impacted more than cinnamon. Heat rose up his neck.

Elias cleared his throat. "Any more questions about tonight? Everyone know what to do?"

With nods of agreement and general talk, they all stood and made their way to the door and their shoes. Cadoc crossed the threshold, hoping the heaviness about his shoulders would dissipate outside in the crisp night air.

Nora and Ziri crossed the yard to the wagon. Cadoc trotted to Nora's side and touched her elbow. She stopped and looked up at him, her eyes dull and listless.

"Are you certain you feel comfortable doing this with him?" he asked.

She nodded. "I do." Yet even as she said the words, Marcus exited the cottage, and she shuddered as though cold. Cadoc shook his head, incredulous, as Ziri lifted her into the wagon. He turned back and glared at Marcus as they walked past each other, he in return to the cottage and Marcus toward Ziri's wagon.

Sunna leaned on the doorframe and crossed her arms, her saucy disposition refreshed. "All right, Commodore. Spill it. What's your beef with Marcus?"

"I despise men who prey on slaves."

Ziri chirruped to the horse, and as the wagon left the yard, Marcus stalked back toward them. He approached Cadoc with a menacing frown and stood closer than manners allowed. "What was all that about inside? You don't know me."

They stood eye to eye, but Marcus's turban and taylasan inflated him to a larger size.

Cadoc held his ground, ready for a real fight. "Anyone can see you've hurt her."

"Who?" Marcus said, incredulous. "Nora?"

Cadoc stared, narrowing his eyes.

Marcus stepped back, looking between Cadoc and Sunna. "There's something wrong with her, but it wasn't me."

"I've never seen you do anything questionable," Sunna said, "but I've noticed Nora's reactions to you, too. They've gotten stronger. Today was the worst I've seen."

"What's all this?" Elias said as he crossed the yard to stand with them.

Cadoc clenched his fist. "Marcus Regá, have you ever fucked a slave?"

Marcus stared, the whites of his eyes ringing his pupils.

"Answer the question, sabhir," Elias growled, inching closer.

"N—not Nora."

Cadoc seized Marcus by the jacket and taylasan and slammed him against the side of the cottage. Marcus grunted on impact. "Have you ever fucked a slave?" Cadoc demanded.

"I have never hurt my father's slaves!" Marcus said, his voice quaking with fear. "Or hurt any slave!"

Cadoc drew his knife and held it at Marcus's throat. "Have you ever fucked a slave?"

"My wife is Tuli!"

Shocked, Cadoc released him like hot coals. He stepped back, and as Marcus gasped for breath and pulled at his collar, Cadoc scanned the faces around him. All displayed the same mystified expressions.

"They sent a grand sabhira to the Tuli camp?" Sunna asked incredulously.

Breathing hard and rubbing his neck, Marcus shook his head. "No. She was already Tuli when we met. I married her. I—I mean, yes, she is a grand sabhira now, but she was Tuli before then and remains so."

"That's not possible," Cadoc said. "That's illegal."

Marcus gasped a laugh. "You're a fucking pirate. You're going to stand there and tell me I can't do something illegal?"

Sunna shook her head. "Who? How?"

"Her name is Ingrid," Marcus said. "She's in the supply group that crosses my father's land near my workshop. We started talking." He shrugged. "It went from there."

Elias scoffed. "I've never seen a Tuli woman in an orange veil. If anyone saw her, she'd be stoned on sight for impersonation."

"I granted her one," Marcus said. "She has it but obviously cannot wear it. It's hidden."

"Do the Tuli know?" Sunna asked.

He shook his head. "No one does. Until now. But we have promised ourselves to each other, and I think that's the most important part." He held out his palms. "You see now why I am desperate to free the slaves. Especially the Tuli."

Cadoc sheathed his knife and crossed his arms. "What of Nora?"

"I don't know," Marcus said. "I'm just as concerned as you are. I'll talk to her. She has reassured me of so many things—it's the least I can do to try to help her, if she'll talk to me. I may have that opportunity tonight. I'll try."

Cadoc nodded. "I apologize for my actions, though not for the intent." He stepped closer once more. "And if I find

out that my original thoughts were correct, and you have harmed her in any way, I promise you my knife will rest on your shoulder before the sun sets again.”

Marcus’s face remained stern. “I would expect nothing less of a righteous man.”

Chapter 38

NORA

Nalta
Gantu

Nora huddled on the dock with Rezki and Tafu on her lap and Ilara and Dario on either side. The waxing moon lit their faces and revealed their wide, scared eyes. She kissed each one on the forehead and squeezed them. “It won’t be long now,” she whispered.

She looked up at Marcus as he stared between the crates with his field glasses. She felt alive for the first time in weeks. To see him, to be at his side, to hear his voice had revived her to life. She could sing or dance or laugh. She sat at his knee, and that was all she needed in the world.

Marcus lowered his glasses. “They’re coming.”

Nora helped the children stand as Marcus pushed the crates apart. Cadoc and Ziri stood at the opening. She passed the children to them and then took Marcus’s hand as he helped her through.

"*Signy* is in the harbor," Cadoc said, "and the shore boat is at the next dock. I'll row them out, and we'll set sail."

Ziri looked over his shoulder. "I'm going back toward the warehouse to keep watch."

They nodded. Marcus picked up Dario, and Cadoc lifted Rezki as he clung to Tafu. Nora clasped Ilara's hand, and they all hurried together as the water slapped against the pilings.

Cadoc set Rezki on the dock and climbed down the ladder to the shore boat. "Hand him to me," he said to Marcus.

Marcus held Rezki out, and Nora held her breath, biting her lip until he was in the boat.

"Next one," Cadoc whispered.

"Tafu!" Rezki shrieked, standing up in the boat. "Tafu!"

The boat rocked wildly. Cadoc swung his arms in circles, trying to catch his balance.

Nora looked back at the wharf, her heart pounding. "Hush!" she pleaded. "Rezki, be quiet!"

"Tafu!" Rezki screamed.

Cadoc tackled Rezki and dragged him to the bottom of the shore boat, his hand over the boy's mouth. "What does he want? What's a tahfoo?"

"His cow," Marcus said, looking around him on the dock. "His toy cow."

Nora saw Tafu floating in the water. "There!" She pointed to it.

"Ow!" Cadoc yelped, jerking his hand away from Rezki's teeth.

"Tafu's gon' get drowned!" Rezki cried.

Cadoc climbed to the edge and reached as far as he could. "Shit. I can't get it."

"Tafu!"

“Rezki, hush, please,” Nora said. “The captain is getting Tafu.”

“Tafu!”

Marcus crouched at the edge. “Rezki! Rezki, look at me! Cows can swim. I’ve seen them swim. They can swim.”

“Hang on! Hang on!” Cadoc said, snatching an oar and flipping it over his hand. He held it out to the cow and scooped under it, catching the legs on the edge of the oar.

Nora held her breath.

The cow dropped off the oar and splashed into the water.

Rezki howled.

Ilara dropped to her knees. “Rez-i, if you keep screaming, the guards are going to put us all in jail. Shut up, or I’ll make you shut up!”

“You know she’ll pound you,” Dario said.

Rezki whimpered.

Running steps approached. Everyone froze, eyes wide and white. Nora clenched her stomach, trying not to faint.

Ziri came into view. “What the fuck is the screaming about?” he hissed in a whisper. “I can hear you all the way at the warehouses!”

Marcus gestured to the water. “Tafu—”

“I’ll get it. I’ll get it,” Cadoc said and reached the oar as far as he could. He caught the cow’s legs, lifted it, and pulled it back in, dropping the soggy toy to the bottom of the boat. Rezki dove for it and squeezed it to himself, the sea water draining onto his clothes.

“Sit still now, Rezki,” Nora said.

“Now go!” Ziri said. “Go! The patrol will be here soon!” He looked both ways, then slunk down the wharf once more.

“Give him to me,” Cadoc said, holding out his arms for Dario. Marcus passed him over, then helped Ilara down the

ladder. The children sat in the boat, and Cadoc slid the oars into the locks and dipped them into the water.

“Good luck,” Marcus said.

“Farewell,” Nora whispered, watching them row away.

Nora and Marcus stood on the dock watching the black dot of the shore boat grow smaller and smaller until it disappeared into the larger dark form of the sloop, *Signy*. A dark lantern shone three times, and they knew all was well. Both sighed deeply.

“That’s it then,” he said. “They’re safe.”

“Yes.” Nora watched the sloop sail away, feeling the finality of the moment, the end of their efforts, the end of her opportunities.

Heavy boots walked on the wharf.

“The patrol!” Nora whispered as terror clinched her throat.

Marcus grabbed her hand and tugged her into a shadowy alley. The steps moved closer, closer.

“Shyan shit,” he whispered. He whipped his taylasan off and folded it inside out, concealing the golden edge. Nora watched, confused. Instead of explaining, he swept the taylasan around himself and pushed her shoulders back against the wall, his bent elbows resting on either side of her head. His body pushed her against the siding, the taylasan over their heads.

Nora’s world went dark as his taylasan shrouded her, blocking the light. His face hovered desperately close to hers. His breath brushed her hair. His chin bumped her forehead. His chest pressed against her breasts, even as he held his hips away from her. Her heart tumbled between exhilaration and terror, her body between fire and ice.

“You there!” a rough voice shouted.

Marcus pulled away from her and flung his hand upward. "Do you mind?"

The second soldier jabbed the first and chuckled as he pointed at Nora.

The first inclined his head. "Apologies, Messer."

"Go on!" Marcus commanded.

The two soldiers walked away, continuing to snicker.

As Marcus stood at the alley entrance watching the soldiers, Nora blinked rapidly, staring at him in disbelief of the intimate posture they had just shared. She loved him with every shuddering breath and swore she would give her very soul to feel him against her once more.

He swung back to her. "I must—I must apologize. Nora, I did what—what I thought would—would work in the moment. You must excuse my utter disregard for—my rudeness toward—it was terrible of—"

She held her hands toward him. "There is nothing to forgive."

He took them and smiled. "Thank you." He inhaled deeply. "Thank you." With a parting squeeze to her hands, he removed his taylasan and folded it correctly, fastening it in place, the gold edge shining once more. "May I walk you back to the inn?" Marcus asked. "I would like to ensure you make it there safely, and you are less likely to be stopped if I am with you."

Nora nodded. He offered his arm, and she took it with trembling fingers. The first few steps were lighter than air. This walk, nourished by their experience on the pier, would tie them together. He would change his mind. He would see how much he loved her and no one else, especially not a Tuli slave.

They walked away from the wharf and along the road toward town.

“I’ve been hoping for a chance to talk to you,” Marcus said.

Nora’s heart beat wildly. She scrambled for something to say, but nothing seemed to fit.

“You’ve seemed quiet the last few weeks,” he said. “Pale, perhaps ill. I’m concerned about you.”

She looked up at him. “About me?”

“Yes, I’ve thought about you a lot. I’ve missed our conversations at the inn.” He chuckled. “I’ve missed our joke about vegetables and flatbread.”

She smiled, amazed he had thought of her and certain more than ever that he would soon declare his love.

He hesitated. “I wonder if I have said something or done something to hurt you.” He stopped and turned to her, taking her hands in his. “Please know I would never want that.” He squeezed her hands.

“Sir, I—”

“Marcus,” he said. “Call me Marcus. Maybe not in front of the people who care about conventions, but when you can, call me Marcus. We are friends.”

She stared up at his eyes, his face lit only by the moon and a distant torch. There were so many things she wanted to say, and yet in that moment their connection was too perfect to be marred by words that failed to encompass all that she felt. His hands held hers, and she lowered her face over them, touching her cheek to his skin. At contact, relief surged within her, and she pressed him tighter. A tear dropped from her eye to his hand.

“What is this?” he asked. “Surely not tears? Have I been so cruel?”

“I love you,” she whispered. The words had been said. She didn’t know if he had heard them, but she had called them forth into the world and now they existed. They were real, functional, and with every echo in her mind, repeated once and again. “I love you.”

Nora pressed her lips to his hand and kissed him, astonished and euphoric to be acting on what had been only fantasy for so long. She lifted her head to see his face, his eyes so soft and kind, his lips parted to speak to her.

“I love you,” she said.

“Nora—”

“I love you! Beyond life, I love you. My heart sings every moment in your presence!” She released one of his hands to cling with both of hers to the other. She smoothed her palm across his and rested her cheek in the cradle of his fingers. “To touch you is everything I’ve ever hoped for. You’ve revealed goodness to me in a world that has only shown me savagery. With you, I’m safe. I’ll love you until my last breath. I’ll serve you until the moment of my death. I’ll wait at your side for your every want and your every desire. Please,” she said, her voice cracking. “Say that you love me.”

She heard only her own ragged breath.

“No, Nora,” he said. “My heart belongs to Ingrid.”

His words exploded like lightning upon the ground, and panic burst through her every nerve and fiber. “What can I do to please you?” she begged. “What can I...” She sobbed, leaning her forehead against his hand.

He withdrew his hand from her, and the abyss yawned before her. As she fell into despair, his arms moved around her, holding her, pulling her against him into an embrace she craved in form and detested in intention. Smoke and

vetiver, softness and warmth, and an impenetrable barricade lacking substance even as it increased in strength and distance.

As he held her, Marcus wiped the tears from her face with the corner of his taylasan. He then kissed the fabric, holding it to his lips for a lingering moment. "I will cherish every word you have spoken to me. I will never disregard the pain you feel."

"Then say you love me!"

"I cannot!" He lowered his tone to say gently, "I do not."

She buried her face in his chest. "How have I failed you? What do I need to do? What do I need to be?"

He nudged her away and held her shoulders. "I don't want you to change at all," he said, looking into her eyes. "You are delightful and bring me warmth and companionship, just as you are. It is I who has failed you, for I cannot love you in return. Please forgive me and allow me to repay you by being your kind friend and humble servant."

She stared at him in confusion. Her most fervent wishes had materialized only to dissipate and float high and away toward the cold and distant stars. She had confessed her love, and now he would kiss her and reveal the same within himself. Yet her body received no sensual embrace, her lips had not melded with his, and while her eyes showed her the man she loved, her ears betrayed her with caustic words, words of tasteless platitudes devoid of the obvious truth, the truth she wanted, the truth she needed.

"Shall we go on?" Marcus asked.

Nora wanted to scream, but none formed. She would push him away, strike him, shout at him from the pain throbbing and climbing within her. She would beg on her

knees. She would spit in his face. She would offer her body, seduce him in the dark for a mere sham of his affection.

He tucked her arm in his, and they walked along a road she could not see through her tears.

Chapter 39

CADOC

Tadsyn
Safwyn Province
Norin

The three children trailed behind Cadoc as he walked through the streets of West Tadsyn. The sky brightened, and shops opened throughout the market with doors flung wide and awnings lifted. A dog barked, and an old man tossed it a sausage.

As a brisk, cold wind goaded leaves through the street, Tadsyn seemed to acknowledge the end of what had once been. Summer was a faint memory, and the trees had completed their autumnal shed. The Carthasach festival approached, and Cadoc expected snow any day. He observed his surroundings, separate and contemplative, like a visitor to his own town. In Andersyn blacks, bold and energetic, this had been his street, his way, his power. But now, in tunic and trousers, Tadsyn offered a gentle, quiet place of

rest, a nudge reminding him that it was the home that had always sheltered him.

He was alone in his reflection because each time someone passed, the children shuddered and huddled together, holding hands and staring with wide eyes.

“You don’t have to be afraid,” Cadoc said. “This is Norin. You’re safe here.”

“Mama says Norin’s got monsters and ghosts,” Dario said.

Cadoc furrowed his brow. “Perhaps wait and see for yourself.”

Ilara looked upward at the former Andersyn Shipping Company building. “That’s a really tall building,” she said. “I didn’t know buildings could be that grand. It’s taller than the Ganstag.”

Cadoc glanced up. It was only stone and mortar and glass, and yet more. It still held people working to maintain meager shipping lines throughout Gavony, many of the same individuals who had worked for him and his father and his fathers before him. Some had transferred willingly to Norinian authority in exchange for promotions. Some had been forced into service only by the need to provide for their families. He felt no ill will.

When he had last seen the living quarters, they were disordered and empty. He had carried away the final trunk of his mother’s possessions to settle her in the province of Elidel, her ancestral home. The room had echoed with life past. Images of his childhood had flashed before his eyes. His father with his pipe, telling stories of hurricanes and exotic lands. The joyous laughter of parties with vibrant music and lively dancing, and the sparkling eyes of his parents as they gazed at each other. The shriek and crumpled

silence when he had told his mother her love had not returned with him, as he had held her and attempted to fill the black uniform that wrinkled, loose about his thin, young shoulders. The monotonous shuffle of grief as she had paced before the window, to one side and back again, once more, once more, as she had struggled to adorn herself with widowhood. The fierce pride in her eyes upon each of Cadoc's returns, as he had slowly exceeded her in height, as he had filled out his uniform, as he had grown to command the world. He wondered who lived there now, if anyone, or if the room remained unkempt, gathering dust, the upholstered armchair tipped to its side and the flowers dead on the windowsill.

A pang of sadness tore his gut. "Yes," he said, "It is a grand building."

"Are we going there?" Rezki asked, dragging Tafu by a leg.

"No, but we're close."

Rezki took Cadoc's hand. "That's a really fancy knife."

Cadoc glanced down at him. "If we had time, I'd teach you to throw it."

"To kill people?"

"No, it's a game. Targets. We call it Rhyshga."

They moved down the street, out of the shadow of the building, to a small two-story house. Cadoc knocked on the door.

"Cadoc," the woman opening the door said. "Children. Do come in."

"Thank you, Shelly," Cadoc said, stepping inside.

Shelly brimmed with hospitality in her indigo hangerok, her graying hair in one long plait. Calluses covered her graceful fingers, and laugh lines encircled her eyes. "You all must be hungry," she said. "I have bread and fruit!" She

shepherded the children to the kitchen where sat a large basket of apples. The children piled around the table. “The harvest is finished,” she said to Cadoc. “It’s time for pies and cakes and apple butter.”

He hummed. “I’ll make sure you get a packet of cinnamon and nutmeg. All of the vanilla beans were seized. I won’t have any of those for a while.”

“You are always so generous.”

He shook his head, uncomfortable at the sentiment. “I need to go.”

Shelly showed him to the door, leaving the children to eat. “They’ll come to get them tonight?”

Cadoc nodded. “A man from Niemynyn, Micah Berg, will come for them with a cart and take them up the Niemynyn Road and over the border into Hykos. There’s a couple ready to receive them.”

“And that will be their home?”

“As much as a strange land could ever be home.”

“As for your payment,” she said, cringing, “it isn’t—”

“I don’t need it.”

She smiled and took his hand in both of hers. “May the First Breath bless your endeavors.”

“And keep you safe,” he said, nodding and stepping into the street.

“Captain Andersyn?” a small voice said.

Cadoc turned back to see Ilara standing on the stoop.

She clasped her hands in front of her and lifted her chin, appearing much like a child tottering in her mother’s shoes. “What you did for us was dangerous,” she said. “You were very brave to sail us here, and I want to say thank you. For myself and for my brothers.”

“No thanks are needed,” he said. “It was my pleasure to help.”

Ilara stepped forward. “I hope to repay you—though I cannot right now. I am in your debt.”

He paused and rested his hand on his ceremonial knife. “Someday your opportunity will come to do something courageous to help others. Be brave in that moment, and I’ll consider the debt erased.”

Ilara smiled. Shelly put her arm around the girl and, with a last nod to Cadoc, closed the front door.

Cadoc walked back toward the wharf, the shadow of the Andersyn building still weighing upon his shoulders as though corporeal. Five generations of work. A livelihood his father had died for. And all had crumbled in his hands. His mother had not blamed him, but he had watched her attempt to hide the tear she wiped from her eyes as she looked up at the building one last time. He had failed her, and nothing could possibly pain him more.

Climbing the plank to *Signy*, Cadoc nodded to Thackery.

The tabby cat sat on the rail washing its face.

“Welcome aboard, sir,” Thackery said. “Children safely delivered?”

“Yes,” he said, his tone listless. He skritchd the tabby under its chin and listened to it purr. “And I am ready to leave this place.” After a final pat to his cat’s head, he walked past his only shipmate to prepare for launch.

“Sir, I took the liberty of retrieving something for you.”

Cadoc turned back to him.

Thackery held up a set of Andersyn blacks. “You have two ships and five in the making. I think it’s time for you to resume your role as commodore. As an Andersyn should.”

Cadoc stared at the uniform. He had disgraced the name Andersyn. To wear the blacks would be a mockery of what it stood for.

“No,” Cadoc said. “Your gesture is well meaning, but I am not that man. Not anymore.”

Thackery’s shoulders dropped, but he nodded. “Yes, sir.”
“On to Robynton.”

They prepared the sloop to sail, and once on open water, Cadoc stood at the bow and stared. The sea was unbiased. She was harsh. She might beguile, but she would not betray. She was fickle and yet still the most trustworthy entity in his life. All causes led to effects without regard to family or stature. He had achieved both success and failure with her, and he was still alive. He sighed and looked ahead.

His hand responded to the dot on the horizon before his mind was consciously aware of it. The moment he saw, the glass was ready at his eye, and he focused.

Not one but five ships appeared. *Darsham* lay besieged by *Basilisk* and a battle group of cutters. A weight sunk into his stomach.

“Sir! Ship ahoy!” Thackery called. “Port bow!”

“I see it,” Cadoc said. “*Darsham* is under attack.” He looked for *Darsham*’s ensign, clenching his jaw and trying to smother the riot of dread and anger within him.

“Shall we approach full speed, sir?”

A flag with a red field flew at *Darsham*’s stern. On the green pale near the pole, it displayed the black Hykosi eagle on a golden shield. Cadoc lowered his glass, barely able to breathe. “No. It’s over. *Darsham* is lost. Feather the rudder.”

“Aye, sir.”

Thackery turned the helm from one side to the other and back. *Signy* shuddered and slowed as Cadoc luffed the

mainsail, and soon she drifted, nearly still. He lifted his glass again for a more thorough examination. Returning to the accursed ensign and its damn eagle, his blood boiled. Slowly, he scanned the area. Sailors swarmed the decks of all, but the ships were separating, the spoils having been distributed. They were too late by many hours.

An anomaly caught his eye, and he turned the glass to the yardarm. His sight cleared, and the macabre image of a body hung by the neck appeared. The body, bloodied and torn, was naked and female and familiar. Cecily.

Cadoc lowered his glass and blinked rapidly. He leaned on the rail, his breath ragged, and his eyes burning with tears of rage.

Thackery lifted his own glass and groaned.

"Fuck!" Cadoc shouted and kicked a wooden crate with such force that it splintered into pieces.

"She didn't deserve that, sir," Thackery said. "Cecily was a fine sailor."

"Damn right she was!"

"May our knives rest on their shoulders!"

Cadoc spat to affix Thackery's vow. He glared at the horizon, daring a ship to sail his way, though he knew he was powerless to fight them.

"Shall we tack about, sir?"

Cadoc grunted and rubbed his face. "Hold."

Thackery hesitated. "Aye, aye, sir."

Cadoc climbed below deck to the cramped captain's quarters and closed the door. His eyes swam with scorching tears as he saw Cecily before him, her white teeth flashing in a broad smile as she clambered down the shroud and jumped to the deck with boundless energy, ready for his next command. He saw her at his side, covered in enemy

blood, with fire in her eyes, fighting for their lives and the treasure that was theirs to win. At night, she'd drop beside him on the sand as he and the others circled a campfire, the ocean at their backs, the stars above, with Breath-awful ale in their cups, and recount their escapades, her hands waving, stirring them with laughter until their sides ached. Even in the end, even as she had stood on the wharf and betrayed him, even as she had taken *Darsham* from his hands, they retained enough between them that he would have fought by her side once more without question. Blood spilled together is not easily separated.

He leaned against the wall and pressed his forehead to the boards. He had lost everything. His company, his livelihood, his self-respect. His heart had been trampled by a butterfly with a key. He had shamed his mother. He could sink no lower. But all of that had been part of the game, cards across a table, risks calculated by himself alone, tokens stacked and pushed.

This was more. They had stepped too far. They had trampled not only him, but others. And he would be damned if he would stand by and allow the Hykosi to kill the people he cared about.

The Andersyn blacks lay on a wooden chest near his hammock. He hesitated, then touched the sleeve. The Andersyn Shipping Company as he had known it was dead, but perhaps something new would rise, infused with courage, tenacity, and vengeance.

Cadoc returned to the deck dressed for war. "Tack about, Thackery. Return to Tadsyn."

"Aye, sir! To rig *Signy* for speed?"

"Aye," Cadoc said. "And fit her for guns."

Chapter 40

NORA

Nalta
Gantu

Nora swept the dining room. Fatigue from being awake all night chewed her arms and neck. The breakfast rush had passed in a blur of yawns and griddle cakes, and she craved the deep sleep promised to those who work with vigor and cry with heartbreak. She leaned on the broom and rested her chin on her hands. Her eyes closed.

“You wouldn’t be so tired if you weren’t out whoring all night,” Safiyya hissed.

Nora started, grabbing the broom before it tipped over. Safiyya stood with her hands on her hips and her nose wrinkled in disgust. Nora’s heart pounded to see her mistress so angry.

“Do you deny it?” Safiyya asked.

Nora bowed her head and stared at the floor, not knowing how to answer. She could offer no proof of where she

had been without getting the others in trouble. She wished for her room and her bed.

Safiyya crossed her arms. "Livie and Paxe both saw you walking with a sabhir at an unholy hour."

Her stomach twisted. Denial was futile. She did not dare raise her head. "Yes, ma'am. I did."

Safiyya sighed with a groan of frustration. "Nora, I have given you everything a slave could ask for. And you turn around and cheat me of the money due to me?"

Nora looked up. "I have not cheated you!"

Safiyya held out her palm. "Give me the money you made last night."

"But I didn't—"

"If you want to whore around with sabhirim," Safiyya said, frowning, "then you can do it upstairs where I get my cut. You belong to me and so does the money you make."

Nora stepped back, shaking her head. "I don't want to work upstairs. I didn't do anything. I swear! He's my friend!"

A sad, incredulous smile spread across Safiyya's face. She chuckled, then laughed aloud. "Your friend? You think a sabhir is your friend?"

"He is," Nora whispered.

"Are you that stupid? He just told you that so you'd let him fuck you for free behind the barn." She waved her hand. "I've seen it a thousand times."

The pain within Nora burst to life again, the wound torn by his words bleeding fresh once more. She cried, shaking with silent sobs.

"You're a slave," Safiyya said. "The only thing a sabhir wants from you is a place to shove his dick."

"Enough!" Marcus said from the doorway.

Safiyya swung around and plastered on a simpering smile. “Gran Messer Regá, welcome. I’m sorry you had to see this. She’s an unruly slave. I’m sure you know the type. How can I help you?”

“The girl speaks the truth,” he said, striding into the room. His hands were clenched, his shoulders tight. His face flushed red, and his eyes flashed with anger. He displayed the most terrible expression Nora had ever seen on his face. “I am the sabhir who walked with her.”

Fear surged across Safiyya’s face, then melted into smugness. “Then you understand I must ask you now for my full fee. She is one of my girls, despite what she may have told you. Perhaps you have noticed her band. My name is on it.”

“Nora informed you that we only walked,” Marcus said.

“She is a liar.”

“And I am Marcus Regá!” he shouted, his voice thundering through the room.

Safiyya stilled. Nora felt faint.

He stepped closer. “I am a grand sabhir in the most powerful family of Gantu. The hell I could unleash on this establishment boggles the mind. Do you dare call me a liar?”

Safiyya paled.

“Do you?”

“No, sir,” Safiyya whispered.

“I thought not,” he said. “You will believe her words. You will allow her to return to her work, unharmed. And if I hear of so much as a peep of retaliation against her, I assure you, in that moment, I will arrange your immediate arrest.”

Safiyya nodded with a small curtsy. “Yes, sir.”

Marcus held out his hand. “Nora, come.” Nora leaned the broom against the wall, then stepped forward to cling to his arm as he led her past Safiyya and out of the room.

He took her to the quiet sitting room and closed the door behind them before guiding her to the chaise. He retrieved a glass of sherry from the sideboard and held it toward her.

Nora shook her head, looking at the cut crystal. "I can't have that. And I can't use that glass."

"I crafted this with my own hands," he said, "and I would be honored to see you use it."

She hesitated, then took it and sipped the sherry. She nodded her thanks.

He smiled. "I also brought you this." He held out a small paper package.

Confused, she placed the glass on the end table and took the package on her lap.

"Open it," he said, sitting next to her.

She unfolded the paper and lifted out a piece of glass shaped like a raindrop with many intricate facets. A small hole had been drilled in the narrow end, and a pink ribbon ran through it. She lifted it by the ribbon. "It's beautiful," she whispered.

"Do you know what it is?"

She shook her head.

He laughed. "It's a prism. Have you not seen one? Come here." He clasped her hand and drew her to the window. Taking the prism, he held it up to the morning sunlight. Rainbows burst through the room. Nora gasped and clung to his sleeve as she stared open-mouthed at the brilliant colors.

"Isn't it wonderful?" he said.

She laughed, amazed. "I didn't know such magic existed!"

He chuckled and stepped to the desk, leaving her to play with the colors. He withdrew from his jacket several envelopes and a dip pen made of crystal. "I have letters to post

for Shalash. Can you do that for me?" He sat and addressed them.

Nora moved the prism closer to the window, then drew it away, watching how the light changed. "Ziri will be able to today."

"Excellent." He wrote on each one, then stacked the letters and put down his pen. "How do you feel?"

She lowered the prism. "Tired. That's all. Just tired."

"Will you be allowed to rest today?" he said, walking to her side.

She nodded, feeling his closeness. "I hope to. At least after lunch for a while."

"I apologize," he said. "For last night and this morning. You have paid a price with Safiyya that I did not foresee. You did nothing wrong in walking with me. It was only at my insistence we were together, and I bear full responsibility. Forgive me for causing you pain."

"There is nothing to forgive," she said.

He smiled. "Good of you to say. Do you feel well enough now? I am to meet Ingrid in a few minutes, but I want to make certain you are all right."

Pain cut deep within her. Her shoulders sank, and she closed her eyes. "I'm fine," she said. "Thank you." She met his eyes and smiled, an empty shell of civility.

"Wonderful!" he said. "Now don't let Safiyya bully you. Send me a message if you need me." He opened the door. "We'll speak again soon. Perhaps over beef stew?"

She smiled. "Perhaps so."

He nodded and left, leaving the room empty and silent, in matching testimony of what remained of her. She would cry, perhaps throw herself across the couch like a lady in

need of smelling salts. Or she would throw the lamp against the wall to see it shatter and splash.

Instead, she retrieved his letters from the desk. Her fingers touched the envelopes, and her eye fell on his crystal pen. The clear stem was striped with blue, and as she picked it up, the sunlight caught it, casting a shining glow from within. She studied the elegant twists and ridges of the clear nib, still tinged with black ink. He had engraved his name on the side. Marcus Izíl Regá. She would run after him. She would dash to the street and call his name and show it to him. He would pat his empty jacket pocket and tip his head back as he realized he had forgotten it. They would laugh. She would hand it to him, and he would thank her and then walk on his way while she waved.

Nora tucked the pen into her pocket next to the tear-drop prism and returned to her work, tenderly rubbing her thumb over the engraving and feeling his name under her fingers.

Chapter 41

IVAN

Shalash
Hykos

Ivan waited outside the viceroy's office in an ornate wooden chair that needed a cushion. He stared listlessly at the glossy table before him, where sat a vase of pink hothouse flowers that were probably worth more than his entire paycheck. A drab oil painting of waterfalls or some such shit hung on the wall, and he stared at that, too. He would stare at every single item in the entire room if he had to, in order to avoid thinking about the damn meeting that was about to take place.

Gavril Kosh, the chief intelligence officer, swept into the room in his fancy-shmancy tailored suit from the southern seas, combined with a wide red sash, the extra long fringe of which hung well past his knees, the show off. Fashionable stubble covered his chin, and his thick, luscious, graying hair—impeccably cut with a classic side part—allowed

him to carry himself like he knew everything and ruled the world. Fuck.

“Secretary Stoyan,” Gavril said, offering his hand to Ivan. “The viceroy has called you, too, I see.”

Ivan stood slowly, drawing out the moment as long as possible, making him wait, hoping to press awkwardness into him before shaking his hand. The door to the viceroy’s office opened before he could speak. It was just as well. He hadn’t thought of anything snappy to say. A moment longer, and he would have laid on some kind of subtle, scathing insult that twisted in Gavril’s gut like a knife with a serrated blade. It would have been glorious.

“Come in!” the viceroy called.

Gavril held out his arm, gesturing for Ivan to walk in first. Of course, he went without protest. His going first demonstrated his higher rank. He had never wanted to be secretary of defense, but he might as well squeeze what privilege he could from it.

Viceroy Laurentiu Serban wheezed with each step toward them as though his body were too heavy a burden. His large lips worked open and shut, not with words but perhaps coinciding with thoughts. He cleared his throat, the motion lifting his jowls, and leaned forward to offer his hand. “Ivan.”

Ivan accepted Serban’s pudgy hand, but the viceroy clasped him in a grip more firm than his own, emphasizing that he was the mightier man. Granted, if the two of them threw fists, Ivan was certain he could thrash the old geezer, but Serban’s political power was second only to King Mihai. The handshake shouted this fact, and Ivan yielded. He was no dummy.

Serban then moved his hand to Gavril, this time subtly turning the grip palm down, just enough to take the chief intelligence officer down a notch. "Gavril."

Ivan's mouth twitched with smug enjoyment. He was never the top man, but in this office, at least, neither was Gavril.

After banal platitudes, they all sat. Serban shuffled to his desk, past his scarlet jacket on the coat rack, and settled in his chair in his shirtsleeves and fringed sash. "Have you seen the latest goods from Norin? Wool. Linen. Cod. Ladvyl wine. Even salted sea trout."

Gavril nodded. "Luxury like that is only possible through your magnificent administration, Your Excellency. The annexation of Norin remains your greatest achievement."

Serban waved his fingers as though the comment had been over the top, but the crinkle at his eyes showed how it had pleased him. "My abilities may count for something after all."

"Indeed, sir," Ivan said, joining the detestable game he knew he had to play. "We are blessed." Blessed. Not his best work. That made him sound like he only thought of soft subjects. Soft subjects made a soft man. He vowed to redeem himself.

"Thank you both for arriving at such short notice," Serban said.

"We—I assume I speak for my colleague, here," Gavril said, motioning to Ivan, "are pleased to be at your service."

Ivan leaned his head in agreement even as he seethed over Gavril's presumption to speak for him. He rode no one's coattails.

Serban tapped his fingers on his desk. "What's the state of things in Gantu?"

“The slaves are restless again,” Gavril said. “If you recall, there was a public attack on a sabhir a few months ago that resulted in an equally troublesome execution. The turmoil is building—slowly, but definitely building.”

“Have there been riots?” Serban asked.

Gavril shook his head. “No, I wouldn’t say that, Your Excellency, but unrest, certainly. Chanting crowds, unruly groups. They have not resorted to looting, but that’s the next step. The sabhirim are understandably tense.”

Serban frowned. “Are the Nalta Guards on alert?”

“Assuredly,” Gavril said. “Nyok has them at the ready.”

“Good,” Serban said. “He’s a fiend for rules and discipline. Always has a stick up his ass.”

They laughed.

Serban looked at Ivan. “And what of the Gantish army? Are they prepared for a slave uprising?”

Ivan shifted in his chair. He couldn’t imagine the Gantish army, the greatest army in the world, being unprepared for anything. He wished Hykos’ troops were as well trained and disciplined. “Most assuredly,” he said. “Of course, Nyok must request them first.” He huffed. “I doubt he would issue such a thing unless the city were about to fall.”

Gavril chuckled. “He could probably hold Nalta with the strength of his anal sphincter alone.”

Ivan raised his brow in tacit agreement.

Gavril continued, “The sabhirim have been forced to strap a metal identification band onto each of their slaves.”

“I don’t see why they mess with that,” Serban said. “Why not just kill them all? Problem solved. But, whatever,” he waved his fingers, “all of those developments have been back a couple months now, and you’re probably wondering why it’s relevant.” He held up a letter.

Ivan snuck a side glance at Gavril. He didn't seem to have a leg up.

"I've received a letter from a grand sabhir in Gantu," Serban said. "He would like our assistance in ensuring the continuation of peaceful trade between Gantu and Hykos, particularly relating to the capture of slaves—which is interesting considering their own risk of internal conflict. You'd think he'd set a better example of control within his own country before reaching out to advise others."

"They have plenty of their own problems," Ivan said. "And no grounds to tell us what to do. They're overly dependent on goods from the southern seas and the far island markets for their cattle, and the collapse of the Andersyn shipping empire has plunged them into shortages—"

"Not just them," Gavril interrupted. "Have you seen the price of almonds? Plus, I'm out of Polese gin, and my wife won't stop nagging me for nutmeg and vanilla."

Serban chuckled. "I'm sure my kitchen has every spice you could want. Give me a few days, and I can round up some Polese gin from the Norries. I'll even throw in a box of Ryntoth cigars."

Gavril grinned. "I'm most obliged, Your Excellency!"

Serban leaned back in his chair and rested his hands on his belly. "After all, what good is annexing Norin if we can't have a nip or two at their expense? Our little painted people don't know how to properly appreciate the finer things of life anyway."

"Very true, Your Excellency."

Fury warmed Ivan's gut. He, too, wanted gin and cigars, but if he asked for it now, he'd look like he was grubbing for crumbs. He always missed out on the best rewards. It wasn't fair.

Ivan rubbed his chin. "These shortages could lead to further unrest. Combined with their existing slave control problems, the potential for Gantish civil war increases daily."

Gavril crossed his ankle over his knee. "Bosh!" He waved his hand as though shooing a fly. "Ivan, you're always worried about war—it's all you defense people can think about. There won't be a war from this. A few sabhirim are worried their slaves will slit their throats in their sleep. That doesn't make a war."

Ivan struggled to keep from sneering. He did worry about war. As secretary of defense, it was his job to worry about war, damn it. He wished he had kept his non-descript desk job with the other actuarial staff and told the search committee to fuck off. But he hadn't done that. Deluded by visions of greatness, he had accepted their nomination, and now he was stuck as secretary of defense with war spanning the entire peninsula a distinct possibility for the near future. He'd probably be blamed for it and executed, if he didn't die of a liver complaint first. Of course, he worried about war.

"Besides," Gavril said. "I've got enough spies in place that we'll see any conflict before it arrives."

"That's good because their advice didn't end there," Serban said. "They want us to seize the former Andersyn ships."

Ivan chuckled.

Gavril laughed outright. "Oh, do they?" He held up his hands. "What an amazing idea!" he crowed, sarcastically.

Serban guffawed at his antics.

Gavril slapped his hand on the desk. “They don’t know we already control the lion’s share? Including *Basilisk*? And fucking *Darsham*?”

“It’s a pathetic, ignorant request, I know,” Serban said, grinning.

Ivan shook his head, amazed. “The Gantish have underestimated the importance of our freshwater sailors—or at least how prepared they are to enter Norinian waters and seize vulnerable ships.”

“Well, Norin isn’t the brightest country out there either,” Serban said. “They underestimated Cadoc Andersyn! Without him, their ships are ours. The Andersyns always knew that. Apparently, the rest of Norin didn’t.”

Gavril sniffed. “Their intelligence networks are trash—and that is a professional opinion.”

“Which country?” Serban asked.

Gavril shrugged. “Both, really.”

“In their defense,” Serban said. “Gantu has limited access to the sea yet has never been required to think about its control. They rely on the Conventions, and they’ve always deferred to the Andersyns—again, the Andersyns, you see? And that brings up their next request—oh, yes!” he said, shaking both hands, “There’s more! They want us to grant Cadoc Andersyn the ocean fleet admiralty.”

Gavril gaped. “Absurd, Your Excellency. Unthinkable.”

“Damn right, it’s absurd,” Serban said. “They may trust Andersyn, but we have our own admirals, trained by us and loyal to us.” He grunted. “Besides, Andersyn lost those ships to Norin. And I rule Norin! Andersyn was conquered, and I conquered his conqueror. Why would I give the ships to a failure who might betray me? I wouldn’t put him in

charge of the pull string on a child's tug boat, let alone the greatest ships in the world.”

Ivan frowned. Hykos had highly trained admirals—that much was true—but they had only served on Lake Iona. The lake was a powerful beast, but one very different from the ocean. Andersyn would be the perfect admiral for the Hykosi ocean fleet. Rumor called him a pirate, so he probably wouldn't think twice about deserting the Norinians. He had the skill, already knew the ships and the water, already knew the crews. Ivan held his tongue. He had been warned against thinking like the actuary he was. “Who wrote the letter?” he asked instead.

Serban flipped the page over. “Akawel Regá.”

Ivan nodded. “I've heard of him. Fancy glass. House Regá or something?”

“That's Marcus Regá,” Gavril said. “Akawel Regá is his father. He's a senator.”

Ivan bit the inside of his cheek, kicking himself for having made such a stupid mistake and having given Gavril the opportunity to correct him. He glared at Gavril, who had not even had the courtesy of using a condescending tone that would have justified the malice he now felt. Ivan hated him all the more for his kindness.

“Feel free to read it for yourself,” Serban said, sliding the page across the desk.

Ivan considered reaching for the letter but was certain Gavril would reach for it first, and he didn't wish to be left in an awkward position with his hand extended. After a moment, Gavril picked up the paper with a dismissive flick, and Ivan cringed, realizing Gavril had expected him to pick it up. He should have taken it. Snatched it. Held it high and

gloated from his superior position. Now, instead, he looked foolish and weak, and a weight settled in his stomach as he waited for his turn.

Gavril finally passed the letter so he could have a look. It had been written in an angular slant with a hasty hand. He imagined Regá as a methodical and aggressive person as he skimmed the words.

"This may not have been written in good faith," Gavril said.

Serban's brow lifted. "Oh? What makes you say that?"

"Akawel Regá is a powerful grand sabhir," Gavril said, "but I have reason to believe that Marcus Regá—the glasswright, my colleague mentioned—may be involved in subversive activities."

"Subversive activities?" Serban repeated.

Gavril nodded. "With the current tensions, I have assigned more of my intelligence resources to understanding the dynamics. One source is deeply embedded and reports a small underground movement with goals of sparking an uprising of slaves and citizens together. They are freeing slaves on a small scale as they arm themselves and bide their time. Marcus Regá is involved with them. Given the poor advice in the letter, I would not put him past writing something like that in his father's name with the intention of causing us some crisis or calamity."

"Is Nyok aware of this threat?" Serban asked.

"Vaguely," Gavril said. "He knows of the movement but is not as aware of the individual players as we are. I'm certainly not going to tell him. We paid a high price for our contact and continue to do so. We value such information more than the Gantish do. He does not prioritize the issue."

"There are fools in all places," Serban said.

Gavril nodded. "Indeed, Your Excellency."

"That is serious," Ivan said with a growing sense of foreboding. "Isolated incidents are one thing, but should such a movement gain momentum—especially with the support of sabhirim like Regá—it would destabilize Gantu as a whole. There would be chaos. Probably bloodshed. The shortages we have already discussed will only encourage such trouble. We must remember that Gantu is our biggest ally against Norin should they attempt to throw us off. We need them strong. And we may need a formal alliance."

"But Gantu may blame us for any instability within their boundaries," Gavril said.

Serban bowed up. "Why would Gantu blame us for their own problems?"

"Because the funding for this underground movement is provided by the Council of Norin," Gavril said.

Ivan raised his brow.

"The Council of Norin!" Serban dropped his fist to the desk. "They blew up my wharf!"

"One and the same," Gavril said, nodding. "They are secretive, but I have spies everywhere—both in Norin and in Gantu—including the one in Gantu who is an eyewitness of such transfers."

"Is this Council of Norin a large group?" Serban asked.

Gavril shook his head. "The inner circle seems to be small but extremely powerful and, so far, impenetrable. I don't know how many they have working for them in the larger networks, though. That could be a large number."

"This core group," Ivan said. "Where are they? Where in Norin?"

"That has been even more difficult to determine," Gavril said. "They use a code we have not yet been able to crack."

But I can answer with near certainty that they are in Robynton.”

“Robynton!” Ivan said, rubbing his chin.

Serban paused for a moment, then lifted his index finger. “But why blame me? This seems to be between Norin and Gantu.”

“Correct, Your Excellency, and prior to that letter in your hand, I would not have considered your connection with the slave troubles. But Akawel Regá—or Marcus or whoever actually wrote it—wants action. To whom did he write? You, Your Excellency! The viceroy of Norin! He did not write to King Mihai or even to our ambassadors. He wrote to you. He recognizes your authority over Norin and is placing some level of responsibility there. If the Council of Norin destabilizes Gantu, I believe all of Gantu will look to you. That letter proves it.”

Serban growled and picked at the wax seal on the letter. “If the letter wasn’t written in good faith, then that’s all the more reason to withhold the admiralty from Andersyn. We’ve already done what they wanted most—we’ve captured the ships. At least that part is sound.” He rubbed his chin.

“We do control most of the ships in play,” Ivan said, “including the greatest ones. But our sailors have been unable to bring them into port, so they’re forced to use small coves to load and unload via shore boats. It’s a tedious and time consuming process, and it’s impossible for us to handle certain types of cargo. They sit in the ocean at risk, and the financial returns, of course, are horrible.”

“They should use the port at Tadsyn,” Serban said.

“With due respect, Your Excellency,” Ivan said, “it’s not that simple. The Norinians have resisted our control. They

don't consider themselves annexed at all. Tadsyn is completely off limits to us. And in Robynton, they have interfered with our access to the harbor—first with their clumsy wreckage at the mouth and then with their insolence.”

Serban growled. “Petulant children. What do we do about it?”

With that one question from the viceroy, the meeting shifted in tone. Ivan narrowed his eyes as he looked between the two men. This was the critical moment in which he could pull ahead and restore himself. He needed to respond first. Powerfully. Take back his strength. Establish himself once and for all as a strong man of action. Serban was vicious—only a moment ago he had suggested killing all of the slaves. That same concept could apply here. Serban spoke the language of violence. He must now, too.

“We can pressure Robynton to work with us,” Ivan said. “We only need your authorization to dress the ships for confrontation.”

Serban nodded. “Granted.”

Ivan puffed his chest, encouraged by the viceroy's swift decision. He had been given something small—now was the time to ask for something big.

He leaned forward again, this time daring to rest his forearm on Serban's desk. “The Council of Norin attempted to destabilize us by destroying the wharf. They are attempting to destabilize Gantu with their slave-liberation movement. Gantu is a powerful ally, ready to support us. Rooting out the Council of Norin would not only eliminate a threat to us, but to them, as well. It would be a gift. It would seal our alliance.”

“Mmm,” Serban said. “Yes. We must eliminate the Council of Norin.”

Gavril lifted his hands. "We don't yet know who they are!"

Ivan wasn't about to let Gavril ruin this moment. He had wrested control away from him. He was proving himself to the viceroy. He looked Serban straight in the eyes. "It is enough that we know they are in Robynton, where you've just approved a confrontation over port access. That the council is based there justifies your sending a strong and definitive message."

Serban slowly nodded. "I think you're right. We must punish Robynton."

"Rear Admiral Ghenedi Marteen commands *Darsham*," Ivan said. "He will enact any orders you issue."

"Yes," Serban said. "Yes, I like him. He has such a firm chin."

Ivan smiled. "A sign of good breeding."

"You know, it is!" Serban said, leaning back again. "Will you take this down?"

"Certainly, Your Excellency," Ivan said, flourishing a pen from his jacket and opening his portfolio. His blood hummed with satisfaction, and the longer Gavril remained silent and defeated, the better he felt.

Serban cleared his throat. "Whereas the government and citizens of Robynton have prevented Hykosi ships from accessing the port of the same town, and whereas the government and citizens of Robynton have granted quarter to the Council of Norin—"

"Sir, perhaps, add something with a Gantish flair, so that our gift is clear."

"What would you suggest?"

"Perhaps, 'Whereas the government and citizens of Robynton have granted quarter to the—anti-sabhiri insurgents—known as the Council of Norin.'"

Serban wiggled his fingers. "I like that. Informal and yet right up their alley! 'Anti-sabhiri insurgents known as the Council of Norin.' Blah, blah, and on and so forth, you fill in the details."

Ivan nodded as he wrote.

Serban leaned back to stare at the ceiling as he dictated. "And then come to, 'I, Laurentiu Serban, Viceroy of Norin, in the Great Kingdom of Hykos, under the rule of His Majesty, King Mihai, hereby order Rear Admiral Ghenedi Marteen to enact justice through fire and sword. So may it be done.'"

Ivan pointed to the letter. "Didn't the Gantish wish their slave trade networks preserved?"

Serban nodded. "They did."

"Then have Marteen take captives as well," Ivan said. "Give them to the Gantish. If they don't want to use them, they can send them to the Tuli camps."

Serban rubbed his chin. "I'll never understand why they don't just kill them all." He nodded. "Change that last line. 'To enact justice through fire, sword, and captivity.'"

"So may it be done," Ivan said and handed the portfolio to the viceroy. "Will you sign the order, please?"

Serban did so, and Ivan cast a smug glance at Gavril. He had triumphed and proven himself to be a man of action.

Chapter 42

BRYNNA

Wyclythe Fortress
Wyclythe Province
Norin

Brynna slid the chart closer to the king. “The numbers are clear. Our loss of *Basilisk* and *Darsham* to the Hykosi is catastrophic. That said, we had not yet built a reliance upon that income. Even so, as we bar Hykosi-flagged ships from the harbor, and those same Hykosi scare away the few Norinian ships that remain, we cannot levy tariffs or fees on any imports nor taxes on fishing—we’re collecting virtually nothing. Our revenue has plunged to levels not seen in 40 years. We aren’t bankrupt—far from it—but these levels are not sustainable.”

King Wyclythe rubbed his chin, toying with his sparse white beard. His signet clacked against the other rings encircling his wrinkled fingers, and his measured wheezing rattled the amulets on his chest. She wondered what he was

thinking, whether he saw her words as credible or only the prattle of one who reads stories by firelight.

Trinan leaned back in his chair, frowning. She avoided his eyes, turning her attention to the secretary of the treasury, Carltyrn Day. Yet Carltyrn's eyes were closed, and his white head tipped all the way to his shoulder. She had no idea how long he had been asleep.

She sighed and returned to the king. "We must diversify our income," she said. "Indeed, Your Majesty, I dare to say—"

Trinan clapped his portfolio closed. "You've dared enough." He shoved his chair back from the worktable and stood. "You said yourself that in absorbing the Andersyn Shipping Company, we had received the greatest transfer of wealth in the history of Gavony." His voice carried through the room. "For you to now claim we risk budgetary short-falls is absurd."

She shrugged. "The numbers do not lie, my lord."

"Then why is there no money?"

"You have plenty of money," she said. "Wealth beyond measure."

He lifted both of his hands, his brows arching in an expression both incredulous and exasperated.

She huffed. "You have plenty of wealth, but without revenue, your supply of liquid capital—hard, cold cash—is hemorrhaging without replacement. It will be depleted over time, so we must bolster it now before it's too late. Your wealth is tied up in assets. Real estate. Machinery. Dry docks. Both here and abroad. Those things are not liquid in today's market and cannot be used to pay workers or to service repairs or to purchase supplies or fund our soldiers.

You can sustain the port and the province for a long while, yes, but without revenue, the money will not last forever. The sooner you act, the better.”

“What would you have me do?” Trinan asked. “Throw rocks at Hykosi ships?”

Brynna slowly inhaled through her flared nostrils. She forced her lips into a smile, but her nose wrinkled with anger. “Issue provincial bonds.”

Trinan stalked away from her and leaned his forearm on the wide stone edging of the conference room window. In the heavy silence, Brynna sank into her chair and sighed as the late afternoon shadows lengthened.

The king coughed. “Bonds would allow us the type of funds we need?” he asked, his voice weak.

“Yes, Your Majesty,” she said, “they would. Liquid capital would come from investors throughout Gavony. And it will show our confidence in a future where all of this mess with the Hykosi has died down. I can draw up the papers before our journey to Lonara for Carthasach. The bonds could be offered for sale immediately thereafter.”

The king extended his hand toward his goblet yet could not reach. Brynna knelt by his side, lifted it to his lips, and he drank. His feebleness increased daily as did her concern for him.

“I see,” he said. He swallowed again, wine dribbling into his beard. Brynna dabbed his face with a damask napkin. He reached his shaking hand to hers and seized it in a tight grip that shocked and surprised her, one that pulled her eyes to his. “I have issued bonds before. Once in the past,” he said, his voice low, for her only. “There are powerful clauses I can use. A demand guarantee clause would protect against—”

“Brynnalyn!” Trinan leaped onto the window ledge. “My spyglass. Now!”

Carltyrn jerked and snorted. “What? What’s going on?”

Alarmed, Brynna slid the king’s hand away and ran around the table to where Trinan’s leather satchel hung over the back of his chair.

Trinan squinted. “I can’t read the flags!”

“What flags?” she called, digging through his bag. She found the scope.

“On *Darsham*,” he said. “She has returned.”

Brynna’s stomach dropped. She handed him the glass and climbed up beside him as he extended the scope.

Her gaze swept across the bare fields to Robynton and to the ocean beyond. A black dot marred the sea. Icy dread seeped into her chest as she glanced between Trinan and the horizon.

“Bullshit,” he muttered.

“What do they say?”

He closed the glass and stepped down from the ledge. “‘Defensive training.’ They’re trying to convince us they’ve only come to play games.”

Standing on the window ledge, Brynna bested his height. “Defense from what?” she said, looking down at him. “The few sloops we’ve used to repel their smaller ships won’t be able to stop *Darsham*. We are no threat to them. No one is or can be! Perhaps they’re here to trade and not to fight.”

Trinan took her waist and lifted her down from the ledge, his grip pinching the handle of her knife into her side. “You don’t take that many cannon on a trading venture,” he said. “The sailors are restless on the decks. This is no commerce expedition. She’s fitted for war.” His tone lacked the bite to

which she was accustomed, and in that, Brynna realized the extent of his concern.

Trinan stepped to the king's side and dropped to one knee. "My king, the Hykosi have sailed their warship to our harbor. I believe they are hostile."

Carltyr rose. "Hykosi!"

But Wyclythe's head sank to his chest, depleted.

"My king," Trinan said, "I will summon General Rhettyn to Robynton Hall. Will you command us when she arrives?"

The king's hands lay still in his lap, the signet silent, his rings in shadow. "Do what you will."

Trinan touched his fist to his chest and bowed his head. "My actions for your majesty."

Carltyr drew his knife and held it high. "May my knife rest on their shoulders!"

Brynna held up her palms. "Your Excellency, thank you. Put that away for now. Go to the quartermaster. Erling Dasveld is his name. Find him. Tell him the Hykosi are here."

Carltyr's eyes flashed, and the veins in his neck distended. "We shall slit their heathen throats!"

"Please go!" Brynna cried.

He hit his fist on chest and left.

Trinan straightened his shirt cuffs. "Come to my study," he called to Brynna as he strode from the room.

"Yes, my lord," she said and hurried to the table to gather her papers and his bag. She ran to the door but paused in response to an internal call. She looked back.

The shadows had deepened to a dull gray. Darkness spilled from the stone pillars and covered the room while King Wyclythe slumped in his chair, alone. Each breath labored in his chest. His loneliness prodded her. Trinan had summoned her and battle threatened, but the king, his

essence and greatness, whispered to her. He seemed to fade as she watched. She wished the witches could stop his slow march toward death, but she knew such things lay beyond the scope of magic. Even with health, a body could only last so long.

Brynna pulled the bell cord to summon the servants, then set down her load and took up a candle and holder, lighting it with a match from her pocket. The bright flame flickered to life, and she cupped her hand to protect it as she walked back.

She set the candle on the table's edge and, with slight hesitation, broke decorum by reaching around the king to pull his blanket over his shoulders, just as he had once broken the rules to assist her with simple graces. She wrapped it about him snugly, taking time to arrange the soft blue folds. She patted his shoulder.

"Thank you, my dear," he said in his raspy voice. He placed his gnarled hand on her soft one. "I will remember this moment."

Brynna smiled. "My actions for your majesty, my king."

He slowly nodded. "Now go. Defend your province."

"Yes, my king," she said, and with a final squeeze to his shoulder, she gathered her papers and the bag and hurried to the hallway.

Anxious thoughts crowded her mind as she ran down the stone corridor and burst into Trinan's study. He was leaning on his desk, writing, not even taking time to sit. "I'm calling up the provincial guard and as many soldiers as I can," he said, folding the pages and lighting his sealing wax. "We will meet at Robynton Hall. I want you there. Attack may be imminent, and time is critical. I should have left by now."

"Of course, my lord."

He looked up. “Trinan. We’re alone.”

“It’s a habit.”

“Didn’t used to be,” he muttered as he pressed his seal into the wax. “Here’s another protection order—dated for today through tomorrow—in case anyone should try to stop you. My seal should be sufficient. Take a pony, and bring the maps from here and the east wing and my other satchel from the library. Meet me there as soon as you can. Avoid the road. Ride straight across the pastures. Stop for no one.” He held out the order and then pulled it back just as her fingers touched it. “No one,” he emphasized. She nodded and took the paper.

Bryнна tucked the order into her pocket. “Do you want all the maps or only the rolled ones?”

“All of them,” he said, opening a cabinet and taking out his revolver. “I don’t know what the night may hold for us.” He strapped the belt around his waist. “Hurry.”

Chapter 43

NORA

Nalta
Gantu

Nora leaned her head against the inn's siding as she listened to the lively evening music. The drums reverberated through her chest, entreating her forward, but she only sighed and crossed her arms over her body. The mizwid player stomped in time to the beat as he played the pipes, and the man with the rebab bowed beside him. Women danced in a circle, their waists and hips tied round and round with bright woven sashes and beads, their hips jiggling with each graceful, swooping step, their arms lifted, bending like the necks of swans. Men, too, danced nearby, dropping their heels and shaking their shoulders as the colorful tassels on their backs swung with their motions. Hands clapped in time around the flashing light of the campfire. The day's work was done, and that alone was reason to celebrate.

When the final chord struck, the people cheered and laughed and milled about, waiting for the next song. The mizwid player approached, now holding a small flute in his hand. "They're getting tired," he said. "Come, Nora, sing one of your ballads. Give them a break."

She avoided his eyes. "I don't feel like it tonight."

"But we need a slow set, and yours is the sweetest voice here."

She hadn't the energy to resist him. With a quiet whimper, she followed and sat on a crate near the fire.

"Which song, Sweet?" he asked.

She swallowed and wet her lips. "Imagine the Ruvoq."

He nodded. "Haven't heard that one in a while."

"No," she said. "Not in a while."

He played the slow opening bars, and she sang.

"My eyes opened when first I saw your face,
The sand on which I stood, a holy place.
I removed my sandals, my belt, my clothes,
And there commenced a merging of souls.

"Imagine the Ruvoq without sand,
The sun without heat,
The bay without land,
And I without sleep
When once I had slept soundly.

"My eyes opened when first I was alone,
The impression beside me cold as stone.
I once felt fire sparked by your hands.
Now I only struggle to understand.

“Imagine the Ruvoq without sand,
The sun without heat,
The bay without land,
And I without sleep
When once I had slept soundly.

“It’s impossible to sleep.
I’ll walk until the morning.
It’s impossible to dream,
And dissolve my soul from yours.

“Imagine the Ruvoq without sand,
The sun without heat,
The bay without land,
And I without sleep
When once I had slept soundly.”

The last note faded, and the musician nodded at her. She tossed him a tight-lipped smile and walked back around the inn, away from them and their happiness.

The porch was dark, the lamps having been extinguished for the night, but as she ran her hand along the rail and climbed the steps, she saw Cadoc Andersyn slumped in a chair, one leg outstretched as he nursed a whisky glass. She slowed her steps and leaned on the rail. The night’s stillness surrounded them.

“Is it your story or mine?” he asked her.

“I don’t know anymore.”

He kicked a chair back from the table and jerked his head toward it.

She sat, and they listened to the distant dance music and clapping as it resumed.

“Will you stay long?” she asked.

“No,” he said. “I sail for Tadsyn tonight—many thanks to the Padynd Beacon. I’ll be in Robynton tomorrow morning and Jarta by nightfall again.”

“Why do you need the beacon?”

“Sandbars. Gantu has so many, and the water is shallow. They’re wide and move with the tide. That’s why only my flat barges and smaller boats could get here and not my big ships.” He considered his whiskey. “When I had them.” He shrugged. “The worst sandbars are near the cliffs of the Padynd Mountains, so the cliffs are a great landmark to use to avoid them. Problems arise at night when the cliffs are hard to see. It’s tough to get a bearing on location. The Padynd Beacon helps me avoid it all, sandbars and cliffs, while I’m turning toward Tadsyn.”

She nodded and leaned her elbows on the table, looking out at the shadows and thinking of the ocean. “The Hykosi are out there.”

“I am a pestering fly.”

She hesitated. “I don’t know what that means.”

“I cannot take them on,” he said, “but I can sail circles around them and sting when need be.”

Footsteps mounted the porch, and Nora turned back to see Elias. He took a chair and sat without invitation. “Do you have them?” he asked.

Cadoc drained the rest of the whisky and set the glass down. “I did. But the port authority seized them. I explained they were for the Tuli, so I don’t think they were destroyed.”

Nora stared from one face to the other, confused.

Elias nodded. “Plausible enough.”

“You’ll still need someone to pinch them,” Cadoc said.

Elias grunted.

“What are they?” Nora asked.

“Blasting caps,” Elias said. “For explosives. The Tuli use them in the mines. We will use them for. . .other things.”

She nodded. “And you need someone to steal them?”

Elias hummed in assent. “Someone will need to get them from the port authority warehouse and take them back to my stable.”

Numbness had clouded her thoughts for so long that the twinge of excitement from the blasting caps lit her like lightning on a dark night. Her pain melted at the thought of doing something important and dangerous. She reached into her pocket to touch the crystal pen and feel the name engraved on the side. She had no future to lose.

“I’ll do it,” she said.

“Do what?” Elias asked. “Steal the blasting caps?”

Cadoc straightened in his chair. “Nora, do you even know where the port authority warehouse is?”

“No, but you can tell me,” she said. “Tell me where it is, and I’ll get them.”

“If you’re caught trespassing, you’ll lose a hand,” Cadoc warned. “If you’re caught with the blasting caps, they’ll hang you. And if those caps go off, they’ll burn you alive.”

“But if I’m successful,” she said. “You’ll have what you need.”

Elias rubbed his chin, then shrugged. “It’s your skin.”

The three pulled their chairs close to the table. Cadoc explained what the box looked like and where it most likely was located in the warehouse. Elias explained the patrol patterns of the Nalta Guards and the best route back to his stable. Nora’s heart pounded. Sweat slicked her palms. She felt alive again and ready to take on the world and the port authority.

With all decided, Elias shook their hands and then disappeared into the night. Cadoc agreed to walk with Nora as far as the main wharf access. "After that, I'll go on to *Signy*," he said. He offered his arm, and they walked through the dark street toward the wharf.

"What are you carrying to Tadsyn?" she asked.

"Essentials for Norin. Meat. Dairy. Cheese," he said. "As much as I can. She's full up and nearly overloaded. Here to Tadsyn, to Robynton, around to Jarta, and back here with supplies for Nalta. As fast and as many times as I can. She's rigged for speed."

"We need it. The shortages are getting extreme. We have meat and dairy, of course, but vegetables, squashes, greens, none of that."

"It's rotting in the fields in Norin," he said. "And they are desperate for meat."

"At least we have that."

Cadoc shook his head. "You will until winter is here in earnest. Without Norinian hay, they'll lose many heads. I suspect they'll cull a large number of animals soon."

"That's really sad."

He nodded. "Tragic and completely avoidable at one point in our past."

They reached the wharf, and with a brief farewell, he walked on into the night.

Nora turned in place. Dark boats slept in the water, yet she was awakening. Her heart beat faster with every step she took as she moved back into the shadows and crept toward the port authority warehouse.

The building was a plain pole barn, two stories high, and Elias had said it was open on the inside so that cargo could

be stacked. A guard was posted at the front, and Elias had told her of one at the back as well while the side door would be unguarded. All was still.

Nora slunk to the windowless door on the side of the building. Old crab traps and rubbish blocked the way. Elias's contact inside the port authority was supposed to have left the door unlocked, but she held her breath, unsure, as she tried the knob. It turned freely, and she pulled the door open enough to slip inside and close it behind herself.

Crates lined the walls and filled the inner space nearly to the roof. They were stamped for many countries, even Sitilia, yet all had been stopped in transit, seized for one bureaucratic flaw or another. Most would ultimately be released, but some would be sold at auction to cover fees, and others would be destroyed for the betterment of Gantu.

Several lanterns lit the interior, providing meager light which allowed Nora to see basic, blocky shapes. She extended her arms before her and crept toward the back corner where her prize was said to be stored. She bumped a crate, a rough-hewn surface full of splinters, and she wished for gloves. As she passed, her gandoura caught on a nail and yanked her back. The fabric ripped, and she wrinkled her nose as she worked the pieces free. The rip had split along a seam, down her side and through her pocket. She pulled the sides together as the front door swung open.

Nora ducked behind the crate. Her fingers splayed on the dirt floor, and she scrunched her eyes shut, wishing away the white sparks flashing through her vision. She couldn't faint now.

Steps at the front of the barn.

A trip and crash as a box fell, then muttered profanity.

"You find it?" a voice called.

"Yeah, yeah, right here," came the response. "This place is a fucking mess."

The door closed.

Nora remained in place, trembling, begging heaven to help her. Forever passed or what seemed like it. She lifted her head and, when no reaction sounded, climbed to her feet. She closed her eyes, breathed, then stepped forward, ready to find the case.

Stepping over a pile of nets, she found several stacks of wooden boxes and soon one with lettering that warned of danger and explosives. She smiled, immensely pleased that Elias's directions had led her straight to it. She bent to pick it up, but it was so heavy her fingers slipped off the sides. Crouching beside it, she wrapped her arms around and lifted, groaning with the effort. Her muscles protested, her joints stretched, and she had only taken three steps before she had to lower it onto another crate. Breathing hard, she rested her hands on her knees.

She had not anticipated it being that heavy. Determined to complete the job, she gritted her teeth and lifted again. Sweat beaded on her forehead, and after several brute attempts, she made it to the door.

Peeking outside, she verified all was quiet. She lifted the crate again and waddled through the doorway, traveling as far as she could before lowering it to the ground and running back to close the door. She pressed her back against the wall and listened, and waited, and was only satisfied when she heard nothing but the clink of a loose tile on the next building as it was buffeted in the wind.

Nora knew her way back to town, but her resolve faltered when she considered the distance. She had no wagon nor

even a handle on the box with which to drag it. She had to rely on her strength and will alone. Therefore, she would.

She clenched her jaw and mustered her fortitude and lifted the box once again. Progress was slow, and her tears flowed hot and fast. Her muscles ached from exertion. Her body quaked with fear. She could do nothing but take another step. It was the only way to safety, the only way forward.

A wagon rattled in the distance. She begged it to turn onto a side road, but it maintained its course, coming closer, and a whimper escaped her lips as she was forced to move further than she had planned in order to find a deeper shadow in which to hide. She climbed onto the box and curled herself, trying to remain unseen and control her heavy breathing. She closed her eyes.

The wheels slowed as the driver commanded the horse to stop.

With every muscle clenched, she waited for the shout, the heavy blow of a fist, the call for the Guards. She opened one eye as Ziri lifted one brow. "What are you doing?" he asked as though she had dressed herself as a jester and was standing on her head.

Nora uncurled. "Shopping."

He grinned and jumped down from the wagon. "Get in."

Exhausted and sore, she climbed to the seat. He lifted the crate with a grunt and slid it into the back of the wagon. "How far have you carried this?"

"From the wharf."

"The wharf? Shyan! You're stronger than I thought," he said. "Is it going to Elias's?"

She nodded.

He climbed up beside her and clicked to the horse. As he turned the wagon around and pointed it toward the edge of town, Nora leaned on his shoulder, unable to express how relieved she was at his arrival. Her body ached, and her back spasmed. She shifted back and forth, unable to get comfortable. Ziri wrapped his arm around her, pulling her tightly to his side, and the pressure calmed her. They rode through town, past sleepy houses and the empty guard post, and on into the country. The horse's harness jingled, and the wheels crunched. Nora drifted to sleep, content with her success.

Chapter 44

BRYNNA

Robynton
Wyclythe Province
Norin

Brynna mounted her pony, and it pawed and danced in the stable. She nudged the animal into the night, forward, faster, and faster still, until she was galloping on the road toward Robynton. The full moon lit her way, and the evening sea breeze carried the pungent smell of the nearby salt marshes. Her skirts whipped and snapped in the wind. The pony's rhythm and clanking bridle marked her time. A final hedgerow was all that stood between her and open country. She braced herself and flew through the open gateway, then veered toward the pastures.

Never had she ridden so hard. She squeezed her thighs and gave full rein to her pony. Her heart pounded faster than the hooves below her. Sweat soaked her clothes, and her breath came in short gasps. She galloped over the brown, rocky hills toward the lanterns of Robynton. Soon

houses emerged from the darkness, their thatched roofs huddled together as if for warmth.

She slowed as she maneuvered through the deserted streets. The bell at the wharf clanged incessantly. No one leaned in any doorway. No one sat on any porch. Her father's workshop was dark. The door and windows of the former Andersyn Shipping Company remained boarded up as they had been since that fateful day of Cadoc's capture.

Robynton Hall soon loomed two full stories above her, blazing with lamps and torches. Accustomed to finery and gallantry and balls, the wrought iron gates stood open and welcoming, but this evening, restless folk in everyday wear and night clothes crowded the grounds, shuffling their feet, talking and muttering, a mass of apprehensive confusion staring at the sky, counting the seconds between lightning and thunder. And still the bell rang.

Brynna dismounted and tied her pony to the fence. She pulled Trinan's satchel from her saddle and lifted it over her head to fit across her body. The maps in the other bags could wait.

Children played hopscotch in the courtyard. Two boys threw Rhyshga, their knives hitting the target simultaneously. Brynna recognized many faces and knew most by name. She was recognized in return, and the crowd parted to allow her to pass.

She entered the grand hall, and the walls muffled the sound of the bell. Though the air was cool outside, inside, the many bodies made the room stuffy and hot. Fear clogged the atmosphere as groups of people formed around various speakers who were sharing their views on which actions should be taken. She walked in a numb stupor. She

had heard talk of the Hykosi invasion her entire life, but deep within, she had never believed it would happen.

“It’s because of your foolish talk! Stop threatening rebellion, and the Hykosi will leave us alone. Choose peace!”

“Submission doesn’t lead to peace!” her father’s voice bellowed.

She crossed the room toward him, but the crowd on her left split in two, opening in the middle, the division cutting the voices into silence. Trinan and General Rhettyn stood side by side, matched in height, fiercely stern, with their hands in fists and fire in their eyes.

“Talk will kill us all,” General Rhettyn said, her voice carrying throughout the room. “The ship is in the harbor, and I have orders to fight. Form yourselves into two companies. One will go to the wharf. The other will be deployed between the wharf and the road. If you value your lives and your families, answer the call! This is your land! This is your fight! Follow me!”

The crowd erupted into discord, matching the bell that rang. Men shouted and pumped their fists, some jeering, some cheering, some drawing their ceremonial knives. Many left to retrieve their weapons. Some women cried; some joined the men. Young boys leaped to the courtyard from open windows and grabbed pitchforks and scythes from the stables.

Bryнна caught Trinan’s attention as she pulled his satchel from around herself.

He took the bag and nodded. “Good, good.” He dug through the contents. “Where are my maps?”

“Still on my pony at the gate. I—”

"I need them now! I told you that!" He slung the satchel on his shoulder and stalked through the crowd to the doorway. She ran after him into the courtyard.

The thunder of horses filled the air. Shouts, creaking wagon wheels, and cracking whips rattled around them. The crowd fled as a line of three wagons tore through the street, the drivers standing on the seats to control the frantic horses. They pulled to a jolting stop in front of the gate, and Erling leapt from the first one. "Every trained person, a rifle!" he shouted, lifting two rifles from the bed and giving them to the reaching hands around him. "Ammunition, bows, crossbows, and arrows in the last wagon!" Most of the villagers with rifles and pistols were moving toward the gates.

A tremendous boom shook the town.

Brynna ducked, cradling her head. People screamed and ran.

"Cannon!" someone yelled.

"Steady!" General Rhettyn shouted.

"Brynna!" Erling shouted, pushing through the crowd. He shoved a rifle at her chest and looped a possible bag around her neck. "It's loaded." He handed a set to Trinan as Brynna slung the rifle onto her back.

Another boom and a growl in the air before the house across the street took a direct hit from round shot, the wall bursting in a shower of splinters. A double boom sounded, a third, fourth, and fifth. Layered cannon blasts, impossible to differentiate, surrounding all in sound and terror.

A tremendous explosion blew her backwards in a hail of wood and rubble. She fell, and the collision of her body against the street knocked the wind from her chest. Her

head slammed against the ground, and the rifle at her back pinched her spine. Gray sparks whizzed through her vision. Somewhere, she was gasping, coughing, grabbing at the air. Dust and smoke billowed above her. Screams and shouts surrounded her. Wood slivers impaled the exposed skin of her right arm and burned like pebbled fire. Her blood mixed with sand.

“Brynnalyn!” Trinan yelled, his voice cracking. “Brynnalyn!”

Brynna rolled to her side. Trinan crawled toward her, hand over forearm, his feet pushing him forward in an obtuse angle. His back curved in a hump, reminding her of the cow she had seen in a traveling circus from Gantu with flags and ribbons and jugglers and a one-eyed man playing a lute. Maybe it was a mandolin. Gantu was a faraway place. Not here. Not in the blood.

He dropped by her side. “Are you hurt?”

Her body hurt. Her head hurt. Her thoughts slunk on sluggish and scattered slides. His hands hurt her, too, as he pulled her across the ground toward him. But the stars shone in the night sky above, flickering between the billows of smoke. The moon cast blue light on Trinan’s face. Her breath returned to her.

She rubbed her forehead. “I’m all right,” she said, wiping dust from her stinging, watering eyes and blinking. “Are you?”

Trinan’s back straightened. His chest heaved. His face, pale and drawn, contorted into ridges, and blood trickled from his nose. “I’m not hurt.”

Her brain felt fuzzy. The world spun, frustrating her attempts to orient herself. She pushed his arm away so she

could focus. “What happened?” she asked, sitting up and leaning her elbows on her knees. She pulled the largest bit of wood out of her arm.

“I don’t know,” he said. “The hall—”

Billowing black smoke issued from the beams and rock that once had been Robynton Hall. Brynna cried out and struggled to her feet, only to stumble back onto a warm mound. Her pony lay dead in the street, its head still tied to the gate and a gaping wound in its stretching neck. Horror and disgust trapped a scream in her throat.

Trinan ran toward what was left of the building.

Cannon boomed to fearful cries. A woman’s scream rent the night, followed by three others. Flames burst forth from the hall. The light and sounds swept through Brynna’s brain, burning away sparks and fuzz. She righted herself and lifted her skirts to stumble forward, feeling stronger every moment as energy coursed through her veins. She struggled over debris as figures ran past her.

“Help me! Help me!” a woman called, limping away from the rubble. Brynna ran to her and pulled the woman’s arm around her own shoulders, lifting her and helping her onward. They hobbled to the area outside the gate, and the woman collapsed and grabbed Brynna’s skirt. “Go back! There are others!”

Brynna ran, her rifle jostling on her back. The chaos grew. Smoke, flames, screams, the smell of blood. A child toddled among the stones, wailing. Brynna scooped him up and held him to her chest, his head under her chin. His hair smelled of lavender powder. He kicked his feet, but she held tighter, only dropping him once she had carried him beyond the fence.

Again, returning. Over the debris. Toward the screams and smoke. A man's arm lay on the ground, the fingers thick with callouses. Brynna's vision ringed with a blackness that closed in on her, but she stumbled onward, desperate to find Erling and her father, frantic to find them alive.

Screams and muffled sobs rose from the rubble as the flames grew, and the cannon boomed again. Brynna flinched at the sound, and when a house down the street exploded, she crouched, covering her head as wood flew in every direction. The sweet smell of burnt flesh stung her nostrils. Vomit filled her mouth. The world spun with shouts and cries.

People ran toward the hall, throwing buckets of water. They tugged away logs and boards, grabbing people and pulling them from the inferno. She shook herself and forced herself to rise and her feet to move in sync. Figures ran back and forth. She struggled to pull a man out by his blackened arm. The man's skin peeled off, and she jerked her hands back.

Trinan lifted a large beam. A form struggled underneath as he shifted the weight onto his shoulder. "Brynnalyn!" he called. "Help me!"

She stumbled forward.

Trinan strained while Brynna pulled at the person underneath. The woman, streaked with dirt and soot, grabbed Brynna's arm, smearing blackness across Brynna's skin and clothes. Trinan's arms trembled with exertion as Brynna and the woman moved from beneath the beams. The boards crashed behind her, and she helped the woman to a tree nearby and leaned her against the trunk.

Brynna wiped sweat from her face and ran to Trinan as he uncovered a body in the rubble. She grasped an arm and pulled with him.

“Have you seen Erling?” she yelled to him over the noise.

“He’s here!” Trinan called. “Somewhere!”

“I’m here!” Erling’s voice answered through the din, originating in a shadow with a familiar lean shape. When Trinan and Brynna had laid the body on the ground, she ran to her brother and fell against him, sobbing. The smell of smoke and singed hair filled her nostrils.

Erling gripped her shoulders with a shake and looked her straight in the eye. “Keep it together, Tree Rat.”

“Where’s Papa?”

“I don’t know,” he said, starting at another blast. “I need to find Kayla. You get more water.”

Brynna nodded and ran toward the nearby houses. The chaos and screaming and flickering lights and smells overwhelmed her senses. Women held torches high as the villagers continued to pull people and bodies from the collapsed building. Time seemed slow, surreal.

Brynna found a bucket and dunked it in a water trough. She heaved it onto the side of the trough and glanced down the street.

A dark cloud rolled toward her.

Her nameless dread grew.

Brynna peered into the blackness, willing her eyes to perceive. Fear in form. She heard the clink of metal and beat of footsteps as the nebulous gloom solidified into a line of crimson-clad soldiers. The one on the end raised his sword high.

“Hykosi!” she screamed. “Hykosi! They’re here!”

Brynna fled back toward the rubble, the bucket falling away. The battle horn sounded behind her, and a rifle volley shook the square. She threw herself behind a low fence that encircled a nearby house and unslung her rifle. Edging over the pickets, she drew the rifle to her shoulder, took careful aim, and fired. Her shot struck true—she watched a scarlet soldier catch his step and fall. Dropping to the ground in the concealment provided by the fence's bare clematis vine, she snatched at her possible bag to get bullets, patches, and powder.

It was gone.

With a shriek of terror and frustration, she slapped at her back and shoulders and skirt, knowing it had to be there somewhere. It had to be. She searched the grass around her, the bushes, the fence, the yard. Reluctantly admitting the bag was gone, she sank back to the dirt, gasping through her tears. With shaking fingers, she drew the bayonet and affixed it to her useless rifle. Other than her knife, this was her only remaining weapon as Hykosi soldiers overran Robynton.

Peering through the slats in the fence, Brynna saw the Hykosi plow through the square with twisted faces, shooting rifles, pistols, and slashing their swords at the Norinians. Those who had run to help the wounded fell in the street, their bodies hacked and bleeding. Brynna bit into her lip, wanting to look away yet determined not to.

Groaning and crying, a thin form rocked forward and backward in the alley beside the house. With a glance over her shoulder, Brynna slung her rifle on her shoulder and ran to the mound of skirts.

"Come! Come with me!" Brynna urged the woman.

“Brynna?”

“Kayla!” Brynna dropped to the ground beside her brother’s intended. “Erling’s looking for you.”

“They burned it,” Kayla sobbed, hiccuping through her words. “They burned your father’s workshop! They burned the barn!”

Brynna pulled Kayla against her chest, and her bodice and stays soon felt wet and warm. She held Kayla away to look. Blood soaked both her clothes and Kayla’s and ran down Kayla’s hands and skirts. It dripped onto the ground in a spreading puddle. So much blood. Too much.

“I can’t move my arm,” Kayla said. “The soldier. His sword.”

Brynna scanned the street, certain the soldiers would return. “Can you walk?”

“I think so.”

Brynna helped her to stand. “Come over here. Come out of the way.”

“We’re all going to die!” Kayla wailed.

“No. That’s not going to happen.”

Brynna hobbled with her to a house deep in the shadows. She kicked at the door of the root cellar, but it wouldn’t open, so they huddled in the darkness, next to the foundation stones. Brynna pulled at the tattered strips of her skirt, tore what remained of the fabric, and hurriedly bandaged Kayla’s wounds.

Light erupted from the next house, and a current of hot air struck Brynna’s face. Flames licked up the thatching, engulfing the house within seconds. Cries of “Fire!” rang from the far reaches of the village as house after house combusted.

Kayla moaned in anguish and gasped with sobs. “Erling! Where is Erling?”

“He’s here,” Brynna said, leaning close to press Kayla’s shoulder and eyeing the house above them, should it ignite. “I’ve seen him. He’s somewhere here.”

“Kayla!” Erling’s voice called, extending the sounds in a searching call that echoed off the walls.

Kayla jumped to her feet, knocking Brynna back. “Erling!” she yelled.

“Kayla!”

Brynna swung around, looking for him. There were too many buildings nearby, which scattered the sounds in many directions. The shout could have come from anywhere.

“There he is!” Kayla said. “Erling! Erling!” She lunged forward.

Brynna snatched Kayla’s hand and pulled her back. “Stay here! Stay hidden!” she said. “That’s not him!” She saw many people, but none identifiable.

“But it’s his voice! Erling!”

“He’s not out there!” Brynna said. “I don’t know where he is! Wait!”

Kayla shoved Brynna away and ran into the street.

A scarlet soldier on horseback galloped toward her.

“Kayla!” Brynna screamed.

Kayla stopped in the middle of the road, terror blanching her face in the moonlight. The horseman leaned low out of his saddle as the horse sped forward. He slung his sword across Kayla’s midsection and pulled it back, red. She crumpled to the ground.

Erling’s anguished cry filled Brynna’s ears. He ran past her into the street as the soldier turned and approached

again. With a roar, Erling grabbed the soldier's leg and heaved him from the saddle. He ripped the sword from the Hykosi's hand and plunged it into the soldier, who fell in a heap at his feet. Erling ran forward and knelt in the dirt, sobbing. He gathered Kayla to his chest, his voice straining with despair.

Brynna trembled as she watched her brother. As she stepped toward him, a building on the street behind her creaked and collapsed in a thunderous roar. She held up her arms, shielding her face and blocking the torrents of air that scorched her clothes.

A hand gripped her shoulder.

She screamed and flung herself around as she grabbed her rifle.

"Brynnalyn! No!" He seized the gun from her hands and threw his weight against her, pinning her to the wall of the house with her own rifle across her chest. "It's me!" Trinan said, before releasing her.

She gasped. "I didn't know who you were. I've lost my ammunition. I need bullets and patches and powder!"

Trinan stepped close. He looped the strap over her arm and set the rifle at her back. "Listen to me. Run to the forest. Stay there until I find you. Do not come back here. Do not leave the woods." He cupped her face in his hands. "Do you understand me? No matter what happens, stay there. The Hykosi..." He shook his head. "This is a Removal." He pinched her chin with his fingers. "Do not come back."

She nodded, unable to answer.

Three soldiers rounded the corner. Trinan shouted, diverting their attention, then raised his revolver and fired. One soldier fell, and Trinan bolted to the street, the two soldiers after him.

Bryнна ran from house to house. The gardens gave way to scrubby underbrush with brambles and vines that dragged at her skirts. She clambered over rocks and roots, falling and scraping her hands, her legs, catching her dress, tearing it, and leaving the pieces behind.

The forest loomed before her, offering freedom and peace. Its darkness would conceal her. Its strength would protect her. Her steps slowed. Stopped. She looked back at the town. Houses burned as far as she could see. The flames' roar pounded upon her, and blistering gusts seared her face. Yet calm, refreshing air cooled her back and welcomed her to experience more of such tranquility. Trinan had commanded her to hide. She wished to obey. She craved it. But she could not leave. She would not hide. She refused to abandon her town and her people. She must choose her own way.

With a cry, Bryнна forced herself back toward town. The cold air cut at her throat while the heat scorched her shoulder. She neared the area of the hall again. Crowds of people, many fighting hand to hand, formed a writhing, flickering mass of black outlines. An occasional gunshot punctuated the groaning cries of the defenders.

A line of wagons overflowed with people. Men, women, children.

A Hykosi soldier struggled to a wagon while gripping a clawing, spitting child.

Fighters grappled near her. Across the alleyway, a soldier lay on top of a woman, grunting and rutting, his trousers loose. The woman's hands scratched his face, and her screams gurgled as she spit blood. Bryнна gripped her rifle and ran toward them until, with a powerful swing, she stabbed the soldier with her bayonet. He roared and pulled

at his trousers, and she impaled him again and again, jabbing hard then twisting, feeling the slice of his flesh and the catch of his bones.

A soldier barreled into her. The impact threw her to the ground. The rifle flung away. She jumped up, pulled her knife, and slashed at him, catching him on the shoulder. He howled with pain and anger.

She fled.

Soldiers pounded after her. "She went to the left!"

"Get her!"

Brynna slammed into a dark form she had not seen. Her teeth rattled. Her knife tore fabric and sank deeply into flesh. The Hykosi soldier yelled as she flicked her wrist and pulled her knife from his abdomen. Holding his side with one hand, he punched her with the other. Bursts of light flashed, and she fell, her head pounding. She struggled to her feet, tripping, falling, rising again, barely escaping his grip. The other soldiers set upon her. One tripped her, another kicked her stomach, and she curled in on herself as arms grabbed and lifted her. She bit his arm, and he struck her head. They dragged her toward the wagons.

"No!" she screamed. "Erling!"

The soldiers flung her into a wagon, and her knife clattered into a corner. Her shin hit the edge of the cart, and blood ran down her leg. Another soldier brought a rope to tie her wrists.

The wagon was full of Norinians. One woman sobbed loudly. A man shouted obscenities at the driver, who was gathering the reins. Most of the captured Norinians sat in silence, their expressions blank as they watched their world burn.

The Hykosi calmed from their fighting frenzy. They gathered near the road, some keeping a lookout, but most edging their way toward the beach. Two wagons drove toward the road that ran to the beach access. Brynna struggled against the bonds.

A dark form leaped to the side of the wagon, but no one responded. Nothing mattered anymore. Sol climbed in and made his way to Brynna. His furs, covered in blood, glistened in the torchlight. Blood and dirt caked in the ridges on his forehead and streaked across his cheeks. Without meeting her eyes, he drew his hunting knife from his thigh and took her hands, carefully wedging the knife between them and slicing until the ropes gave way.

Brynna rubbed her wrists as he moved to the next person. She jostled around the people and searched the wagon floor for her own knife. When she found it, she joined Sol in releasing the people.

“When I shout, jump out and run for the woods,” she directed each of them as she cut through the ropes.

The wagon lurched and rolled toward the wharf road.

“Go! Now!” Brynna yelled.

People jumped out, the wagon shuddering. Some landed on their feet. Most sprawled in the dirt.

Hykosi soldiers yelled, but the other wagons rolling toward the road blocked them and impeded their chase. Brynna dashed toward the trees and dropped into the shadows at the brush line. Sol was gone.

The Hykosi disappeared down to the beach, and the wind stirred up the flames again. Brynna shielded her face with her hands, but the smoke covered her in ash. She coughed and gasped.

Crawling to the road, she squatted at the beach's edge and heard shouts and the creak and crash of a wagon overturning. Cries of pain joined bellows of anger. The Hykosi yelled sharp orders. Soldiers herded people into long, low boats. Rifles fired, and shadows fell. The Hykosi pulled oars, and the boats left the shore, rowing toward *Darsham*. The cries and screams of women and children drowned out the crash of the waves.

Brynna ran across the beach, her breath heaving, her head pounding, the sand slowing her steps. The men shouted and threw rocks into the waves. Several people beat the ground with their fists, sobbing. A few splashed into the ocean and swam toward the ship. Some ran for shore boats.

"Come back!"

"Cowards!"

"May my knife rest on your shoulder!" a man screamed before falling onto his face and sobbing into the sand.

Brynna trembled as she stared at the shrinking black shapes rowing toward the clipper. More people gathered on the beach.

"The pier!"

"Pier's on fire!"

"Back to town!" Erling called. "Help the wounded! Save what you can of your homes!"

Brynna darted back up the road, nauseated and light-headed. Pounding footsteps overtook her, and Erling shot ahead. Gravel sprayed as he slid to a stop in front of a burning mass of rubble and timber.

A woman screamed from a fenced yard. Lotti. Brynna's schoolteacher. Wisps of chanted multiplication tables echoed in Brynna's ears.

"Brynnal!" Lotti cried. "Aro is in there! Aro!"

Only a shell of the house and part of the second story remained.

Brynna raced towards it.

“Be careful!” Erling called.

She maneuvered to the back, stepping over the remains of a table and dishes with fish and turnips on them.

Hot air rushed from the fire. The wood above creaked. The beam swayed. With a roar, the second story collapsed. Boards, beams, and floor planks fell around her. A smoking post struck her arm. Brynna screamed as the red coals burned through her sleeve and into her flesh. She tumbled into the rubble.

“Brynna!”

She could see nothing. She could say nothing. Pain consumed her thoughts. Darkness. Cries. Answering calls. Movement. Strong hands gripped her and pulled her from under the pile of lumber.

“You’re almost out,” Erling said. “I’ve got you.”

Brynna could only moan.

“We’re putting the wounded in the square.” Another voice.

“I’ll carry her.” Trinan.

“No, I’ve got her. I’ll take her there.”

Erling carried her out of the house. Brynna buried her face in his chest. She smelled the smoke, blood, and sweat on his clothes.

He carried her a while, then settled her on the ground. “Here! Help her!”

“Help her yourself.”

“Is there no one?”

“No one.”

He knelt at her side. “I’ll find a witch. Don’t worry.”

Brynna heard the cries of the wounded, the screams of others when the fight was lost. The pain was strong. Only despair and wretchedness sang, and she succumbed to the thick darkness.

Chapter 45

MEELA

Wyclythe Fortress
Wyclythe Province
Norin

In a cold sweat, Meela wrung her hands. The darkness, usually such a comfort, oppressed her. Her skin crawled, and her throat burned. She stood and paced her chamber in the Wyclythe fortress, rubbing her arms and then shaking her hands, her fingers extended. Anxiety licked her neck, and she whimpered. Something was wrong. Deadly wrong.

Unable to bear it, she seized a candle and struggled with a match. When it broke, she cried out and dashed into the fortress corridor, seeking anything that would vanquish the darkness without and within. Her shoes tapped as she ran on the stones, past the torches lining the walls, not knowing if she was escaping danger or running into its clutches. Blind panic drove her forward, up the stairs, spiraling to the top, and she flung herself onto the roof, gasping in the night air.

She walked toward the railing and gazed toward the Sitalian Bay on the western side of the Wyclythe Province. The sun had long since set, and the moon was following in its footsteps. She touched the iron railing with her fingers and closed her eyes, breathing in the evening winds. Still, her restlessness grew. She walked again, trailing her fingers along the metal and staring at the land in the distance as she moved from one side of the fortress to the other.

She rounded the corner, and the fire filled her view. The flames burned high and stood wider than seemed possible. Robynton. She ran back to the stairs and descended to the main floor where voices shouted and doors slammed and boots pounded.

Meela slipped through the main entrance. Norinians veered toward the stable as others already galloped toward the road and the fire. Hurrying to the treeline, she followed the ancient paths and arrived outside of the town in minutes, well ahead of the riders. She gasped at the enormity of the fire and the horror of the bodies mounding in the streets.

Tears slipped from her eyes as she stepped back and touched the Myrki Stone at her throat. Mystical light emitted from deep within, a jumble of flashes, iridescent greens, reds, yellows, and blues.

She raised her arm, her hand to the sky. Blue light bubbled from her palm, propelled upward like a fountain, flowing forth, then dropping to the ground where it splashed into drops and faded. The flow grew in power, blue morphing into green, aqua, and azure, colors swirling, until it burst high into the sky, a geyser of light that sprayed into the stars and lit the forest and the road, a light strong enough to cast a greenish hue upon the burning town.

Meela held in place as the signal grew brighter, but the energy coursing through her quickly drained her resources. She released it with a cry and allowed her arm to fall. The forest returned to darkness, and the town to its yellow and orange inferno.

Canonical witches stepped from the shadows, witches from Wyclythe and Bryton appearing first, followed by those from Elidel and Safwyn. Minutes later, witches from Corradh joined them. Others would take longer. No ancient paths crossed the rivers.

Meela walked toward the town, her witches behind her, instructions unnecessary.

Screams and shouts augmented the roaring flames. Villagers ran with buckets and carried the dead and dying. Witches paused to tend to the wounded they met, but Meela strode forward, never stopping for the injured, though they clung to her skirts and reached their hands to her.

She sought him.

The town alternated in flames and darkness. She sensed his presence—his life—and a wave of relief filled her chest, the tightness in her throat relaxing. She moved closer and searched until she saw him.

Sol held a child in his arms as he walked toward the square. At the edge, he passed the small form to a man who nodded in thanks. Sol turned, stopping short.

Their eyes met. His many injuries and pain echoed within her, and she rushed toward him.

“I’m fine,” he said, striding toward her as she approached. “The others—”

“The others can wait,” she said, reaching out.

Sol took her hands but held her away from him. “You must conserve your strength for those who most need it. There are many.”

“I will not!” she said, twisting to place her palm on his chest. In a burst of violet light, she instantly sealed the connection despite the resistance she felt. She spiraled through the light, the icy ondilska crashing over her in a strange, chaotic oscillation. She summoned her strength and will and gathered every trace she could, drawing it away from him and sealing it within. A weaker witch would have failed, but Meela held the skill and power to overcome Sol’s reluctance. It was done, and with a cry and a cracking sound, she returned.

Meela stumbled, and Sol took her into his arms, his hand pulling her head against him, his lips kissing her hair. “Stubborn woman,” he muttered.

Meela pressed her cheek to his chest, resting in the sensation of his breath.

Sol took her shoulders and gently held her away. “You must leave me,” he said, looking around them. “This chaos will not last. Someone will see.”

She nodded and stepped back, swallowing hard. He rested his hand on his ceremonial knife and with another glance at the square, strode back into the street.

With the cries of the hurt and mourning in her ears, Meela knelt by the first person she found and healed them as quickly as she could, moving on to the next and the next.

She found the chancellor amidst the rescuers as he pulled groaning survivors from a collapsed building. Trinan met her eyes and nodded to her as he tugged a young man’s arm around his shoulder and walked him to an area for casualties. After assisting the man to the ground, Trinan

returned to her. Blood dripped from his nose and from a gash on his forehead. Soot and blood covered his clothes.

Meela placed her hand on his forehead and closed her eyes to summon the healing stream. Warmer and gentler than the crashing, coursing tumult of Sol's healing, the restorative power lifted her and soaked through her fingers like a spring rain. The cold of his ondilska saturated her hand and flowed through her arms to gather in her chest. Darkness crept into her vision, but she pulled it within her, tightly storing it, preventing its escape. With a snap, the light extinguished, and she blinked.

Trinan wiped the remaining blood from his face and nodded. "Follow me," he said, walking toward the middle of town.

Meela flared her nostrils that he would dare to direct her. He had not uttered a single word of thanks. She considered ignoring him, helping the others who were nearby, at her feet, begging for her help. Yet she must follow the man who knew her secrets, and that understanding created a foul taste in her mouth.

She walked behind him as he approached a small, wiry man sitting in the street. The man cradled a dead woman in his arms whose clothes, from bodice to skirt, were saturated in drying blood.

Trinan stooped and touched the man's shoulder. "Where's Brynnalyn?"

The man exhaled a harsh, ragged breath and wiped his eyes. "The square in front of the brewery. There's an area shielded from the fires where they are placing the injured."

"But she's alive. You—"

"Yes," the man said. "At least she was when I saw her. She's not conscious."

Trinan's face contorted. "You left her? You left your own sister?"

The man clutched the woman's body to his chest as he reared up on his knees. "And what would you have me do?" he cried. "I can't stop this! Kayla's dead! I've lost everything!" He dropped back to the ground and shook with deep sobs as he bent over the woman's body.

Meela stared at him with curiosity. She understood the pain of loss, of watching in horror as those she loved were hurting, yet there remained a barrier between her and the Norinians. She was a witch. She was not one of them.

Trinan motioned for her to follow him as he strode through the town. Groups of villagers called out to him or attempted to stop him, but he paid them no attention. They arrived at a square surrounded by smoking, burnt out structures. The fires in this area had burned out and no longer provided light. Torches had been set to augment the weak, setting moonlight.

Bodies—living, dying, and dead—covered the ground, spread evenly to allow people to walk between them and offer sips of water or an occasional blanket brought in from outside the conflagration. Three of her witches ministered to the injured, and the violet glow from their hands cast monstrous shadows across the charred remains of the surrounding buildings.

Meela followed Trinan as he picked his way through the square, stepping over bodies, lifting blankets to see the faces of the dead. His pace quickened until he knelt by a small figure. "Meela!" he called, raising his hand.

Meela walked to his side and saw the body of a young woman. Her long brown hair spread around her upon the stones, torn and tangled and matted with the blood that

trickled from her ear. Dirt and blood marred her face, except the areas across her cheekbones, where someone had wiped it away. Her eyes, swollen and puffy, rendered her unrecognizable, and had Trinan not said her name in their search, Meela wouldn't have recognized this creature as his attaché. The tattered silk dress had been torn away from her shoulder and arm, and burns, black and crusty, covered the exposed skin. The remains of the blood-soaked dress twisted around her body and exposed her leg to show a bloody laceration on her shin. Her delicate, uncalloused hands lay limp with blisters across the palms, and each irregular breath she took was shallower than the last. She was fading. In less than an hour, she would be dead.

"Heal her," Trinan said.

Meela met his eyes. "And be free of you?"

"You're canonical! She's dying!"

Meela knelt and placed one hand on Brynna's forehead and the other on her chest. The heat flowed, and her hands glowed with a violet light stronger and steadier than that of the witches surrounding them. A frigid rush of icy ondilska cascaded into her soul. She pulled the churning current within her and marveled at the intensity of the hatred interwoven with it. She wondered whether it originated with the aggressors or the victim. It swelled and roared, the closeness to death increasing its power, but she accepted it all. The light wrought changes, visible and wondrous. Brynna's eyelids shrank, and her face returned to its former appearance. Lacerations sealed, and the burns retreated, leaving her skin clear and unscared. Patiently, skillfully, Meela waited until the last drop subsided before relaxing and lifting her hands.

"Brynnalyn," Trinan said, gently shaking the woman awake.

Bryinna's eyelids fluttered, and she pushed herself to sit. "Are you all right?" he asked.

She rubbed her forehead. "Breath, why is this real?"

Meela stood. "I'm needed by others."

Trinan stood as well. "This was an act of your calling. You merely abided by your nature. You remain indebted to me."

Meela narrowed her eyes. "Ungrateful cur!"

He lifted a brow. "I know what I know."

Meela swung away and left the square. Down every street, she found victim after victim. Some she healed. Many were dead. The ondilska built within her as she healed and as she seethed, thinking of the chancellor and his bargain. She held the iciness within, more and more. Her movements weakened, her actions slowed. As the sky lightened, she neared the edge of her endurance.

Chapter 46

BRYNNA

Robynton
Wyclythe Province
Norin

Brynna shrank with horror as she observed the many bodies surrounding her. Some screamed and writhed in pain. Others lay silent, without movement, without breath.

Trinan knelt beside her. “There are things I must do.”

She nodded. “Go. I must find Erling.”

He offered his hand, which she took, and he pulled her to her feet. She rubbed her temples, blinking, and when she looked up, he was gone.

Brynna stumbled through the streets, chilled and shivering, her hair and tattered skirts stiff with dried blood. She tugged at her bodice but couldn’t cover her shoulder or arm, and the cold air stung her newly healed skin. Clouds blanketed the sky, or maybe it was smoke. Many buildings had been completely leveled, and smoke rose from what

remained. One flared up, renewing cries for water, but the call enacted only a lame response in return. Snow flurried and fell, and the tiny flakes sizzled when they hit burning embers, releasing wiggling bursts of steam into the cold air.

The wounded groaned. Blood's metallic smell stung her nose. The sights and smells of gore permeated through her and spread like an oily blackness she could neither stem nor flee. She surveyed the casualties and recognized most of them, all languishing in helplessness and hopelessness. Bodies lay in the gutters, both sleeping and dead. She wondered which one she was.

A man stumbled toward her, carrying a woman in his arms. "Where should I take her? Where are the witches?"

She turned and pointed back at the square. "There. Find them there."

He hurried on.

She walked to the edge of town. The sacred funerary hill, encircled by cedars and browned by winter's chill, rose gently before her. Rows of bodies lay on the grass, and more were being added as each moment passed. To the side, away from the circle of trees, lay more bodies, these scattered and haphazardly thrown into piles. Corpses in crimson uniforms.

Mourners moved within the circle, positioning bodies, weeping over loved ones. She stepped forward, without will, as though her body moved independently, apart from her crushed and bruised spirit. She wandered between mourners as they wept over loved ones. She wandered between rows of bodies. She had come to the area of the dead, but she did not look for Erling among them. Instead, she watched those who walked and embraced and cried. She did not drop her gaze to the ground. She would not. Could not.

Erling crouched next to a body. With one hand, he covered his face; the other held the lifeless hand of his intended. At the sight of him alive, a tremendous gasp shuddered through her.

Brynna stumbled forward up the hill toward her brother.

On Erling's other side lay their father.

She froze. A groan escaped her lips.

Erling rose and reached for her, but she pushed him aside and knelt next to her father, cries growing into sobs. With trembling hands, she rubbed his cheek and kissed his forehead. "Papa!" she cried, sinking to the grass and dropping her head to her father's cold chest. Weak and spent, her sobs faded quickly.

Time passed. She didn't know how long and didn't care. It didn't matter as she lay in the midst of the plodding, unrelenting pain of grief.

The sun broke through the snowy clouds and lit the treetops. The branches glowed in the yellow light, accenting beams that stretched across the sky, lifting the clouds, clearing thoughts. Strengthened by the sight, Brynna sat up. It could have been any other winter morning, sitting with her father, but the strange, lifeless hand in hers bore no resemblance to her dear Papa's. It was the same weight, marked with the same wood stains from years of carving, yet it was not him. He was not there.

She squeezed his hand and waited.

His fingers lay in hers, unchanged, the squeeze unreturned. Confusion and strangeness pressed around her. One moment seemed normal. The morning. The sun. All was the same, nothing had changed. Her heart still beat. Her lungs drew breath. Her body, healed by the witch, moved with increasing strength. Then another wave crashed over

her, and she could not endure the weight of existence on her skin nor the death and pain surrounding her. All was lost, and she could not bear to live.

She straightened her father's collar and touched his vest, satiny and smooth. Her fingers trailed over his pocket, and she caught his watch chain, pulling it out. Erling loved that watch. As a child, he had often begged to hold it to his ear and hear it tick. She rubbed her palm across the bronze surface. Her brother rested his hand on her shoulder, and she lifted the watch to him. He accepted it, opened and shut it with a click, and slipped it into his own pocket. She stood and embraced him.

Together, they wept.

A crow called overhead and swooped toward the forest, its raucous cries fading into the gloom. At the sound, she stepped away from him, but he cast her a glance that begged her to stay. She nodded, and he turned to Kayla.

Dark, dry blood covered Kayla's clothes. Blood and dirt caked her ashen skin where his tender hands had not wiped it away. He approached her slowly, hesitantly, as though fearful of waking her. A new stream of tears crossed his cheeks. He knelt and reached the trembling fingers of both hands to her cheeks, bending his face to hers, touching noses, then kissing her lips. A sob broke deep in his chest and shook his body.

Brynna's vision blurred once more with tears. She dropped to the ground behind him and reached her hands to his shoulders, mourning with him. He gripped her hand as he cried, and she leaned against his back.

Erling reached into his pocket and withdrew an object. She lifted her head to see what it was. As he placed it on Kayla's chest, Brynna realized it was a newly crafted

ceremonial knife with a group of three oak leaves carved into the handle. The Dasveld crest. It was the knife he had had commissioned to present to Kayla at Carthasach during their Teerlagee. He took the Fromyn knife from her side, her everyday knife, which was adorned with its crest of peonies and years of nicks and scratches, and placed it in the sheath at his side.

“Kaylalyn,” he murmured, binding himself to her even in death.

Brynna closed her eyes and dropped her head to his shoulder, shaking with a silent sob.

Time was an impossibility, and yet somehow, it passed. Erling wiped his nose on his sleeve and placed his arm around her. “You and me, Tree Rat. Just you and me now.” She stared at the ground, too exhausted to move, to think, or to respond.

Trinan approached, bearing an expression of firm resolve.

Brynna lifted her head.

He stepped toward her. “We’re regrouping on the road to the wharf.”

Chapter 47

CADOC

Olam Cove
Bryton Province
Norin

Cadoc stood at the helm as he steered *Signy* past Olam Cove. In days past, he would have zipped into the sheltered waters and relished harassing any ships he found there. He would have enjoyed going ashore and raiding the camps of the brigands known to lurk near the sandy beaches. The cove provided a sheltered place to access the caves where slavers would hide their captives until they could be sold to the Gantish. There had always been brigands and slavers to chase, but he lacked both the manpower and time to undertake such missions anymore.

Instead of heading to shore, he veered away, leaving the Cove behind him. He stretched his shoulders, then relaxed into the last leg to Robynton. The morning's sky had displayed a magnificent deep-red sunrise, but now a haze

impacted the visibility he normally would have had sailing in that area. It seemed early for controlled burning.

Cadoc squinted. "Haze is thickening."

Thackery climbed about the deck, piddling with the rigging. "It's an odd one, isn't it, sir?"

A notch appeared on the horizon, and it didn't register to Cadoc as a ship. He lifted his glass. A plume of black and gray smoke rose into the sky precisely where Robynton was due to appear.

"Shit," he whispered, then shouted. "Shit! Fire in Robynton!"

"What?" Thackery said, raising his own glass.

Cadoc crossed to the rigging. "We need to fly! Hoist the topsail!"

"Aye, aye, sir!"

Together, they tightly trimmed the sails and worked to windward for full speed. Cadoc willed them to go ever faster. The harbor came into view, first in the glass, then by sight alone, and his chest spasmed as though it would collapse. The wharf and the shanties nearby either burned or stood charred. He held no sense of pride in having been correct in his predictions. He turned in a circle looking for *Darsham* but saw only open sea. She had certainly sailed to deeper waters to escape any kind of retaliation. Once again, he was too damn late.

In the harbor, Cadoc found the pier charred and broken. He cast a rope and tied up at an isolated post where the dock had burned away. Directing Thackery to stay at the ship and protect it at all costs, he checked his loaded revolver, lowered a coracle, and rowed to shore.

The wharf was a total loss. The buildings were blackened ruins, piles of smoldering timbers. The one shack that still stood at the far end of the eastern side was burning and releasing some of the smoke he had seen. No one threw water on it. No one seemed to have the energy to care. The few who walked around seemed dazed as though they were sleepwalking. Bodies lay waiting for transport to the sacred hill. He recognized those with faces and mourned the loss of able sailors.

Cadoc crossed the sand and walked toward the road where a group had gathered. Raised, angry voices increased his agitation.

“The delegation must act while Norin is gathered for Carthasach,” Trinan was saying to the crowd. “The high king will take audience.”

Trinan’s voice grated on his ears, and he marveled at the scumbag’s audacity. That Trinan dared to address these people when he had caused such a devastating catastrophe sent rage coursing through his veins. He clenched his fists and walked with a powerful stride up the hill toward them.

“Our response,” Trinan said as Cadoc’s anger and pace grew, “must be decided in concert with a quorum of provincial representatives. Only at Lonara in Grand Assembly—”

“Only in Grand Assembly,” Cadoc shouted, “can you finally destroy all of Norin!”

Everyone turned.

Trinan’s face darkened. “You speak absurdities.”

“Shut your fucking mouth, you limp-dicked traitor!” Cadoc lunged forward and drew back his fist to gasps and cries of those around him.

Bryнна stepped from the crowd, her clothes in tatters, her shoulder bare, her skin and hair caked with dirt and blood.

Cadoc stumbled with surprise and lost momentum. Never before had he held a punch midswing. He leaned off-kilter and side stepped, confused by his own action. He stared at her, shocked by her presence, her condition, and the unreadable expression on her face.

Trinan straightened his posture. He jerked at the ends of his filthy shirtsleeves, trying to straighten his cuffs. "This was genocide," he said. "Norin must respond."

Cadoc moved closer. "Norin can't respond! You've fucking hamstrung us! We've no way to counter this Breath-damned massacre!"

"We can! And we will!"

The men stood nose to nose, fists clenched, murderous tempers barely in check.

Trinan stepped back and lifted his chin. "War," he said calmly, "is a last resort, but we must—"

Cadoc shoved him. "Piss off with your lies and bullshit! Words don't revive the dead. This blood is on your fucking hands!"

Trinan sneered. "I don't heed the words of a criminal!"

"Obviously not, because I warned you this would happen! I told you it would! On that very wharf!" He swung his arm to point at the harbor. "Do you all remember?" he called to those crowded around. Their eyes stared but were then diverted as King Wyclythe's open carriage approached. No grand entourage accompanied the king. The footman alone rode at his side.

Cadoc and Trinan separated, a reprieve in the fight. The villagers seemed to revere their king, yet Cadoc saw no relief

on their faces nor heard cheering upon their king's arrival. This was no savior, only a weakened man wrapped in a blanket.

In the pause, Cadoc's eyes strayed back to Brynna. She stood, not with Trinan, but another man. With one look, he realized this man must be her brother, Erling, the quartermaster. They seemed nearly identical, a male and female version of the same entity.

As the carriage slowed and stopped, the footman rose and removed the king's lap blankets. The king stood, allowed the footman to adjust his robe, and alighted. The people pressed closer, whispering.

King Wyclythe surveyed the townspeople. "My children."

The townsmen, as one body, placed their fists on their chests.

"I bid you fond greeting," the king said as his coronet shone, and his voice rang strong. Brynna sank in a curtsy in her blood-stiffened clothes, and Cadoc watched as the other women followed her lead. He wondered if she understood the influence she held in such a moment.

"Report!" the king commanded.

Trinan stepped forward and recounted the entire event, from the bombardment, to the slaughter of the people, to the Removal. The sound of weeping rose from pockets in the crowd. Several times, Cadoc closed his eyes, horrified by the events reported. Trinan recounted a brief list of the prominent dead, including General Rhettyn and, to Cadoc's shock, Seth Dasveld. He glanced at Brynna once more with little wonder that she was so pale.

The king listened attentively, asking no questions.

"There are nearly 200 dead, my king," Trinan said. "Bodies are still being recovered. I estimate the wounded at over

300, though the witches have been at work and a proper count is difficult. I don't know how many people were taken."

King Wyclythe rubbed his chin. "How many fit and able?"

Trinan held his hands to the crowd. "You see them, my king," he said, letting his arms drop.

Wyclythe nodded, silent. His eyes glistened. "Food stores?" he said, his voice weakening.

"Destroyed."

"Buildings?"

"All burned, completely or partially, from here to the sea."

King Wyclythe closed his eyes. "Robynton is no more."

Bryнна pushed past Erling and moved to Trinan's side. "On the contrary, my king," she said, her voice cracking, "Robynton is before you, and Robynton is across the sea in the clutches of the Hykosi." She projected her words, yet the sound was strained and lacked the fullness Cadoc had once heard in her. It seemed as though she had not the vitality to speak loudly, despite her attempt. Even so, the familiar timbre of her voice struck him deeply, and he closed his eyes as a peculiar pang sliced through his chest. He wished she would be silent, if only for his sake. "We are not defeated," she continued. "Rather, we will rise stronger!"

Cadoc huffed at her childish sentiment.

King Wyclythe smiled, pausing a moment before speaking. "I can always count on you, Bryнна, to guide me in a better direction."

Bryнна stepped back, bowing her head.

The king lifted his hand. "Now is a time for encouragement and bonding together. We may not understand why this calamity has befallen us, but we can move forward in unity and strength!"

Cadoc bowed up, puffing his chest. “But we do know why this has happened!” he shouted. “You tore down the only protection you had and now you dare to shelter the Council of Norin!”

Trinan rounded on him, eyes flashing. “This is not a time to lay blame!”

Murmurs rose from the crowd.

“What are our options?” King Wyclythe asked.

“Robynton has fallen,” Trinan said. “We must seek assistance.”

The king nodded. “The closest help, then, would be Jarta.”

“By land, only,” Cadoc said. “Tadsyn is more easily accessible by sea.”

Trinan faced him. “Any sign of Hykosi ships?”

“No.”

“Do you know where they sail?”

Cadoc crossed his arms. “Ask your own fucking captains.”

Trinan narrowed his eyes. “You b—”

“I can make a return voyage for supplies,” Cadoc said, motioning to the harbor. “I can send my barge as well, fully loaded with whatever is needed.”

The king nodded. “An invaluable service.”

“It’s the only decent thing to do,” Cadoc said. He despised the small, weak nature of the assistance he could provide and imagined what he could do if only he had his full fleet once more. Yet if he had had his fleet, the burning of Robynton would not have occurred in the first place. His powerlessness rankled his pride. He glared at Brynna—the one who had ruined everything—and said, “I could do more if I still controlled a fleet.” He knew it was a low blow, especially at this moment and in this place, but he was itching

to fight someone, anyone, even her, perhaps especially her. He braced for her venom, ready to spar, even if only with words.

“Yes,” she said, averting her eyes.

He stepped back, puzzled and deflated. He had expected repartee, some exhibit of her animosity now that she no longer had to act the part of his lover. She could stand there and crow over him, but instead she displayed the same remorse she had shown at his arrest. It gave him nothing to push against, nothing to fight, nothing to hate. It irritated him.

King Wyclythe raised his arm. “I thank you, Commodore Andersyn, for your kind assistance. However,” his voice dropped into deep and powerful tones, “that will not be our only response.”

Cadoc looked up at the new sound.

Fire smoldered in Wyclythe’s eyes. The king clenched his fist. “This was an act of war. We must counter it!”

Concerned voices rose in the crowd.

Trinan lifted his arm. “We must go to the Great Circle of Lonara and rally all of Norin. If we do not avenge this violence against Wyclythe,” he said to the crowd, “the entire country will suffer the same fate!”

Cadoc faced him. “Impossible! We don’t have the means to raise a strong army nor to feed and supply it. Norin is already teetering on the edge of collapse. If we challenge them in war, destruction and starvation will spread throughout Norin. They will annihilate us! There are other ways!”

“You dishonor your nation!” Erling shouted. “We can defend ourselves!”

Cadoc swung around. “There is no honor in extermination. Norin has already lost. We must negotiate—”

“Coward!” Erling shouted.

Cadoc moved for his revolver.

“No!” Brynna cried, throwing herself towards Cadoc, her hands striking his chest to push him back.

He stopped, his hand resting on the revolver’s grip, his breath shaking with anger and insult. Looking down at her, he sought her eyes as though they were a source of comfort, but she turned her face away. Still, his tension dissipated, and he stepped away from her brother. Her hands dropped once more to her sides, but her resonance remained with him.

King Wyclythe placed his hand on Erling’s shoulder. “The commodore is offering great assistance.”

Erling frowned, but nodded sullenly, recanting.

Cadoc glared at him.

The king addressed the crowd. “Robynton has fallen. If we tolerate this attack, then Robynton remains exactly that. Lifeless and beaten.” An angry ripple spread through the people. “Unchecked, this attack will embolden and empower the Hykosi toward even more vile, tyrannical acts.” The crowd grew louder. “And so! We shall avenge this massacre! To war!”

The crowd cheered with new vigor. The townspeople rallied around their king, and he stood straight and nodded and seemed like a young man again. Trinan furrowed his brow as though he observed great wisdom in the king’s speech. Erling stood as tall as he could, lifting his heels slightly, ready for action.

Cadoc shook his head and swore, anger boiling within. Their stupidity would get them all killed.

King Wyclythe struggled to achieve quiet enough in the crowd for him to speak. “My place is here with my people.

I shall send a delegation to Lonara in my stead. How many horses do we have?"

"None in town," Trinan said. "Those that survived the blast and the fire have fled. The only remaining horses are at the fortress or are being used in the recovery."

"Then those I send must walk," Wyclythe said. "Erling Dasveld."

Erling stepped forward. "Yes, my king?"

"You will organize the logistics of the delegation and lead them to Lonara."

Erling bowed his head. "My actions for your majesty." He stepped back.

"Trinan Walyss," the king called.

Trinan stepped forward, towering over the age-bent king. "Kneel."

Cadoc groaned, disgusted by what he knew was about to occur.

Chancellor Trinan Walyss knelt before his king.

The king lifted his golden coronet and placed it on Trinan's head. "You will bear the weight of my sovereignty. Attend the council in my stead and cast your vote as I would."

Trinan placed his fist on his chest. "My actions for your majesty."

"Rise, Trinan Walyss, Regent of Wyclythe."

Regent Trinan Walyss stood and faced the town. Cheers erupted.

Cadoc rolled his eyes, repulsed.

"My king?" Brynna said.

The king pivoted toward her. "Yes, Brynna."

"Carthasach, my king," she said. "What of Carthasach itself? To miss such a sacred event. There are expectations.

Requirements. Wyclythe Province must meet its obligations in the Circle. The high king expects our tribute, and we must dance Basigh for those we have lost. Our festivals are the essence of our people. The Hykosi have destroyed our homes and our families. We can't let them destroy what it means to be Norinian. It is our sacred duty."

Cadoc weighed her words and reluctantly saw the importance of them. Though he despised the act of agreeing with her, she was correct, and he nodded in her support.

King Wyclythe lifted his chin. "Brynna, you will also join the delegation. Dance Basigh on behalf of all and represent the province of Wyclythe in any other rituals required."

"Wait," Erling said, holding up both of his hands. "Brynna on the delegation?" He motioned to the crowd. "We have other dancers. She doesn't need to go."

"It is appropriate for her to travel to the Circle," the king said. "She should be at the regent's right hand."

"Then we must take a witch, too," Erling insisted. "She cannot endure such a journey right now! She was nearly dead only a few hours ago!"

Cadoc's gaze flew back to her face. The fatigue in her eyes. The pale skin. Her weak voice. His stomach twisted, but he quickly disregarded it, looking away, turning once more toward the king. The near death of an attaché meant nothing more to him than that of a farmer or a blacksmith or a dairymaid. Nothing more.

"Was her healing insufficient?" the king asked.

"I am strong enough!" Brynna said, her voice cracking once more.

Cadoc tightened his jaw.

Trinan turned to the crowd. "Meela?"

The people fell away as a witch in glimmering purple robes approached. "She was near death," the witch said. "I have healed her, but her strength may be affected for a while."

"Then you will travel with us," Trinan said. "You will assist her."

She bowed in assent with an expression of contempt.

King Wyclythe smiled. "Very good. And I shall supply the provincial tribute from my treasury. Sol Frontyn!"

A huntsman walked from the edge of the crowd. Cadoc blinked with a double take. It was the same man who had stood outside his office the night Brynna had stolen the manifest.

The king nodded. "Sol, you will deliver what remains of our tribute to High King Corradh."

Sol bowed.

The king raised his arms over the delegation. "May your journey bring renewal and prosperity to us all!"

The crowd shouted in response, channeling their anger and bloodlust. Talk erupted as people discussed the coming war, and the crowd dispersed.

Cadoc remained in place as the many people moved around him, forming other groups and walking back toward town. The delegation would seek war to reclaim Norin's honor, but they didn't understand the horrors that awaited them if that decision came to pass, the suffering he knew would follow. He had been right once before. To see the same happen again throughout his entire country filled him with deep dread and a sensation of defeat. He turned toward the beach, but at the sight of her, stopped short.

Brynna stood on the opposite side of the dirt path, facing him, still and pale. Her eyes, clear and blue and somehow questioning, prodded him.

He stared at her. Words built within him, scattered then organized, building in pressure until he could finally bring himself to speak. "Most of the women I'm with beg me for baubles and trinkets." He took a ragged breath. "Some are bold and ask for watered silks or exotic perfumes." A derisive laugh escaped his lips. "Or flowers! Gara wanted a single bloom of Talahmese oleander." He paused and shook his head. "But not you. No, you demanded five-generations' worth of empire, all my business ventures, and my livelihood."

Her gaze remained connected with his, though her struggle to do so played out on her face as her brows met together in pain. Her lips remained still, accepting every accusation without defense.

He shook his head again as anger and pain welled within him. "Damn you."

She winced, and a tear formed and spilled down her cheek.

He tore his gaze away and surveyed the smoldering wharf, searching for words, searching for peace. Only the breakwater remained. He stared at it. "The brightest butterfly holds the bitterest poison."

He looked back at her. Her escaping breath crushed her chest, deepening hollows around her collarbones and bare shoulder, and still she made no sound, no cry, no whimper. He wished to command her to speak to him, to compel her voice into his hearing. He wanted to demand a response, to shout at her and for her to shout back, but he faltered and

mocked himself as a fool. She had ruined him. Trampled him. Crushed everything that had made him successful, that had made him a man. He was struck with a thousand emotions, each warring for control of his consciousness. He could endure her presence no longer.

Cadoc stalked away. He crossed the beach and ran the coracle into the water. His muscles pulled against the oars, and he welcomed the burning sensation as he returned to his sloop.

“What’s the word?” Thackery asked as Cadoc climbed aboard.

Cadoc scowled. “War.”

Thackery puffed his cheeks. “I thought they might do that.”

“It’s fucking absurd,” Cadoc said. “They have no army. No means to raise one. And no central government to keep factions from fighting against each other.” He flung his hand back toward the smoldering ruins. “Yet they think they’re going to war!” he yelled at the beach.

Thackery crossed his arms.

“And now!” Cadoc continued, swinging back to face Thackery. “Now! Trinan Walyss is fucking regent! The most vile, ignorant—” He growled in place of words he couldn’t think of. “—traitor Norin has ever seen.”

“Is there no one who can speak sense to them?”

“No one.”

Thackery nodded. “Will you go to Lonara, then, to speak your piece?”

Cadoc considered. He could sail to Bryton to find a horse that would take him there. He could speak to the Grand Assembly. But such a journey would detract from his support

of the recovery effort and would mean more frustration. In Lonara, he would be forced to see and hear Trinan. He would see her.

“No,” he said. “No! I will not. I’m finished with them. Fuck them! Fuck them all! They’ve brought this on themselves over and over and over. I’ve done everything I can. If they want war, so be it!”

Chapter 48

MARCUS

Nalta
Gantu

Marcus dismounted and tossed the reins to the stable boy. He walked toward the inn, portfolio in hand and hunger in his stomach. He intended to check on Nora while he ate lunch with Lor and then ride out of town toward the Niq Niq Bog once again to find Ingrid. He had honed his skills, both of sneaking away without being seen and of navigating through the swampy land fit for nothing but the concealment of those who wished to hide.

The night before, he had snuck away from his father's house in the dead of night and ridden to the bog. There, he had traced his finger along dappled moonlight as it had formed patterns across her skin. In the curves and shadows, he had found inspiration, the result of which was a new design he wished to show her. He carried the drawings he had hastily drawn that morning and looked forward to

asking her opinion on them. He smiled to himself at the thought of seeing her again, of kissing her again.

Nora hurried toward him, wringing her hands. Her tear-stained face displayed streaks of worry, and he braced himself for the need to confront Safiyya.

“Sir, I’m sorry! I’m so sorry!” she cried, standing before him, her head down and her shoulders stooped.

“Whatever for?” he asked. “What is all this?”

“I lost it,” she said, looking up. “I stole it, and then I lost it.”

“Nora, what are you talking about?”

“Your pen, sir.”

“My pen?”

“The beautiful crystal pen with your name on it! You left it at the inn when you spoke to Safiyya,” she said. “I found it. I was going to return it, but I wanted it so badly, so I kept it. I stole it from you! I’m so sorry!” She burst into tears again. “And now,” she said, sniffing, “I’ve lost it! I’ve searched everywhere, and I can’t return it to you even if I had the strength to do so!”

Marcus’s lips quivered as he struggled to withhold his laugh. “We can’t have this, can we?”

She shook her down-turned head. “No, sir. I’m sorry.”

He paused. “I meant your tears.” He reached into his jacket. “I keep two on me at a time. It’s no loss. Here, have another to replace it.” He handed her another crystal pen with “Marcus Izîl Regá” engraved on the side. Nora gulped, and he handed her his handkerchief as well. “Now wipe your face. I’m sure you have work to do.”

She smiled and dabbed her face with his handkerchief before hesitating and offering it back.

He chuckled. “Keep it.”

“Thank you, sir!” she said, beaming and holding the handkerchief to her chest. “Thank you so much!”

Marcus watched her as she ran back to the inn, turning around every few steps to wave at him. He waved back as Lor walked to his side.

“What was that all about?” Lor asked in the tone of a disappointed older brother.

“Oh, nothing,” Marcus said, knowing Lor would never understand. “Shall we?” He motioned toward the inn’s porch as he noticed a contingent of the Nalta Guards approaching on horseback. They moved with strong purpose, more than they would on patrol.

Lieutenant Nyok dismounted and approached. “Gran Messer Marcus Regá.”

Marcus furrowed his brow. “Yes?”

“I’m placing you under arrest,” he said, motioning to the other guards to take his arms and bind him.

“Absurd!” Marcus said. “I—”

“Shut up,” Lor said, pressing a hand on Marcus’s shoulder as he stepped forward. “On what charges, Nyok?”

Nyok remained unmoved and unflustered. “Trespassing in a restricted area and theft of explosive materials from a licensed dealer.”

“Trespassing!” Marcus shouted. “Nyok, you—”

Lor grabbed Marcus’s collar. “Shut up, if you know what’s good for you!”

Marcus glared as the guards bound his hands, but he obeyed. As humiliating as it was to be arrested in the street in front of the entire town, he knew he would be quickly exonerated. Even so, it kicked him in the gut to be arrested in front of his smart, perfect, favored elder brother. “I don’t need your help,” Marcus said through gritted teeth.

Lor leaned closer. "I'm the only attorney you have, so I'd say you do." He turned to Nyok. "Can we discuss this with you further?"

Nyok nodded. "You are welcome in my office."

They walked through town and toward the Nalta Guards' compound. Marcus had never been inside before, though Lor seemed familiar enough with it. The guards saluted Lieutenant Nyok as they passed through the shadows cast by the tall guard towers and moved within the stockade. Several low buildings stood in the area as well as a stable. One seemed to be the guards' living quarters, one a large dining and meeting hall. The last contained the offices and Nyok's quarters.

They entered the lieutenant's office, which was a large room, sparsely furnished. A shabby rug filled most of the area. A fire burned on the hearth, and the walls held the heat. Nyok's desk chair scraped against the wooden floor as he pulled it back to sit.

"Please," Nyok said, gesturing to a chair for Lor.

A guard shoved Marcus into place, standing before the desk, while Lor sat and crossed his ankle on his knee as though he were discussing the weather or an economic theory.

"Would you mind untying Marcus so that we can all discuss this like gentlemen?" Lor asked.

Nyok's lips puckered like he had eaten sour grapes. "That's against procedure."

"Yes," Lor said, nodding. "I'm sure it is, but I doubt Marcus will run far with your guards here in the room, at the door, and at the entrance of the compound."

Nyok hesitated, and his eyes blinked several times in the strange way he had. His eyelids closed slightly too hard,

moving a larger area of his face, as though he only blinked with conscious intention. He nodded to the guard. Marcus was unbound, for which he was grateful. He rubbed his wrists as he pulled a chair next to Lor and waited, feeling the first tremors of anxiety break through his indignation.

“Now what is the situation?” Lor asked.

Nyok examined several papers on his desk. He gave the appearance of placing things in order, but Marcus guessed he was intentionally pausing for time in order to seem stronger and more in control, especially as he faced two grand sabhirim. He supposed Nyok didn’t see how weak he truly felt.

“This morning,” Nyok said, “I received a report that a crate of explosives allegedly ordered by Atógo had been stolen from the port authority warehouse.”

“Atógo? The valsydian miners?” Marcus asked.

Lor glared at him for interrupting, but Marcus needed to know precisely with whom he was dealing—the Atógo Mining Company owned Ingrid.

“Yes,” Nyok said. “The port authority reported that a crate of explosives had been stolen from the warehouse at the wharf. I examined the scene and found nothing else amiss, save an unlocked side door.”

“Why would you link this to Marcus?” Lor asked.

“Because of this.”

Nyok placed a pen on the desk.

Marcus Izîl Regá.

Marcus stared at his pen. The one Nora had lost. Either the thief had stolen it from her, or she was the one who had stolen the explosives, probably at Elias’s bidding. He closed his eyes. He couldn’t tell them who had dropped it.

He would not betray her, both for her sake and for the sake of the underground movement.

“That’s yours?” Lor asked.

Marcus hesitated, then nodded.

“Anyone could have picked that up,” Lor said. “Marcus is always drawing at the inn’s tavern.”

Marcus’s spirits lifted, and he admired Lor’s skill at his trade.

Nyok nodded. “That’s what I thought, too, so I went to your estate this morning and questioned a few of your servants and slaves. Marcus was seen leaving the property last night about eleven.”

Marcus’s stomach dropped.

Lor waved his fingers as if the news of that didn’t surprise him. “Slaves will talk.”

“And sometimes tell the truth,” Nyok said. He looked at Marcus. “Gran Messer Regá, where were you between eleven last night when you were seen leaving the estate and six this morning when the theft was discovered?”

“Don’t answer that,” Lor said, quickly.

“He can’t answer a simple question about his whereabouts?” Nyok asked.

Marcus masked his face and held as still as possible while Lor and Nyok argued. He stared at the edge of the desk. He had been with Ingrid, hiding on the edges of the Niq Niq Bog, listening to her laugh as they lay on the soft moss, wrapped in blankets, and watching the moon sail past the tree canopy above them. Nyok would learn nothing of that from him. Nothing. He would die first.

Or lie.

If Nora was the thief, she would need an alibi as much as he did. If they said they were together, they could vouch

for each other. He could call Safiyya to testify that she had seen them together prior to that night—they had a history of walking out together at night. No one would believe they had only been walking, but if he were convicted of debauchery he would only pay a small fine, much less than the penalties outlined for theft. She would be beaten, then, but if he bribed the right person, he could spare her that.

Lor lifted his hand. “I need to speak with—”

“I was with Nora,” Marcus said.

Lor’s hand slowly sank to his lap as he heavily sighed.

Nyok furrowed his brow. “Nora Jlassi? The slave at the inn?”

Marcus nodded.

“I see,” Nyok said.

“You know her?” Lor asked the lieutenant. “This slave?”

Nyok nodded. “I do. I found her out walking one night and sent her back to the inn. I had suspicions concerning her activity then, but no proof.” He looked at Marcus and hesitated. “What were you doing?”

Marcus swallowed. “Would you believe we were out walking?”

“It doesn’t matter what I believe,” Nyok said, “only what the truth is. And how the judges rule.”

Lor leaned forward. “You would still try him? He just said he was with a slave girl!”

“I have evidence that literally bears his name,” Nyok said. “I can’t overlook that.”

Lor leaned forward. “May I remind you we are grand sabhirim?”

Nyok folded his hands. “And what does that mean?”

“I think you know.”

Nyok's face remained impassive, but he leveled an intense glare at both of them. "I maintain a deep respect for the rule of law and the impartiality of justice. A crime has been committed. I have evidence pointing to an individual. It is my duty to turn that evidence over to the court, regardless of who that individual is."

"I'm aware of your devotion to order," Lor said. "But it was only a box of explosives. That's a very small matter, if you think about it. I'm sure we can work something out. Your salary is meager. I can pay for the box and make that transaction worth your while."

Nyok lifted his brow. "Shall I add a charge of attempting to bribe an officer? Gantish Code 722.1."

Lor paused. "No."

Nyok addressed Marcus. "Gran Messer Regá, you will be moved to the Nalta jail here within the compound until your trial date."

"You can't be serious!" Lor said, his voice loud. "He's not a flight risk. He should be released until trial."

Nyok once more leveled his gaze. "Did you or did you not attempt to bribe me only a moment ago?" His voice was strong, and his words seemed to echo through the room. Nyok shifted several papers on his desk before looking up again. "Sergeant Misko, take Gran Messer Regá to a cell."

The guard walked to stand at Marcus's side. Marcus looked up, then slowly stood.

Lor grasped his shoulder. "I'll get you out. We'll fix this. Don't worry." He faced Nyok. "I need to speak to my client in private."

"At the jail will be sufficient," Nyok said. "You may stand at the door of the cell under the guards' supervision."

Lor frowned but didn't argue.

Sergeant Misko led Marcus to the cell, and Marcus walked without arguing or fighting. He held his head high, but his face was drawn. He was certain Nyok would question Nora. She needed to be told of his situation and the story he had concocted before that happened, or all was lost.

The guard opened the cell door for Marcus. In the light from the small, barred window, Marcus saw a tiny cot with a chamber pot beneath it, the only items in the room. The door closed behind him, and the key clicked in the lock as he turned back.

Lor leaned his face near the bars at the square opening in the heavy locked door. "What the hell did you do?"

Marcus shrugged. "Nothing," he said. "Truly nothing."

"Did you steal the explosives?"

"No," Marcus said, his voice flat.

"Then where were you last night?"

"I can't tell you that."

"And I can't help you unless you do," Lor said. "Listen, I know I got onto you before about fraternizing with slaves, but if you slept with that girl last night, it may save your skin!"

"I didn't," Marcus said. "I wasn't with her at all."

"What?" Lor exclaimed, then glanced at the guard and lowered his voice again. "Why did you—"

"You need to go to her now and tell her my story," Marcus said. "Tell her I said I was with her. Tell her I'm in jail and that she needs to say I was with her last night."

Lor paused. "Will I need to bribe her?"

"No," Marcus said. "She'll do it anyway."

"Why would she do that?"

Marcus sighed. "She's in love with me."

"So you're manipulating her because of her affections. That's low, Marcus."

Marcus ground his teeth. He was almost certain Nora had stolen the explosives. His story would protect her, too. If he lost standing in Lor's eyes, so be it.

"It's not a good situation, I know that," Marcus said, "but just the same, you need to go to her."

Lor sighed. "Where were you, Marcus?" Lor asked with the voice of a brother.

A moment passed. Marcus wished to answer. He wanted to tell Lor everything and had wanted to for months. He had longed for his family to meet his bride, to wish them happiness for the future, but it was not to be. Silence was the only answer he could give.

"All right," Lor said, his tone hardening once more. "I'll go see her."

Marcus nodded. "Thank you." He heard no answer except the closing and locking of the outer jail door.

Chapter 49

BRYNNA

Robynton
Wyclythe Province
Norin

Brynna placed three small loaves of bread in a burlap bag, mentally listing four other things to add. The delegation needed to procure all the supplies for the trip, and it was proving to be a difficult task.

Trinan sat on the tack room table near her, his back against the wall. “Some votes are obvious. Queen Gara of Elidel will vote for war. They rise and fall with us.”

Brynna bristled at the mention of the name Cadoc had thrown at her only an hour before. Gara and her stupid Talahmese oleander. After a moment, she took a breath and started counting portions of dried meat. “We don’t have enough meat. Or bread.”

He picked up a piece of straw and chewed on it. “We can hunt on the trail,” he said, absentmindedly. “Safwyn, Ladvyl, and Bryton will vote with us, too.”

“Yes, all the southern provinces should be reliable,” she said, cinching the bag closed and tucking it into her knapsack. A throbbing headache muddled her thoughts, and her arm, where it had been burned, ached again, despite having been healed. “I don’t think we’ll have time to hunt on the trail.”

He grunted. “King Amiman will be reluctant. Always has been a pussy.”

“Hardly. You just don’t like him,” she said with a shrug. “The northern provinces will sustain more losses, so they are more hesitant.”

Trinan threw the straw to the floor. “Cowards just the same. Lincanly is a risk, too. We have few contacts there, and it’s difficult here at the outset to know what they’ll do. Especially with Rand Luuk elbowing his way into power with the king—fucking immigrant. I don’t know much of anything about him, and there’s no time to build an intelligence report before we call for a vote, especially without horses for travel.”

She hummed. “I wonder if Clara has heard anything about him?”

Trinan huffed. “Clara knows shockingly little about the world.”

“She could learn things about him when we get there.”

“I will have no need of her in Lonara,” he said. “She will stay here for now and travel later with the larger group.”

Brynna looked up. “She’s my assistant, not yours. I may need her.”

“Food is short. You said so yourself. She will stay.”

Anger warmed her stomach. “Yes, my lord.”

He cleared his throat. “What about Ryntoth?”

Bryнна stepped back from the bags and crossed her arms. "Same situation. I haven't spent a lot of time there. What did Wyclythe's cabinet say?"

"Damn the cabinet," he said. "And the generals! I can't rely on them. All of them together lack the genius found in General Rhettyn's little finger. Fuck her death! Such a loss!" He sighed and leaned back against the wall again. "Where does that put us?"

Bryнна counted on her fingers. "Wyclythe, Elidel, Safwyn, Ladvyl, Bryton. Five for sure. Amiman, Grymsin, and probably Lincanly against. With Ryntoth and Niemynyn unknown."

"Niemynyn is for us," he said firmly.

Bryнна raised her brow at his certainty. "You're sure? It's a northern province."

"Definitely. So Wyclythe, Elidel, Safwyn, Ladvyl, Bryton, and Niemynyn. That's six. We need one more. The vote will fail unless we swing Ryntoth in our favor. I need intel on Hykosi movement in Ryntoth Province as well as word on their responses and openness to war."

"But what of Corradh?" she asked. "The high king can sway all of them."

Trinan shook his head. "He can't counter the vote if we have seven provinces in agreement. It's a super majority. Plus, going to war would mean centralizing power under his control for the sake of a common army. He can't move in that direction without an appearance of self-aggrandizement. He must abstain from this process entirely or risk his own neck."

Erling entered, carrying a jumble of canvas and stakes. He dropped all of it as well as the large pack he had on his back. "Shelters. You've got food?"

"It's ready," Brynna said. "It's not enough, though. Not for all of us and not for that many days and not in the cold. The temperature's already dropping."

"It'll only take three days," Trinan said.

Brynna lifted her brow. "Three? We're hardly fresh and rested."

Trinan nodded as he climbed off the table. "We must arrive before the Carthasach Circle disbands. We'll have Meela. It'll be fine."

Erling frowned. "You can only push a witch so far."

"I have utmost confidence in Meela," Trinan said. "She's the most powerful canonical witch in Norin."

"She's still a witch," Erling said. "They have their own ways. If we—"

Trinan raised his palm in dismissal. "I have no concerns. I have her well in hand." He left the tack room through the burned out doorway that rattled as he passed through. A chunk of charred wood fell to what remained of the floor.

Brynna propped her hands on her hips as she watched him leave. She glanced at Erling. "There's too much to do. All of these supplies, and I still have paperwork to sign off on at the fortress."

"One step at a time."

She huffed. "We need more food. I guess I'll get some from the fortress when I go up there."

"I saw someone selling some on the edge of town," he said, motioning his head toward the door. "Shall we look?"

She nodded. "Better than having to carry it all the way back from the fortress."

Brynna and Erling walked through the strange, black, charred landscape as it continued to smoke. The cries of the grieving rose and fell with papery ash. Brynna fought the

impulse to block the sounds, to stuff her ears with linen or burlap or screams of her own.

A man separated from a group of huddled forms. "Erling!" Brynna saw no recognition on her brother's face.

"Yes?" Erling said.

"Your loss is mine," the man said, holding out his hand.

Erling shook it. "Thank you. You are?"

"A friend. Your father was an inspiration. I—we all—" he gestured to the group, "want you to know we stand behind you as you carry his legacy." The man clapped his hand on Erling's shoulder, and the others gathered close.

"His. . . legacy," Erling repeated.

"Norin Å Sdolevy!" the man cried.

"Norin Å Sdolevy!" the surrounding group answered.

Brynna stepped back, confused and disturbed.

Erling furrowed his brow. "Um, Norin Å Sdolevy. Yes. Sure." He grasped Brynna's elbow and continued walking, quickly turning a corner.

"What was that all about?" Brynna asked.

He chuckled nervously. "I don't know. They've been through a tragedy, I guess. Pulling together as a people, I—I guess."

She looked back to see if they were following her, but no one was there. "Norin Å Sdolevy," she said. "They're very patriotic."

"I think the rebels fighting against Hykosi occupation use that as a rallying cry or something."

"What does any of that have to do with Papa?"

Erling rubbed his head. "He inspired many people. Maybe? I mean, his art moved people, especially his altarpiece at the Great Circle. Think of how many visitors we had at the house after it was installed."

“I suppose.”

Their steps slowed as the sacred hill returned to their view. Her heart palpitated. She didn't want to walk past it. She didn't want it to exist. Erling clasped her hand, and they walked together, hand in hand, just as they always had as children scared of ghosts.

Motion caught Brynna's eye. Men pulled Hykosi bodies toward the road. Others hauled logs to still more men, who were chopping the ends with axes. Some dug holes. Gibbet after gibbet after gibbet after gibbet lined the road, inverted claws rising.

“Walk,” Erling snapped. “Walk faster.”

“What? Why?” she asked, trying to see what could be worse than piles of bodies and gibbet construction. “What are they doing?”

“Don't look. Just walk.”

She kept up at his side but looked over her shoulder to see.

Hykosi bodies rose over the road. Some were hung by the neck, some impaled on pikes. All had been stripped. The skin had been scraped from their limbs, and their genitals and ears had been cut off. Staring eyes bulged—where there were still eyes. Tongues protruded, mottled and grotesque—where there were still tongues. Dogs growled and fought over the blood and juices that dripped onto the road.

Brynna gasped then retched, spots forming before her eyes. She lurched forward.

“Whoa, easy,” Erling said and held her tightly.

The air cooled. Brynna blinked and breathed.

“All right?” he asked.

“Yes,” she said, unsure of her legs or her voice.

A commotion rounded the corner. A large crowd of shouting, angry people moved toward gibbet row. Brynna watched, stunned, until Erling dragged her out of the path, and they stumbled backward, away from the road.

As the group came closer and closer, Erling grabbed a young boy who skipped ahead. "What's going on?"

The boy rubbed his sleeve over his snotty nose. "They caught a 'Kosi! Hiding in a stable he was!" He pulled away and ran back to the crowd.

"First Breath," Brynna said.

She stared as a confusion of bodies and fists and stomping feet unleashed a town's worth of grief and anger. At the epicenter, they dragged a screaming man. His animalistic shrieks tore at her ears. Like the bodies of his comrades, he had been stripped of his uniform, down to the skin. Blood and dirt caked his lower body. Men kicked and spat on him and stabbed with pikes.

Erling's face changed from shock into a contortion of rage. He pushed through the crowd. Three men tumbled, and he fell with them.

"Erling!" Brynna screamed, unable to see him.

He clambered back to his feet and dove further in. Brynna lost sight of him once more amid the confusion as the shouts of the crowd drowned the screeches at the riot's center.

A shot rang out.

The shock threw the crowd back, and voices stilled.

Brynna shoved herself forward through a break in the wall of people. Erling's arm remained extended, his hand gripping his revolver. The Hykosi soldier lay dead, shot in the face.

The crowd was undeterred. The noise grew again, and the mass of people rushed forward. They dragged the body toward gibbet row. The crowd followed, jeering and yelling.

Erling remained in the middle of the street, standing in the pool of blood. He holstered his weapon. For a moment, their eyes met, but his gaze faded, and he walked away.

Chapter 50

NORA

Nalta
Gantu

Sweat soaked through Nora's bodice as she pumped water into the bucket. She wiped her arm across her forehead and then lifted the bucket to the worktable behind the inn where she would wash the first of the lunch dishes. With a glance at the yard, she reached into her pocket and touched the new pen with Marcus's name on it. She knew each bump and crevice by memory and spelled his name by feel.

"Nora," Safiyya said.

Nora flung herself around to see her mistress standing in the back doorway. The bucket handle clanged against the side. Safiyya's stern eyes flashed, but her forehead wrinkled with worry.

"Lieutenant Nyok is here," she said. "He wants to ask you some questions."

Nora failed to breathe. He was here to arrest her for the explosives. He would bind her hands and throw her in jail.

There would be no trial. She would be beaten and then have some form of torturous death devised for her. She would be hanged. Or burned alive. Or both.

She could run. The yard was open at the back. She could run out of town and hide in the Niq Niq Bog. She had heard of slaves doing that, hiding among the thorny plants and quicksand, avoiding the noxious fumes and polluted runoff from the mine.

She could run to the wharf and wait until Cadoc came back. She would stowaway on his sloop, and he would sail her to Norin, and she would make her way to Hykos like the children had.

She could run to Marcus's workshop. He would hide her. She could live in his workshop and see the sparkling showroom and help with his work, and he would see how useful she was and fall in love with her and grant her a veil.

She followed Safiyya into the inn.

"He's in the front sitting room," Safiyya said.

"Yes, ma'am," she said and walked to the front room.

Lieutenant Nyok sat in the quiet room at the desk where Marcus had once sat to write his letters. He, too, was writing. His clothes, dark and gray and sinister, were covered by his burgundy taylasan which made him seem even more scary.

"Close the door behind you," he said without looking up.

She obeyed, then stood in the middle of the floor, her sweaty palms clasped before her.

He continued to write, and her anxiety and awkwardness grew. The clock on the mantel ticked, and it rang in her ears like a gong.

Finally, he placed his pen on the desk and folded the paper. She waited still longer as he lit the wax and dropped it

to the page and closed the message with an official stamp. Only then did he look up and tent his fingers.

“You are Nora Jlassi,” he said, his eyes meeting hers.

“Yes,” she whispered, trembling.

“And you—”

A knock at the door echoed through the room.

Nyok paused, but Nora saw no further reaction in his face. “You—”

The knock sounded again, insistent. “Lieutenant!” a voice called.

Nyok continued to stare at Nora. “Enter.”

The door opened. “A message for you,” a guard said.

“I’m in interrogation,” Nyok said, his voice even, and his eyes still locked on Nora. “It can wait.”

“With due respect, sir,” the guard said, “it cannot.”

Nyok broke his gaze from Nora and looked at the guard. “Go on.”

“The Hykosi destroyed Robynton last night. They fired artillery from *Darsham* and then sent in shock troops as well as their occupation forces. They burned it to the ground, massacred the people, killed the king, and seized enough slaves to fill a barge that has just arrived in the harbor.”

Nora’s eyes widened.

Nyok stood, gathered his papers, and exited the room without a word, the other guard following.

The clock on the mantle ticked. Nora looked from one side of the room to the other, then pivoted and left.

The last of the lunch crowd was filtering out as Nora passed through the dining room where Lor Regá stood in conversation with Safiyya. Lor’s somber clothes in navy blues and dark grays, suited his reserved manner. He never wore tassels or ornaments nor followed any of the fads so

common among the sabhirim. Though she had seen him laugh and enjoy himself, he always maintained a tranquil demeanor as if he were too wise to be ruffled by pleasures and trivialities.

Lor looked at Nora, and then Safiyya did, too, as though Nora were the subject of their conversation. She moved closer, wishing to hear, and they failed to quell their words at her approach.

Safiyya tugged at her apron string, a habit she had when she was irritated. “I appreciate your patronage, sir, but I’ll remind you as I reminded your brother—if you want time with Nora or any of my girls, I will need my full fee.”

Nora’s stomach twisted. She did not want to work upstairs.

Lor straightened, and his brow furrowed. “I have never once—”

“My full fee,” she said again.

He pressed his lips together and took a full breath. “How much?”

“700 brek sterling.”

Lor glared as he pulled his checkbook from his jacket pocket. He scribbled the amount and handed it to her.

Ice flooded Nora’s body. He had bought her. He had paid money for the ability to do anything he liked to her. She stared at him in shock.

Safiyya tucked the check into her apron. “Thank you.” She motioned to Nora and said, “Follow me,” as she led the way to the stairs.

Lor held out his hand to allow Nora to proceed ahead of him, but her feet were heavier than granite. Her stomach lurched, and she couldn’t catch her breath. Lor’s forehead

wrinkled with pity as though she were a crippled puppy, yet his hand remained insistent for her to walk ahead of him.

Nora somehow walked to the bottom landing and stared upward. Safiyya arrived at the top and turned to the hall, and Nora heard the keys jingling in her mistress's hands. Slowly, Nora climbed the stairs.

She would walk into one of those rooms, a room with a giant bed and soft cushions, the ones that smelled of perfume and tobacco.

Another step.

He would be there. He would close the door. He would kiss her. He would take her clothes from her and put her on the bed.

Another step.

She wished for gentleness. He was Marcus's brother, after all. He wouldn't hurt her much.

Another step.

She wouldn't fight. She wouldn't give him a reason to hit her. Then it would be over quickly. Just like the times she had been trapped by other sabhirim. Just give him what he wants and don't make a fuss. It's better that way.

Nora jolted forward. There were no more steps, and the door was closed, and they were alone. Perfume curled around her and touched her nose.

Nora closed her eyes and trembled, even her teeth chattering.

A tear traced her cheek.

"Nora," Lor said, his voice low.

She waited for his hands.

"Nora."

She opened her eyes.

He sat in the far corner in one of the chairs near the window. His shoes touched the floor, one slightly ahead of the other, and his hands rested on his thighs. He still wore even his turban and golden-edged taylasan.

“I need to speak with you.”

She remained in place.

His shoulders dropped. “Nora, I’m not going to touch you.”

700 brek sterling. More money than she made in a year. His words made no sense.

He gestured to the chair across from him. “Please. Sit.”

His eyes were kind. She had no choice but to trust him. Slowly, shaking, she stepped to the chair and sat with her thighs pressed together and her hands clasped tightly in her lap.

Lor smiled, closed-lipped, and nodded in thanks. “Marcus was arrested this morning.”

Nora’s heart came to a crashing halt. Marcus had done nothing wrong. He never did anything wrong. He had participated in the attempt to rescue the children but nothing else. He had helped with the second rescue, as well, but nothing more than that. He had met with Elias and Ziri and Sunna and knew of the resistance movement and arms, but he hadn’t done anything wrong.

“Why?” she asked.

“Nyok accused him of stealing explosives from the port authority.”

Her own crime. Her lips parted.

“He insists he is innocent,” Lor continued. “But they found his crystal pen at the warehouse.”

A strangled sound escaped her. She had been careless. Foolish. She realized the exact moment it had happened,

the very instant she had torn her gandoura and its pocket along the seam. She had caused this. She had implicated him in her own crime.

"I believe he is innocent," Lor said. "But he won't divulge where he was and doesn't have an alibi to explain where he was. If only he had an alibi—"

"He was with me!" she blurted out. "He was with me," she said again. "I can be his—I'm his alibi."

A muscle twitched in Lor's forehead. He nodded slowly. "That is what he wants you to say."

She met his eyes. Marcus had wanted her to say that, to cover for him. He had thought of her. He was in trouble, and he had thought of her. Her anxiety burst into elation.

"Nyok may come here to ask you questions," Lor said.

"He was already here."

Lor narrowed his eyes. "Oh? And what did you say?"

"I didn't say anything. He was interrupted by a message about Robynton."

"What of Robynton?" Lor asked.

"The Hykosi burned it down and killed the king. The whole army invaded."

"Hykos invaded Norin?"

She nodded. "And the boat is coming here."

"They're coming here?"

"Yes."

He blinked. "We must hurry then. Listen closely, Nora," he said, leaning forward. "Marcus left home at eleven last night. The box of explosives was discovered missing at six this morning. I want you to say that he was with you from just after eleven until six."

"I was in the kitchen at five."

"Five, then. That's fine. And if they ask what you were doing, try saying you were walking together."

She nodded. "Of course. We've done that before."

Lor sighed. "So I hear."

She yawned and quickly covered her mouth with her hand. "Pardon me."

"Long night?"

She nodded.

"Where were you last night?" he asked.

Nora paused. "I was walking with Marcus."

He smiled. "Very good. But in reality?"

Nora shoved her hands under her thighs and stared at the floor. She wanted to be able to tell him, but that must remain a secret. She met his eyes but said nothing.

Lor frowned. "I don't know what happened last night, but the two of you are trying my patience."

Nora ignored his frustration. "Thank you for helping him," she said as a rush of gratitude washed over her. Lor was the best attorney in Gantu, and if he was helping Marcus, then everything would be resolved.

"He's my brother and my friend," Lor said, standing. He offered his hand to her, and she took it. "I don't understand the nature of his relationship with you, but I appreciate your willingness to assist him in this matter."

"Sir, I would do anything he ever asked of me."

Lor smiled sadly. "He thought as much. I'm not comfortable with any of this, but I suppose the situation calls for it. And now I must crawl back to my wife and kvina and explain to them why I hired a prostitute. I'd rather face twenty panthers than the anger of both of them together."

Nora shrank back. "But I—I'm not—"

“No, no,” he said, lifting his hand. “Of course not. I didn’t mean that. It will just look that way on my bank report.”

Chapter 51

BRYNNA

Ladvyl Hills
Ladvyl Province
Norin

Brynna trudged along the trail with Meela at her side. The granite cliffs of the Talmi Ridge rose above them on their left, and the rolling, grassy hills of Ladvyl, now brown from winter's cold, extended to the horizon on their right. Clouds thickened over their heads, but the snow had held thus far. Brynna sniffed back the cold-induced congestion in her nose. She watched her feet on the rocks, the roots, the dead grass. On and on. She pushed through fatigue with sluggish thoughts that begged to stop.

Erling, in the lead, raised his hand. "The next way station is right there," he said, pointing to a small cache high on a rickety wooden platform ten paces away. "We'll rest here for the night and camp in that clearing. There's a stream just ahead, but it may be iced over."

Brynna didn't care where they stopped, only that they stopped. She sank to the trail, dumping her knapsack on the dirt. Meela plopped beside her, puffing for air.

Erling and Trinan walked the final distance to the cache and dropped their packs. Trinan knelt and examined the cold fire ring as Erling unfolded two sets of oilcloth, a smaller one for the women's shelter, a larger one for the three men.

Erling hesitated, then walked back to Brynna and Meela. "Sol didn't sleep in the tent last night. Do you two want the larger shelter?"

"No," Brynna said. "Meela and I slept so close together for warmth that we had plenty of room. You two can keep it."

Erling furrowed his brow. "You were cold?" He glanced at Meela. "Can't you build some kind of magical fire or something?"

Meela scowled. "Doesn't work that way," she said in a sharp tone. "I heal. That's it."

Erling muttered as he walked away. Brynna hefted herself to her feet and followed him, catching his arm. "Hey, lay off Meela," she hissed in a whisper. "The last thing we need is a bully."

"I'm not a bully."

"She's not doing well. Her skin is sallow, and I keep finding chunks of her hair on our blankets."

"Only one more day," he said. "We should arrive at Lonara tomorrow evening."

"I'm scared I'll wake up tomorrow and find her dead."

Trinan approached. "What's this?"

Erling shrugged and tied off the shelter. "Brynna's fussing that Meela's sick or something. Can canonicals even get sick?"

"Meela's fine," Trinan said.

Brynna huffed, even more frustrated to be brushed aside. "She's not. She needs more food. Or something."

"She can have some of mine," Erling said, tightening the oil cloth and hammering in the peg.

Brynna glanced over her shoulder, ensuring Meela remained out of earshot. "Mine, as well."

"No, not yours," Trinan said, taking his flint from his pocket and kneeling once more by the fire ring. "You need your strength." He drew his knife.

"I have more than enough," Brynna said. "I can spare her some bread, for certain. My stomach won't tolerate it anyway."

Erling cast her a closed-lip smile. She knew he wasn't eating either. Their grief was keen, and they each suffered moment to moment with the horrors they had seen.

Trinan threw her a scathing glance between flint strikes. "I forbid it. You will eat your portion." He nursed a spark.

Brynna fumed over his attitude as he placed fodder on the fire, each sliver in careful formation. He blew on the embers, and they responded and grew strong enough to sustain a full log. "I'm going to the stream," he said, tossing one last twig on the fire. "If I can get a fish or two, maybe it'll whet your appetite." He walked away, and Erling carried his ax to the brush line.

Brynna squatted and poked the fire with a long stick. Her muscles ached. Her stomach churned. Her tongue was parched. Her body was as cross as she was. She hated everything and everyone and clenched her jaw with the anger that coursed through her. So much death and destruction. She shook her head, trying to clear the images of Hykosi soldiers, bleeding entrails, screaming children, gibbet after

gibbet. Eating couldn't matter anymore. Her vile existence would remain, food or no food. It was no use.

Erling's ax rang through the clearing. The rhythm comforted her. She closed her eyes and imagined she was home in Robynton again, her father in his shop, Erling chopping wood. Stew on the hearth. If she hurried, she could bake biscuits on the cast iron lid. Her father would swoop into the kitchen, catch her up in his arms, and swing her around. He would smell of cedar. His hands, covered with brown stain, would break the biscuits apart and dunk them in the stew. He would tell them stories of his adventures. They'd plan another day of sport shooting—she loved the smell of gunpowder. And if the evening was dark and warm, and if he stared long enough at the fire, his voice would calm, and he would tell them of their mother, his beloved wife, Marcy. They had lost much in the First Removal.

Erling dropped a load of firewood. "I want to talk to you."

Bryнна poked at the fire again, scowling.

"War is coming," he said.

"No shit."

"I'm going to fight."

She sighed. "I figured as much."

He crossed his arms. "I need to know you'll be all right. Protected."

She held the stick horizontally, mimicking a gun barrel, and stared down the length of it into the fire. "I can outshoot you."

He shifted his feet. "I'm serious."

She stood, throwing back her cloak and crossing her arms, matching him as close as a mirror could. "How do you plan on knowing I'll be safe?"

"Dance Teerlagee," he said. "Swap knives."

“With whom?”

“You know with whom.”

Brynna threw the stick on the fire. “Fuck off.” She walked away.

Erling chased after her and grabbed her arm. “I’m serious, Brynna.”

She pulled out of his grip. “No.”

“Why the hell not?” he said. “You two should be together!”

“Trinan doesn’t love me,” she said. Her mind flashed to the burned-out road near the beach. Cadoc’s glare, so intense, so angry, so hate filled, had struck her with agonizing despair, a feeling that lingered. “No one loves me.”

Erling swatted away her words. “I didn’t say one thing about love. I don’t fucking care if you love him or he loves you. Love—” His voice broke. He looked out at the mountains and blinked rapidly. “It’s probably better to dance without love anyway. Love just—” He swallowed hard. “—hurts.” He cleared his throat. “Everyone thinks you and Trinan have already swapped knives. A secret engagement, maybe a writ. Something like that. Even I expected you two to dance Teerlagee at Harvestide or even the Erstemdag before—”

“That won’t happen.”

“It almost did, though. You shared his bed. I don’t understand what changed.”

Brynna rubbed her arms. “You know what changed,” she said. “He kicked me out. You were the first one I told.”

“But why?” he said, his voice rising again. “In all this time, you’ve never told me why!”

Brynna hesitated. “He says I seduced Cadoc Andersyn.”

Erling kicked at the dirt, nodding. He looked up. "Did you?"

She slapped his face, and guilt churned within her at the sight of his pain and the weight of her lie.

"Suppose I deserved that," he said, rubbing his cheek.

She shrugged.

"Still," he said. "Trinan's the regent now. And you and I and everyone knows he's really the crown regent. King, Brynna. Trinan's going to be king. With Wyclythe on death's door, we'll be living in Walyss Province soon, and you could be his queen. Think about that. Queen. And I wouldn't have to worry about you. Just patch things up with him."

Brynna shook her head. "It's not that simple. He doesn't want me for his queen. He ejects me from important meetings and refuses my recommendations. When I report now, I only anger him." She shrugged. "At least King Wyclythe still hears what I have to say."

Erling shook his head. "You're so fucking stupid."

"What do you mean?"

"Think, woman! You handle budgets and taxes and the regulation of things he doesn't understand. He's placed you in King Wyclythe's presence and relies on you there. He's training you—and only you—to be queen. His queen will need to be familiar with all of that."

Brynna crossed her arms again. "Queens don't have to deal with any of that, if they don't want to."

"Sure," he said, "if they have kings who can handle it alone. He can't. He's out of his league, and he needs you. I've seen how he talks with you and discusses his plans. He asks for your advice. He cares what you think."

"I'm his attaché! He has to talk to me. That has nothing—"

“Fucking First Breath!” Erling shouted, flinging his hand up. “It’s more than that, and you know it. The way he watches you. The way he prefers you. He still loves you. He always has.”

Brynna considered his words. “Did he say that?”

“No,” Erling said, rubbing his neck. “Not exactly.”

“Wishful thinking, then.” She shrugged. “It doesn’t matter. He doesn’t trust me. He’s angry at me most of the time. He threw me out, and that’s that.” She turned away. “I’m going to the stream.”

“What name does he call you?”

She stopped, rigid.

In her mind, she could hear Trinan’s voice speak her sacred name, the name reserved for use by her chosen partner, the name set apart by Teerlagee, the symbol of mutual love, intimate trust, and deepest respect. With every use of that name, Trinan acknowledged her place beside him, regardless of his tone or feelings. And he had never wavered. Not when they had fought. Not when he had thrown her out. Not now.

But she wouldn’t give Erling the satisfaction of an answer.

Brynna continued to the stream instead, her footfalls sluggish. Nameless anxiety wound around her neck, coiling and tightening slowly, continuously. It slithered into her, hissing and flicking its forked tongue along her spine, finding room enough in her empty stomach.

The stream wound down the mountain in suspended animation. The once burbling rapids were now still and cloudy ice formations. Trinan crouched on the surface. He had chopped a hole with a spud bar from the cache and was feeding a small net into the water below. He glanced back at her as he looped the end over the bar and set it in place,

then walked to where she stood on the bank. He carried a gourd of water he had dipped before setting the net.

He offered the water, and she drank. They stood side by side, looking out at the frozen stream.

“War then,” he said.

She glanced up at his face, but he continued to stare at the ice. “Yes,” she said.

He nodded and paused before asking, “That’s what we want?”

She set the gourd on a rock. “No one wants war.”

“Then why ask for it?”

“Why ask me?” she said. “You’ve been in counsel with generals and the cabinet and the king.”

“Damn them!” His shoulders sank. “The province’s decision is mine alone. The country’s, even. I feel the weight of it.”

She inhaled a deep breath. “What are your options?”

“Few,” he said, running his hand through his hair. “Three, I suppose. First, do nothing.”

She shook her head. “We did that after the Removal—”

They turned their heads and spat.

“May it...” His voice faded.

Confusion flashed within her. She sought his eyes and saw her reaction mirrored on his face. The ritual had failed. “What do we say when it has happened again?” she asked.

He only shook his head and looked away.

Bryinna wrapped her arms around herself, partly for comfort, partly for warmth. “We must do something. We did nothing before, and they continued their aggression with occupation and raids and now another Removal.”

“Second option,” he said. “We could use targeted counterattack. Specific retaliation for the Second Removal.”

She nodded. "On whom, though? Where did the order originate?"

He shrugged. "It was Hykosi." He rubbed his boot in the grass. "That's all I know at this point."

"But who led it?" she asked. "Who planned it? It required troop movement. Someone guided it."

"I'm not sure yet," he said. "I don't know."

"We need intelligence."

He lifted his hands. "I don't have time for intelligence! Or means!"

She sniffed and waited a moment, enough time for his emotion to cool. "What's the third option?"

"Coordinated general counterattack," he said.

"War."

He nodded. "The primary action must be a rally of the provinces. Join together. Consolidate our power. Make the world recognize we are one country. Finally speak to the Hykosi with one voice. One diplomatic channel. One army. It's the only way." He shook his head. "It seems impossible."

Daylight faded, and the bitter cold of night crept from the shadows. Brynna shuddered with a chill. "You are well known and respected. Your words ring true. They'll see that."

Trinan reached for her cloak where it hung on her back and wrapped it snugly around her shoulders. "They're cowards."

"No, they aren't," she said, pulling the edges tight, acutely conscious of his lingering touch. "And you aren't, either. They just want to live their own quiet lives. You're informing them that those lives are at an end and that new ones must begin. You're forcing them to let go of their perceptions and see the dangers at play."

“Words won’t be enough.”

Bryinna sighed. Her teeth chattered, and he put his arm around her shoulder, pulling her against his side as they stood in the gloaming, looking out at the frozen stream. Slowly, she warmed. Feeling Trinan’s closeness, Erling’s words echoed in her mind, and her hostility toward him softened a slight, but not imperceptible, amount.

“Brynnalyn,” he said, as if in answer to her thoughts.

She craned her neck to look up at him.

“When we get to the Circle,” he said, “I want you to throw Sel Rhyshga.”

She furrowed her brow and faced him. “On Wyclythe’s orders?”

“No.” His voice hardened. “Mine.” He took her shoulders. “I’ll not hide behind anyone else’s crown. We’ll move forward as one country. With new leadership. I can appeal to their logic, but I need you to rally their spirits.”

The seriousness of his request weighed on her. “I’ve only seen Sel Rhyshga once,” she said, anxiety pressing into her voice. “It was after a raid in Tadsyn, and—and the motion failed.” She paused. “Do you understand? To request Sel Rhyshga—there’s no going back from that. And if it fails—”

“The timing wasn’t right then,” he said. “Now it is. Will you do this for me?”

His expression bore a mixture of strength and concern, and a twitch at his brow revealed an undercurrent of fear. He knew what he was asking, and she saw the conflict he felt. She inhaled deeply. “Yes. I’ll do it.”

He touched a strand of her hair at her temple. His fingertip traced her face. “You understand the risks?”

She nodded, feeling the warmth of his hand and becoming aware of her own breath as it quickened. Somehow,

he was closer. His thumb brushed her cheek and set her aflame. He tipped her chin upward. The smallest of spaces separated his nose from hers. She could almost feel his lips on hers.

The bar shifted on the ice. Trinan's head snapped toward the stream, and he straightened, blinked as though awakening, and walked back onto the ice.

Brynna's shoulders sank, and she puffed her cheeks, gathering her thoughts, returning to risks. "If we fail, we'll be crushed. Norin will become part of Hykos. It will be the end of us."

He crouched by the hole. "We won't fail."

"They'll want to know about funding," she said, crossing her arms. "And supply lines are critical. Cadoc was right. He said—"

With a roaring growl, Trinan stood and rounded. "Do not speak his name!"

Brynna closed her mouth and scowled. She swung away and walked back down the hill, kicking a rock and watching it fly into the underbrush. It quelled her anger.

Sel Rhyshga loomed before her. She was a good Norinian woman; she had been able to throw a knife with precision since childhood. The basic task didn't daunt her, but the ritual act would push her beyond the confines of her books, reports, and cabinet discussions. She was wary of the sharp move from the theoretical to fire and flame. Trinan expected her to uncover courage, tease strength, and manipulate the people's emotions as one would mold with clay, pulling, shaping, glazing, firing, handing the final form back to him as he stood ready to pour the verdict he needed. If she failed, all would be lost.

Sol stood before her.

Bryнна slowed and stopped several paces away. She didn't know what he meant by it, standing there, whether aggression or something else. Yet he said nothing, nor offered any indication of his purpose.

"Why do you follow me?" she asked.

She didn't expect him to answer at all. His gaze dropped to the trail, then returned to her, with a slight furrow of his brow that caused her to wonder if he was considering how to answer her question. As her hopes rose, he sharply faced the trail behind her, and she heard Trinan's step approaching. Trinan walked into view, the empty net and spud bar in hand, and he, too, stopped short, his face darkening. The two men stared at each other. Tension built as Bryнна's heart pounded in her chest.

Without a word, Sol turned and walked down the hill toward camp.

"What did he want?" Trinan demanded. "Did he say anything about Sel Rhyshga?"

"Nothing," she said. "He said nothing."

Trinan continued to stare down the trail where Sol had been.

"How would he even know about Sel Rhyshga?" Bryнна asked. "What would he say?"

Trinan pressed his hand on the small of her back, pushing her toward camp. "Just stay away from him. Avoid him."

"I can't avoid him," Bryнна said, struggling against him to turn around, determined to learn the answer of Sol's mysterious presence. "He's always there. Everywhere I go. With anything I do, I look up, and there he is." She struck at Trinan's reaching hands and stepped away. "He saved me from Hykosi captivity, and yet he stalks me!"

"I know," Trinan said.

“You said he was dangerous!”

“He is.”

Hot tears formed in her eyes. She held out her palms. “So do something! You’re the regent. You—”

“Go to camp,” he said, crossing his arms.

“Trinan!”

His face was stern. “There are other forces of which you do not know. Just stay away from him.” He walked down the trail.

“But I can’t!” she shouted to his back.

Chapter 52

CADOC

Gulf of Norin

Struggling to sleep, Cadoc punched his pillow and rolled over again in the berth, muttering curses upon the mattress maker and the First Breath itself for the state of his left shoulder. He and Thackery had loaded the whole damn ship with every damn box of relief supplies they could find and set sail for Robynton once more, repeating the same actions they had taken for the last two days and now a third. They had swapped duties on the ship back and forth between them just so they could keep moving. It was finally his turn to sleep after having kept watch all night, but his stupid, aching muscles had other plans.

The tabby cat pounced on his feet, and he nudged it away with his toe. It returned and curled next to his thigh.

The ridiculous Wyclythe delegation had left Robynton for Lonara the day after the burning, or so he had been told by the proud townspeople they had left behind. He had not seen her go. Walking to Lonara would be an intense strain

on her, and Erling had been right to insist on their taking a witch. Even her brother seemed more sensible than that scumbag regent.

That dick would destroy the whole fucking country. Cadoc could envision every bloody detail. Each province would attempt to build their own army and waste funds by repeating the same administrative offices. They'd trip over each other in their individual attempts to smite the Hykosi, who would run over the top of them all. Farms would be laid to waste, supplies would rot in storage, and the armies would starve. The only way around such a catastrophe would be to strip the provinces of sovereignty and consolidate the government. Feed all things through one channel. A preposterous idea. Such a move would violate hundreds of years of history and require incredible political wrangling, bribery, threats, and probably in the end, still rely on some sort of emotional play to the people. Something like Sel Rhyshga. But no one could pull that off. It had never worked before. Trinan would have to find someone who could not only dance it but to whom the people would respond, someone they already knew.

Bryнна.

Cadoc bolted up and slammed his head on the low ceiling. "Shit!"

The tabby yowled and jumped to the floor.

Cadoc cradled his head in his arms, adding the ship-builder to his list of the damned.

Bryнна, the daughter of the people's beloved liberty preacher.

A perfect candidate for Sel Rhyshga.

He understood now why Trinan had not objected to her traveling, even though she had almost been killed in the

burning of Robynton. Trinan needed her. She was his secret weapon, and the son of a bitch would use her to win the debate for him—if she didn't fucking die in the process.

Cadoc had once watched Sel Rhyshga in Tadsyn after a particularly bloody raid by the Hykosi. The motion had failed. He had also seen Sel Rhyshga danced in Jarta. There the dancer had failed to complete the ritual. She had thrown the sacred knife, but it had veered wildly, and she had been speared by the Circle's guards and trampled by the people.

If Brynna succeeded, the country would go to war. If she failed, they would kill her. Trinan dared to place the fate of the country on one side of the scales and Brynna's life on the other. Fucking bastard.

Cadoc listened to the creak of the ship as his blood pounded in his brain.

Maybe he should have ridden to Lonara.

"Ship ahoy, sir! Hull down!"

Cadoc could read Thackery's tone like a book, and this call turned his blood to ice. Whichever ship it was, it was a worthy threat, and there were only two such threats in their waters.

Cadoc pulled on his boots and climbed to the deck while he stuffed his arms into the sleeves of his jacket. He extended his glass with a flick of his wrist and saw *Darsham* appear, the sunlight on her sails. He caught his breath. She was beautiful.

"*Darsham*," he confirmed.

"Aye, sir. Looks to be coming into Tadsyn."

Cadoc nodded. "And quickly. They'll be upon us in no more than a quarter hour."

He could run to sea or hide among the coves. Even returning to Tadsyn would prevent them from attacking,

but he was no coward to turn tail and run, despite what Brynna's fool brother had said.

"The wind is in our favor." Cadoc lowered his glass. "Let's break their stride."

Thackery grinned. "Aye, aye, sir!"

Darsham was sailing northeast toward Tadsyn while *Signy* moved due west, nearly into the wind. By continuing his westerly track, Cadoc forced confrontation.

"Close haul the sails," he said.

"Aye, aye, sir!"

Cadoc's nerves sang, and he forgot the aches and pains of the moment before. *Darsham* approached, sails full, rapidly closing the distance between the two ships. "She'll turn or risk collision."

"Aye, sir, she'll turn and show out her broadside."

"With all those shiny new guns."

Thackery nodded. "It's a risk, sir. A big risk."

Cadoc adjusted the helm. "Risks are like women. They may leave you dead or broke—but they are never boring."

Thackery chuckled.

Cadoc didn't need to order Thackery's every step and for that he was grateful. With one eye on *Darsham*, he positioned and loaded the cannon with bar shot, ramming them in, hurrying to prick the cartridges, prime the fuses, and check the restraints while Thackery attended the sails.

"She's turning, sir," Thackery said.

Cadoc's eyes flicked back to the approaching ship. "Let's dance," he muttered.

It was a matter of timing, nothing more. *Darsham's* captain would have to balance the ship's need to turn away from *Signy* with the need to keep the guns in range. Turn too soon, and the guns would not reach far enough. Turn

too late and risk collision. And yet the turn itself, ever more windward, would diminish *Darsham's* speed, power, and maneuverability. The greater the turn, the more speed lost.

Cadoc loosened his knees and found his connection with *Signy*. She was a sleek, weatherly vessel that could hold close to the wind. Thackery had her tightly trimmed, and in response, she was sprinting.

Darsham bore down on them and slowly revealed her side as *Signy* gained speed. Cadoc watched the guns appear, a row of menacing barrels, firing range closing in upon them. He pushed *Signy* as close to the wind as he could, goading her to run in front of *Darsham* like a squirrel before a horse.

"Steady," Cadoc called. "They should fire soo—"

Cannon fire flashed. The guns exploded, and with a brassy growl, grapeshot pelted the sea. Water shot high as the rounds fell short. Cadoc clenched his jaw. Chain shot was for rigging, ideal for tangling lines and cutting canvas while leaving masts whole. Bar shot could accomplish the same and add hull damage, but grapeshot, especially aimed at the quarterdeck, was for officers, a spray of lead with intent to kill. *Darsham* was not chasing *Signy*. *Darsham* was targeting him. Hot with anger, he calculated the ships' trajectories.

Darsham's turn continued, and *Signy* ran windward, ever faster, even as *Darsham* slowed. A mechanical rumble reached Cadoc's ears. He was near enough to hear the guns creaking as they adjusted their firing angles.

The ships sailed closer. He could see his sailors on the deck. He knew their faces. He recognized Birger's hulking form. He heard the calls to fire.

Explosions sounded, peppering the side of *Signy*, tearing the lower wale, shredding the wooden side. Cadoc collapsed,

hitting his head on the taffrail as *Signy* shuddered and lost the edge of her speed. His leg burned as though he had stood in a campfire, but he dragged himself up and gripped the helm, keeping her in line. “Thackery!” he shouted.

“Here, sir!” Thackery called. “No worse for wear.”

Cadoc pulled at his pant leg. His hand came back bloody. “Steady!” He hobbled to the closest cannon. The metal felt cool to his clammy hands.

“Will they fire again?” Thackery asked.

“Doubt it. We’re too close now.” He gritted his teeth as warm liquid ran down his calf. “But we can. Prepare to fire.” They both lit a wick.

Darsham cut through the ocean, plowing the roaring water, shoving it to the sides of her prow. *Signy* sailed even closer, neck and neck with the clipper ship.

“Fire!” Cadoc shouted. They lit the fuses, and moments later, the cannon exploded. The shock wave shuddered through his chest as the recoil punched him back. There was no time to assess any damage they may have caused. They prepared the cannons for another shot.

Darsham breathed down his neck, forcing him back to the helm. “Hold!”

“Aye, aye, sir.”

Cadoc held the rudder while Thackery assessed the sails. They kept her in place, and she flew past *Darsham*’s bow.

As *Signy* continued, *Darsham*’s guns erupted, pelting the water with shot. Only a weak smattering of lead thudded against *Signy*’s stern, and as the moments passed, Cadoc relaxed. *Darsham* fell away with *Signy* out of range once more.

Cadoc watched *Darsham* as she continued to lose momentum and fall out of sorts with both the wind and her

intended course. He did not envy the tedious sailing the captain would have to do to get her back on course to Tadsyn without scuttling on the rocks near shore. Cadoc hoped the captain, whoever he was, was worth his salt, for he didn't wish to see *Darsham* maimed. Shot with his cannon, perhaps, but not ruined on rocks.

Out of sight of *Darsham* and among the coves near shore, Cadoc gave orders to slow *Signy's* speed. He pulled at his pant leg and flinched. "Cat the anchor. Be ready to drop."

"Aye, aye, sir."

Signy sighed as Cadoc piloted her into a sheltered area near a sandy beach. "Drop anchor," he said, the tread of his boots crackling as he walked through his blood on the deck.

"Aye, aye, sir. Shall I check her over, sir?"

Cadoc nodded. "The fore-and-aft sail is torn. I can see it from here."

"Aye, sir."

"And find the cat."

"She's on the deck, sir. Never left."

Cadoc wiped the sweat from his brow, and his heart continued to race. As he listened to the splash of the anchor and creaking of the chain, he drew his knife and cut away the blood-soaked fabric, revealing a gaping wound to the meat of his calf. Dark blood oozed down his skin, but he released his breath, heaving with relief. It was not as bad as he had first thought. He shoved the cut-away material into the wound to staunch the blood, his nose quivering with the pain. He moaned and tipped his head back, squinching his eyes shut.

"I'm going to be running my needle for a while," Thackery called.

"I may need your needle as well."

Thackery leaned to see him, then hurried to his side. “Fucking First Breath!”

“It’s a graze,” Cadoc said. “I just need bandaging, maybe some cautery, and a hell of a lot of whiskey.” He attempted to stand but stumbled back. Thackery caught him and helped him to sit once more. He lifted the bloodied fabric and cringed at the sight before covering it quickly once more.

“If I may be honest, sir,” Thackery said. “I’m not certain why we’re alive right now. The lower wale and gunwale are splintered but sound. The sails need work, but they held for us. I wasn’t hit, and you’ll live.”

“Their aim was shit.”

“They could have hit us several more times.”

“They didn’t,” Cadoc said.

“But why not?”

Cadoc looked out at the cove. Small waves washed through the sea grasses near shore. “Because those are my sailors. They’re still loyal to me. They gave me every chance they could while under the command of another officer, and it was enough.”

Chapter 53

NORA

Nalta
Gantu

Nora clasped her hands before her. She stood once again in the middle of the front sitting room, and Lieutenant Nyok stared into her eyes just as he had done before. This time, she stared back, firm in her purpose. She would protect Marcus at all costs, no matter what lies she had to tell.

“When we spoke a few days ago,” he said, “we were interrupted.”

“Yes, sir. You received word of the Hykosi invasion of Norin.”

“It was an isolated attack.”

Her eyes watered trying to hold his stare. “And a barge with hundreds of slaves, sir.”

“Forty slaves,” he corrected. “And two of those had died on the way.”

Unable to endure, she finally dropped her gaze to the floor.

Nyok stood and walked around the desk to sit on the front edge of it. Her confidence faltered with his nearness, and she suspected he understood that about her which further intimidated her. He was blinking now—a relief—but his blinks were different from other men, as though he squeezed his face instead of just letting the lids touch.

“Where were you the night the explosives were stolen?” he asked.

She wet her lips. “I don’t know which night that was, sir,” she said to the floor.

“The night before the day we last spoke.”

“I was here, sir.”

“The entire night?”

“No, sir.”

“Where did you go?”

“I walked, sir.”

“You walked,” Nyok repeated. “And where did you walk?”

“Through the town, sir.”

“Were you alone?”

She paused. A pause would make her lie seem more authentic. “No, sir.”

“With whom did you walk?”

“Marcus Regá, sir.”

“Are you in the habit of using his full name instead of ‘Gran Messer Regá’ as dictated by Gantish Slave Code 24.5?”

“No, sir, but as he has a brother and a father with the same surname, I thought you would like to know which one I was speaking about.” Her tone grew as she spoke, and she looked up. But his fierce black eyes flashed and wilted her confidence, and she returned her gaze to the floor,

feeling the warmth of shame creep up her neck and into her cheeks.

“What did you do on this walk?”

“Only walked, sir,” she said.

She listened to the ticking of the clock as her anxiety grew. A group far away in the dining room laughed. Somewhere a plate was dropped. The clock continued to tick. Still, he did not speak, and pressure built within her to fill the void with words.

“We walked through the town,” she said, the speed of her words increasing. “Along the streets. Past the houses. . .sir.”

“Is that all you did?”

“Yes, sir.”

He returned to the desk chair and picked up his pen. “Get me a glass of water.”

Rattled by the sudden request, she obeyed and went to the sideboard to pour him a glass with shaking hands. She set it before him and stood once again before the desk.

“Good,” he said. A moment later, he asked, “Nora, why am I here?”

She wrinkled her brow, confused. “To ask me questions, sir.”

“To find the truth.” He stood and again walked around the desk to her. “You see, sometimes when I investigate crimes, I discover other crimes.” He positioned himself at her shoulder, facing her from inches away.

Nora stared at the floor, her breath quickening.

“I think I have found some,” he said.

Her throat tightened.

Nyok placed his hands behind his back and crossed toward the window. “Lying to a state official is a violation of

Gantish Code 18, section 1621. What is the punishment for someone who lies to me?" he asked, turning back, blinking his hard blink.

"F-Finger. S-sir."

"Good. That's right. They lose a finger," he said. "It has been three days since we last spoke. In the interim, I have learned a lot about that night." He walked to the desk. "For example," he lifted a sheet of paper, "I have Gran Messer Regá's statement. His own words about what happened. A very complete description of everything you two did together while out walking. He told me everything." Nyok shook his head in disapproval. "Every sordid detail."

Sweat broke out over her skin, prickling all over.

He lowered the paper. "I know exactly what went on when you two were alone in the dark." He leaned on the edge of the desk once again and crossed his arms. "So, let's start over. What happened while you were out walking with Gran Messer Regá?"

Nora's thoughts whirled with confusion. He knew she was lying. He had Marcus's words, an official statement, on paper, and the lie she had already told was not aligning with the story Marcus had told. She didn't know what to say or do or how to answer. She gripped her gandoura, and sweat ran down her back.

"We went walking," she said, pressure throbbing in her forehead.

"And what did he do to you?"

Marcus had told Nyok he had done something. She saw a new scene in her mind. "He kissed me."

"What else?" Nyok asked, his tone softer. The change encouraged her to continue in that vein of thought.

"And held me close to him."

Nyok gestured to a cushioned chair beside the desk. "Please. Sit." As she complied, he, too, sat in a matching one. He propped himself on the arm of the chair. "He kissed you and held you close. In the dark, while out walking." He paused. "Nora, did Marcus take advantage of you? Does he have. . .carnal knowledge of you?"

She shook her head rapidly. "No. No, sir."

Nyok leaned back behind him and reached all the way to the desk. He lifted Marcus's testimony, looked at it, and pressed his lips together. He set it back down. "Nora."

The clock ticked louder. Her head pounded. She was drenched in sweat under her arms and between her legs. She had to answer him. She had to make her story match.

"What did he do to you in the dark?"

She closed her eyes. "He made love to me."

"Gran Messer Marcus Regá asked you to walk with him through the town, and while you were out with him, he debauched you?"

"Yes," she whispered.

"And when did you return to the inn?"

"Just before five," she said. "I had to work in the kitchen."

He nodded. "And was that the only time he has done such a thing? Or were there other instances?"

"No, sir. No other times."

Nyok suddenly stood and returned to the desk to gather his papers. "Stand before the desk," he said in a low, strong tone.

Nora did as she was told, confused by his abrupt change.

"Safiyya!" he called.

The door opened. "Lieutenant?" Safiyya said. "Did you call me?" Her gown rustled as she entered the room. She brushed her white veil behind her shoulder.

“Yes, I’m finished here,” he said. “I have the information I need.”

“Oh?” she said.

“It is as you suspected. A violation of Gantish Slave Code 10.2. Debauchery.”

Safiyya’s eyes narrowed. “I see,” she said in a voice that cast tremors through Nora.

Nyok walked to the doorway. A paper fluttered to the floor.

“Sir!” Nora called. “You’ve dropped Gran Messer Regá’s testimony.” She picked up the paper and saw the marks of words she could not read.

He took it from her. “The testimony?” he said. He smiled with a look of pity. “That’s a note describing patrol tactics. I don’t have his testimony.” He closed the door behind him, leaving Nora stunned.

Safiyya stalked toward Nora. Her face was red. Her eyes flashed with rage. Her lips formed a scowl even as her nose wrinkled. She struck Nora across the face.

Nora cried out and held her cheek, cowering before Safiyya. Tears ran down her cheeks.

“I was kind,” Safiyya said in a terrible voice. “I never beat you. I never starved you. I never made you work upstairs.” She gripped Nora’s chin with fingers like pincers. “You’re pretty. Your eyes. Your face. Your ass. Men have offered me a lot for you—Winsen Luna, for one—but I refused every time. People laughed at me. Told me I coddled you. Told me I would regret it.”

Safiyya shook her head with a jaded laugh. “And now,” she said. “Now you are caught—once again!—whoring with a sabhir outside of my supervision and without paying me the money I’m due. Do you know how dangerous that

is? Acting like a common prostitute? That's how girls get killed." She pushed her veil back over her shoulder. "The girls who work for me are safe. The rooms are elegant. You gave that up to fuck in the dirt."

Nora closed her eyes and cried.

"No more," Safiyya said.

Nora looked up.

"No more," Safiyya repeated. "Tomorrow night, you work upstairs. Tomorrow night and every night after! A bath, some altered clothes, and up you go! I'll find someone else to take your place in the kitchen. There are plenty of girls in town who will jump at the chance to waitress for me." She turned on her heel.

Nora threw herself on the floor and clung to Safiyya's gown, sinking into the abundant petticoats. "Please don't do this!" she cried. "I'll never do it again! Please! I don't want to work upstairs! I don't want to!"

Safiyya leaned over her. "There are men who prefer it that way. And you're about to meet them."

Chapter 54

SOL

Corradh Forest
Corradh Province
Norin

Sol turned his face toward the sunset and heard only the roar of the wind. The hills of heather stretched as far as he could see, leaving nothing to block the gale.

“Keep walking!” Erling shouted from the head of the line.

Sol watched the travelers ahead of him with concern. They bowed their heads into the wind, and misery hung from their shoulders. Brynna clutched Meela’s hand and pulled her along the trail. Their steps had slowed. Their faces had grown pale and ashen.

Brynna was managing the journey well enough, considering her losses and the physical trauma she had endured. Her pointed question to him on the hill, wanting to know his purpose, had not surprised him in substance, only the lateness of it. He had thought she would have demanded

an answer sooner. He meant no harm. Some secrets are beneficial.

Meela, though, seemed drained and weak, burdened and exhausted by the ondilska within her. It was too much. He tightened his jaw. He had never felt such anxiety for any creature—it was a new and strange sensation. His life was one of isolation and solitude, of walking the paths in the forest alone. He could go weeks, occasionally months, without seeing another living soul, and that suited him. He didn't need comfort or companionship, but he needed a world with her in it—not necessarily by his side, but present, somewhere, with her graceful beauty and astonishing power. He needed to know she existed. As he watched her struggle, he realized he would need to carry her soon.

Motion caught his eye. Far in the distance, on the horizon of the furthest hill, a man on horseback rode, but Sol couldn't determine whether he was friend or foe. "Stop!" he called to the travelers. "Get down!"

Bryнна dropped to the path and tugged Meela until she fell onto her. Erling ducked beside them, readying his revolver. Trinan remained standing—the fool—holding his hand at his brow and endangering them all. Sol crouched low, picking up a rock to throw at Trinan's head when, finally, Trinan hid as well, moving to Bryнна's side and unholstering his revolver.

Sol moved in front of them, facing the trail, hidden by the heather. If there were other enemies about, he didn't want them to hear a pistol shot. Kneeling, he unslung his bow from his shoulder and nocked one of his blue-fletched arrows. He aimed, pulling the arrow under tension to his cheek and visualizing the path the arrow would take.

The horse trotted toward them, then turned at a slight angle, revealing the shield of the high king. Sol sighed with relief, lowered his bow, and with a quick motion, slid his arrow back into the quiver. He rose and motioned to the others, and the traveling band stood, revealing their position. Trinan and Erling holstered their guns.

Moments later, the rider drew up to the travelers, a spear in his hand. "Hold! Are you from Wyclythe?"

"We are," Erling replied.

"Wyclythe's failure to pay honor and tribute at Carthasach has been noted. High King Corradh seeks an explanation."

The travelers exchanged glances as the rider dismounted. Erling frowned. "Robynton has fallen to the Hykosi."

Sol remained at a distance as the travelers explained themselves. Political discussions were for observation, not participation.

The rider's face creased with anger. "May my knife rest on the shoulder of every Hykosi!" he said, spitting. "You have an hour's walk ahead of you, and you are already almost too late to address the Circle. I can carry one of the women back and give notice to the high king."

Trinan nodded. "Brynnalyn will—"

"Meela should go instead of me," Brynna said.

Sol strode forward. "Meela will go," he said with a finality that closed Trinan's mouth. "And I will go with her."

The rider shook his head, confused. "You don't understand. I can only take one."

Sol faced him. "You will walk. I will take your horse and deliver her to the witches' circle."

The rider shifted his spear. "You can't have my horse."

Sol raised his brow. "You prefer to be the one who visits the witches?"

The rider paused, and his expression changed from defiance to fear to acquiescence. He shook his head and offered the reins.

Trinan blocked Sol's path and shoved him back, his hand remaining on Sol's chest. "Brynnalyn will go."

"Take your hand off me," Sol said, pushing down his anger.

"She must save her strength to dance Sel Rhyshga," Trinan said. "You may disapprove of that, but you can't stop it."

Sol looked down at Trinan's hand on his chest and imagined the satisfaction of tearing such a pompous fool to pieces. "I said, 'Take your hand off me.'"

"You do not have the final say!"

In one motion, Sol's fist connected with Trinan's jaw in a smooth punch. Trinan stumbled back and sat hard with his legs outstretched in front of him, his eyes round and wide. His coronet thudded to the ground beside him.

The others stared, their eyes, too, round and wide and their mouths gaping open. Trinan had had that coming for a long time. To Sol, the shocked faces seemed a bit overly dramatic.

"Get up," Sol said, shaking his satisfyingly sore hand.

Erling offered his hand to Trinan, but Trinan batted it away to stand up on his own. He snatched up his coronet.

"That will cost you!" Trinan growled, rubbing his jaw. "I won't—"

"Meela is near death," Sol said. "I will take her."

Trinan stepped closer, his nostrils flaring—but he did not touch him. "You gave Seth your word," he said, his voice low. "You swore an oath."

Sol huffed. He was well aware of his oath. He needed no reminder. If Trinan cared so much about it, he should inform Brynna of it. There were many things Trinan needed to reveal to Brynna. He despised the layers upon layers of secrecy and deception Trinan wove around them all.

“Wyclythe placed me in charge of this delegation,” Erling said. All looked at him, awaiting a verdict. “Meela will go.”

“I am regent!” Trinan growled. “Brynnalyn must—”

“Meela will go,” Erling said, holding up his palm. “That’s my decision.”

Sol mounted the horse, and Erling lifted Meela in front of him. Sol held her tightly with her head resting on his chest. With a final glance and nod, but no farewell, he pressed the horse forward over the hills as fast as he dared go. Meela slumped against him. He feared she would die in his arms or fall from the horse. That would certainly kill her. The penalty for killing a witch was death, but if she died this night, and he were charged, he would welcome it. He wanted no life without her.

Veering away from Lonara and the Life Fire, he crossed the river and rode toward the witches’ sacred land. Night fell. Trees overtook the heather. Branches blocked the moonlight. He traveled further into the rocky hills. It must be close.

The pulse of drums reverberated deep within his ears and chest. Torch light flashed through the trees, fickle and fleeting. He pulled his horse to a stop.

“Go on,” Meela whispered to his surprise. He had not thought her conscious.

Sol clicked to his horse, and it walked forward. He entered a clearing lined with torches. Dark figures moved

about, and low, strange voices sang. He feared they were cardinals. One misstep, and they would kill him in a flash of red light. But soon he saw the flowing purple dresses of the canonical witches, and he released his breath. He stopped the horse and carefully climbed down, pulling Meela into his arms. Cautiously, he moved forward and stepped into the clearing.

Silence fell as crisp and sudden as a flash of lightning. No drums. No voices. Only the crackle of torches.

Heart pounding, he walked forward and placed Meela on the ground in the middle of the clearing. She lay on the dirt with her eyes closed, and only the rise and fall of her chest reassured him that her spirit remained in her body.

A figure approached, increasing in definition with each step. Her face was unpainted, and her hair hung loose. A purple dress. Canonical.

He nodded in greeting. "I brought—"

"Leave," she said, pointing to his horse.

He obeyed, returning to his horse and mounting. He walked it into the darkness and the safety of the woods. The drums beat again behind him, and he slowed his horse with the urge to go back, to see what they would do, to see if she would recover. He needed to know.

Sol tied his horse and slunk to the edge of the clearing.

The canonical witches, peaks of purple, surrounded Meela where she lay on the ground. They stood in a circle, hand in hand in hand, and swayed with the beat of their chanting, a unison rhythm, ancient and guiding. The circle rotated with each step the witches took, words winding around Meela where she lay. Mist rose from the ground in billowing iridescent clouds, shimmering under the stars, collecting

into shapes and forms. A luminescent stag bounded past, then a rabbit and a fox, each glimmering, a rustle of light, scattering to the edges and disappearing.

Meela's arms and legs jerked. Her eyes rolled back in her head, and she convulsed, gurgling as foam filled her mouth. The circle spun faster, but the witches then stepped back in the other direction, skirts swirling and catching and unswirling the other way, current pushing slowly against itself, heaving momentum once more. Flashes of light, rustling creatures, fur and teeth and shimmering eddies. Pushing round, pushing back. Faster.

Hanáv, the high priestess, cardinal of cardinals, punctured the canonical circle of witnesses and moved to the middle, reanimating the bounds behind her once more.

Stark white paint coated her forehead. Blackness covered the hollows of her eyes and cheeks, and jagged streaks like sharp teeth encircled her mouth. Her hair hung in thick, twisted locks that shook when she moved and clattered with interwoven bones. Horns caked with white mud adorned her head, and black fur and strips of leather, each secured with strings of finger bones, covered her body. At her throat, she wore a red stone, and from her neck hung a string of shells that suspended a human skull on her chest. Devoid of lower jaw, it vomited forth strands of red moss which trailed to the ground.

Sol watched with acidic horror in his throat.

Hanáv swayed with the chanting, the sounds building, the circle moving. The drum pace accelerated. She raised her hand, and with her movements, Meela's arms lifted from the ground toward the sky. Her body rose and hung suspended as if held by her hands, barely above the ground, her feet still touching.

Hanáv slashed her hand to the side as if cutting with an invisible knife. Viscous black fluid poured from Meela's wrists, falling into pools on either side of her body. Steam rose from the ooze into the night sky, twisting and melding with the sparkling mist.

The chanting grew louder. Hanáv, too, ascended into the air, floating above the heads of those in the circle. Her skirts billowed in a magical wind. The skull on her chest glowed, and venomous-green light shone from the eye sockets and vacant nose. She lifted the skull in one hand and reached the other hand toward the sky. The wind whipped around her as the skull sucked the black fluid from the ground into two strands, both snaking together with the green light. The high priestess threw her head back as the shining cord of black and green shot from her lifted hand into the sky. Light flashed across the circle, bright enough to cast shadows behind the circling witches. Her voice screeched higher and higher. Sol covered his ears and crouched closer to the ground. With a crack and pulse of light, silence reigned again.

All was still.

Sol slowly lifted his head, his hands remaining close to his ears.

Meela lay in the middle again, appearing to sleep. Her lovely face rested peacefully, and Sol exhaled, with profound relief. She would live. She would live.

The witches stood motionless around her, Hanáv near. A large lump of stone fell from her hand—valsydian, lifeless and spent.

She turned, slowly, smoothly. Her eyes locked with his. He had trespassed. He had disobeyed. With his presence, he had demonstrated his enduring love for Meela, despite

the presence of cardinal power, despite the threat of the woman in front of him.

Hanáv lifted her pointed finger.

Sol flung himself onto the horse and fled.

Chapter 55

NORA

Nalta
Gantu

Nora held the teardrop prism toward the lantern. Specks of light scattered through the stable, small yellow dots on the hay bales and the walls. There were no rainbows, no matter how she tilted it. Nothing ever worked right in the dark.

Resting on the hay, she laid her head on her arm and rubbed the pendant, feeling the smooth facets. Her eyes ached. Her body felt heavy. She had released a tempest of hot tears and anguish. Ziri had held her tightly against his chest as she sobbed. But he had needed to return to his work, and though his touch had lingered, he was gone. She was alone.

She heard boots approaching, but she didn't care. There was nothing anyone could do to her that would be worse than what would soon be a normal occurrence upstairs.

"Nora?" Elias said.

A horse nickered in the stall.

Elias stepped closer. "Ziri told me what happened."

He groaned as he bent to sit in the straw next to her. He propped his arms on his knees.

"At least Marcus will go free now," she said.

He nodded. "Perhaps." He paused. "Probably. It will still go to court."

"When?"

"Tomorrow. They handle sabhiri cases in the evenings when there are fewer eyes around."

She held the pendant to the lantern again.

He sighed. "That won't be the end of it, though."

"What do you mean?"

"They believe you've told the truth," Elias said. "So you won't lose a finger. But Marcus is a sabhir, and according to your story, he debauched a slave. That's against the law. There's nothing Asa loves more than upholding the law."

The rainbowless dots moved around the stable with each tilt of the glass.

Elias rubbed his knee. "Marcus'll pay something like 200 brek sterling." He hesitated. "They'll beat you."

Dots never cared about rainbows.

"My back won't be pretty anymore," she said. "I won't be worth full price."

She dropped the pendant to the straw. The stable seemed darker.

"The blasting caps," he said. "The ones you stole. I'm placing those explosives tomorrow."

She rolled over. "Where?"

"The Ganstag."

She slowly sat up. "The Ganstag?"

He nodded. "It's time. It's time for us to act. To do something big. To bring people to our side. I've tried recruiting every way I know how, but they don't believe we can do it. We need something big. Something to convince people to join us. To force the sabhirim to see that we mean what we say. To make them know that we won't be trampled on." He met her eyes. "Do you want to help?"

The idea would have terrified her, but when one is assigned to work upstairs, terror loses its meaning. She would gladly exchange numbness for the tingle of excitement she didn't think she'd ever feel again.

"I only work at night now," she said. "I'm free during the day."

"Most of the government business is completed in the morning," he said. "There are only a few citizens and some sabhirim around the building after lunch. We can sneak in and place the explosives in the late afternoon. You'll be back by supper."

"You won't blow it up while Marcus is there, will you?"

He hesitated. "No. For your sake."

"Where should I meet you?"

"Lunja's butcher shop. Meet me there at five."

"I'll be there."

Chapter 56

BRYNNA

Lonara
Corradh Province
Norin

Brynna's legs ached. The wind screamed in her ears, and a stitch twinged at her side. The delegation's pace slowed as the night wore on. One hour's walk had stretched to two. The travelers crested a small rise.

"Light!" Erling called. "We've arrived."

Brynna walked to his side to see for herself. Below them lay the sight she had craved for days. The Great Circle of Lonara. The Life Fire, fueled with burning, tree-sized poles, flared high, whipped to a fury by the winds. Since her childhood, the roaring flames had filled her with awe and fear, adding magnificence and glory to the holidays.

The Life Fire cast its light and heat outward to the surrounding Circle, smooth and open and protected by guards at the cardinal directions. Dancers dotted the ground, stepping through rituals on behalf of the people, twirling and

swaying in motions Brynna knew so well she could follow them in her sleep.

Around its bounds, hundreds of dark forms gathered, a human murmuration guided by drums and flutes, lit with torches, and marked with billowing provincial banners. Tents and campfires, horses and wagons, spread into the distance under a haze of smoke and dust. A shift of the wind brought to her the smells of cooking and animals, along with the distant sound of pipes and horns. Though Wyclythe was the home of her birth, Lonara was the home of her heart, and every beat pulsed for Norin.

Erling motioned them onward, and the other three followed him down the hill toward the nearest encampments. The once-rider quickly separated from them in a rush to return to his superior officer.

As they passed through, Brynna stared at the camp and the hundreds of Norinians enjoying their holiday. She knew what they did not, about invasion, death, and Removal, and that knowledge separated her from them. She was different and alien. The Norinians milled about, some walking to the Circle and some settling to camp for the night. Children fussed and rubbed their eyes while begging to stay up to watch more dancing. Parents shushed them and tucked them under mounds of woolen blankets and sheepskins to gaze at the moon and the campfires until they fell asleep. Brynna glanced at the sky, watching the curls of smoke play with the stars, one moment revealing them, the next rendering them absent and forgotten. The acrid smoke over Robynton had done the same.

Young men gathered around a target and played Rhyshga, throwing their knives from ever further distances and hoping to catch the eyes of the girls who stood in a group

nearby. With every throw of their knives, their brown cloaks opened momentarily to reveal burgundy tunics with golden cording. The burgundy wool and black facial markings from hairline to nose spoke of their membership in the northern province of Lincanly. The idea of other provinces beyond Wyclythe suddenly seemed odd to Brynna, that there were places that continued on as before, living their lives as if nothing had happened, as if Robynton had never been destroyed.

Brynna and her companions moved deeper into the crowd. Few noticed them. A group of women crouched by a campfire, wearing layers of burgundy and green linen cinched with deerskin belts. Strings of small shells adorned their arms, necks, and ankles, and three blue lines marked their faces from mouth to chin. Grimsyn.

The images pressed around her, all strange, though the sights were familiar enough. Everything seemed changed. Light to dark. Up to down. Instead of joy, she held only an aching sadness. She should have been celebrating Carthasach. Now she sought war.

“Brynna!” a woman’s voice called.

Brynna squinted to see. “Peetra!”

Peetra ran forward, and the two embraced. A green circle had been painted on each of Peetra’s cheeks because she was from the province of Bryton, to the east of Wyclythe. She giggled and smiled, pulling back but still holding Brynna’s arms. “Where’ve ya been? I’ve looked everywhere for you!” she said with the Bryton drawl.

Brynna’s eyes filled with tears. “We’ve just arrived.” She dreaded what she had to say, and she surveyed the Norinians around her as they gazed back at her, so oblivious to the outside world. If only she could remain silent and bury

the truth in the ground, tamp it with her foot, and leave it to rot.

“What d’ya mean?” Peetra asked. “Carthasach’s over. Why...” Her voice faded, and her forehead wrinkled. “What’s wrong?”

“The Hykosi burned Robynton.”

“What?” Peetra said without tone.

Brynna choked through retelling the story. Tears wet her cheeks, and she had to pause several times to catch her breath and fight back the sobs. Others noticed the commotion and pressed closer to listen.

Peetra grew pale. “What of Lora? And Waryn?” she asked of her sister and sweetheart.

Brynna shook her head, not wanting to answer. “They’re dead.”

The crowd murmured, bodies tense. Peetra stepped back once, twice, her lip quivering. And then she screamed, a wild, primal shriek. Her scream broke the dam holding back the crowd. People pushed closer around the travelers, yelling, jostling them and trying to catch their attention.

“Walyss! This true?”

“What about Sasha! Erling, did you see Sasha!”

“My boat’s in the harbor! What of the wharf?”

“Who cares about the fucking wharf! Any word on Bridget?”

Brynna stepped back, trying to hold herself in check, yet she was overwhelmed by the movements and shouts of the crowd. A woman drew close and shouted, “Harval! My daughter, Harval!”

Brynna held up her palms. “I don’t know her.”

The woman grabbed Brynna’s shoulders, tugging on her hangerok. “You have to! Is she all right? My Harval!”

Brynna pried at her fingers. "I told you. I don't know!"

Erling gently, but firmly, pushed the woman away, then stood in front of Brynna, shielding her from the crowd. She shrank into the shadow at his back.

Trinan held up his hands. "Everyone! Listen! Listen!"

"Be quiet!" Erling shouted.

The crowd still moved and shifted, but their voices quieted.

"It's true," Trinan said. "The Hykosi have burned Robyn-ton and taken Norinian citizens in a Second Removal. We will address this in the Grand Assembly. But now, please, let us through for Basigh."

"And the harbor?" a man called.

"The harbor is open, but the wharf and pier have been destroyed. Now, please! Move back!"

The travelers moved through the crowd. Crying women clung to each other, and confused and worried voices carried through the air as the three walked away. A few called more questions, but these hung in the air unanswered.

They arrived at the Circle as the musicians played a lively song over the roar of fire and wind. People danced and sang around the outer boundary of the Circle or sat on the ground chatting and eating corn cakes and roasted potatoes, relaxing in the dwindling festivities.

The Life Fire revealed itself in heat and fury. Brynna had long greeted it with joy and excitement, but she had always arrived together with family and anticipation. Now it seemed not an expression of loving warmth but of searing pain.

"Ready?" Erling asked. They nodded and removed their boots and socks.

The three pushed between the people and emerged in a line, shoulder to shoulder, violating the bounds of the Circle. The dirt compressed under Brynna's feet with each step further onto sacred ground. The music stopped abruptly, and the pipes cried with air sharply pressed from the bellows. A horrified gasp rose from the crowd as people were shocked by the desecration of the Circle. Two of the guards ran toward them, spears ready to fly, screams rising from the crowd.

Trinan stepped toward the guards and lifted his hands, arms wide, with a loud, guttural cry. The Life Fire flashed off his coronet, and the guards fell back, looking at each other in confusion.

Erling pointed to the musicians. "Play Basigh!"

"Carthasach is over," called the conductor. "Basigh has been played. We cannot—"

Erling seized his knife and drew his arm back, prepared to throw it. Brynna tensed. She knew his deadly aim. "Play Basigh!" he shouted.

The musicians picked up their instruments. Voices in the crowd quieted.

Brynna shuffled her feet.

A lone pipe pierced the night.

The musical cry stepped higher, falling lower, a lone voice, a lone spirit, a keening wail. She focused intently upon the sounds and the sensation of her body. She lifted her hand and moved forward, her motion dictated by ancient tradition and honed with years of practice. She stepped, turned, and moved, but those movements formed pieces, lowly parts, dispassionate clockwork of spring and balance. She heard notes but no melody. She took steps but did not dance.

Drums infused strength into the music, pulsing forward in power, but she struggled to maintain the pace, to keep breath and time. She spun past Trinan's steely gaze as he watched. With lean and leap, she moved by script and twirled in a sense of unease. Music dripped over her body, yet her skin proved impermeable and dry.

Brynna's feet slowed.

The music flowed on without her, away from her, and she, struck by her own blasphemy, realized she was lost and alone. Her movements, perfect in form and timing, hung disconnected from emotion, far from her own life. Her dance lay dead, a bleak, worthless waste, incapable of conveying the suffering of herself or others. She dropped her putrescent claims of knowledge. She knew nothing. Her breath stilled into the acceptance of her emptiness.

Yet Basigh drove onward, and Erling moved to her side, his face uplifted and his tears glistening in the Life Fire's light. His shoulders shook with each sob he released as he obeyed the nature and spirit of Basigh, his legs bending and buckling, his arms swaying in time with his personal sorrow. His hands curled into fists, rising to the sky and then beating his chest. His feet stepped and shifted with the tone and cadence, every step inaccurate and flawed, but more, every step authentic and striking the essence of his grief as he melded ancestry with agony. In synchrony with wailing pipes and unrelenting drums, Erling danced. He danced. And in the weak, diluted fire light, she saw her father in his face, his movements, and his being.

Pain flared to life, filling her chest and growing. She reached for breath as if hands could hold it, drink it, and swallow it. She gripped and pulled at her skirt, grief unfurling within her. She could not push against it while

also escaping from it. Her steps now were running, Erling keeping pace at her side, matching form and function, with drums in tandem. She beat against a door that would not open, beat until her hands bled, craving escape to a serenity that failed to exist. Her fingers bent into claws, her head flung to one side, and she fought and pivoted and leaned. With the extension of her arms, her pain snapped into sudden alignment with tempo.

She burst into whirling rapids of tonal force, and with a primal scream, she spun into power, shattering inhibitions. She whirled and arched against the erupting torment, her anger roaring from the depths of her vitality. She curved and pressed her arms into and against the shadows that were and the darkness that was. The melody grew and infused her with the swirling of skirts, the turning of her body, and the bending of her figure, seeping into bone and marrow, spirit and soul.

Erling stepped away from her, breathing hard, for she commanded the Circle, dominated the space, curled to the rhythm, and flexed to the pain. Her steps floated and twisted, gathering sight and sound and crafting her grief into a stunning array of impassioned anguish, an elegant darkness trimmed with fractals of light, honoring the dead, acknowledging her pain, and finally, totally, and completely feeling all that was to be discerned without resistance, without defiance. Acceptance.

As the music receded, Brynna sank to the ground, on her knees, on her arms, poured out, unable to even raise her head. Only her heaving, gasping breath touched the silence.

Dirt crunched. Warm hands touched her shoulders, and Trinan helped her to her feet. The fire blurred. Cries

announcing the high king's arrival barely registered in her brain as her knees gave way, and her vision narrowed.

Trinan's strong arms picked her up. She wrapped her arms about his neck and buried her face in his chest, breathing his scent of sandalwood and cypress. He carried her to the Circle's bounds where Norinians pressed forward to see and question.

"They're the ones from Wyclythe!

"Ian Dany! Did you see Ian Dany? Is he alive?"

"Move out of the way," Trinan said.

"How many were killed?"

"My son lives in Robynton! Do you know him?"

"Did they burn everything? What's left?"

Trinan wove through the people as Brynna clung to him. The people patted him, trying to gain his attention, and they touched Brynna, either from pity or curiosity. "Let me through!" he said.

"Traitor!" a voice shouted above the rest. "The Com'dore said this would happen!"

Brynn lifted her head as Trinan strode faster between the people.

"You're a damn murderer!"

Trinan stopped short. His muscles shuddered.

The crowd surged into them, and he struggled forward once more.

"You did this!" the voice yelled again.

Trinan swung back, and Brynna saw a man in Wyclythe paint walk to the edge of the crowd. Flashes of orange camp-fire light flickered across his contorted face. "He warned ya!" the man shouted.

Trinan turned away once more and walked, faster, pushing harder through the people, his breath ragged.

“Run away, Chancellor!” The voice faded behind them. “Run like the coward y’ are!”

“Bring her,” another man’s voice said, this one with a musical quality instead of anger. “This way.”

Trinan changed directions and soon ducked into a tent heavy with the scents of lavender and lanolin and filled with thick blankets and skeins of woolen yarn.

“Set her on the cot there,” the man said. “I’m Gareth.”

“Trinan Walyss, Regent of Wyclythe.”

“You are welcome, my lord.”

“This is Brynnalyn, my attaché.” He lowered Brynna onto a low cot. She had never touched a blanket so soft. For the first time since the Second Removal, she could relax.

“Is she hurt?” Gareth asked.

“She’s exhausted,” Trinan said. “We’ve just walked from Wyclythe.”

Gareth nodded. “What happened there? I’ve heard terrible rumors.”

“We fought the Hykosi.”

“First Breath...”

Brynna lay on the cot, wanting only to sleep.

Gareth brought another blanket. “This may lead to war.”

“Damn right it will,” Trinan growled.

Chapter 57

NORA

Nalta
Gantu

Glancing over her shoulder, Nora ducked into the alley. She hurried through the meager shadows, her body humming with anticipation. Elias's task offered her purpose and vitality, a means of striking back at the ones who sought to trample her.

A hand grabbed her arm.

Ziri jerked her around to face him. "What the fuck are you doing?"

"Let go of me," she hissed. "I'm going to do something about this country. I'm going to make them hear us."

"You're just repeating the words Elias put in your head," he said. "The Ganstag is heavily guarded. You're going to get caught."

"No, I won't," she said, walking toward the street.

"You know what will happen if they catch you?"

She stopped, still staring at the street ahead.

“Nyok will kill you,” he said.

She turned back to him. “He’d be doing me a favor.” She pulled her hood over her head and went to the edge of the building.

“Nora!”

She paused once more.

“Please don’t go,” he said, his voice heavy with emotion. She didn’t want to make him sad, but his pleas were not enough.

Nora stepped out into the crowded streets. The Ganstag loomed over the town. She moved quickly from alley to alley, making her way to the butcher’s shop. Elias was waiting out front, chewing on a piece of straw that he tossed to the ground as he stepped in sync with her.

“Everything is in place,” he said. “The guards were bribed, so they won’t be on this side of the building.”

“Where are the supplies?”

He jerked his head toward the door. “Someone else assembled the blasting caps and dynamite earlier this week. They’re in a crate inside.”

She nodded, and he opened the door for her as they entered the stone building. The grand hallway, lined with marble, smooth and stark, felt oppressively quiet and empty. The closing door echoed loudly, and Nora cringed from the sound. Elias showed no reaction and motioned for her to follow him.

They walked to the stairwell, but he didn’t approach the stairs. He veered to the side and opened a small door to a cupboard underneath.

He squatted next to a wooden box. “This is it. The dynamite and the fuses are in here. We’ll take all of this to the

central storeroom and run the fuses until we're far enough away to spark them and run."

"We'll blow it up?"

He shook his head. "No. I don't want you here when I do it. We're just going to get it ready—in a place where no one will see it. I'll come back in the morning and blow it up. By setting the explosion here on the first floor, we may be able to bring the whole building down."

She nodded.

"I'm going to lift this box," he said. "I need you to close the cupboard and go ahead of me and open the doors. I can't open them and move quickly enough by myself."

"I understand," she said.

Elias pulled the crate toward himself, gripped it, and lifted, emitting a low groan from the weight. He staggered forward, and Nora closed the cupboard, then ran ahead of him to open the door to the hall. Once he was through, she ran ahead, gripping her gandoura so it wouldn't rustle.

"To the left," he directed in a strained voice as they moved through the building. "Over there."

At the storeroom door, Nora waited until Elias came into sight, trudging through the outer room with sweat pouring down his red face. She cracked the door open and peeked inside. No one was there. She held the door.

Elias plodded into the dark room. Light filtered through a small window high at the ceiling that opened into a room still further beyond. Setting the box on a stack of crates, he went to a far corner, slid aside a large urn, and removed a piece of baseboard. "We'll put the dynamite into these spaces. There is a space at every post all around the room. The fuses can run along the bottom in the space between

the board and the floor. People rarely come in here at all, and they'll never look close enough to see."

Using a bar, Elias pried open the box. Nora leaned forward to watch. He lifted the top and stopped, a puzzled look on his face. He set the top down, and Nora saw dozens of red sticks of explosives.

He gingerly moved the sticks around. "Shyan shit yentera."

"What is it?"

He shifted a few more. "The fuses aren't here."

"What does that mean?"

"Shut up, and let me think!" he said, his fist on his forehead.

She bit her lip and listened to her heart pound in her ears.

"These have short fuses," he said. "Without the longer fuses, it's just a bomb in a box. That's it. It can't be set as a systematic explosion from a distance."

"Can you set them out now and bring the fuses when you come back to set them off?"

He huffed. "Maybe. But I don't know where the fuses are. They're supposed to be here. Damn it!" He scrunched his face. "No, I can't put them out now, because if I have to steal new ones from Atógo, it may take days. Or weeks!" He rubbed his face and groaned.

She tipped the box toward her.

Elias lunged toward her and pulled her hands away from the box. "Don't do that! Those caps are sensitive to shock. I'm telling you. It's a giant bomb. Friction. Fire. Shock. With the blasting caps ready, anything can set it off."

He put his hands on his head and turned around, scanning the room. "Here," he said, walking to a closet. "What's

in here?" He opened the door. A broom fell forward, and he caught it before it hit him. "There's only a few cartons in here and cleaning supplies. We can hide it."

She nodded, and he lifted the box into the closet. Carefully, she stacked a mop bucket and a dustpan on top. He closed the door and brushed his hands on his pants.

Voices filtered into the room. Nora stiffened.

"Take my arm," Elias said, "and we'll walk out of here like we're supposed to be here. Do you understand? No nerves. No twitches. No gasping. We belong here. Smile and act like you know what you're doing. If we do that, no one will stop us, and we can walk right out."

She nodded, trying to smile and hide her fear. She couldn't discern whether she was excited or anxious. In such a moment, they seemed a lot alike.

Elias opened the door for her. Once outside, she took his arm, and they strolled through the outer room to the hall. Two men in turbans and taylasans walked down the hallway toward them, discussing a legal case. Elias and Nora continued to walk, and the secretaries didn't even pause the flow of their conversation.

A guard in dark gray rounded the corner. Nora's breath left her, and she clung to Elias's arm. The guard's brows met, and his steps slowed. Elias continued to stride forward and then nodded in greeting. The guard's eyes flashed with confusion, but he said nothing, and they passed by.

Moments later, Nora stood outside in the sunshine, drinking in the fresh air.

"You did it," Elias said. "Well done."

But she barely heard him because she was watching Marcus Regá walk into the Ganstag, flanked by Nalta Guards.

Chapter 58

BRYNNA

Lonara
Corradh Province
Norin

In the camp at Lonara, Brynna awoke to the warmth and softness of a small cot piled high with woolen blankets. The diffuse sunlight through the roof and sides of the large tent revealed sturdy wooden racks holding skein after skein of woolen yarn in every color. Shelves displayed garments and scarves in each province's design, ready for browsing and sale. Several shelves were empty, and others held only sparse remnants. It seemed that sales had been good.

She shifted deeper into the covers. Her body felt strong, her mind refreshed, and her memory pulsed with violet light and flowing warmth. Awakening naturally, slowly, filled her with peace.

A rhythmic clicking arose in her awareness, and she lifted herself onto her elbows. A man sat near her, knitting. His large brown eyes seemed kind, and his white face was clean

and unmarked by the dirt and blood she had grown used to seeing on people. His fine tunic of an excellent folk cut assured her of his residence in Lincanly with its burgundy and gold cording.

He lifted his head. "You're awake! Good morning," he said, chuckling and continuing to knit. His fingers moved with speed and surety.

"You're Gareth," she said.

"Correct! I'm surprised you remember such a minor detail from your ordeal last night." He gathered the ball of yarn and put his knitting into a basket by his chair. "Are you hungry?"

"Famished," she said, pushing back the covers.

"You're in luck," Gareth said, retrieving a steaming tray. "I saved this for you. I hope you don't mind mutton stew."

Stew seemed heavy for breakfast, but her stomach rumbled, not caring either way. "That smells delicious!"

She placed her bare feet on the woven mat and slowly unfolded herself to stand, cautious for any twinge. Her muscles flexed, surprisingly supple and strong, responsive to every movement, and ready for any command. A deep refreshment emanated from every cell and fiber. She was born anew as though the arduous journey had never happened. The wonders of canonical magic amazed her once again.

She sat at a small table, and Gareth passed her a spoon.

"You're from Lincanly?" she asked before tasting the stew. It was flavorful, but heavy on the thyme.

"Correct, again. I spin and weave and make textiles." He grinned sheepishly. "You could probably tell from all the yarn."

She motioned to the racks. "The colors are beautiful."

"Some of the dyes I invented myself."

“Really! I do recognize that blue on the end.”

He nodded. “Wyclythe blue. I buy it from those adorable little farms that dot the coast. There’s a marsh to the east of Robynton that has never failed me yet.”

“Somewhere near the Fromyn’s place?”

“Yes!” he laughed. “I stay with the Dennysyn’s nearby when I travel there.” His face fell. “I do hope they escaped the Hykosi.”

Her eyes teared, and she swallowed hard, lowering her spoon. “Kayla Fromyn, my brother’s wife, did not. She’s dead. As for the rest, I don’t know.”

He placed his hand on his chest. “By the Breath. My heart aches. Your loss is mine.”

Brynna nodded. “But the rest are quite far from town. They should be fine for now.”

“Eat! Eat!” Gareth said. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have brought it up.”

Brynna blinked and smiled. “It’s all right.” She scrambled for a new topic. “How have sales been?”

“I make most of my income here at the Circle,” he said, relief in his voice as the conversation moved again. “Especially when I can camp like this, so close to the main event. I’m always here for the big three.”

“That’s wonderful!” she said. “Now that I’m taking time to look, I think I’ve shopped here before.”

“A happy customer, I hope? I love the festivals. All the people, the dancing. Like your Basigh last night. I’ve never seen anything like it. I was truly moved.”

She nodded her thanks but then shrugged. “I remember little of it,” she said. “But I feel so refreshed—a witch must have visited, but I don’t remember her. Only some light.”

“Yes,” he said. “Several witches, actually, including one that I believe is their leader. Mira? Meeta? Something. You were in terrible shape as were your companions.”

Brynna looked up, alarmed. “How are—”

“Oh, they’re fine,” Gareth assured her, lifting his hand. “They seem just as chipper as you.”

“So they’re up and about, too? The sun isn’t high yet.”

“Yet? You mean the sun is almost down,” Gareth laughed. “It’s nearly evening. You slept the day away. I’ve sat and watched—”

“Nearly evening!” Brynna exclaimed, jumping up. Her spoon clattered on the table. “You said good morning to me! I thought—”

“You had just woken up. It was a joke.” He cringed. “Obviously, mistimed.”

She clapped her hands to her head. “Oh, the stew instead of breakfast!” she cried as it all made sense.

“I thought you knew.”

Brynna had no time for stew and yarn. She had to find her socks.

“What of the Grand Assembly?” she asked as she hurried back to the cot and searched around. No socks.

“I don’t know,” Gareth said. “They’ve been in conference since sunrise, and I’ve been with you.”

She climbed over the cot and found her boots. “Who called it?” she asked over her shoulder. Shoving her hand inside her boot, she found her sock.

“Your regent. The one who brought you here.”

Brynna pulled on her socks and crammed her feet into her boots, laces flying. “Thank you so much for the food. I’ve got to go!” she said, brushing past him.

“You can’t go like that!” he objected.

"I must! The regent will want—"

"Brynna, look at yourself!" he said, gesturing to her clothes. "You are about to walk into the Grand Assembly with the most powerful people in Norin. You just rolled out of bed, and you look it. And you haven't bathed since your journey. How many days has it been?"

"There are more important—"

"You can't go in there looking like that," he said, then muttered, "smelling like that."

"I have nothing clean to wear."

"Yes, you do," he said, walking to a crate. "Look, I have things you can borrow."

He opened the crate and revealed stacks of hangeroks in every color, pattern, and design. "Forgive me, these are mostly Lincanly." He pursed his lips. "I'm a bit biased, I suppose. But I have Wyclythe blue hangeroks somewhere. And some green. There's no Wyclythe embroidery on it—so I can sell to both Wyclythe and Elidel, you understand. But it will match Wyclythe, and your belt and beads should be fine." He pulled out a green overdress. "There are plenty of serks and stays over here in all sizes, just pick some that fit."

Brynna took the dress. "Gareth, it's lovely, but—"

"We'll get square later. I'm not worried about it." He laughed. "I'll send the bill to your regent."

She nodded.

"You wait here," he said, "and I'll get some hot water. You can bathe and dress behind the screen. We'll get your hair to rights and send you to the assembly in proper form."

Brynna assented and sat at the table as Gareth fetched water. She bounced her feet, antsy and nervous, and when she could endure it no longer, she stood and paced. The weight of the moment pressed her shoulders. An entire day

had passed. Perhaps they were already at war. Perhaps a decision was at hand. Perhaps the motion had failed. Her absence would infuriate Trinan. She tapped her foot in frustration. The fate of the country rested on fetching water.

Gareth soon returned, and Brynna ducked behind the screen, hastily shucking her filthy clothes and sponging herself off in tepid water that had misrepresented itself as being hot. Chilled, she wrapped her stays quickly and pulled on the buttery-soft serk. She paused for a moment to smooth her fingers across the even weave and tiny stitching. Under the edge of the hangerok, she found an embroidered "G. L." which she assumed were Gareth's initials. These garments were no common sutler's work, but the craft of a master weaver and tailor.

Another male voice entered the tent. Brynna started and grabbed her clothes, even though she was well behind the screen. She heard a kiss and then soft conversation. She pulled on the green hangerok and secured it with her woven belt and beads, buckling on her knife belt. All in place, she stepped from behind the screen.

A black man stood next to Gareth, his clothes and paint in the Lincanly style. "Hello there," he said, holding out his hand. "I'm Rand."

"Brynna," she said, shaking hands.

He smiled. "You seem to be feeling better," he said in a thick Talahmese accent.

"Yes," she said. "I've been well cared for. Are you a weaver, too?"

He shook his head. "Shepherd."

Gareth grinned. "Finest sheep in Lincanly."

“A fortunate alliance for you both,” Brynna said. “You’ll have to excuse me. I must attend the assembly.” She attempted to move past them.

“Hair,” Gareth called. He held a brush and a pile of ribbons.

She chewed her cheek and sat down. Gareth set to work.

“I’ve just come from there,” Rand said, sitting in a chair by the table.

Brynna leaned forward. “Have they—ow!”

“Lean back,” Gareth said.

Brynna obeyed and rubbed her head. “Have they declared war?”

Rand shook his head. “No, there’s a larger appeasement faction than anyone expected.”

“What have they been discussing?”

“The destruction of Robynton, primarily, and they’ve talked about the rebels—those who would have us rise up against the Hykosi whether or not the official Norinian government supports it.”

Brynna rolled her eyes. “They always gum up everything we want to accomplish.”

“Especially in this. It seems their leader was based in Robynton, one Seth Dasveld.”

Brynna jumped to her feet, the brush ripping through her hair. “Rebel leader! How dare you!” she shouted, her hand on her knife. “My father was a respectable man, an honored man! He was no rebel!”

Wrinkles formed into ridges on Rand’s forehead, then smoothed as his eyes widened with understanding. “Your father!”

“Yes, my father! Renounce your words!”

Rand and Gareth exchanged glances.

Gareth slowly lifted his hands in realization. “Brynna—Brynna—and Erling...Dasveld,” he murmured. “Of course.”

“Norin Å Sdolevy,” Rand said, his voice quiet.

“What do you mean, ‘of course’?” Brynna exclaimed. “What are you talking about? And Norin Å—why do you people keep saying that?”

Erling appeared at the tent door. “What’s going on? I heard yell—”

“Erling!” Brynna cried.

“Norin Å Sdolevy!” Gareth and Rand proclaimed together.

Brynna swung back. “And forever fucking more!” She turned to her brother. “Erling, explain to them Papa wasn’t a rebel!”

“Our father wasn’t a rebel,” Erling repeated to the men, then turned to her. “But it seems everyone here thinks he was.”

Brynna shook her head. “That’s absurd! Why would they think that?”

“I don’t know,” he said. “He would preach sometimes.”

“Mother was killed in the First Removal—”

“May it never—” Gareth began.

“Hush!” Brynna demanded, and he shut his mouth. “Of course, Papa would have strong feelings,” she said, rushing her words. “Of course, he would talk! Anyone would. You do! I do! Any—”

“He traveled a lot,” Erling said, shrugging. “And he spent a lot of time up at the fortress. And here in Lonara.”

“He had carving commissions! He had to meet with people!”

Erling rubbed the back of his neck. “I guess he shared his thoughts while he traveled.”

"A traveling unity preacher is not a rebel!" Brynna retorted, her hands on her hips.

"I know! I know!" Erling said, raising his hands, exasperated. "I don't know where they're getting all this from, but it's all very complicated right now. The opposition is stronger than we thought. Everything is disorganized, and there have been terrorist attacks. And—"

"Terrorists!" she cried

"—everything's going to hell, and we need to get back. Are you coming?"

"Where's Trinan?" Brynna asked.

"In the thick of it and has been all day."

"Shit!"

"They've stopped for supper," Erling said, "but will start again soon, I'm sure."

"All right. Let's go back."

"Hair!" Gareth called.

"My hair doesn't—"

"Brynna, fix your hair!" Erling commanded.

She quieted at his tone.

Erling sighed. "Trinan thinks we'll need Sel Rhyshga before the night is over," he said. "We need everything in order. Everything rides on this assembly. There's too much at stake to be careless."

Anxiety flared in her stomach, and Brynna lowered herself onto the stool again. Gareth braided her hair, weaving in blue, green, and white ribbons and gold leaves. Rand sat at the table, and Erling crossed his arms and waited.

Gareth stood back to look at his work. "Paint?" he asked, looking to Erling. "Wyclythe or Sel Rhyshga?"

Erling shook his head. "I don't know. Someone else will have to make that call. Not me."

"Plain faced is an awkward look right now," Rand said. Gareth, his own face plain, raised an eyebrow at him.

"It's an awkward time," Erling said. "But to walk into that assembly painted for Sel Rhyshga at the wrong moment could be detrimental to the process."

Brynna nodded. "Let's go now. I'll paint later."

"Are you coming back to the fortress?" Erling asked Rand.

Rand nodded. "Yes, I'll be up there soon."

Brynna and Erling bade them farewell and struck out across the camp, the Circle to their backs. Campsites were emptying as holiday-goers returned to their provinces. The tents of those who remained for the political developments sat eerily quiet, awash in the early glow of sunset. No music, no hawkers with wares, no milling crowds, no impromptu drum circles with dancing and laughing. Instead, people, young and old, stood together in tight clumps, looking out at nothing, kicking the dirt every so often, and waiting. Waiting.

The pathway widened, joining with others to form the road leading to High King Corradh's fortress. Nearing the bridge over the stream, Erling walked with purpose, and Brynna hurried to keep up, her body tense, her mind racing. Her boots sounded hollow on the bridge's wooden planks. Her thoughts pelted her with doubt. She slowed. "Was Papa a rebel?"

Erling stopped but stared ahead toward the fortress. "Looks that way."

"Why didn't he ever say anything?" she said to his back. "How could we not know?"

"I don't know." He faced her. "I guess he never wanted us to know. Looking back—I can see it."

"What do you mean?"

“All the traveling, the meetings. His constant talk of power, of standing up to the Hykosi, the need to organize ourselves. And strangers would stop by the house, even late at night. You remember. The people in the kitchen. The chats in the yard.”

“That was a long time ago,” she said. “He’s always been well connected.”

“But then we left home. And he’s been alone since we’ve been working at the fortress. He could have done anything with those connections. We’d never know.”

“But I moved back home after Trinan kicked me out,” Brynna said, shaking her head. “I haven’t seen—”

“Sleeping there, sure.” Erling held up his finger. “But you haven’t been watching him. You’ve been walking back and forth and working. You don’t know what he was doing. Could have been anything.”

“Was he a terrorist? You said there have been attacks—”

“No,” Erling said, his voice firm. “Papa had nothing to do with those. They were in Hykos and...Amiman or Grim-syn. Somewhere on the border. I don’t remember. Nowhere nearby. And these recent ones have been since he—it’s obviously not Papa. Just—it wasn’t Papa. Not those. He was a unity preacher, just like you said. A rebel encouraging people to rise up. To make change. That’s all. Certainly not everything they’re making him out to be. And not a terrorist.”

Brynna leaned on the bridge’s handrail and looked to the ice below her. “I could shoot before I could write my name.” She turned back to him. “I could field strip a rifle by the time I was—”

“Brynna—”

“He trained us to fight—”

Erling grasped her shoulders. “You were a motherless child. He was left with a seven-year-old boy and a three-year-old girl by himself. Completely alone. What else was he supposed to do with us? He taught you what he knew. To climb trees and manage a carving business and, yeah, to shoot. That doesn’t make him a terrorist.”

“It doesn’t make him not a terrorist, either.”

“The Council of Norin claimed the attacks, not the rebels,” he said. “The Council is organized and well funded. They aren’t liberty preachers or country rebels hot to pick a fight in a backroad skirmish. They have an agenda, and they’re vicious. As near as I can tell,” he said with a shrug, “the rebels never actually did anything except badger the Hykosi. They just formed good-ol’-boy networks and talked. If he was their leader and wanted them to make lasting change, then. . .he failed.”

Brynna crossed her arms and sighed.

Erling flicked a leaf from the handrail. “Look at it this way,” he said, leaning on the rail. “Trinan was chancellor when Papa was alive, and he was charged with keeping Wyclythe province safe, right?”

“Yes,” she said, confused.

“Trinan knew Papa well—probably better than we did. If Papa had been a danger to the province or to Norin, Trinan would have known.” He leaned toward her. “You would have known.”

“I suppose.”

“But instead, whom did Trinan go after? Whom did he see as a danger? A threat?” He tapped his fingers on the rail. “Commodore Andersyn.”

“Cadoc,” she whispered.

“And that’s whom Trinan brought to justice.” Erling met her eyes. “Our father was a good man.”

Bryнна stared at the ice.

“Do you believe me?” he asked.

“Yes,” she answered.

“Good.” He continued up the trail again. “Come on, Tree Rat,” he called over his shoulder. “We need to get back.”

She humored him with a half smile and followed.

Chapter 59

CADOC

Robynton
Wyclythe Province
Norin

Cadoc leaned on Thackery as he climbed from the coracle onto the Robynton beach. His swollen leg ached as though it were being mauled by rabid dogs. Blood soaked through the bandage, and the skin was hot to the touch, where it wasn't weeping. Thackery had attempted to sew the wound, but the task had proved too difficult for him. Too much had been destroyed, and there had been nothing left to sew.

Hissing through his teeth, Cadoc hopped several times before finding his balance and limping further onto the sand.

A man approached, his rolling gait marking him as a sailor.

Cadoc squinted. "Is that Skipper?"

Thackery looked over his shoulder as he pulled the coracle further onto the beach. "Looks to be."

Skipper hallooed and waved as he approached. "Ya be needin' some grunts to unload my *Signy*, eh?"

"If you've got them," Thackery said. "And we need a witch, too."

Skipper crossed his arms. "Tha's a mite tricky. There's some 'bout, but ya gotta go further into town. Ain't no one near the harbor no more, aside longshoremen. Not merchants, not witches."

Cadoc nodded. "Any idea where to find them?"

Skipper hemmed for a bit. "Aye, sir. Long 'bouts the sacred hill. Seen a few thereabouts. And iff'n you be stayin' at The Dusty Toad, that be on the way."

"Not sure where we'll stay tonight," Cadoc said, reaching into his pants' pocket. He tossed the entire purse to Skipper. "Think you can get *Signy* unloaded and the goods distributed?"

Skipper opened the purse and shook it with a jingling sound. "Aye, aye, sir. This here will be enough to see it done."

Skipper returned to what remained of the wharf. Cadoc slung his arm around Thackery's shoulder and leaned on him as they crossed the sand to the road. It took all of damn eternity, and pain shot through his leg with every step. He was tired, feverish, and cross. All he wanted was a witch and a whisky.

Though hammering and other sounds of recovery could be heard ringing throughout the town, most people were settling for the evening. Golden sunlight tinged the edges of the burned-out ruins and cast long bony shadows over the

streets. A woman wrapped in a shawl squatted beside a fire built in what had once been her garden. She stirred the pot, and the smell of the stew reminded Cadoc of rat flesh.

“That’s Andersyn!” a man’s voice called. A group of townspeople looked up, and a woman ran toward them, her skirt in tatters and tears on her face.

“Bless you, sir! Bless you!” she said, seizing his free hand in hers.

Cadoc shifted his weight, causing Thackery to lurch, and both teetered over the dirt, wheeling for balance. The woman paid no notice and clasped her hands before her. “You have brought us so much comfort!”

A man approached behind her and doffed his hat. “These supplies. You’ve helped us survive. Can’t tell you what it’s meant.”

Cadoc smiled, a bit embarrassed. “It’s my pleas—oof!”

A small boy collided with him and flung his thin arms around his waist, squeezing tightly. Cadoc doubled over and stepped his full weight on his leg, pain bursting before his eyes in white flashes.

“Thank you, captain, sir!” the boy said.

Cadoc blinked through tears and controlled his breath through his nose.

Thackery waved to the thankful people. “We’ve been happy to serve you. Now we need to walk on.”

Cadoc held up an index finger, requesting Thackery to pause, as he waited for the bulk of the pain to subside. “Alright,” he said, straightening and regaining his grip on Thackery’s shoulders.

They limped along the gentle rise in the road. A putrid smell struck him, and he glanced at Thackery who was blinking rapidly.

“Gibbet row,” Thackery said, coughing.

The broken corpses appeared. It had been six days. Six days of open entrails. Six days on pikes. The blackened skin had slipped, and tissues liquified in various stages of thaw.

The two walked faster, despite Cadoc’s pain, and put the sight behind them.

A woman in a purple robe traveled ahead.

“Wait here,” Thackery said, helping Cadoc to lean on a broken fence. He jogged ahead. Cadoc watched him speak to the witch and motion for her to follow him. “This is Sissel,” he said when he returned with her at his side.

Without a word of greeting, Sissel knelt by Cadoc and removed the bandage. “Was this caused by magic?”

“Hardly,” Cadoc said in a hard tone. “Grapeshot.”

She looked up at him. “I cannot rebuild flesh. I can heal what is here, but no more.”

“Fine. I would settle for pain relief.”

She placed her hands on his leg, and he sensed her power, feeling his skin grow warmer than the fever. Her touch was light and tender, but as his leg pulsed and warmed, her hands grew heavier, stronger, pressing into him, through him, and beyond him. Stretch one way. Stretch another. He closed his eyes. The heat intensified. The pressure grew. His ears throbbed with each wave. It spilled over, gushing down to his foot, then splashing up over the rest of his body. Deep relaxation and weight filled his limbs, and tranquility flowed into his core. His breath fell faint. His heart beat slowly. Violet light filled his vision as starbursts appeared, yet he could not open his eyes. Sounds dropped away, first muffled, then quelled, and silence pressed through his very tissue and marrow, churning, lifting, and smoothing—

Cadoc jolted into the present.

"How is it?" Thackery asked. "How do you feel?"

Cadoc stepped once, then walked forward two paces, testing his leg. His gait was smooth, and his muscles trustworthy. "Much better," he said, pacing back and forth. "I could run for miles." He ran his hand from his knee at the edge of his cut-off pants down to his ankle. The skin bore ridges, the muscles lay uneven, and a large depression sank into the swell of his calf. "I'll never win a woman based on my looks."

"You didn't have that ability to begin with," Thackery said. "Sir."

Cadoc grinned, then addressed the witch. "Thank you, Sissel."

Without returning his smile, she stood and nodded. As though they had never met, she continued her walk along the road.

"You're well then?" Thackery asked.

"Yes," Cadoc assured him.

"Shall we return to the harbor? Check on the supplies?"

Cadoc shook his head. "I'm certain Skipper has it under control. I think a shot for each of us would not go amiss. It's been a wild few days. I'll buy." He clapped his hand on Thackery's shoulder, and they walked on toward The Dusty Toad.

With the town in rubble, finding their way was a challenge. All familiar landmarks had been destroyed, and a dusting of snow covered the ground. The placard for The Dusty Toad was gone, but the building outline remained discernable. "Nothing can kill The Dusty Toad," Thackery said.

Cadoc chuckled and stepped inside, allowing his eyes time to adjust to the darkness. The front right corner of the building had burned, and an oilcloth covered the area

where the roof had been. The bar remained intact, complete with an array of bottles and plenty of patrons to buy them. Smoke with a strange smell rose from a table near the wall and combined with the odors of alcohol, unwashed bodies, and old vomit. The occasional whiff from Gibbet Row drifted through the hole in the roof, and rhythmic breathy moans emanated from the darkened corners of the room.

A rough man with dirt and sweat caked on his face leaned on the bar, scowling and drinking from a wooden cup. His dirty shirt, open at the neck, revealed a chest marred with the punctures of several old gunshot wounds. The man next to him drank straight from a bottle of liquor, his head and eyelids drooping. So delirious was he that he failed to notice the woman with limp blonde hair who trailed her fingers across the bar and over his shoulders. Her chemise had slipped off her shoulder enough to reveal her tit and its light-pink nipple which she didn't try to cover.

Cadoc met her eyes, holding his face impassive. She glanced at the bar, then looked back at him, affirming her interest. He would return to her later unless he found something nicer on the menu.

Gustaf, the old barkeep, as much a fixture of The Dusty Toad as the liquor itself, dropped a rag onto the bar as he nodded his head in familiar greeting. "Either drink, smoke, or fuck, but you can't just watch. Unless that's your thing, then it'll be 50 mynt."

They each ordered a shot of whisky and then leaned on the bar, nursing their drinks in the silence that further strengthened their friendship.

Two men shook hands at a table near the back. One shoved a folded bundle of papers into his jacket and donned his hat. With a glance around the room, he turned and left.

The other man sauntered to the bar. "I suppose you salts are interested, too."

Neither Cadoc nor Thackery answered, but their eyes slid to his face.

"Bonds," the man said. "These is perilous times. You can keep your money secure in bonds. Hell, you may even profit from this war."

Cadoc gripped his glass tighter. "We're at war, then?"

"Dunno," the man said. "Word ain't come back from Lonara yet. Get some bonds. Keep your money safe."

"You seem convinced we'll go to war."

The man shrugged. "Only a matter o' time. Dasveld's got long fingers."

Cadoc's skin crawled with disgust. He sneered. "The father? Or his cunt of a daughter?"

The man lunged, a bar stool crashing back. His hands jutted forward, one grabbing Cadoc's shirt, the other holding a knife to Cadoc's neck.

Thackery drew his pistol, but Cadoc raised his palm to restrain him.

The man breathed in his face with his grimy teeth bared.

Cadoc could have punched him. He could have flipped him over the bar and slammed him into the back wall. He could have broken his neck in one motion or slit the man's jugular with his own knife that was ready at his side.

Instead, he relished the stinging pain.

He deserved this treatment, this choking sensation, this sharp burn at his neck. It pleased him to feel his blood dribble down his skin. He had struck out at her. He had said the words because he had needed to. He had needed to hear them, to examine their merit, to test the truth. But

now, released into the world, those words were as repulsive to him as they had been to this stranger.

“No one insults Brynna Dasveld in my presence,” the man growled.

“Well put,” Cadoc said with a nod, using one finger to push the knife away from his throat.

The man drew back and sheathed his knife. “Dasveld stood up to them Hykosi. Got us to do the same. I’d follow his children to the ends of the earth. Die for them. His legacy lives on.”

Cadoc lifted his brow as he dabbed his handkerchief at his neck. He glanced at the red spots, a bit dismayed at how quickly the fabric was becoming sodden with blood. Ceremonial knife wounds were like that. He held pressure again. “And what legacy is that?”

“Norin Å Sdolevy.”

“Norin will suffer no more,” Cadoc translated.

The man nodded. “We’ll take our rightful place among the nations. We’ll lead.”

“Leading requires war?”

The man hit his fist on the bar. “If the Dasvelds say it does—then it does! If they say ‘rise up,’ we rise up. If they say ‘fights,’ we fights—whether or not the powers in Lonara agree.”

“Rebellion even against your own government?” Cadoc asked. “While other threats are bearing down? Hykos? Gantu?”

“If they say ‘rise up,’ we rise up. Norin Å Sdolevy.”

The corner of Cadoc’s mouth lifted. “And make sure to buy war bonds from a dealer at The Dusty Toad.”

The man leaned back and stared at him down his nose. “Eh, now, we each gotta make a living. You two on the sea.”

He jabbed his thumb into his chest. "Me, I'm a broker. You aren't any better than me. War bonds. Provincial bonds. It helps everyone."

Cadoc returned to his whiskey. "And what backs these provincial bonds?"

The man grinned and withdrew a stack of papers from his patched jacket. "These here," he said, setting them on the bar and patting them, "are backed by the Andersyn fortune which is now controlled by King Wyclythe."

Thackery coughed on his liquor.

The man pounded him on the back. "Clear it out!" he said, then turned back to Cadoc. "You're a sailor. You familiar with them Andersyns?"

Cadoc wet his lips and stared at the bottles lined up behind the bar. "Vaguely."

The man hummed and nodded. "Bloke got caught smuggling and lost it all to the king. Now all those assets are ripe for bonds—that fortune was built over four generations. Few things is more solid than that."

"Indeed." Cadoc pushed back from the bar. "I'll consider."

"You do that," the man said, standing. "I'll be around. Hansyn's the name. Ask anyone."

Cadoc nodded but did not extend his hand.

Hansyn grunted and left the room, stepping outside into the golden light.

Cadoc ran his thumb over the throbbing mark at his neck as he shoved his bloody handkerchief back into his pocket. The bleeding had stopped, but the wound would scar—injuries caused by ceremonial knives always did. He was glad of it.

He stared at nothing, his eyes unfocused, his mind wandering, his soul restless. A thin hand touched his cheek and

turned his face. This palm was not as smooth as hers had been, but these eyes were just as blue. Her hair was the same tumbled brown he could wrap around his fist. She didn't gasp as he jerked her against him nor shudder as his lips kissed her neck. In the back room, she removed her clothes without hesitation and moaned brazenly when he twisted her nipples. But he couldn't bear to look into her eyes, those blue eyes the same shade as hers. He bent her over the bed, and she knew exactly how to stand, without a hint of inner conflict or of any thoughts at all. As he thrust his hips and stared at the wall, his hands gripping unfamiliar curves, his satisfaction rang hollowly, clanging in a cold void. Buttoning his pants, he tossed coins on the bed and fled the room as her eyes stared at his back.

Thackery sat at a dirty table, smoking a cigar, as Cadoc dropped into a chair across from him. Cadoc tapped his fingers on the table, searching for words. He was being stupid. Rash. Impulsive. He knew it, and he didn't care. "I'm going to Lonara."

"To speak your piece?"

"To watch."

Thackery shook his head. "You'll never arrive in time."

"With a strong horse—"

"You don't have a horse."

Cadoc pointed at him. "That's never stopped me before." He stood. "I'll pay your bill. Get *Signy* and meet me tomorrow in Jarta." He paused. "And feed my cat."

Chapter 60

BRYNNA

Corradh Fortress
Corradh Province
Norin

With Erling ahead of her, Brynna walked through the wide corridors and past guards and flaming torches. As they approached the hall housing the Grand Assembly, she heard the din of voices and the clink of crystal.

“Wait here out of sight,” Erling said. “I’ll tell Trinan you’ve arrived. He may want you to prepare for Sel Rhyshga right away.”

She nodded and held back as he entered, but then, curious, she stepped closer and peeked around the frame. The hall blazed with light from torches, candles, and the enormous fireplaces along the walls. The room, filled with radiant heat from fire and bodies, bordered on hot. The painted ceiling soared three stories high, upheld by sweeping wooden beams. Magnificent stained-glass windows interspersed the beams and filled the exterior wall, and a large stained-glass

rosette crowned the wide central window, flanked by two others. Oriented for morning splendor, the sunset failed to deliver any means of appropriate majesty. Instead, the light in the room reflected back toward her, and only through the large panes of the clear lower section could she see the light from the distant Life Fire, which continued to burn.

Normally, the Life Fire would have been allowed to fade and fizzle out at the end of Carthasach, but with the potential need for Sel Rhyshga, it had been maintained. The sight of the flames had always filled her with warmth, but now the yellow spark through the window left only cold dread in her stomach.

In the room, the kings and queens and representatives of every province of Norin sat around a long, broad table. Their attachés and lesser nobles sat beside them or bustled about, discussing the issues at hand. Servants dressed in the folk wear of Corradh Province—red serks and white hangeroks, or red or white tunics—carried wine bottles and trays piled with golden breads, fruits, and roasted hens. The sight would have led one to think of a holiday or wedding feast, but the heavy atmosphere of strained voices, wrinkled foreheads, and clenched fists denied the possibility outright. This was not a joyous occasion.

Elderly Queen Ryntoth sat closest to the doorway where Brynna waited. Wrapped in the white furs commonly found in the northern provinces, she wore her hair twisted up upon her head and kept her cane close by her side. Smoke from her cigarette curled through the air before her. Her intelligent eyes shone brightly from her stern face and shifted constantly, laying a piercing gaze on all around her. Two red lines ran across her cheeks and nose, and her crown, adorned with large rubies, bobbed as she nodded to

her queen consort, seated to her right. The other woman matched Queen Ryntoth's splendor in all but the ruby crown. She wore, in its place, a tiara dotted with garnets.

King Bryton sat next to her, surrounded by a group of rapidly speaking attachés he seemed to be ignoring in favor of sopping a biscuit in gravy. His bright blue robe, embellished with silver thread, rested on his uplifted shoulders, and the women and men around him wore folkwear of a similar color.

Across the table, in black furs and green wool, King Amiman gripped a turkey leg in his fist as he argued with King Safwyn. His teeth tore into the flesh. Bits of meat flung from his mouth as he made his point and pounded the table. Brynna wrinkled her nose, but King Safwyn, in rich indigo, nodded and rubbed his chin, giving full consideration to whatever had been said.

The head of the table remained vacant, the large, ornately carved chair, empty. High King Corradh was not in attendance at one of the most important meetings in Norin's history.

Brynna continued to scan for Trinan, and at the far side of the room, near the end of the table, her eyes finally rested on him where he sat in his sophisticated navy-blue suit. Clean shaven, hair brushed, and his neck adorned in a bright white cravat, one would never have known what he had endured in the last week. Now, with his classic, amiable movements and charming manner, he conversed with King Ladvyl. Brynna admired him as he spoke.

On Trinan's opposite side sat the elegant and alluring Queen Gara of Elidel. Her long blonde hair flowed from her silver crown down her back along the dainty lines of her sky-blue gown. Three white circles had been painted over

her left eye. Sapphires and sea shells draped her arms, highlighting her thin fingers and expressive hands. She rested one of those hands on Trinan's arm and spoke, a smile on her lips. Trinan laughed and leaned toward her, nodding and answering. He took her hand and kissed it softly, his lips lingering on her skin. His eyes gleamed, and Brynna recognized his desire. She knew all of his expressions, that one especially well.

She shrank into the shadows by the door, a knot in her stomach. She rubbed the fabric of her skirt between her fingers. It was a masterpiece of folk wear, but it was not a silk gown, and certainly not the couture of a queen. She closed her eyes, thankful for Gareth's help. She may look simple, but at least she didn't smell like a barnyard animal. Even so, she could hardly compete for Trinan's attention among such company. She winced from the sting of her station. Perhaps Cadoc was right. Maybe Trinan only thought of her as his subordinate, his due until he could take his place on the throne with rightful royal companionship.

Erling returned. "It's not time yet. But he wants you to attend. They'll be starting again in a few minutes."

Brynna only nodded and stepped once more to the doorway, into the light this time. She looked across the room to Trinan. He met her eyes and motioned slightly with his index finger for her to approach. With a deep, slow breath, she pushed back her shoulders and lifted her chin. She was no queen, but even an attaché could walk with dignity. She stepped into the room.

The noise around her changed. The collective voice grew in volume. The eyes of many rested upon her as she walked by the long table. She stared straight at the wall, her stomach fluttering.

“Dasveld!” a voice cried. Her breath caught at the sound, but she maintained her cadence. She assumed the call was for Erling, not herself, yet he didn’t respond. She then realized it hadn’t been a call for her attention but rather one announcing her presence. It seemed out of place to have a herald for such a meeting, but then again, the situation was unique.

“Dasveld!” another shouted from a different part of the room, again a cry of notice. The talking grew louder. Brynna heard her name spoken behind hands and realized the calls were impromptu and spontaneous.

“Dasveld!” a third voice shouted. A change of emphasis, a clear warning to the attenders. A command for the respect of those gathered. Brynna furrowed her brow. She arrived at the table and stood at Erling’s shoulder. Many eyes stared at her, but she avoided them. She stepped on the toe of Erling’s boot.

“I don’t know,” he whispered in response. “They did the same to me when I arrived this afternoon. I guess it’s something because of Papa.”

Trinan pushed his chair away from the table and faced her with no offer of a smile. He leaned close and spoke for her ears only. “I’m glad you’re finally here. We’re about to restart. Are you prepared for Sel Rhyshga?”

“Yes.”

He nodded. “We’re almost ready. So close. Queen Ryn-toth has been persuaded, but her agreement is tenuous as best. She should be our seventh vote, even with Amiman and Grimsyn firm against. One more would seal everything, especially if we have miscalculated and one falls through.” He eyed King Lincanly and dropped his voice further. “Lincanly is up for grabs. He’s the one I want.”

Bryнна lacked his confidence. Across the room, Niemynyn, the young northern king, sat before a plate of chicken, quiet and alone, all knees and elbows with his dark-orange robe hanging on his thin shoulders. He had not been king long, and being so young, might be easily swayed—in either direction. “Are you certain Niemynyn is secure? It would be understandable for him to align with Amiman.”

Trinan pressed his lips together. His nostrils flared. “He will vote with us.”

She nodded. “Our demands?”

“Two fold. First, joining all the provinces under a single government, and second, declaring war on Hykos. Truly, the only way to win. Those who resist don’t want their power stripped and given to a central government. They cling to provincial sovereignty. Provincial weakness.”

“And Corradh is absent,” she observed.

“Abstained. He obviously has much to gain.” Trinan took a drink of his wine. “This group can only handle one more session.” He surveyed the room. “Corradh is plying them with feasting, but addled brains are dangerous for us in this moment. Too unpredictable. I’ll grant one more opportunity for discussion. If they seem to progress, I’ll allow it to continue, but if they rehash the same old dry points, then I’ll force a vote with Sel Rhyshga.”

“That’s risky,” she said.

“Yes, but I think we have the votes, and it’s better to have them make some kind of stand, than have it all fall into disarray and chaos they can wash their hands of with no level of accountability.”

She nodded in agreement.

“Grimsyn keeps harping on toll revenue on her precious bridge with Sitilia,” Trinan said, looking to the ceiling,

exasperated. “What portion of their economy is actually based on that?”

“It’s insignificant,” she said. “The toll doesn’t apply to Norinians, and the Sitolians refuse to pay it. Grimsyn depends on wool, same as Lincanly.”

“I suspected as much. And the man, Carter, whom Niemynyn keeps referring to from the ironworks—is he linked to the same Carter family in Amiman Province?”

“No, they’re only distant cousins. They have little contact.”

“Indeed.” Trinan nodded, satisfied with her answers and ability to strengthen his arguments. “How long do you need to prepare?”

“An hour, at a minimum,” she said. “I’d prefer two. We need to give everyone enough time to notify their ritual delegates and walk to the Circle.”

He shook his head. “That’s too long.”

“It’s needed,” she said. “Perhaps it will help clear the alcohol from their minds?”

He shrugged. “I suppose. Here,” he said, pulling a small folder from the inner pocket of his jacket and a string pouch from his pocket. “Hold these for me.” She took them. “Can you also—”

The sound of a fork on crystal called their attention. The room grew quiet. Trinan shooed Brynna away from him, toward a line of chairs positioned along the wall where sat several servants. He resumed his place next to Gara and tossed the queen a gallant smile.

Brynna stood behind them, stunned.

She scanned the table. Many of those in attendance, King Safwyn, Queen Ryntoth, and others—even King Amiman—sat next to their attachés, referring to notes and

exchanging whispered comments. Trinan had called the assembly, yet she, his attaché, didn't even have a place at the table. She stared at his items in her hands as she sank into the hard chair at the wall with empty seats on either side. He only wanted her there to fetch and carry and feed him information he couldn't remember.

Erling sat down next to her. "Why the hell is she in your seat?" he whispered.

"She's a queen," Brynna said, with a sinking sensation in her stomach. "She can sit wherever she wants."

"He's all over her."

She answered only with a small sigh.

King Bryton stood and called the room to order. In his gravelly drawl, he thanked the absent Corradh for his hospitality and graciousness. He encouraged everyone to listen carefully to others and speak civilly. Every face was drawn and grim. None lost the gravity of the decision at hand.

As the king spoke, Rand hurried into the room, his arms full of scrolls and paper. He snuck around the table as quietly as he could and dropped into the seat beside Brynna.

"If it's not one thing, it's another," he whispered to her, straightening the sleeves of his burgundy suit.

"You're just in time," she said.

"This seat is available, yes?"

"Yes, of course," Brynna said absentmindedly as she watched Trinan run the backs of his fingers along Gara's arm and fiddle with her bracelets. Brynna's smile faded. King Bryton droned on, but she didn't hear many of his words.

". . .to the Regent of Wyclythe." King Bryton resumed his seat.

Trinan stood. “Let’s not waste time rehashing settled issues. We have all established that the burning of Robynton was an unjustified and unprovoked attack by the Hykosi. The only relevant question is how we will respond to this massacre of our people.”

Queen Grimsyn rose. Strings of small shells adorned her crimson gown. “We must choose civilized means of interaction and not risk war with its obvious costs in lives and wealth. Trade controls should be sufficient,” she said, the shells clicking as she waved her hand. “If we close our roads and ports to the Hykosi—who, I will remind you, are landlocked—they will be forced to listen to our demands—”

“And what then would be our demands?” King Bryton challenged. “To please stop killin’ us and maybe stop burnin’ our cities, and then we’ll just allow them to remain within our borders?”

“And how do you plan to shut down the roads when they occupy so many of our own checkpoints?” King Ladvyl said, standing and facing her. “How will you do that without war? Even now their troops are organizing for attack! Our spies report that many outlying troops are returning to Hykos to build larger units. They are preparing to invade!”

King Safwyn pushed away from the table, his chair scraping across the floor. All heads turned to watch the king of the Tadsyn port pull himself to his feet and tuck his thumbs into his belt. “The Hykosi stand on our necks! Grimsyn, you are far to the west. You are shielded from Hykos by Amiman. You have few Hykosi within your border and no concept of what is truly occurring and what dangers are at hand. The truth is far different from what you see.”

Safwyn coughed into his fist until his face glowed scarlet.

“Pardon me,” he said, clearing his throat. “Hykosi swarm through my port at Tadsyn. We repel the ships we can, but there are too many. With barges, they control the Gantish waters, and their alliance with them is strengthening. With the fall of Robynton, Tadsyn—under my control—is the only remaining deepwater port, and it’s only barely under our control at all. All shipments from Gantu are under Hykosi oversight.”

“We must control those ships!” the king of Ladvyl shouted, remaining seated. He twisted around and called to the back of the room. “Hepsath, how do we get *Darsham* and *Basilisk* flagged for Norin?”

General Hepsath walked forward. His white hair contrasted with his navy-blue dress uniform, the sleeves of which were lined with stars of valor. He frowned as he approached the table. “The Hykosi cut out our vessels, one by one, seizing them, flagging them for Hykos, and turning each into a ship of war, until at last they took the clippers. It was a long-term, coordinated effort guided by expertise, and it can only be overcome through the same process once again. Your Majesty, may I speak plainly?”

King Ladvyl nodded.

“We retain little control of the waters,” Hepsath said. “I fear Robynton is only the first to fall. Tadsyn may be next. And then what? The story of the clippers is a perfect allegory—a dark lesson—from which we should learn that we must join together in order to fight them off. We are too weak to operate on our own as separate entities.”

Applause and shouts broke out.

Rand leaned toward Brynna. “We heard about the Andersyn scandal,” he whispered. “But I thought he returned to sea?”

“Yes,” Brynna whispered back. “The company was rechartered. He paid enormous fines and was released from jail. He’s back on the sea but only has two small boats.”

“Shallow water work.”

“Yes,” she whispered, nodding.

“Must be like exile to him.”

She considered. “I suppose. He offered to transport humanitarian aid to Robynton after the burning.”

“Good thing. Why on earth they decided to go after him, I’ll never understand.”

Brynna blinked. “He was smuggling.”

“Oh, I’m sure,” Rand said, “but that’s exactly who we needed to keep the Hykosi in check, not to mention the Gantish. Someone who would get the job done no matter the rules. It was worthwhile to look the other way.” He shrugged. “Ah, well. I guess that’s why I don’t make those decisions, eh?”

She offered a tight-lipped smile.

King Amiman rose, towering over the kings beside him. “My province is on the border of Hykos. We constantly repel the Hykosi. It can be done. Ryntoth, too, is able to keep them at bay. But Niemynyn! That’s where the weakness is. Shut down the Niemynyn Road, and the bastards can’t reach anyone. That’s where they come into the country. That’s what they use to transport goods. If we restrict their access, we cut them off! Trade controls and peace!”

King Niemynyn paled and shrank in his seat.

“I agree to a point, Amiman,” Queen Ryntoth said with one hand propped on her cane. The other held her cigarette, from which she took a drag and exhaled. “Your strength is admirable, and I speak without malice—you know I do. But Niemynyn doesn’t have it as easy as you seem to think

he does. That road is also Norin's primary trade route—for international and domestic trade. To cut that off, we slit our own throats. We must have trade amongst ourselves, and—dare I say it?—we do need Gantish beef and ore as well as Hykosi agriculture. We cannot eat cloth. Trade routes must stay open to maintain that. We already suffer from the lack of Gantish goods. Without improvement, this will be a winter of hardship and the beginning of further depredation.”

King Lincanly lifted his hand and scowled. “The Gantish and the Hykosi are strengthening their alliance like nothing we have seen since the times of our forefathers,” he said without standing. “Any act of offensive aggression against the Hykosi, whether by closing the roads or attacking them outright, will violate our trade agreement with Gantu. They'll lay an embargo.”

“Need I remind all of you,” Queen Grimsyn called out, bouncing on her toes. “That Gantu is a vile country of bigamists! They've built their wealth through slavery and brutality, and we willingly benefit from it! We are no better—”

Groans rose from the table. King Ladvyll threw his napkin on his plate.

Queen Grimsyn shouted over the noise, “We are no better than them! Slavers by proxy! Tearing up that trade agreement would be the best thing we can—”

“The Gantish can no more lay an embargo on us than prevent the rain from falling!” King Safwyn shouted, leaning forward on the table. “They need our crops and cloth just as much as we need their beef. Any threat of embargo is a bluff!”

Trinan raised his hands to the gathering. The room quieted. “We can stand up for ourselves without foolishly burning bridges. We can maintain roads and control them

for our own purposes if our army is in play. Our first and highest goal must be the defense of our people and the expulsion of the Hykosi from Norin. To not is to perish. The burning of Robynton was an act of war. Hykosi troops are organizing. In truth, war has already begun!" His voice rose in power. "Meet force with force. Together! If we are to die, may it be side by side in battle rather than smothered alone while we are sleeping. Let us declare this!" A murmur rumbled through the room. "We will consolidate and strengthen ourselves and purge the Hykosi from the land once and for all! As Regent of Wyclythe, initiator of this Grand Assembly, I call for Sel Rhyshga commencing in two hours' time!"

Pandemonium broke. Voices shouted. King Amiman roared with anger. Safwyn, Bryton, and Ladvyl beat their hands on the table in applause. Attachés ducked their heads toward each other, chattering rapidly and sliding papers across the tables. King Niemynyn cringed, looking as though he wished to sink into the floor. Servants jumped to their feet and scattered, gathering dishes and trays. People left the room, some to go to the Circle, some to prepare, and some gathered together to discuss what had been said.

Rand leapt to his feet and stretched. "Let the games begin!" he said, offering Brynna his hand.

She accepted his help to stand.

"Brynna!" King Safwyn's attaché pushed through the crowd.

"Ana!" Brynna said. They embraced warmly.

"Oh, darling!" Ana said, brushing her blonde hair over her shoulder. "I was heartbroken when I heard what happened! And your father passing! Your loss is mine! What you must be going through!" They hugged again.

“Thank you,” Brynna said. “Ana, this is Rand...” She glanced at him for his surname.

“Luuk,” he said.

Ana smiled, pursing her lips slightly. “Yes, of course I know Rand! King Lincanly’s chancellor for the last two months. Isn’t that right, my lord?”

“Give or take,” he said.

Brynna’s eyes widened. “My lord! I thought you were a shepherd.”

“I am,” Rand said, nodding. The corner of his mouth twitched with mirth.

“Oh, you’re too modest!” Ana gushed. “Rand and Gareth have extensive land holdings. The most in Lincanly. And sheep. And flax,” she counted on her fingers, laughing, “And linen, and yarn, and clothing, you name it.” She lifted the hem of her apron overdress. “See? G.L. Gareth Luuk. My favorite!”

“Yes,” Brynna said, reaching to her own hem. “I’m wearing some myself. It’s very nice.”

Rand leaned toward her, tipping his head apologetically. “I did not intend to mislead you,” he said, his eyes sparkling. “My holdings entwine Lincanly’s interests with my own. The king and I decided it would be best if I were on staff.”

“Yet not made regent?”

Rand shook his head. “As an immigrant, I am not eligible for succession, so regency would have little meaning. I enjoy a few areas of sovereignty over various issues—trade, justice, and the like—but I only use the title when forced by circumstance. I wanted a voice, not a crown.”

“And such a pleasant transition,” Ana said, squeezing his arm. “We get to see you so much more often now.” She

leaned her head toward Brynna. "He's ever so responsible and such a dear!"

Rand gestured toward the corner, guiding Ana's eyes. "Eh, I think the beautiful woman over there is trying to get your attention."

"Oh! My wife," Ana said. "She is gorgeous, isn't she? Do excuse me." She hurried away.

"Brynna, I've wanted to ask something," Rand said. "I heard you wrote an analysis of provincial budgetary projections? I would like to read it, but I can't find a copy."

"Now, my lord?" She paused. "That's an odd request."

His shoulders dropped. "I'm uncertain on the funding of all of this. The reasoning behind the war is good. I agree with it. But I don't know where the money will come from. If you want my honest opinion, I'm afraid this war is already over—that we've already lost."

"That's not true, my lord," she said. "You and I are both free as we stand here, so no, it hasn't been lost yet. There's still time."

He lifted his hands, his callouses incongruous with his elegant suit. "But the money. Especially with needing to rebuild Robynton."

"It will be a hardship," she said, nodding. "I wouldn't worry about Robynton, though."

"Oh?"

"Our province has sufficient funding."

"For rebuilding and for war, as well?"

"Yes."

Rand flashed his brow. "I'm surprised, shocked even. Forgive me, I never took Wyclythe as a wealthy province."

"That changed a few months ago."

“Ah!” Rand tipped his head back in understanding. “Andersyn. By the Breath, how much money was the settlement?”

“Five generations of Andersyn wealth,” she said. “All company assets and holdings were transferred to Wyclythe. They originated and exist throughout Gavony and thus were spared the burning. Wyclythe still holds more than—”

“Corradh, himself.”

“Corradh and the Grand Assembly combined.”

Rand whistled. “I’m surprised Andersyn’s out of prison. Hell, I’m surprised he’s not dead.”

She nodded. “Any other smuggler would have been executed—we’ve made that clear to him. The asset exchange allowed him to keep his life, his freedom, and the two ships.”

Rand narrowed his eyes quizzically. “Why not execute him?”

Bryнна paled. “For—for the same reasons mentioned. He’s no longer a danger, and as our sailors are loyal to him, his formal statement—which he signed—encourages them to work for the Norinian authorities. We’ve not had to impress many, though there are always the resentful few.”

“The Hykosi need sailors, too.”

“Yes, my lord. That’s another reason the sailors’ opinion of Wyclythe Province matters. As long as we keep Andersyn alive, they’ll sail with us and resist Hykosi recruitment.”

Rand shook his head in amazement.

“I need you to understand,” Bryнна said, “that Regent Walyss is serious in his demands.”

“Crown regent, then?”

“Yes. He commands full regency and is eligible for succession.”

Rand puffed his cheeks. “That explains quite a bit. The Andersyn funding makes this fight a possibility.” He shook his head. “The moment Walyss seized those ships, he bought himself a war.”

“I can find that report if you feel it is still relevant,” she said, hoping the conversation would suffice.

“Can you get it to me within the hour?”

Pressure rested on her shoulders. Yet one more thing to do. But he seemed so close to their side, and Trinan wanted Lincanly more than any other. The report might be the final push needed to secure his vote. “I have a copy in our offices upstairs,” she said. “Wait here. I won’t be long.”

Chapter 61

NORA

Nalta
Gantu

Nora pushed on the Ganstag's heavy door. The weak red light of sunset flashed in the bronze fixtures.

"Where are you going?" Elias asked. "You're late to be back at the inn, and the guards will return any minute."

"I need to go back in," she said. "I need to see what happens to him."

He pulled on her arm. "They'll arrest you."

"They didn't before, just a moment ago."

"It won't work again."

"I want to see!" She pulled away and entered the hall once more. The door closed behind her, and the echoes surrounded her. The air was still. She stepped forward slowly, glancing back over her shoulder at the corner where the guard had appeared. No one was there. She continued along the hallway, close to the wall, walking with light steps and trepidation.

A large room opened before her, the formal entry hall. Dark, shiny wood paneling lined the walls, and two grand staircases descended toward the middle. Large pedestals, taller than she, stood against the walls, adorned with life-size marble statues of historical figures, men in taylasans and turbans and fierce stares into the void. She heard voices from the opposite hall, voices in serious conversation.

She slunk along the wall and pressed herself against the side of a pedestal, the smooth, varnished wood cool on her cheek. She peered around the edge. The room was near, the first along the hall, and the door stood open, guarded by two men in dark gray. She ducked back. She could get no closer—even now, danger was only a few steps away—but if she held her breath, she could hear the words spoken.

“. . . on the charge of debauching a slave. Enter your plea.”

“I am not guilty,” Marcus said, his voice calling tremors to her heart.

“Her testimony states otherwise which places the court in the position of determining whether the slave is guilty of perjury, which has a punishment of the removal of one finger from the hand by an ax blade, or whether you are, indeed, guilty of debauching a slave, in which case, you will be convicted and fined 100 brek sterling, and the slave will receive 20 strikes.”

A pause.

“My client wishes to change his plea to guilty,” Lor’s voice called.

“Please state such for the court.”

“I am guilty of debauching the slave in question,” Marcus said.

“The court accepts the defendant’s guilty plea and fines him 100 brek sterling. The slave in question, Nora Jlassi,

property of Safiyya Gil, will be beaten with 20 strikes of a cat-o-nine-tails.”

A gavel hit.

Nora closed her eyes. Her back prickled.

“The court proceeds to the charges of trespassing in a restricted area and theft of explosive materials from a licensed dealer.”

Lieutenant Nyok’s voice then reached her ears as he addressed the court and presented a report of the theft, the evidence he had gathered, and his theory of what had occurred. “. . .at which time, Gran Messer Marcus Regá took the explosives, dropped his glass pen, and left the area.”

A pause, and then Lor’s voice answered. He, too, addressed the court, but he presented several character references from those who knew Marcus and then walked through his own evidence. He concluded, “My client was not in the warehouse, was not at the wharf, and did not steal the explosives. Per the last case on which the court ruled, my client has an alibi for that night. He was with the slave, Nora Jlassi.”

“If I may address the court,” Nyok said. “Gran Messer Regá’s conviction of debauching a slave does not prove that he was not also at the warehouse. It makes no account of his time outside participation in that act. Rather, it shows a pattern of criminal activity on the night in question. It also does not explain the pen with his name engraved upon it.”

The talk went back and forth and even as uneducated as Nora was, she understood clearly that Marcus was about to be convicted of the charges in question.

She would not let that happen.

She would not let him be hanged in her place.

For there was one thing she had that he did not, one thing that would prove beyond any doubt who the criminal was.

She had the explosives.

Nora shrank back to the wall and crept to the hallway once more. Looking both ways and finding the corridor empty, she scurried to the central storeroom, opened the closet, and caught the broom that fell toward her. She lifted the box lid to reveal the sticks of dynamite. After unfastening her cloak and spreading it on the floor, she took out as many sticks as she could carry within its folds. She wrapped them up, hefted the bundle to her shoulder like a pack on her back, and pushed the heavy box back into the closet with her foot.

With a breath to steel her nerves, she strode back down the hallway, through the entryway, and past the guards at the door of the room. If she acted like she knew what she was doing, no one would stop her. Elias had demonstrated that concept already.

The courtroom was filled with empty chairs. Only the ones near the front were occupied, with Lieutenant Nyok and Lor and Marcus and their father, the senator, in attendance. The judge sat on the dais above them, wearing a red turban and taylasan with golden edges.

“What is this?” the judge bellowed.

Nora glanced back to see the guards approaching her with confused expressions. She continued forward. “Gran Messer Regá is not guilty!”

“Nora!” Marcus said. “What are you doing?”

“He didn’t do it,” she said, speaking loudly so the judge would hear her. “He wasn’t there. And he didn’t drop his pen.”

Lieutenant Nyok revealed nothing in his face, and his piercing eyes unnerved her. She swallowed hard but continued walking forward.

“How do you know this?” the judge asked.

She held up a roll of dynamite. “Because I did it. And I still have the explosives.”

“This is outrageous!” Senator Regá said.

Nyok pointed to the explosives. “Are those active?”

The judge leaned forward. “What are you saying, slave?”

“I stole his pen,” Nora said. “I put it in my pocket, and that night, I went to the warehouse. I broke in and stole the explosives, and I dropped the pen while I was there. It was me. He’s done nothing wrong. Gran Messer Regá is innocent.”

Nyok stepped into the aisle. “Put those down,” he said in an even tone. He stepped closer.

She held the stick toward him. “Stay back! Stay away from me!”

He lifted his palms. “I’m not moving.”

His eyes flicked to the side. She swung around to see the two guards creeping up behind her. “Stay back!”

They, too, lifted their hands and stepped back a pace.

Nyok stood his ground. “Your Honor,” he said, never taking his eyes off Nora, “Senator and Gran Messers Regá, please leave the room.”

Nora’s gaze bounced between Nyok and the guards. She watched the judge, the senator, and Lor leave.

“I’m staying,” Marcus said. “Nora, please talk to me.”

“There’s nothing to say,” she said. “You’re innocent, and they need to let you go.”

He took a step toward her. “They have let me go. You heard Lieutenant Nyok tell me to leave.”

The heavy cloak hurt her shoulder. She shifted it, and Nyok's chest jerked with a sharp breath. "It's not the same," she said. "They need to declare you innocent."

"They will," Marcus said. "But you need to put all of those down."

She shook her head as the reality of what she was doing caught up to her. She didn't know how she had ended up there, how she was now in a room, threatening men with explosives. "No," she said. "I can't. Not now."

"Lieutenant," Marcus said. "I want to speak to Nora alone."

"That's not a good idea, sir," Nyok said.

Marcus took a slow breath. "It's what needs to happen."

"Are you certain, sir?"

"Yes," he said. "She won't harm me."

"The guards, too!" Nora said, tears burning in her eyes. "The guards, too! Make them leave!"

Marcus nodded. "Nyok, take your guards."

Nyok hesitated.

"Now, please," Marcus said.

"Stand down," Nyok called. "Leave the room."

The guards went back to the door Nora had entered. Nyok, with one last look at Marcus, exited through the door at the front. The doors closed, and she was alone with Marcus.

"Will you put those down now?" he asked in a soft voice.

She shook her head. "No. If I do, they'll come back and get me."

He wet his lips. "It is noble of you to try to save me."

"It's the truth. Cadoc said that if someone was caught at the warehouse, they would lose their hand, and if they

were caught stealing the explosives, they would be hanged. I can't let that happen to you."

His brow wrinkled, and he sighed deeply. "Those punishments," he looked away, "are for slaves. He must have been speaking to you specifically. I'm a grand sabhir, Nora. I would only pay a fine at most. A hefty one, perhaps, but they won't hang me. Nothing like that would happen to me."

She looked at his face as she understood. She had not saved him from death. She had only condemned herself. "I will die," she whispered.

"Lor and I will do everything we can to fight it," he said. "For now, please put the explosives down."

"I did it because I love you," she said.

He nodded, and his eyes softened. "I know. You have always been so sweetly devoted to me."

"I didn't mean to lie about the debauchery," she said, crying. "Nyok confused me! He tricked me into answering like that!"

Marcus held up his palms. "I know. You were confused. It's almost resolved, and I'll try to get your sentence reduced or pardoned. We'll work together on this."

"We work well together."

"Yes, we do," he said, smiling.

She looked at the explosives and saw the insanity of them. "Do you think you could ever love me now?"

"Nora, I love Ingrid. She's the most wonderful wife I could ask for, but you and I can be friends and—"

"Your wife?" Nora asked, shocked.

"Yes," he said. "You knew that."

"No!" she said. "You do not have a wife!"

He stepped toward her. "All of you in the group know. I told you the day that Cadoc was at Elias's cottage. Remember? He almost beat me up?"

"I didn't know!"

He tipped his head back. "You left early that day. I'm sorry. I thought you knew."

"You can't be married!" she cried. Her breath quickened, and her fingers tingled as she gripped the dynamite. "You can't be married to her!"

"Nora—"

"Did you grant her a veil? What color is her veil?" she asked, her face wet with tears.

Marcus closed his eyes and sighed. "Orange."

Nora shuddered with a sob. "Please," she whispered. "Please take me as your kvina. I'll do anything you want, just please let me be yours."

"I. . ." He shook his head. "I can't do that."

"You can! The law says you can!"

"Nora," he said. "I'm not going to take you as my kvina."

Snapping, tearing pain ripped through her. She couldn't be in the room with him anymore. She couldn't bear to see him any longer. Gripping the cloak full of explosives, she ran between the chairs toward the door behind the judge's dais.

"Nora!" Marcus called.

She dashed down the corridor, but as she looked out the window, she saw guards in gray gathering in the yard outside. She couldn't leave. There was nowhere to go. She turned to the stairs and ran up, flight after flight. Reaching the top, she pulled open the door and entered the senate chambers. Ornate upholstered chairs sat in concentric circles with a space in the middle that allowed a lectern. A

crystal chandelier made by House Regá hung in the center of the frescoed ceiling, which depicted beautiful women in flowing robes walking among the stars. The wooden floor had been polished to a high gloss that reflected back the light and colors.

The far wall held a bank of windows that revealed the final streaks of sunset. She walked slowly toward them and saw the entire town below her. She saw the guard compound, the inn, the bell tower, the stores and shops. In the far distance, she saw the yellowish-green smudge of the Niq Niq Bog. The far horizon held the orange Ruvoq desert. The sunset faded to gray.

Nora lowered the cloak and carefully set the explosives on the floor. She found a lamp on a shelf and lit it with a match from her pocket, then set it on the sill. Sitting on the window seat, she took the teardrop pendant from her pocket and held it to the light. Speckles of light jumped through the room, and she smiled as her shoulders bowed with exhaustion, and tears ran down her cheeks.

Chapter 62

BRYNNA

Corradh Fortress
Corradh Province
Norin

Brynna rushed toward the Wyclythe wing, her heart pounding from exertion and stress. It had taken much too long for her to escape the Grand Assembly hall. People had pressed to speak with her until she had finally begged apologies and left. Securing the Lincanly vote was far too important to waste time talking to those whose vote was assured.

As she ran through the passages, she replayed the assembly in her mind, over and over, reviewing all objections, rehearsing viable arguments and ideas she could pass to Trinan so he could win the others to his side before time ran out.

The sound of crying caught her attention. She slowed, searching for the source, and found King Niemynyn by a row of secluded windows. She paused with surprise and

concern as he sniffed and leaned on the sill, looking out over the courtyard below. The window's soldered joints cast shadows across his face, blending with his acne and the paint he wore. His crown slid askew on his head, and he pushed it back in place, seeming even younger than he had before.

On another night, Brynna would have waited for Trinan to introduce her, but this was a time with stakes far beyond conventionalities. She stepped forward. "Your Majesty?"

With another quick sniff, he rubbed his face, smearing the gold circle painted above his right eye. "Yes?"

She dipped in a small curtsy. "I'm Brynna Dasveld. I don't think we've met."

He narrowed his eyes. "The rebel leader's daughter."

"Um, yes," she said, with a brief nod of acquiescence. "Did you know my father?"

"No, and I wouldn't want to. Rebels are troublemakers."

"I see," she said, cringing inwardly at the poor start of their conversation. She motioned back toward the hall. "This is a serious vote."

"I'm aware."

"If you have questions, I'd be happy to—"

"Leave me be."

Brynna shut her mouth, surprised by his terse response. "Your Majesty, if I may be so bold—"

"You may not."

"Then I'll be foolish. Can we count on your vote for war?"

He gritted his teeth. "Yes."

Relieved, she nodded. "That's welcome news. A pleasant evening to you, Your Majesty." She curtsied, wishing him no more annoyance, and stepped away, her thoughts running ahead to the budget report.

“Because I’m a coward.”

She stopped short and turned back. “Why would voting for war make you a coward? It’s a wise and brave thing to do for your people.”

He faced her, his green robe sweeping around his shoes. “War is not what is best for my people. Hykos is strong, and Norin is not. You would do well to learn this. We will lose our control of the road, and then we will all die. The people of Niemynyn first, and then the rest of Norin.”

Trinan needed his vote, and Niemynyn had promised it. Nothing more needed to be discussed. But she studied his face and saw fear and anger. Contradictions. Confusion. “Forgive me, Your Majesty,” she said. “Why then are you voting against your own interests?”

“It is against my province's interests, not my own.”

She furrowed her brow. “But why would yours be any different?”

“Because I want to live.”

“You puzzle me.”

He clenched his fists. “The threat is near.”

She stepped forward, shaking her head. “What threat? If someone is threatening you, tell me. Tell Corradh! We can help you. We can stop it. The fortress is secure. No one can kill you within these gates. I promise.”

He laughed. “And they call me naïve.”

“Explain it to me then.”

“If I do not vote for war, I will die tonight,” he said. “If I do vote for war, I will save my own skin—yet it will be at the cost of my people, and I will be nothing more than a traitor. My choice is not between war and peace. I choose only between cowardice and honor.”

She reached for him. "Please let me help you."

He lifted his hands as he pulled away. "I told you—you have my vote!" he said and stormed away from her. "What more do you people want from me?" he called as he disappeared into the darkness.

Bryнна rested her hands on top of her head. His vote seemed set, but the circumstances troubled her. Only the most powerful of persons could threaten a sovereign and be taken seriously. Another sovereign could. Then again, it was something the Council of Norin would do. Trinan must be informed immediately—after she had retrieved the budget report for Lincanly.

She ran through the corridor once again, her shoes slapping on the floor. She arrived at the east wing, and the guard allowed her to pass without introduction. She remembered him from Harvestide. The wing had been opened for Carthasach by the Elidel staff, and a breeze blew through the passageway, freshening the air and pestering the torches.

At the sound of a door opening, Bryнна caught her step, surprised to see someone emerge from the office on the left, the one she shared with Trinan, where her own desk was. No one was allowed to access that room but Trinan and herself, with the exception of approved servants. She watched as Queen Gara of Elidel closed the door quietly.

Bryнна clenched her jaw at the sight of the woman whose name she had heard too frequently of late. Her nostrils flared at the thought of the queen snooping through her office. She maintained few confidential documents in the room, but there was enough information stored there to respond to any provincial emergency, and that information shouldn't be in the hands of any other province. That

the queen had entered without her permission fanned her anger. Gara had no legitimate need to enter the Wyclythe rooms. None at all.

Gara looked up and hesitated, but then rallied and glided through the passage toward her, her silk gown rustling. The queen's flushed cheeks glowed in the torchlight, and a few mussed, blonde curls escaped around her crown at her forehead. Her tight-lipped smile and narrowed eyes made Brynna feel conquered and confused as though Gara had won the war before Brynna had even realized the battle had commenced.

Brynna stood unmoving in the center of the passage. Protocol dictated she cede the way, that she curtsy and bow her head in deference. She had no intention of performing any of that. She crossed her arms, met the queen's gaze, and remained firmly in place, her head unbowed. The queen swept past, her petticoated skirt shoving Brynna off-balance.

Brynna listened to Gara's steps recede before continuing down the hallway. She chewed her cheek. Gara's violation of her office mandated she now inventory her papers and schedule an urgent audience with the high king within two days—more work and distractions she simply didn't have time for. And with Niemynyn's threat at hand, this infraction became critical evidence for an investigation into that matter.

Brynna pushed open her office door.

Trinan sat at his desk, shirtless, wearing only his trousers. His knife and belt lay discarded. He had leaned back in his chair to read a letter with his feet propped on the desk. His cravat lay crumpled on the floor. Though the night was

chilly, and the fire struggled to heat the area, the room smelled of sweat.

Bryнна stared him down as all became clear. There would be no inventory needed nor a request for an audience with the high king. Anger pulsed at her temples. Her stomach ached as though she had been punched.

She closed the door behind her. “Gara was here.” She picked up his cravat and dropped it in front of him.

“Yes,” Trinan said, finishing his letter. He removed his feet from the desk and stood, shuffling papers into different stacks. “Indeed.”

She couldn’t breathe to speak. Instead, she walked to her desk to search for the report she needed. First, the report. Maybe by then her world would stop tumbling.

Trinan walked around his desk and sat on the edge to watch her. “Gara,” he said. “‘Queen of Elidel and Jarta.’ ‘Font of Generosity.’” He crossed his arms. “What do you think of her?”

Bryнна wet her lips and knelt to open the bottom drawer. He shifted. “She’s beautiful, yes?”

Bryнна closed her eyes. “Yes, my lord.”

“And poised. Soft and feminine. Graceful. Every bit of lace clean and in place. Hair soft and brushed. Never climbs trees. Never tears her dress. Never tastes of blood.”

Bryнна leaned her forehead on the drawer. She couldn’t see his face, but she could hear the smugness in his voice. “Yes, my lord.”

“Well educated. Well connected—”

“Yes, my lord.”

“Rich and powerful. Capable of more than doubling the size of my province.”

Brynna shoved the drawer closed harder than was required. "Yes. My lord." She stood and walked to the bookshelf, where she pulled out a folder. She flipped through the pages and sensed his eyes on her.

"I've displeased you," he said with a mocking tone.

She found the budgetary analysis, pulled it loose, and snapped the folder shut. "No, my lord."

He moved closer and leaned on the bookshelf over her. "Such proper answers," he said. "Just how the lowly attaché is taught to reply."

She looked up to meet his gaze, her hands wrinkling the report.

He caressed her cheek. "You and I," he said, "we each play roles for our country. Don't we?"

She jerked her head away. "Don't touch me."

Eyes burning, she jammed the folder back on the shelf. She inhaled a breath, shoving her emotions away, wishing to extinguish them forever. She couldn't wrestle with this now. She had a job to do. She knew her duty.

"I spoke," she said, her voice shaking, "to Niemynyn." She walked to her desk.

"Oh? And?"

"We have his vote."

He shrugged. "Nothing new."

She opened a drawer and withdrew an empty portfolio to use for the budget report. "But he explained his concerns."

Trinan returned to his desk. "Go on." His chair creaked as he sat. The physical space between them allowed her to breathe more easily and focus on her task.

"Someone is threatening him for his vote." She closed the report into the portfolio. "Someone in the fortress."

Trinan flipped through his papers. "He should report them. Corradh will give protection."

"I told him that, but he won't consider it," she said. "My lord, I think there's more to it."

His eyes flicked up to hers.

"I think it may be another sovereign," she said.

Trinan slowly rose from his chair. "Check yourself," he growled. He leaned forward on the desk, his fingers splayed on the papers. "Say that again."

She knew her statement was outrageous, but it was the truth as she understood it. She held her ground. "It may be a sovereign. Or the Council of Norin."

"You dare to accuse the sovereigns—"

"Niemyryn is within the Lonara fortress with guards at every doorway, and the army at his command. Who else could threaten a sovereign besides one of equal rank or one. . ." she inhaled a ragged breath, ". . .of even greater power?"

She had said it.

She had called into question the actions of the high king, the one who stood to benefit most from the vote at hand. Her words were treasonous. She trusted that Trinan would understand her motives and desire for truth, but as he leaned on his desk half-dressed, she wondered if that trust was misplaced.

Trinan stared at her. "And the Council of Norin? Is there a note? A seal? Any indication?"

She shook her head. "Not that I know of. But Niemyryn is being pressured for his vote, and rumors persist that the Council pressured King Safwyn over the valsydian tariffs. And. . ." She screwed up her courage. Her heart pounded in her ears. "And also that they pressured you over the same."

Trinan stalked around the desk and stood over her. She closed her eyes, trembling.

“Do you think I am compromised?” he said, in a terrible, low voice.

She swallowed through a tight throat and shook her head, not daring to look at him.

“I didn’t think so,” he said. “Did Niemynyn implicate anyone? Anyone at all?”

Again, she shook her head. “No, no one. And I could press no further. I have no idea whom it could be.”

“Whom else have you told?”

“No one, my lord. I came straight here.”

“Good thing.”

She hugged the portfolio against her chest. “There is no one else I could tell.”

He turned away and entered the adjoining bedchamber. “Hepsath.”

“Pardon?”

“General Hepsath,” he called from inside. “You were right to come to me, but if you ever come across anything like this again, and I am not available, you may go to him. I have no time to address this right now,” he said. “We’ll go over it later. After the vote.”

“How do we even risk a vote?”

“We have no choice. There’s no process for withdrawal once Sel Rhyshga is declared. With Amiman and Grimsyn firm against and now this with Niemynyn, all rides on Lincanly.”

“Yes,” she said, tapping the portfolio. “They’ve asked for a report of mine. That’s why I’m here. To retrieve it.”

He appeared in the doorway wearing the black tunic and trousers he would wear for Sel Rhyshga. Bright orange and

red embroidery lined the edges. "Well, you've got it," he said dismissively, tying on a red woven belt. "Now get out. I have things to do, and I must hurry."

"Yes, my lord," she said in a strangled voice. She left the room and closed the door behind her, resting her hand on the latch as confusion and pain tore at her heart.

Despite her misery, duty drove her onward, and she returned to the Grand Assembly hall. She found it empty, save a few servants gathering platters and goblets. Of the large gathering, only Chancellor Rand Luuk and Queen Grimsyn remained.

Bryнна approached and dropped a curtsy to them both. She handed Rand the report. "My lord, this is the information you requested, I believe. I ask only for your consideration."

Rand withdrew his spectacles from his jacket pocket and put them on to peer at the papers. "Yes. Yes, this is it." He gestured to the queen. "This is what I was telling you about, the budgetary analysis," he said and handed her the paper. "By understanding this, you can see how paying for the war is possible."

The faint pounding of drums filtered through the windows to them.

"It's almost time," Rand said. "You need to prepare."

"Yes," Bryнна said. "Unless I can be of more help here."

"Your Majesty?" Rand said, deferring to the queen.

"No," she said. "I believe I have all the information I need in order to vote. I will consider Sel Rhyshga validation of my decision. You may go."

Bryнна curtsied and left the hall. There wasn't much time left. Once out of sight, she hurried to the front entrance and across the stone terrace on her way to Gareth's

tent to prepare. The Life Fire blazed in the distance, surrounded by myriad torches. Already, a large crowd gathered at the Circle. The drums continued their steady beat, slow and deep.

A faint sound slowed her steps. Trinan's voice. She pivoted, looking back, certain he had called to her. She walked to the edge of the terrace and surveyed the garden below. In the light of the waning moon, two figures entwined. A rustle of silk. The voice she knew so well. He murmured to her. She giggled. A kiss.

Brynna shied away, her breath short, her body shaking. With no time to stop, she let her tears fall as she hurried toward the road, cursing Trinan with every step. Her tears distorted her vision, and she tripped over rocks and roots. Gasps rattled her chest, and her skin crawled with rage.

Trinan didn't owe her faithfulness—she understood that. They had not danced Teerlagee. They had not swapped knives. Her heart had broken long ago on the Robynton wharf when he had used her to destroy another. And yet, during the last few months, his tone had softened, and his smile had appeared more easily. They had shared close and heartfelt moments. As always, he had used her sacred name. For all of that and more, she had believed in the existence of a tender connection, a promising affection, and a strengthened bond between them. Despite her protests to Erling, a part of her had indeed believed she would soon be Trinan's queen. Now it was obvious that that was not the case and never would be. She was an attaché. Nothing more.

A sob slipped from her control as she crossed the bridge. She stopped and leaned back against the railing, trying desperately to regain control of herself so she could continue on.

A figure stood next to her.

Bryнна gasped and drew her knife.

Sol was leaning on the rail, using his hunting knife to clean under his nails. He paused and met her gaze, and her anger converged into a driving force. It had found a target, and her knuckles whitened around her knife. She watched and trembled. She wanted an excuse. She dared him to move. She begged for any reason to attack. "Get away from me!"

He picked at his nails, then shoved his knife back into the sheath. Crossing his arms, he remained leaning on the rail, silent and unconcerned that she stood ready to slit his throat and rest her knife on his shoulder.

"I said, 'get away!'" she yelled.

"I'm here at the command of another," he said.

"Whose? Who would dare to speak for me? Who would overrule my own commands?"

"Your father."

Bryнна shrieked with every bit of rage, grief, and pain that roiled within her. She lunged forward, jabbing toward his stomach, but his hand caught her wrist and twisted her arm behind her. Her knees collapsed as she sobbed. After removing her knife from her hand, he lowered her to the planks of the bridge where he crouched beside her.

"My father is dead," she cried, dropping her fist to the rough wood.

"I swore to him I would guard you."

Bryнна rose to her knees, hissing through her gritted teeth. She grabbed his furs with both hands and pulled his face to hers. "Give me my knife," she said. "I'll protect myself!"

"Listen first. Your father saved the life of the woman I love. He bade me swear to protect you in return. From anyone and any danger."

"You're just one of his damn rebels!" she shouted and shoved him backward. She struggled to her feet.

Sol recovered but did not rise. He remained on his knees with his hands on his thighs. "I am not one of his rebels," he said, slowly. "I am one of yours." He placed his fist on his chest. "Norin Å Sdolevy."

Brynna stared at him as if hearing for the first time.

"What does that mean?" she said, every muscle taut.

"Norin will suffer—"

"—no more," she interrupted, waving the phrase away. "It means more than that."

"In the ancient tongue, it reveals the picture of a woman. And when she screams in final anguish, Norin's redemption will be secured."

"And?"

"You are Norin."

She shook her head. "You're drunk."

"I served at your father's request," he said, standing. "I followed you, as he wished, and I stood ready whenever I sensed danger near you. I protected your person because I owed a debt to him. But I have watched. I have seen. I believe you are the Norina. I believe. And now I serve you." He returned her knife on the flat on his palm. "Norin Å Sdolevy."

"You intend to protect me through this?" she asked. "Through Sel Rhyshga?"

"The power of Sel Rhyshga far exceeds that of one man," he said. "I can only promise to be present and to give my life, if required. My devotion far exceeds Sel Rhyshga."

Bryнна stared at him. He spoke madness. But a vow of protection held great value during such a dangerous time. She gripped the handle of her knife and resheathed it at her side.

“Ardet,” she said in the ancient tongue. A word of acceptance, approval, and finality. She walked past him, away from him, and toward the Great Circle to prepare for Sel Rhyshga.

Chapter 63

MARCUS

Nalta
Gantu

As Marcus jogged down the Ganstag's front steps toward Lieutenant Nyok, panic squeezed his stomach. "She still has the explosives," he said, his heart in his throat.

"Where is she now?" Nyok asked.

"I don't know. She ran from me."

"Light, sir!" a guard shouted. "At the senate window!"

Marcus looked up and saw a lamp at the window. It shone like a bright star in the night sky. He looked out at the gathering crowd. Sabhirim, citizens, and slaves were gathering, swapping their own versions of rumors and pointing up at the top of the Ganstag. Nyok stood in conference with his men and the few sabhirim who claimed enough clout to warrant giving their opinion.

Ziri approached, his hands shoved into his pockets as he walked. He hung his head like a beaten dog.

Marcus nodded to him.

“She’s up there?” Ziri asked.

Marcus nodded once again.

They stood shoulder to shoulder, looking up.

“I think I made it worse,” Marcus said.

Ziri shrugged. “There is more to her than you.”

Marcus considered his words. He had always thought of Nora as the little waitress who fed him more than the others, the slave whose love and devotion he found amusing, his partner in adventure with the beautiful voice, but Ziri had a point. Marcus had never seen her as a person with ideas for herself.

“I’m sorry,” Marcus said. “I haven’t viewed her as someone with hopes and dreams, and—”

“Hopes and dreams?” Ziri said. “What fucking world do you live in?”

“I—”

“She’s a slave. She doesn’t have hopes and dreams. She’s going to be beaten and burned to death. And if for some reason she is pardoned of all of that—though I don’t see how—she’ll be forced to return to the inn where she’ll be used by the likes of Winsen Luna every night until she is too worn out for sabhirim to fuck or she slits her wrists in my stable. Fuck off with your hopes and dreams!”

Marcus stepped back, stunned.

The group around Nyok broke apart, and Nyok strode toward a line of his guards. “Send for Morenza!”

“Shyan shit yentera!” Ziri muttered.

“What?” Marcus said, confused. “Who is Morenza?”

“Sergeant Poth Morenza,” Ziri said. “He’s a sniper.”

Chapter 64

BRYNNA

Corradh Fortress
Corradh Province
Norin

Brynna threw back the flap and entered Gareth and Rand's tent.

Gareth dropped his knitting to his lap. "Aww! You look like you've been chewed up and spit out!" He stood and guided her back to his chair. "Sit down. There."

"I can't. I need to prepare for Sel Rhyshga," she said.

Gareth grinned, a twinkle in his eye. "Look!" He darted to the corner and lifted a kitten from a wooden crate. "Isn't he cute? Want to hold him?" He pushed it into her hands.

Brynna couldn't help but smile as she nuzzled it on her cheek. It settled in her lap and licked its paws, purring. Her stress melted as she stroked its ears, so small and delicate, a stark contrast to the power of the drums. "But I really must get ready."

“I have something for you,” he said. He moved a stack of garments aside and held up a brilliant red dress.

Brynna’s lips parted. “Gareth,” she said, setting the kitten back in the box.

“Exquisite, yes?” he said, smoothing the full skirt. “Now I don’t want you to miss anything. Of course,” he shrugged, “the wool is from Lincanly. I wouldn’t have it any other way. The neckline trim is made from furs from Amiman and Ryntoth, alternating, see?” He pointed. “The flowers there, the centers are pearls from Elidel, and the petals are bits of linen from Corradh’s flax fields, dyed with Wyclythe snails—the Dennysyn’s farm, you remember?”

She nodded.

“The hem is trimmed with shells from Grimsyn and Safwyn,” he continued. “The feathers on the belt are from hawks in Niemynyn and kingfishers in Ladvyl. And, oh, I’m missing one.”

“Bryton?”

“And Bryton! Yes, the chokecherries for the red, to dye it. Those are from Bryton.”

Brynna ran her hands over the fabric. “But how? How did you know to make this?”

Gareth tossed his hand. “Rand told me you would need it at some point, and I threw it together this evening with bits I had on hand from other pieces. I already had the red dress and the other, so why not? Do you like it?”

“It’s perfect! Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. Go back there and put it on then.” He fluttered his hand. “You don’t have much time.”

Brynna ducked behind the screen and changed. The dress was not tailored to her, but the extra room would

allow for movement. It was a work of art, and wearing it, she accepted the invitation to connect with every province in Norin. She watched the sweep of the skirt, feeling the strength it infused into her resolve.

She stepped from behind the screen, barefoot. Gareth looked up from his knitting and smiled. "Beautiful! Now sit here, and I'll paint."

Brynna settled herself and closed her eyes as Gareth ran the brush over her face. The softness of the bristles and the cold, wet sensation of paint felt as ominous as it did soothing. The moment neared, and the drums beat in relentless cadence that resonated in her chest and pounded in her brain, the same rhythm continuing on and on. It proclaimed itself to last until eternity, but she knew it would change the moment her bare foot touched the Circle. She fidgeted with nervous energy.

"Be still," Gareth said.

"Sorry."

Sol's words echoed in her brain, making even less sense than when he had said them. "Do you know anything about 'Norin Å Sdolevy'?"

"Be still," Gareth said again.

"Sorry."

He continued painting. "From the legends?"

She moved her eyes to his but didn't dare move again.

He shrugged. "Not really. What's there to know? It's a slogan. That's all."

She hummed and held still. Sol was just another fanatic.

Thoughts of Trinan drifted through her mind, and with him, nausea. She was naïve. Stupidly naïve. Even Niemynyn, as young as he was, had seen her naïveté. Trinan didn't love her. She had no standing. No money. Even her inheritance

from her father's business had been lost in the Robynton fire. Trinan would soon be king—the wealthiest king in Norin and the wealthiest man in all of Gavony. She had been foolish to believe a love between them could have been possible.

Cadoc was right. Trinan had only wanted her because she was under his control, a familiar comfort from his boyhood. Now she had been tossed away, in favor of silk and land and ports. Cadoc was right.

Shame welled up within her.

“Last bit,” Gareth said, dipping the brush again. She lifted her face and held still. “Finished,” he said, stepping back, still holding his brush at the ready.

The tent flap opened, and Erling stepped in. As Wyclythe's Sel Rhyshga representative, his face displayed full paint for the ritual. Sel Rhyshga required the most striking paint design Norinian tradition allowed, with vivid colors and intricate brush strokes. Each province's individual paint schemes typically reflected themselves and their interests, but all of these images could be layered together to form a symbolic scene of Norin—the same one depicted in the stained-glass windows of the fortress.

The yellow circle of Niemynyn was the sun shining over the mountains depicted by Amiman's black triangles. The Lincanly mark on the ridge of the nose divided day from night. The rain from Wyclythe flowed into the rivers of Grimsyn. The stars, the sun, the paths of seasons were all shown through the markings of Elidel, Bryton, Ladvyl, and Safwyn, and the blood bonds of Ryntoth and Corradh held them together across nose and cheeks.

For Sel Rhyshga, each representative wore the fully painted scene. Brynna's face bore the same complete

markings as her brother's with the exception that his were painted in many colors, like the other eight representatives, and hers were entirely in red. He would represent Wyclythe as a member of a unified Norin. She would summon the spirit of war.

Erling looked out through the tent flap before closing it again.

"What's it like out there?" she asked.

He puffed his cheeks. "There's a large crowd. People are coming in from the closest provinces. They know the significance, and they're restless. There are horses and riders, messengers for every province and large town, ready to carry word as soon as the votes are cast."

Gareth motioned to her. "What do you think?" he asked Erling.

"It's fine," Erling said, barely glancing at her. He pulled the flap back once more. "No one will pay much attention to her face."

Gareth deflated.

Bryнна stood and shook her full skirts out. Her hair—removed of ribbons and leaves—hung plain, loose, and unadorned. There was nothing else for her to do but wait. She attempted to walk through the steps in her mind, but her thoughts jumped around wildly. She picked up the kitten and handed it to Gareth, who smiled once more.

The flap rustled again, and Rand entered. "It's almost time," he said.

Gareth grabbed Rand's hand. "I didn't think I'd see you before it started."

"And here I am!" Rand said with a chuckle that ended in a choke. "What is that?"

Gareth held up the kitten. "A kitten."

Rand pointed to Brynna. "Yours, right?"

She shook her head.

"Not another one," Rand groaned.

"But it's got nowhere else to go!" Gareth pleaded. He held it up. "It's tiny."

"You've got to stop finding things to take care of," Rand said. "I let you have Brynna."

Brynna snapped to attention. "What?"

Rand met her eyes, a faint smile at his lips.

"But she has to go save the country," Gareth said. "Alfy can stay with us."

Rand stared at Alfy, then looked at Brynna. She smiled.

"Get painted," Rand said to Gareth, shaking his head in defeat.

Gareth grinned. "Back in the box, Alfy!"

"I'm more of a dog person," Rand said, leaning towards her.

"Trinan's here," Erling said.

Trinan swept in, filling the tent with an icy aura. Several of the lamps swayed, casting frantic shadows, and two blew out, plunging the group into somber dimness. His black hooded robe enshrouded his figure and swirled around his boots. Thick black paint concealed his face in the Wyclythe pattern only, and the line of sovereignty crossed his forehead. Had Brynna met him in the darkness, she would have thought him a wraith. She would have screamed or fled or fought. Even now, conflicting emotions buffeted her with a confusion of mistrust, anger, and dread. She shivered.

"We've said all there is to say," he said to the three of them. "This is all that remains."

Brynna's stomach quivered. She shook her hands at her side and shuffled her feet.

"Are you strong enough?" he asked.

She lifted her chin. "I'll give what's necessary."

"Not what I asked."

"All the same."

He grunted. With a motion to Erling, the two left the tent.

Brynna stared at the tent flap, willing her feet forward. Yet they remained in place, encased in quicksand. She slowly sank into the earth. The weight of the vote reared up before her. Her legs were pinned, her arms entrapped. Tumbling emotions clawed at her, spitting visions of her father, pallid and still. She saw bodies mangled and broken, heard torturous screams. She closed her eyes only to see Trinan and Gara embracing. Sand compressed her neck, and tears ran down her cheeks.

Brynna lurched back to Gareth and Rand. They stood next to each other, solemn and silent, hand in hand.

"Go on," Gareth said, quietly.

Brynna shook her hands at her sides, flinging her fingers. "What if I can't—what if it's not—"

"It's all right," he said.

"I can't," she whispered.

He nodded again. "You can."

Brynna nodded with him. "I can."

She faced the door, and Gareth placed his hand on her shoulder. He squeezed.

With a ragged breath, she left.

Heads turned as Brynna hurried through the crowd, but she ignored the stares and whispers. The gathered Norinians were painted according to their provinces, and many were barefoot, showing their preparedness to enter the Circle. The cold air crackled with tension and suspense.

Brynna caught up with Trinan as he strode forward, splitting the crowd, his cloak billowing behind him. Erling drew to her side, and they moved in trio to the edge of the Circle, the occasional 'Dasveld!' ringing out over the unrelenting drums.

The Circle, the vast clearing of sand, expanded before them. The Life Fire roared, shining on hundreds of Norinians as they danced in shuffling form within the Circle, small steps forward, a slow, deep tide, around and around the fire, signifying their support for the vote. She couldn't see beyond those who were dancing, but she knew that, in the center, people encircled the fire, arms linked, stepping and dancing and gathering the warmth, heat, and life the fire offered. They stood shoulder to shoulder, equal no matter the province, and the others circled beyond them, prepared to receive whatever the future held in store.

"Come," Trinan commanded, and he walked along the edge of the Circle. Brynna moved to follow him, but Erling caught her hand, holding her back. He squeezed his grip, and they exchanged a glance before she pulled away to catch up to Trinan.

Brynna and Trinan moved through the crowd beyond the Circle's bounds until they arrived at a large wooden dais, behind which wooden scaffolding supported a tall backdrop draped in velvet. Two modest thrones had been placed on the dais before the curtain, and there, High King Corradh sat in state, presiding over all that occurred. In the prime of midlife, his solid form imposed his presence on the world. His stern, ivory face and square jaw betrayed no emotion, and he leaned forward, studying the spectacle with his elbow resting on the throne's arm and his index finger

curled above his lip. Black furs lined his rich black robe, the gold embroidery of which glistened in the fire light. The Diadem of Norin, a golden band set with sapphires and pearls, adorned his head, and his queen, a lithe and graceful creature, sat to his right. She was the height of beauty in a boned, corseted bodice with an off-the-shoulder neckline, and a skirt constructed from mounds of frothy pink silk. Her white sable wrap defended her against the cold. She bore herself in a regal manner, lighter than a cloud, a fitting ornament to Corradh's nobility and steadfastness.

Brynna touched her red folk wear.

She would throw Sel Rhyshga.

The sovereigns would vote.

Corradh would declare the outcome.

One need only glance at the high king to understand the decision would be final with no tolerance of further argument or discussion. Rebellion against his word would end in death.

Brynna counted each king and queen who stood ready to vote. All were present.

A figure stood in the shadow of the dais. Sol.

Trinan cast a nod to the chief drummer. The drummer, maintaining the steady beat as he had for hours, returned the nod, and Trinan raised his black hood to conceal his face. He walked to the center of the area before the dais. Facing the high king, he raised his arms, holding the edges of his cloak like dark and heavy wings. He rotated to face the fire, and all of the kings and queens of the provinces walked into the area in single file and formed a line of royalty in front of the dais with Trinan in the center, his arms still upraised and cloak spread.

The drums continued. The official provincial dancers, one representative per province, stepped forward from the crowd and positioned themselves around the shuffling mass encircling the Life Fire. They were each painted for Sel Rhyshga with complete Norinian paint. Brynna saw Erling nearly halfway around the Circle from her. She was proud to be his sister.

It was time.

Her bare feet touched the Circle's sandy ground. The intensity of the thundering bass drums increased. Brynna lifted her chin and strengthened her stride, but she felt insignificant, like a speck amidst the masses. She marched in front of the line of royalty and stood before Trinan, looking up at him. His wings and body towered over her. She met his eyes, but the paint prevented her from reading his face. With one swooping motion, he arced the thundering wings down and around her, and she was swallowed from view.

Chapter 65

NORA

Nalta
Gantu

Nora watched the crowd below. She didn't know what criminals did once they ran away. She couldn't climb any higher.

The guards would come for her eventually. They would have guns or swords or whips. They would kill her. Dying might not be so bad. The priest said those who disobeyed would go to hell, but the stories whispered among the slaves spoke of returning spirits. Perhaps she would be a flower. Or a horse. Or a bird. A bird would be nice. She could sing all day.

The door to the chamber moved, and fingers appeared around the edge. Nora's heart galloped. The door slowly opened, and Ziri looked in.

"Ziri," she said.

He walked in, looking up at the chandelier and the ceiling. He whistled. "I've never seen this room before. Impressive."

“Yes,” she said. “How did you get in here?”

“Marcus convinced Nyok to let me in.”

She nodded and looked back at the window. The crowd was thicker, and all the faces turned upward, trying to see her.

“They want me to come down,” she said, “and give them the explosives.”

He shoved his hands in his pockets. “Yeah.”

“I can’t do that,” she said.

“I know.”

“Do you?” she asked. “Do you understand?”

He nodded.

She sighed and rested her hands in her lap. “What happens now?”

“That’s up to you,” he said. “They’ve called in a sniper, so if you sit here much longer...” his voice faded.

She tipped her head. “That would be fast.”

“If they have to come up here, they’ll probably shoot you then, too, but there’s a chance they won’t.”

“And if they don’t?”

“There won’t be a trial. They’ll beat you first.”

“20 strikes with a cat-o’-nine-tails,” she said.

“I heard that,” he said. “And then you’d be hanged, unless,” he hesitated, “unless the explosives go off, then—if you survive—they’ll burn you to death. A limb at a time.”

Nora looked at the mounded cloak. “I don’t want that.”

“You can walk out of here with me and the explosives. The Regás can probably delay your punishments which would give us all time to think.” He sat next to her on the window seat and stretched his feet out in front of himself.

“Is Elias mad about the explosives?” she asked.

"It's his own fault. This was a stupid idea that was never going to work."

"It almost did."

He shrugged. "There are better ways to fight."

"I can't help you now," she said.

He swallowed, his throat moving.

"What do you think I should do?" she asked.

"This is your choice," he said.

The bell rang at the temple for the sabhirim evening prayer.

Nora studied her hands in her lap, then looked around the room. It was dark, and the chandelier no longer sparkled. The figures on the ceiling stared down at her, judging from on high, devising new ways to torture her, deciding how she would die. Ziri was her only respite from such a world. She leaned her head on his shoulder, and he took her hand in his.

Nora smiled to herself, happy.

"I'm ready to turn myself in," she said. "Will you carry my cloak?"

He nodded and picked up the explosives. They left the senate chambers and walked through the halls. They went down the many flights of stairs to the grand entry.

Nora paused and studied the statues and frescoes, feeling quiet and sad. "This is my last moment of freedom. Let me have a few minutes alone. Take those to Nyok," she said, gesturing to the explosives. "I don't need them. I just want to be alone. Free. Just for a moment."

"If you take too long," he said, "they'll come after you."

She nodded. "I know. I'll only be a moment. It would mean a lot."

He studied her face, then slowly turned away and opened the front door of the Ganstag. She heard the crowd cheer, and as the door closed, the building fell silent.

She would miss him.

Nora walked to the central storeroom. The closet door was open, and the broom lay on the floor. The remaining explosives were stacked in the box.

She scooped out the sticks of dynamite and walked to the central wall that was marked with decorative divots and cubbies. She slid the sticks into the holes with their fuses hanging out. Five, ten, fifteen, twenty. The fuses were short, slightly longer than the length of her hand. They wouldn't burn long. She would have to light them all quickly.

Nora pulled a straw from the broom and lit it with a match from her pocket. Her throat tightened as she clasped the teardrop pendant in her other hand and touched the straw to each fuse.

Chapter 66

BRYNNA

Great Circle of Lonara
Corradh Province
Norin

The drums fell silent, and there formed an unsettling vacuum of absent sound.

Brynna and Trinan squatted in the darkness provided by the cloak. Her ears craved the pounding drums to which she had grown accustomed. They seemed to continue beating in her thoughts, or perhaps that was her heart. She could see only darkness and feel only her knees on the dirt. The close air stifled her breath as sweat broke on her forehead. She held her face away from him as much as she could for fear of smearing the paint on her skin.

Brynna slid her arms around him, reaching for the long, wide ribbon that had been hidden at his back. The fabric, smooth and tight, ran swiftly through her fingers as it pulled loose. His breath fell on her face as she unfolded

it, and he helped her position it around her shoulders. She grasped it in each hand.

His hand squeezed her shoulder. "Fly my Spirit of War!" he whispered and rose, his arms crossed and raised, draping the cloak over her, continuing to conceal her.

She stood, her back against him, her head against his chest. Her arm positions matched his, and the ribbon draped around her, covering her shoulders and trailing to the ground. Her heart hammered in her chest.

Trinan cast his arms out, releasing the cloak and revealing her, a burst of cold air striking her face. Cries rang from the crowd, and the drums beat a new rhythm. In cadence, the singers opened their song, a chant composed of syllables, primal meaning cast into tones sharper and more powerful than words. Their sounds engulfed her, and as Trinan moved back, returning to the line of royalty, she entered the rhythm.

Bryнна stepped slowly forward, two beats for every movement. She extended her arms before her, the ribbon looped behind her back and hanging from each hand nearly to the ground. All was red. Her face. Her dress. The ribbon. The radiant fire's glow. With majestic grace, she moved one arm to the side, the other following closely, the ribbon wrapping her body. Again, to the other side, extending the ribbon yet draping herself. In this manner, she moved ahead, one side then the other, with a rolling, smooth step. Her breath matched the movement, and her heart slowed. She leaned into a wide, smooth river of sound and dance.

Bryнна approached the crowd around the Life Fire. A surge in the music lifted her to her toes, and she flung her arms wide, slinging the rippling ribbon and eliciting sharp

cries from the observers. She bent and swept the ribbon about her feet in a circular motion and rotated to brush the nearest person away. In this manner she continued, swiveling back and forth, with spread arms, sweeping the shuffling crowd away from the Life Fire, gentle, yet insistent. Each person touched their fingers to their forehead, then acquiesced and returned to the outer bounds of the Circle. On and on, she turned and swept, rotating around the Fire, meeting each person and allowing them to pay homage to the Spirit of War.

The minutes built and passed. The many faces ran together, indistinguishable in the flickering light, one after the next, always another one behind. A tall man. An old woman. A child. Another man. The drums beat. The singers chanted. Brynna swept and pivoted, traveling around the fire, rotating within the crowd, meeting each one and sending them to the side. Her arms ached and shook, eventually filling with fire as she endured the sustained position. When the exertion surpassed her endurance, she would bend and sweep the ground, shaking them out, only to extend them once more.

When she arrived at the inner circle, she slid between two women, breaking the chain. They released their linked arms, and their circle melted away, allowing Brynna to sweep the last people from around the fire. Only the chosen provincial dancers remained, scattered evenly around the Circle. With a final swooping, circular motion, she moved back toward the high king.

General Hepsath stepped into the Circle, his shadow stretching away from the fire. With footfalls matching the drum beat, he walked toward Corradh, carrying a small chest. He placed the box onto the dais at the high king's

feet, and Corradh nodded his approval. Hepsath moved to the side, allowing Brynna to approach with the ribbon spooled around her hand.

The noise of the crowd grew with anticipation. She closed her eyes and listened to both the calls of those who supported her and the jeers of her opponents. The increasing power of the drums edged out the voices, and with each beat, she focused more intently on what she must do.

Brynna opened her eyes and steeled herself. The strong-box had been constructed of rich mahogany and adorned with the Great Seal of Norin, a triquetra carved by her father's expert hand. The angles of each small cut were telling and familiar. Her eyes filled with tears. She set the ribbon on the dais, her mind returning to his workshop as she ran her hand across the box's silky smoothness and the carving's rough indentations. He had said the time would come, and his approval infused into her muscles, bolstering her strength.

With shaking fingers, she unfastened the latch and drew out a pile of small red ribbons which she separated into two groups. Each group of ribbons was attached to a strap. These she tied below her knees so the straps rested on the swell of her calves and the ribbons draped over her legs to her feet. She reached into the box again and pulled out four leather straps covered in small bells which she fastened to her wrists and ankles. With a slight pause and catch of breath, she unbuckled her ceremonial knife belt from her waist and placed it tenderly into the box.

Her fingers brushed against the final object.

Brynna lifted out a finely tooled belt, the sheath of which held a bronze knife. Forged many generations prior, its edge held sharp for this purpose alone. She withdrew it

from the sheath, and the Life Fire reflected off a blade that held a deeper curve than her own knife. As in the game of Rhyshga, she must throw it and hit the target—in this instance, the center of the seal. If she was able to make the throw, those in attendance would see it as a sign to approve the vote. If she failed, it would be considered an ill omen, and the throw might be enough to turn minds away from the prospect of war. She returned it to the sheath and buckled it in place at her side.

Brynna closed the box. The magnitude of her task weighed upon her shoulders. She faced the fire.

Drums burst into frantic rhythm. Brynna bounce-stepped, turning, ribbons flying in waves with each fling of her leg. The bells jingled with her steps and the flick of her hands, punctuating her movements. She held her arms out like a bird soaring over the battlefield, seeking those whom she could command.

She darted toward the dancers, then shied away and wove—jumping, hopping—in and out and around them as they stood silent and still. Twisting and whirling, entwined with drums and song, she danced around and between them to complete her revolution of the fire.

Brynna approached the first dancer to her left. The woman's face was painted like the others, in the full Norinian style, but her sky-blue garments with lines of silver and dotted pearls signified Elidel. Brynna hopped and flourished the ribbons on her legs and the bells on her hands. She veered close and hovered her hand over the woman's head a moment before placing it gently atop. The woman sprang to life and matched Brynna's steps in tandem. Her movements continued as Brynna traveled on to the next dancer, a tall man from Ladvyl in a green and white tunic and

trousers. Because Brynna could not reach the top of his head, she placed her hand on his chest, calling him awake. He, too, then mimicked her steps, dancing at her side until Brynna moved around the Circle to Bryton, and to Safwyn, invigorating each to life.

She arrived at Erling and placed her hand on his head. He stepped out to dance, matching her movements closer than any of the others. They were copies of each other, duplicates in height, physique, and flair. They stepped and hopped in the same manner, transitioning and inclining to the same angles, in the same moments. This magnified their progress and expanded the power sensed by all. A war cry ripped the night. Voices murmured in the crowd. People shifted their feet. But the call dissipated unanswered, and Brynna continued around to Amiman, Grimsyn, and Niemynyn.

Lincanly next. Brynna spun around and saw Gareth's smile. She pressed her hand on his chest, and he jumped into motion. He captured the beating drums with his steps and held the song in his hands. She instantly recognized his skill as exceeding her own. His arms were responsive, his hands expressive, and his feet perfectly in time. She acknowledged the honor of dancing with a master of her art. Her fatigue abated, and she watched, delighted, following his lead. The crowd appreciated the dynamic, and several shouts peppered the air. With a twinge of regret, she moved on to Ryntoth to finish the circle.

The drum beat grew into a vicious pulse, pounding, throbbing. It drove the dancers before it.

As Brynna spun into place before the high king, the provincial dancers moved into two rows with her in the center. She stepped and stomped, leaning forward, one foot and then the other. The dancers mirrored her, stepping and

stomping in unison. The tempo increased, and Brynna's heart matched it.

A war cry sounded from the crowd and was answered on the other side of the Circle.

A log collapsed in the Life Fire, showering sparks into the Circle and pelting the dancers. The embers stung Brynna's skin, shaking her focus. She returned to a burned-out house, thick darkness, waking up on a cold street. Her anger flared. Every face of every Hykosi soldier she had seen flashed before her, and her fury blazed. Brynna's hands curled into fists, and she struck the air over her head with each side-swinging step, her core tight and jaw clenched.

The dancers strode toward each other, in step with the reverberating beats. Gareth emerged from the darkness opposite Brynna. Their eyes met—she in the lead this time. His intensity matched her own, solidifying their connection.

Brynna's step quickened aggressively. She sharpened her movements, sliding powerfully with her knees bent and shoulders forward. Gareth mirrored her move for move, and a synergy grew. Bending, striking, shifting, pushing, the strength of his arm and the force of her leg beat back fear and cowardice until courage and vitality spread forth into those who watched. War cries lifted from the masses. The drums beat in Brynna's ears to the point of pain. The sounds churned around her as she spun before the dais. The dancers retreated.

Brynna ran. She sprinted ahead, past the dancers, across the Circle, around the fire, and returned. The others scattered. She skidded into place before the high king, a cloud of dust rising.

The drums stopped.

A precipitous silence descended over the Circle. She stood alone, every eye on her. The box with the carved triquetra remained at the feet of the high king, but in her mind, the dais surely had moved and was now miles away, the distance ever increasing. She saw the triquetra with the high king in narrow proximity. He was close enough to be struck by ricochet or, Breath forbid, hit straight on. She dared not meet his eyes. If she assassinated the high king—no matter how unwillingly—the loyal, armed, and agitated crowd would ensure her own immediate and bloody death.

Her palm graced the knife handle. She wrapped her fingers around it, touching the ridges on the surface. With a deep breath, she drew it. Her gaze never left the triquetra. She tossed the knife slightly in her hand, adjusting her grip for the weight and balance.

Brynna raised her arm.

The triquetra.

She threw the knife, and with its release, seconds stretched to minutes, to hours, to years. The knife shifted mid-air. Her thoughts raced. It had felt clean. In her mind's eye, she saw it hit flat, smack against the wood, and fall, but in the world in which she stood, it flew smooth and straight and struck the center of the carving, where it wobbled slightly and stuck firm.

War cries tore the darkness.

People rushed forward, disregarding the Circle's boundaries. Voices shouted. The guards barked orders, but still the people pushed in. Brynna sank into the deluge of bodies.

Gareth grabbed her arm. "Over here!" he yelled over the shouts around them.

He shouldered his way through the crowd, shielding her from the people. He supported her, and she leaned her

weight on him, her breath labored, her heart fearful for her country. They fled to the shadows behind the dais and ran along the backdrop.

"There! Up there!" she cried, pointing to the wooden scaffolding.

"What?" he said.

"We can climb it. We'll be able to see."

"Are you sure?"

Brynna tucked her skirt into the tooled belt. "Yes, come on." She found a handhold and lifted herself upward to the next. Gareth clumsily followed, and they climbed to the top, perching on the edge. He teetered, and Brynna pulled him back.

The crowd spread before them, shouting and screaming, the bounds of the Circle invisible. "Can you see?" she asked. "Are they voting?"

"I can't tell," he said.

They watched the tumult, listening to the shouts and screams and trying to make sense of it all.

Gareth pointed. "There they are!"

Leaning as far as she dared, Brynna saw that the sovereigns of each province had gathered in a close group near the dais. Trinan joined them and encourage them to step closer. All in a circle. He spoke a while, then lifted his hand. The first vote. He gestured to Queen Elidel, and she raised her hand.

"They're voting," Brynna whispered. Nervousness scraped her stomach. "Two in agreement."

King Ladvyl raised his hand.

"Three," Gareth said. "How many do you need?"

"Seven. If more than three dissent, the vote will fail."

King Bryton rubbed his beard, then nodded and lifted a finger.

“Four,” Gareth said.

King Safwyn raised his hand quickly.

“Five,” Gareth said. “You’re almost there.”

Brynna shifted her weight. “I don’t trust the rest.”

King Amiman in his fur-trimmed tunic shook his head. He spoke strongly, shaking his fist and pointing at several of the other royals. Finally, he stepped back, still shaking his head, his rejection clear.

“We knew he’d vote against,” Brynna said. “There can only be two more against, or it won’t pass.”

Gareth nodded.

Queen Grimsyn paused a moment, then stepped away.

Brynna shook her head. “Shit! I thought we had her.”

Queen Ryntoth shook her cane as she spoke to the sovereigns, then raised her hand.

“Six!” Brynna cried. “We’ve got it! We’ve got it!”

“I thought you needed seven?”

“We do, but Niemynyn’s vote is secured. We’re certain about his vote. That makes seven!”

She puffed her breath with relief and watched the young king. He stood motionless, his arms crossed as Trinan, in the center of the circle of sovereigns, stood before him.

Niemynyn stepped back and turned away.

Brynna’s throat tightened. “No,” she whispered. “No! He gave his word. He said he would vote for war!” She gripped the rail as she watched Trinan approach the young king. His mouth and arms moved as he questioned the king’s vote. Niemynyn shook his head once more and remained outside the circle with Amiman and Grimsyn.

"He's not recanting," Gareth said.

"I don't understand!" she said. "We won't have the votes now! There's only one left. We must have that vote or the motion will fail. Everything rides on one vote!"

She stared at the circle. Only King Lincanly had yet to vote.

She grabbed Gareth's sleeve. "Do you know what Rand recommended? Did he tell you anything?"

Gareth shook his head. "I was distracted by Alfy."

King Lincanly stepped into the circle. Brynna could see he was talking and would have given anything to hear his words. Moments stretched. The tension grew within her, every muscle taut. She chewed her cheek and tasted blood.

Lincanly raised his hand.

"Seven!" Brynna shouted. "Seven! It passed!" Relief flooded through her, and she hugged Gareth, laughing. They jolted on the scaffolding, and both grabbed tightly to the shaking rail.

War cries shattered the night, crescendoing into shrill screams, one upon the other, filling their ears and saturating the air. Brynna's relief dissipated into agitation from the horrifying sounds. Gareth seized her hand, fright on his face. The howls and wails passed from one side of the Life Fire to the other, then circled back. On and on, around and around, the yell screeched, a sound of horrors, a voice of terror. Brynna shrank with dread. Slowly, the sound lessened and withdrew into a din of wild voices. She shuddered with each breath.

Gareth kissed her hand and pressed it to his chest. "That's it then. War."

Chapter 67

MARCUS

Nalta
Gantu

Marcus squinted at the guard tower as it stood high over the Nalta Guard compound, high enough to offer a vantage point of the Ganstag's third story. Upon it, a dark figure moved. Marcus had heard the murmurs in the crowd. Poth Morenza, the Sniper. Morenza, the Genius. Morenza, the Hand of Death. Marcus's chest tightened.

The front door of the Ganstag opened, and Ziri appeared with Nora's cloak and the explosives wrapped within. Shouting, two Nalta Guards rushed toward him. One seized the explosives, and the other shoved him toward Lieutenant Nyok.

The crowd cheered, and Marcus's shoulders relaxed. Everything would be resolved now. No need for a sniper. No need for death. Everyone could sit and discuss this now, and Lor would solve the legal problems.

He approached Nyok who was asking, "Where is she?"

“She’s coming,” Ziri said. “She wanted a few last moments.”

Nyok looked at his pocket watch. “She has two minutes. If she doesn’t come out, my men will go in and get her. I don’t guarantee they will remove her alive.” He directed the soldier to carry the explosives to the compound.

“She’ll come out,” Ziri said.

Nyok grunted and walked away along the front of the Ganstag.

“How is she?” Marcus asked, his stomach a dead weight of worry and guilt.

Ziri frowned and shrugged. “She—”

Lightning flashed, white light flaring at the Ganstag windows. Growling thunder boomed in Marcus’s ears as adobe and plaster exploded into fragments. A roaring blast collided with his chest, smashing him backward as dust and smoke launched into the square.

Another flash illuminated the cloud into a blazing fireball as a shockwave once more crashed into him. Another boom, and Marcus braced his arms over his head and pressed his face to the dirt, certain of his imminent death. His teeth ground on sand as rubble bombarded his body and pelted him with rocks. Another blast. Another. Subsequent blasts built over and over, surging over him and spiraling his terror.

And then quiet.

Marcus lifted his head a small amount, glass tinkling with the movement, and his hands ready to cover him again. As the stillness endured, he sat up. The clasp of his taylasan had broken, and the shawl lay on the ground. His turban had fallen from his head, and only the undercap covered his hair. Dust layered his skin and torn clothes, and he coughed

as the abrasions and cuts on his arms and legs stung. Blood covered his hands. He was bleeding from somewhere but couldn't find the wound. He touched his face. It felt sticky, and he realized blood was running from his ears. He couldn't hear on the left side, and the right was muffled.

All around him, people slowly sat up.

Some lay on the ground, writhing in pain.

Some lay still.

The Ganstag remained.

The doors and windows had been blown out, and the building had shed much of its plaster and adobe. Chunks of the walls were missing in places, edges crumbling.

Marcus stood. His legs shook. He picked up his taylasan and stumbled to Ziri, who was kneeling in the dirt with his head bowed. His hands lay open on his thighs, palms upward, and dust and debris covered his unruly hair.

"Ziri," Marcus said.

Ziri looked up. A gash on his jaw bled over his shirt. His mouth was moving.

"I can't hear you," Marcus said, then crouched at his side, closer.

"They backed her in a corner," he heard Ziri say as if from a far distance.

Marcus held his taylasan on Ziri's face to staunch the bleeding.

Ziri winced. "They backed her in a corner," he repeated.

Marcus nodded.

Ziri spat blood on the ground. "They backed her in a corner, and she made the only choice they allowed her to have."

Chapter 68

MEELA

Cardinal Territory
Corradh Province
Norin

Meela stood at the edge of the cliff. Corradh's fortress, lit with torches, glowed below her in the darkness. The distant Life Fire, buffeted by the cold winds, shone on the Norinians below her. Faint war cries and screams lifted from the masses. The sounds filled her with restlessness and dread.

A twig snapped, and a figure emerged from the path through the woods. Hanáv's red gown melded with the night. Gone was the dramatic ritual paint of the preceding night when Meela had been cleansed. Instead, the high priestess's clear skin gleamed in the moonlight.

Meela nodded in greeting. They watched the people below.

"They have chosen war," Meela said.

"They have chosen death."

Meela said nothing, her eyes swimming and her breath heavy with sadness.

“Their swift destruction will benefit all,” Hanáv said. “The Hykosi will move with strength.”

“I have much to prepare,” Meela said.

Hanáv faced her. “Our supplies are low, and without that sea captain, little more is being shipped in. I will not permit our valsydian to be diminished any further.”

“There will be much suffering to relieve.”

“Theirs, not ours.”

“Hanáv,” Meela said. “I am canonical. Their suffering is my own.”

“They have upset the balance,” Hanáv hissed. “We owe them nothing. They depend on us!”

“And we on them.”

“The Tuli,” Hanáv said. “The Gantish. The Hykosi—not the Norinians.” Hanáv flicked her hand. “They are expendable.”

“Valsydian travels through their land. The Valsydian Conventions mandate it.”

“I care nothing of Conventions,” Hanáv growled. “They will cede.”

“They cannot,” said Meela. “They need the land to survive.”

“And we to travel through,” said Hanáv. “Their roads, their ports. That’s all we need. We do not need the people. The Hykosi have demonstrated that. The Hykosi are strong. The Norinians are not.”

“Do you see no value in their lives?”

Hanáv tossed her head. “The Padyń Mountains hold only a finite amount of valsydian. When it’s gone, we all will die,

Gavony peoples and witches alike. I am the steward. First to the witch, then to those of Gavony.”

“Norin is part of Gavony.”

Hanáv sneered and pulled down the neckline of her gown, revealing the triquetra scar. “Norinians are dogs.” She spat on the ground. “Liars. Hypocrites. Torturers. All of them—”

“Not all!”

“All! They are the worst of humankind. You are blinded by your obsession with that meddling man!”

Meela turned away.

“I have tolerated your errors. The Norinians will soon be no more—he will soon be no more—and Gavony will be better for it.”

Meela reared up in protest, but before she could speak, the air around her vibrated, pulsing rapidly, flickering still faster. Her ears thrummed with the pressure, and her blood throbbed within her until, with a final tremendous pulse, it stopped.

Gasping for breath, Meela looked to Hanáv. “What was that? Did you feel it?”

“Gantu has shuddered.”

“With war?”

“More than they yet realize.”

Meela walked to the cliff’s edge, staring out at the Norinians below. “I will disburse my witches and attempt to place them where I anticipate the heaviest casualties.”

An intense silence divided them.

“Do as you will,” Hanáv said. “But my cardinals will remain in the ancient places. I do not guarantee your purification.”

“We are canonical. It is our way.”

Chapter 69

MARCUS

Nalta
Gantu

Marcus stood at Ziri's side as soldiers removed Nora's body from the Ganstag. Safiyya had been summoned to identify the body of her slave, and now he watched as she nodded. A soldier used a large pair of tin snips to remove the metal band from Nora's thin wrist. He gave it to Safiyya, a kind of receipt in exchange.

Marcus saw no emotion on Ziri's face, even though a cascade of conflict tumbled within himself. "I always thought of myself as being different," Marcus said. "I'm a grand sab-hir, but I thought myself different from the others. I don't own slaves. I was kind to my father's slaves and to others' slaves. I tried to see them as people, as individuals, and I did that well enough to befriend Ingrid and marry her and love her, but now I see how wrong I was—how wrong I am."

Ziri glanced at him.

Marcus continued, “I tried to understand by putting myself in their place—into their shoes—but I carried my own biases with me. My own experiences will never grant me full comprehension of their lives. I need to hear their stories, spoken by their own tongues, in their own words and believe them.” He shook his head. “I know nothing. I don’t even know my wife.”

Ziri motioned to the left, and Marcus turned to see Lieutenant Nyok. He started because he had not heard Nyok’s approach.

“Pardon me, Gran Messer Regá,” Lieutenant Nyok said in a voice muffled by Marcus’s ears. “I found this with the deceased slave. I believe it is your work.” On his palm lay the teardrop pendant.

Marcus stifled a groan as he picked it up. “Yes, I gave it to her. Thank you.”

Nyok bowed, then returned to his soldiers.

Marcus stared at the pendant on his palm and remembered Nora’s delight. He saw her in the sitting room, reaching for the rainbows, giggling as they shone on her hands.

“I was wrong,” Ziri said.

Marcus looked at him.

“I told you that Nora didn’t have dreams,” Ziri said. “I was wrong. She did have dreams. Many of them. Her wild imagination overflowed with them. It often ran away with her.” He shrugged. “You were her inspiration. Every day. In every moment. Her thoughts of you filled her life with light and color and sustained her in a world that gave her darkness in return.”

Marcus’s eyes blurred with tears. He held up the pendant, and though the moon and torchlight failed to refract

through the crystal, the facets reflected and flashed as it moved. Lowering it once more, he offered it to Ziri. "I want you to have it. I may have been in a few of her thoughts, but I think her own light and color sustained you."

Ziri's brow creased with pain as he took the pendent and tenderly wrapped it in his handkerchief.

Safiyya approached, her face pale and her eyes downcast. She nodded to Marcus, but then addressed Ziri. "She had no next of kin, but you two were close." She offered Nora's band.

He took it and nodded.

Safiyya's lips moved as if she wanted to speak, but she turned and walked away.

Ziri rubbed his thumb over the name, then handed the band to Marcus. "You keep it. Remember her."

Marcus accepted it and studied the dents, the dust, the flecks of blood, and a lump formed in his throat. "I have no right. I—"

"She loved you," Ziri said.

Marcus looked at him. "You loved her."

Ziri's gaze dropped. He shook his head and shoved his hands in his pockets. "I feel no passion. I have no experience with romance, nor do I want it." His head tipped back to the sky as he blinked his eyes, and he took a ragged breath before lowering his head once more. "I valued her life and her happiness. I preferred to be with her over anyone else—even in silence. I smiled at her face in the morning. I sought her song at the end of the day."

Marcus's shoulders sank. "The sabhririm, myself included, have distorted love into laws and veils and sex and vows, means of satisfying ourselves through the

manipulation of others. We've forgotten that true connection is founded in friendship."

"Nine months," Ziri said. "Nine months more, and I would have saved enough to free her. I only needed nine more months."

Marcus shuddered. He didn't know how much Nora's freedom would have cost, but he suspected he could have written a check on the spot that would have covered it. Conviction drove a spike of guilt through his chest.

Nyok called orders, and soldiers pushed back the growing crowd. Nora's body had been wrapped in a sheet, and four Nalta Guards lifted and carried it toward the inn. The silent crowd parted with shuffling feet, moving to allow her bearers to pass. A man placed his fist on his chest, the band of his slavery over his heart. The woman next to him did the same. Then three more. And more. The crowd lined the street from the Ganstag to the inn, pressing forward, yet allowing the guards to pass. And slave after slave after slave placed their banded fist over their heart as far as Marcus could see.

Chapter 70

BRYNNA

Great Circle of Lonara
Corradh Province
Norin

Chaos erupted around the Life Fire. The mass of humanity crowded around the dais. The ground could not be seen, only bodies pressing closer, talking, cheering, pushing. Some danced, knocking into others and stumbling. Some cried. Some shook their fists. Every emotion was mirrored in Brynna's heart, magnifying her thoughts and fears.

"What happens now?" Gareth shouted, his knuckles white as he clung to the beams.

"Corradh must declare it final," Brynna said.

Below them, High King Corradh raised his hands and spoke. Even as close as they were, perched above him, they could not hear his words over the shouts and cheering.

"The people have declared it so," Gareth said.

Bryнна nodded, scanning the crowd. "I need to find Trinan."

He shook his head. "Too much commotion!"

She ignored him and climbed to the highest point of the scaffolding, placing her foot on a thin rail and pushing herself to stand as she held onto a corner post. The icy wind blew into her face, stealing her breath. Before her, it twisted the Life Fire higher, flung sparks over the people, and then snatched at her loose hair, streaming it behind her. Her skirt adhered to her legs and snapped taut, the edge dancing fiercely in the roaring, tumultuous currents like a red flag. She scanned the crowd from one side of the Circle to the other, searching through the roiling mass of shouting and screaming people as they undulated in movements individual and collective.

Her gaze stumbled on a horse and rider standing on a small rise outside the Circle, beyond the crowd, out of reach of the Life Fire's glow and only lit by the cold, silvery moonlight. He sat astride the horse, tall and motionless, and though paint obscured his face, she knew him. His white shirt softly reflected the moonlight, and his black pants had been cut at the knee, revealing his bare legs. His feet were bare as well, but whether from his bedraggled state or reverence for the Circle, she did not know.

Every muscle tightened within her, her heart pounding for a new reason. She scrambled down from the rail and climbed down the scaffolding in long, loping motions, ignoring Gareth's confused calls.

She dropped the final distance to the ground and strode through the crowd, past shouting men and crying women. Girls danced in a small circle, and young men cheered

together, proclaiming the glories of war. She passed them without acknowledgement, reaching the rise and seeing only the horse and rider.

She stopped four paces away.

Cadoc dismounted but did not approach.

They stood unspeaking, surrounded by noise, and yet the silence between them held strength.

“We’re at war,” he said.

She heard his words, then paused and listened to their deeper meaning, the one held in his language of riddles. She glanced over her shoulder at their countrymen. “Perhaps others,” she said, meeting him in kind. Norin was at war, but she was not at war with him. She could never be at war with him again.

“You are not?” Cadoc asked, taking a step forward, the horse’s lead sliding through his hands.

Brynna lifted her chin, her breath shaking. “As I said.” Once more, she had chosen his own words, and within her mind, they cast the image where she had first heard them spoken, an image of a sunset on the wharf, the taste of salt upon her lips, and his challenging presence before her.

He paused. “I have lost much.”

She nodded and allowed his loss to rest without argument, without defense. Instead, she listened to the cries of faraway seagulls, heard his voice telling stories of the southern seas, and felt the bellyache that only laughter could give. She remembered his arresting hand on hers, gripping tightly, and she blinked back tears. “As have I.”

His brow twitched, and an emotion she could not identify flashed across his face before hiding once more. “Then we must each accept our defeat and part in peace.”

She swallowed through her tightened throat. She looked at the grass, then back to him. "Peace to you, Cadoc Andersyn."

"And to you, little butterfly."

He mounted his horse and hesitated, looking down at her, then turned and rode away.

Brynna stared after him, a tear on her cheek but none in her eyes. Gareth's arm slipped around her and squeezed. She leaned her head on his shoulder.

Hands seized Brynna's waist, pulled her backward, and swung her around and around. She yelped, disoriented in the spin.

"Norin Å Sdolevy!" the man shouted. Swinging her around again.

"Norin Å Sdolevy!" another shouted.

"Norin Å Sdolevy!" A third and fourth and a fifth.

Brynna stumbled as the man released her, only to be picked up by another. This man, his face striped for Ryntoth, kissed her cheek before tossing her like a bale of hay to the next man. She was unharmed, only confused and swung about before being passed along to increasing shouts.

"Norin Å Sdolevy!"

A young woman grasped Brynna's hands and pulled her to an open area, capering around and around. Brynna laughed and skipped to the flutes that had joined the drums.

"Dasveld! Dasveld! Dasveld!"

"Norin Å Sdolevy!"

They hoisted Brynna to their shoulders and paraded toward the Life Fire, their cries growing louder, and the crowd growing larger. The road from the fortress to the Circle bustled with Norinians responding to the celebratory chants that built in volume and jubilation.

Across the Circle, Brynna saw Erling in the same predicament. A second group had lifted him up. He waved to her. She laughed and waved back. The two groups merged and released them to the ground. Those around them pulled away and clasped hands, and the Dasvelds ran to join as they all formed a circle and ran to the middle and back.

Someone passed a wineskin, and Erling drank and handed it to Brynna. Strong and refreshing, the wine dripped down her chin as the crowd jostled her. She wiped it away with the back of her hand, laughing, and passed the skin on.

The women separated out, swirling their skirts and forming the twisting line dances common at the Erstemdag festival. They clasped hands and turned, arms about the waist of the next, turning and turning again. Not to be outdone, the men joined in and all danced and wove together in joyful time and harmony. Round and round with colors and movement and drums, one song following another. Skins were shared, both water and wine, never knowing which until swigged.

Brynna saw Gareth across the Circle and made her way toward him, her head swimming with wine and song. "Come!" she called, pulling his arm. He grinned and followed, and they pushed their way through the dancing crowd to the edges. Brynna tripped. He caught her, and they laughed, leaning on one another.

"It's breathtaking!" she called to him over the music. "And heartbreaking."

"What do you mean?"

"Look at them all!" Her face fell, and her movements stilled. "How many here will die because of this vote? How can I dance knowing I'm responsible for their blood? Death

is waiting for them.” She surveyed the dancing crowd. “They have no idea the horrors in store.”

“They see it,” Gareth said. He laid his hand gently on her cheek and guided her gaze away from the Circle and back to his face. She blinked through the wine to see him clearly. “They know it,” he said. “They feel the contrast. But Brynna,” he shook his head, “death is no reason not to dance.” He grasped both of her hands in his, kissing one and then the other. “Dance because there is death! Dance now. Dance while you can.” He lifted her arm and spun her under it. “Dance until you shatter!” He stretched out their arms then pulled her close to him, his hand on her back as he turned them both around. He kissed her forehead.

She considered his words and studied his face, his earnest expression, the gleam in his eyes. With her palm on his chest, she felt his heart thudding rapidly. He smiled once again, and she matched it in return, happiness bubbling up within her. She grabbed his hands and dragged him to another circle where they joined in the dance and laughed under the stars.

PLEASE REVIEW ON AMAZON & GOODREADS



LEXICON

with pronunciation guide

-lyn [LIHN] (Dialect)

A suffix applied to a woman's name by her beloved. Norinian mark of deepest intimacy.

Adel Slimani [AY-dehl slih-MA-nee] (Character)

Gantish. Rancher.

Akawel Regá [AWK-uh-wel reh-GAH] (Character)

Gantish. Grand Sabhir. Senator. Estate owner. Widower. Father of Lor Regá and Marcus Regá. Master of Maya Regá.

Alfy [AHL-fee] (Character)

Gareth Luuk's cat.

“All mops and brooms about ye” (Idiom)

Unkempt.

Amelia [ah-MEE-lee-ah] (Character)

Shialorian woman.

Amiman Province [AH-mee-mahn] (Location)

Location: Northwest corner of Norin, on the border of Hykos. Separated from Sitilia by the Iona River.

Flag: Green lightning bolt on a black field

Primary Industry: Fur

Ceremonial Markings: Three black triangles across the face at eye level

Ana [AH-nah] (Character)

Norinian. Safwyn Province. King Safwyn’s attaché. Blonde hair.

Ancient Paths (Location)

Byways that enable fast travel. Known and seen only by witches.

Andersyn Shipping Company (Business)

Primary shipping company in Norin. Only company capable of international trade in the southern seas.

Andersyn Mess (Concept)

Someone of mixed racial heritage as a result of the population mingling encouraged by the shipping industry. Pejorative, yet reclaimed by many with such lineage.

Anika Ryntoth [AHN-ih-KAH RIHN-toth] (Character)

Norinian. Ryntoth Province. Queen of Ryntoth Province. Wife of Queen Consort. White hair.

Ardet [ahr-DEHT] (Dialect)

Ancient Norinian. Acceptance, approval, finality.

Arnar [AHR-nar] (Character)

Norinian. Trade commissioner. Thin. Spectacles.

Aro [AHR-oh] (Character)

Norinian. Wyclythe Province. Child. Son of Lotti.

Asa Nyok [AY-sah NY-ok] (Character)

Gantish. Lieutenant and commanding officer of the Nalta Guards. Black eyes. Black hair. Bronze skin.

Ásdís Hænning [AWZ-dees HEN-eeng](Character)

Sitilian. Viska. Ambassador to Norin. Stark white skin. Brown eyes.

Atoll (Geographic Feature)

An island formed from coral reef.

Atógo Mining Company [ah-TO-go] (Business)

Gantish. Valsydian mining company.

Attaché [at-ah-SHAY] (Occupation)

A diplomat's secretary, usually with a specialized skill.

Backstay (Shipping)

Rigging on a mast that counteracts the forestay to adjust the sag of the mast.

Bar Shot (Shipping)

Cannon shot composed of two balls connected with a rod. Designed to tangle in the rigging and tear sails.

Bardoon [bar-DOON] (Location)

Island in the southern seas. The land of giants.

Barge (Shipping)

Flat-bottomed freight boat. Capable of sailing in shallow waters.

Basigh [buh-SYE] (Ritual)

Norinian dance of grief.

Basilisk (Shipping)

Clipper ship.

“Beat to Quarters” (Shipping)

Prepare for battle.

Bennetti Cliffs [ben-EHT-ee] (Geographical Feature)

Picturesque oceanside cliffs, the largest tracts of which are owned by the Regá family.

Berth (Shipping)

A shelf-like sleeping space.

“Best kind” (Idiom)

Very well, fine. Common greeting.

Bianchi [bee-AN-kee] (Character)

Gantish. Member of the Nalta Guards.

Birgir [BIR-gir] (Character)

Bardooni. Sailor for the Andersyn Shipping Company.

Blue Veil (Clothing)

Indicates the wearer is a sabhir's kvina.

Bosun (Shipping)

Short for boatswain. Officer in charge of equipment and crew.

Bosun's Whistle (Shipping)

A high-pitched whistle used to signal the crew.

Bow Rake (Shipping)

To shoot artillery straight toward the bow of a ship.

Brahim Salisa [bra-HEEM sah-LEE-sah] (Character)

Gantish. Grand Sabhir.

Breakwater (Structure)

Wall used to shelter a port.

Brek Sterling [brek STIR-leeng] (Currency)

Gantish currency.

Brails (Shipping)

Small lines used to control the edges of a sail.

Brat (Clothing)

Rectangular cloak, attached at the shoulders.

Bridget [BRIH]-eht] (Character)

Norinian.

Brigitta [brih-GEE-tah] (Character)

Norinian. Elidel Province. Wife of Filip.

Brody [BROH-dee] (Character)

Norinian. Wyclythe Province. Harbormaster of Robynton. Tawny skin. Bushy mustache.

Brynna Ædmair Dasveld [BRIH-nah AYD-mahr DAHS-veld] (Character)

Norinian. Wyclythe Province. Daughter of Seth and Marcy Dasveld. Sister of Erling Dasveld. Accountant. Trinan Walyss's attaché. Brown hair. Blue eyes.

Bryton Province [BRY-ton] (Location)

Location: Province on the southern coast of Norin, between Wyclythe and Safwyn.

Flag: Green tree on a periwinkle field.

Primary industry: Lumber.

Ceremonial Markings: Blue circles, one on each cheek. Only one circle is worn for Sel Rhyshga.

Buntline (Shipping)

Rope used to control the sail when it is being hauled up for furling.

B'y [BYE] (Dialect)

Boy

Cadoc Andersyn [KA-dawk AN-der-sihn] (Character)

Norinian. Safwyn Province. Norinian, Tahlamese, and Shialorian ancestry. Only surviving child of Greteh and Rayne Andersyn. Owner of Andersyn Shipping Company. Adept sailor. Chestnut brown skin. Black hair.

Camellia (Plant)

Used for tea. Contains caffeine.

Canonical Witch (Occupation)

Any nationality. A woman capable of healing and accepting the flow of ondilska. Mandated to preserve and protect life.

Captain of Barge 16 (Character)

Hykosi. Bushy mustache. Nephew of Ivan Stoyan's assistant. Married. Eight children.

Cardinal Witch (Occupation)

Any nationality. Woman capable of purifying canonical witches and sending ondilska into the universe through the use of valsydian in a ritual.

Carina Nilsyn [kah-REE-nah NIL-sin] (Character)

Norinian. Grimsyn Province. Wife of Siv Nilsyn. Blonde hair.

Carltyrn Day [KARL-tin DAY] (Character)

Norinian. Wycythe Province. Provincial Secretary of the Treasury.

Carminative (Concept)

An herb that calms gas and bloating.

Carthasach [KAR-thah-sak] (Holiday)

Norinian winter solstice celebration.

Casia [KAY-shuh] (Character)

Norinian. Safwyn Province. Resident of East Tadsyn.

“Cat the Anchor” (Shipping)

To lift the anchor in preparation for setting it.

Cecily Layton [SEH-si-lee LAY-ton] (Character)

Norinian. First officer of *Basilisk*. Russet-brown skin.

Chafik [shah-FEEK] (Character)

Gantish. Member of the Nalta Guards.

Chain Shot (Shipping)

Cannon shot made of chains. Designed to tangle in the rigging.

Chalwar [SHAL-war] (Clothing)

Loose trousers.

Chase Cannon (Shipping)

A cannon capable of rolling to various positions on deck.

Check (Shipping)

A crack in a wooden piece on a vessel.

Clara [CLAH-ra] (Character)

Norinian. Wyclythe Province. Brynna Dasveld's assistant. Appointed by Trinan Walyss. Brown hair.

Clew Garnet [CLOO GAR-net] (Shipping)

A rope used to furl a sail.

Clipper (Shipping)

A merchant sailing vessel designed for speed.

Coracle [KOR-a-kul] (Shipping)

A small boat made of wickerwork.

Corradh [kor-AHD] (Character)

Norinian. Corradh Province. High King of Norin. Ivory skin.

Corradh Fortress [kor-AHD] (Location)

Large castle built by the settlers of Norin. Palace of High King Corradh. Seat of the Norinian government. Displays the Jeweled Windows of Lonara.

Corradh Province [kor-AHD] (Location)

Location: A central province in Norin. Home to Lonara, the capital.

Flag: A red crown within a ring of five flax flowers, on a white field

Primary Industry: Linen

Ceremonial Marking: Four “X”s across the cheekbones

Coryn Stone [KOR-ihn] (Item)

Ruby necklace worn by the chief of the cardinal witches.

Council of Norin [NOR-in] (Organization)

A secretive organization.

Critical Spars (Shipping)

Masts and booms.

Cutler (Occupation)

Someone who makes and/or sells knives

Cutter (Shipping)

Small, fast vessel with one mast and two headsails.

Cutting Out (Shipping)

Attack on an anchored ship using small boats.

Dabrash [dah-BRASH] (Location)

Town in Wyclythe Province near the Bryton border. On the coast.

Dario [DAH-ree-o] (Character)

Gantish. Brother of Ilara and Rezki. 10 years old.

Darsham [DAR-sham] (Shipping)

Large clipper ship.

Dennysyn's Farm [DEH-nih-sin] (Location)

Norin. Bryton Province. Snail farm known for having the highest-quality dye.

Dry Dock (Shipping)

Narrow channel that can be flooded to allow a vessel to sail in, then drained to allow for work to be completed.

Dwolin' [DWOH-lin] (Dialect)

Tired, fatigued, drowsy.

Duckie (Dialect)

A generic term of endearment for any young woman.

East Tadsyn (Location):

Primarily residential area on the eastern side of the Padyne River

Eastern Barge Fleet (Shipping)

Andersyn Shipping Company vessels that travel between Tadsyn and Nalta on a regular schedule.

Elias [ee-LY-ahs] (Character)

Gantish. Middle aged. Portly. Partner of Sunna.

Elidel Province (Location)

Location: Province on the western side of Norin, north of Wyclythe, south of the Indeling River.

Flag: Dotted white circle within a solid white circle on a teal field.

Primary Industry: Pearls

Ceremonial Markings: Three white circles over the left eyebrow.

Ensign (Shipping)

Flag of the nation under which a vessel sails.

Erik Hepsath [EH-rik HEP-sath] (Character)

Norinian. A general of the Norinian Army. Gray hair, nearly white.

Erling Dasveld [ER-leeng DAS-veld] (Character)

Norinian. Son of Seth and Marcy Dasveld. Brother of Brynna Dasveld. Husband of Kayla Dasveld. King Wyclythe's quartermaster.

Erstendag [ER-stem-dahg] (Holiday)

Norinian celebration of spring. Known for wild, amorous dancing.

Fall Skard [FAHL SKARD] (Geographical Feature)

Impassable mountain pass

"Feather the Rudder" (Shipping)

To move the rudder back and forth in order to slow the vessel

Ferrier (Occupation)

A specialist in hoof care and horse shoes.

Field Glasses (Item)

Binoculars.

Filip [FIL-ip] (Character)

Norinian. Elidel Province. President of the Bank of Jarta. Husband of Brigitta. Beady eyes. Graying hair.

First Breath (Religious Concept)

Earth's creator. A deity. Also used as an interjection or expletive.

“Fish are eating the rocks” (Idiom)

The fishing is good.

Fore-and-aft Sail (Shipping)

Sail set parallel to the keel of a vessel.

Frelun [fre-LOON] (Location)

Island in the southern seas.

Frelunian Vegetable Elixer [fre-LOON-ee-an] (Item)

Green, high-proof alcoholic drink containing highly-concentrated hallucinogenic herbs.

Fyos [FYE-ohs] (Game)

Norinian. Similar to rugby.

Galactagogue [gah-LAK-toh-gog] (Concept)

An herb that promotes breast milk production.

Gandura [gahn-DOO-rah] (Clothing)

Long tunic of a light material. Usually striped and hooded. Worn by men and women.

Ganstag [GAHN-stag] (Structure)

Gantish government building.

Gantu [GAN-too] (Location)

Location: County on the eastern side of Gavony with only shallow-water access to the sea.

Flag: Black field with a white fesse, lending the appearance of three broad stripes, with a red chevron at the pole and a centered white blaze.

Gara of Elidel [GAH-rah] (Character)

Norinian. Queen of Elidel Province. Blonde hair. Blue eyes. Porcelain skin.

Gareth Luuk [GAYR-eth LOOK] (Character)

Norinian. Lincanly Province. Weaver and fashion designer. Husband of Rand Luuk. Brown eyes. White skin.

Gavony [GA-von-ee] (Location)

Region on a continent in a far northern ocean.

Gavony Peoples [GA-von-ee] (Characters)

Non-magical inhabitants of Gavony.

Gavril Kosh [ga-VRIL KOSH] (Character)

Hykosi. Chief Intelligence Officer. Graying hair.

Ghenedi Marteen [ge-NEH-dee mar-TEEN] (Character)

Hykosi. Rear Admiral in the Hykosi Navy.

“Give a good randy” (Dialect)

Offer a sexual encounter.

Gran Messer [GRAN MESS-er] (Dialect)

Honorific for a grand sabhir.

Grand Assembly (Concept)

Gathering of all of the Norinian provincial sovereigns and their chief staff.

Grand Sabhir [GRAND sah-BEER] (Concept)

Male member of the Gantish ruling class. Grand sabhirim, masculine plural. Grand sabhira, feminine. Grand sabhiras, feminine plural.

Great Circle of Lonara [loh-NAR-uh] (Location)

Area of sandy ground in Lonara. Considered sacred by the Norinians. The location of the Life Fire.

Greteh Andersyn, née Olsen [GRET-ah AN-der-sin] (Character)

Norinian. Elidel Province. Wife of Rayne Andersyn. Mother of Cadoc Andersyn. Alabaster skin.

Grimsyn [GRIHM-sin] Province (Location)

Location: Western side of Norin, on the Iona River.

Flag: Yellow arrows on a red field.

Primary Industry: Wool.

Ceremonial Markings: Three blue lines from mouth to chin.

Gulf of Norin (Location)

Ocean south of Norin

Gulf of Sitilia (Location)

Ocean east of Sitilia, west of Norin

Gustaf (Character)

Barkeep at The Dusty Toad

Gwafa Todesto [GWA-fa to-DES-to] (Character)

Gantish. Commanding officer of the Gantish Army.

Haik [HAK] (Clothing)

Thick veil that wraps around the head and body.

Halvar IV [HAHL-var] (Character)

Prince of Sitilia. Third in succession to the crown. Black eyes. Ghostly white skin.

Halyards (Shipping)

Ropes used to hoist.

Hanáv [hah-NAHV] (Character)

Powerful cardinal witch. Red-orange hair. Stark white skin. Green eyes.

Hangerok [HANG-er-ROK] (Clothing)

Apron dress.

Hansyn [HAN-sin] (Character)

Bond broker.

Hare (Animal)

Rabbit.

Hart (Animal)

Deer.

Harva (Character)

Norinian.

Harvestide [HAR-ves-tey-d] (Holiday)

Norinian fall festival. Known for ribbon dances and harvest displays.

Head Braces (Shipping)

Ropes used to rotate yards on a mast.

Helm (Shipping)

Wheel controlling the rudder of a vessel.

High King (Concept)

A king who rules other kings.

High Committee (Concept)

Group of the most powerful Gantish senators.

Hohlt Myers (Character)

Norinian. Safwyn Province. Provincial solicitor. Son of Captain Myers.

House Flag (Shipping)

Flag on a vessel indicating company ownership.

House Regá (Business)

Marcus Regá's glass and crystal brand.

"How she cuttin'?" (Dialect)

Direct translation: How is your ship maneuvering?

Implied translation: How are you?

"Hull down" (Shipping)

Seeing another vessel on the water, but the ship's hull remains below the horizon with only the upper sails visible.

Hykos [HY-kohs] (Location)

Location: Country in the northern region of Gavony, on the shore of Lake Iona. Landlocked from the ocean.

Flag: Black eagle on a yellow shield on a green stripe near the pole. Red field.

Ian Danyim [EE-ahn DAN-nim] (Character)

Norinian. Wyclythe Province. Captain of the Wyclythe fyos team.

Iero [EE-er-o] (Character)

Gantish. Grand Sabhir. Senator. Cousin of Winsen Luna.

Ilara [ih-LAR-ah] (Character)

Gantish. Child rescued from Winsen Luna. Sister to Dario and Rezki. 13 years old.

Indeling River [ihn-DEL-eeng] (Location)

River flowing from the Padyń Mountains northeast of Norin, across central Norin, mouth at Jarta.

Ingrid [EEN-grid] (Character)

Gantish. Tuli slave. Owned by Atógo Mining Company. Olive skin.

Iona River [EYE-oh-nah] (Location)

Shallow, non-navigable river from Lake Iona to the Gulf of Sitalia

Ivan Stoyan [EYE-van STOY-an] (Character)

Hykosi. Secretary of Defense.

Jerynt [JER-ahnt] (Character)

Norinian. Norinian Army.

Jeweled Windows of Lonara (Structure)

Set of three stained-glass windows with corresponding rosettes found at Corradh Fortress.

Jib [jihb] (Shipping)

Triangular sail, forward of the forwardmost mast.

Joby [JOH-bee] (Character)

Gantish. 5 years old. Brother of Teva.

Jon Rohde [JON ROD] (Character)

Sitilian. Green eyes. Ghostly white skin.

Ju [JOO] (Character)

Frelunian.

Juno [JOO-no] (Character)

Shialorian. Captain of *Darsham*.

Kadim [kah-DEEM] (Concept)

Gantish. A slave. Both singular and plural. In casual speech, an insult to the level of expletive. Kadima, feminine. Kadimas, feminine plural.

Kayla Dasveld, née Fromyn [KAY-lah DAS-vel'd, FRO-min] (Character)

Norinian. Wyclythe Province. Wife of Erling Dasveld. Black hair.

Keaton Farag [KEE-tuhn fa-RAHG] (Character)

Gantish. Grand Sabhir. Ambassador to Norin. Ochre skin.

Kerfuffle (Concept)

A disturbance or commotion.

Kol [KOL] (Character)

Gantish. A ruffian well known to law enforcement.

Kurta [KER-tuh] (Clothing)

Loose tunic, either collarless or with a high collar. Can be short at the waist or long to the knees.

Kvina [kuh-VEE-nah] (Concept)

Sabhir's concubine.

Kya Evers [KEYE-uh EH-vers] (Character)

Norinian. Grand Ambassador to the Nations. A powerful member of the Council of Norin. Gray hair. Lily white skin. Blue eyes.

Ladvyl Forest [LAHD-vil] (Location)

Forest in Ladvyl Province, near the Lonara River.

Ladvyl Province [LAHD-vil] (Location)

Location: South of Corradh Province between the Talmi Ridge and the Lonara River.

Flag: Purple grapes on a kelly green field.

Primary Industry: Wine.

Ceremonial Markings: Green circle on the right side of the chin and a white circle around the left eye.

Lake Iona [EYE-o-nah] (Geographical Feature)

Lake in northern Gavony.

Larboard (Shipping)

Left side of the ship. Also called port side.

Laurentiu Serban [lah-REN-tee-oo SER-bin] (Character)

Hykosi. Self-proclaimed viceroy over Norin.

Leeward (Shipping)

Downwind from a point of reference.

Life Fire (Concept)

Bonfire in the center of the sandy Circle at Lonara. Lit for the three main holidays.

Lincanly Province (Location)

Location: Province in northwest Norin, north of the Indeling River, west of Corradh Province.

Flag: Yellow ram on a red field.

Primary Industry: Wool.

Ceremonial Markings: Black line from hairline to nose.

Lios [LEE-os] (Character)

Norinian. Private in the Norinian Army. Tall, thin, beige skin.

Livie [LIH-vee] (Character)

Gantish. Works upstairs at the Nalta Inn.

Lonara (Location)

Seat of Corradh Province. Capital of Norin.

Lonara River (Location)

River that branches off of the Indeling River and flows into the Padyr River

Longshoreworker (Shipping)

One who loads and unloads ships at a port.

Lor Regá [LOR reh-GAH] (Character)

Gantish. Eldest son of Akawel Regá. Brother of Marcus Regá. Husband of Masilia Regá. Master of Rashida Regá.

Lora [LOR-ah] (Character)

Norinian. Bryton Province. Sister of Peetra.

Lotti [LOHT-ee] (Character)

Norinian. Wyclythe Province. Brynna Dasveld's school teacher. Mother of Aro.

Lowyk [LO-ik] (Location)

Town in Safwyn Province, Norin.

Lunja [LOO-nyah] (Character)

Gantish. Butcher.

Luff (Shipping)

To sail close to the wind with the sails flapping.

Lur Horn [LOOR] (Item)

Large wooden trumpet, either straight or curved.

Manifest (Shipping)

A captain's final and secret inventory of their ship.

Marcus Izîl Regá [MAHR-kus ih-ZEEL reh-GAH] (Character)

Gantish. Second son of Akawel Regá. Brother of Lor Regá. Glasswright. Dark-brown eyes. Deep ochre skin. 28 years old.

Marcy Dasveld [MAHR-see DAS-veld] (Character)

Norinian. Wife of Seth Dasveld. Mother of Brynna Dasveld and Erling Dasveld.

Mark Aven [MAHRK AY-ven] (Character)

Norinian. Kya Evers's assistant.

Matim [mah-TEEM] (Concept)

Gantish. Both singular and plural. A citizen. Rarely used in casual speech.

Mausey [MOW-zee] (Dialect)

Foggy.

“May My Knife Rest on Your Shoulder” (Idiom)

Greatest Norinian insult. Implies a slow and calculated slitting of the throat with time to wipe the blade clean. Preferred means of killing an enemy.

Maya Regá [MAH-yah reh-GAH] (Character)

Gantish. Akawel Regá's second kvina.

Meela [MEE-lah] (Character)

Norinian. Chief of the canonical witches. In love with Sol Frontyn. Auburn hair. Fair skin. Green eyes.

Messer [MEHS-er] (Dialect)

Gantish term of address for male citizens and sabhirim.

Micah Berg [MY-kuh BERG] (Character)

Norinian. Neimynyn Province. Transports goods on the Neimynyn Road.

Mihai [mih-HY](Character)

Hykosi. King of Hykos.

Misko [MIHS-ko] (Character)

Soldier in the Nalta Guards.

Misilia Regá [mih-SIL-ee-ah reh-GAH] (Character)

Gantish. Wife of Lor Regá.

Mizwid (Item)

Double bagpipe.

Mizzenmast [MIHZ-en-MAHST] (Shipping)

Mast at the back of the ship.

Mizzenshroud [MIHZ-en-SHROWD] (Shipping)

Ship rigging that holds the mast in place. Located at the back of the ship.

Muqadesh [moo-kah-DESH] (Item)

Holy book of the Gantish religion.

“My actions for your majesty” (Idiom)

Norinian. A phrase acknowledging respect, allegiance, and intended obedience.

Myers [MY-ers] (Character)

Norinian. Safwyn Province. Assistant to Erik Hepsath. Gray-ing hair.

Mynt [mihnt] (Item)

Norinian currency.

Myrki Stone [MEHR-kee] (Item)

Black oval pendant of spent valsydian, polished, set in gold. Worn by the chief of the canonical witches.

Nadia [NAH-dee-ah] (Character)

Gantish. Chief of the cardinal witches. Strawberry-blond hair.

Nalta [NAHL-tah] (Location)

Capital of Gantu. A port town.

Nalta Guards (Organization)

Police force of Nalta. Gray uniforms. Commanding officer wears burgundy.

Neap [NEEP] (Shipping)

Minimum tide at the first and third quarter moon

Neatsfoot Oil (Shipping)

Yellow oil rendered from cattle shins and feet. Used to protect leather.

Niemynyn [NEE-mih-nihn] (Character)

Young king of Niemynyn Province.

Niemynyn Province [NEE-mih-nihn] (Location)

Location: Northeasternmost province in Norin, west of the Padyen Mountains, south of Hykos. Controls the Niemynyn Road.

Flag: White stag on an orange field.

Primary Industry: Niemynyn Road

Ceremonial Markings: Gold circle above right eye, black "V" on forehead

Niemynyn Road [NEE-mih-nihn] (Location)

Major thoroughfare between Tadsyn and Hykos.

Niq Niq Bog [NEEK-NEEK-bog] (Location)

Swamp in Gantu, near the Padyen Mountains.

Njala [NYAH-la] (Character)

A sailor for the Andersyn Shipping Company.

“No Way to Holler” (Idiom)

For certain.

Nora Jlassi [NO-rah y-LAH-see] (Character)

Gantish. Black hair. Olive skin. 18 years old.

Norin [NOR-ihn] (Location)

Location: country in Gavony that controls the majority of accessible shoreline.

Flag: Seven stars in an arc on a flax blue field.

Norin Å Sdolevy [NOR-ihn AH s-do-leh-vee] (Idiom)

A common Norinian greeting and blessing that loosely means “May Norin suffer no more.” Direct Translation: “Norin will not suffer forever.”

Norina [nor-EE-nah] (Concept)

Mythological savior of Norin

Norina Sdola [nor-EE-nah s-dol-ah] (Idiom)

Direct Translation: “The Norina suffers.”

Norina Sdolevy [nor-EE-nah s-do-lah-vee] (Idiom)

Direct Translation: “The Norina will suffer forever.”

Norin Sdol [NOR-ihn s-dol] (Idiom)

Direct Translation: “Norin suffers”

Norinian Ceremonial Knife (Item)

Magical knife capable of inflicting permanent scarring. Given in childhood by parents and swapped at Teerlagee. Engravings generally reveal family markings.

Norinsklagen [NOR-ihn-SKLAH-gihn] (Literature)

Poem, written circa 1550. Also known as “The Great Prophecy.”

Direct translation: “Norin’s Lament.”

Norrie [NOR-ee] (**Dialect**)

A pejorative term for a Norinian.

Nott Myers [NOHT MY-ers] (**Character**)

Norinian. Safwyn Province. Farmer. Son of Captain Myers.

Olam Cove [O-lahm] (**Location**)

Series of sand bars, lagoons, and grottos in Bryton Province. Known to harbor brigands and slavers.

Ondilska [ohn-DIHL-skah] (**Concept**)

Essence of illness and injury that flows through the Valsydian Cycle.

Orange Veil (**Clothing**)

Usually worn as a haik. Indicates that the woman wearing it is married to a sabhir.

Oskar [OHS-kar] (Character)

Sailor for Andersyn Shipping Company.

“O Bar E O Var” [o-BAR-ee-o-VAHR] (Idiom)

Old Norinian. Direct translation: “To fight is to defend.”

Padyn Beacon (Structure)

An oil beacon set atop the cliffs to warn sailors of the presence of sandbars near Tadsyn harbor.

Padyn Mountains [PAH-din] (Location)

Volcanic mountain range through Gavony that divides Norin and Gantu.

Padyn River (Location)

River that flows from the Padyn Mountains to the Gulf of Norin at the Tadsyn port.

Part and Parcel (Dialect)

Normal, expected.

Paxe [PAX] (Character)

Gantish. Works upstairs at the Nalta Inn.

Peetra [PEE-trah] (Character)

Norinian. Bryton Province. Sister to Lora. Girlfriend of Waryn.

Peppermint (Plant)

Antispasmodic. Carminitive.

Periwinkle (Plant)

Decreases male fertility.

“Pipe the Side” (Shipping)

Bosun’s call given when the captain disembarks the ship.

Pola [PO-lah] (Location)

Island in the southern seas.

Poth Morenza [PAWTH moh-RIN-zah] (Character)

Sniper in the Nalta Guards.

Port (Shipping)

Harbor where ships load and unload.

Portside (Shipping)

Left side of the ship. Also called larboard.

Prow (Shipping)

Part of the ship's bow that is out of the water.

Quarterdeck (Shipping)

Upper deck at the back of the ship. Where officers stand.

Queen Consort of Ryntoth (Character)

Consort of Anika Ryntoth.

Queen Corradh (Character)

Wife of High King Corradh.

Rake (Shipping)

Fire on the long axis of the ship, either bow or stern.

Rand Luuk [RAND LOOK] (Character)

Tahlamese. Immigrant to Lincanly Province in Norin. Shepherd.

Rashida Regá [rah-SHEE-dah reh-GAH] (Character)

Gantish. Lor Regá's kvina.

Rebab [reh-BAB] (Item)

Bowed string instrument.

***Reliance* (Shipping)**

Shipping vessel.

Ree-Raw (Dialect)

Excitement and activity.

Rezki [REHZ-kee] (Character)

Gantish. Brother of Ilara and Dario. Friend of Tafu. Six years old.

Rhettyn [RET-in] (Character)

Norinian. General. Most decorated warrior in the Norinian Army. Tall. Long gray hair.

Rhyshga [RY-shgah] (Game)

Norinian ceremonial knives thrown at targets.

Robynton [ROB-in-tohn] (Location)

Seat of Wyclythe Province. Deep water harbor.

Robynton Beacon (Structure)

An oil beacon set to warn sailors of the presence of the cape.

Rolling Tackles [ROHL-een TAY-kles] (Shipping)

Ropes and pulleys used to stabilize a ship.

Ruvoq Desert [ROO-vawk] (Location)

Desert in the northern part of Gantu. Occasionally known simply as “The Ruvoq.”

Ruvoq Fields (Geographical Feature)

Active lava fields, area of frequent earthquakes.

Ryntoth Province [RIHN-tawth] (Location)

Location: Northernmost province in Norin.

Flag: Abstract blue flax flower on a red field

Primary Industry: Linen. Known for cold-hardy tobacco.

Ceremonial Markings: Two red stripes across the cheeks and nose.

Sabhir [sah-BEER] (Concept)

Gantish. Ruler. A male member of the Gantish upper class. Sabhirim, masculine plural. Sabhira, feminine. Sabhiras, feminine plural. Sabhiri, masculine adjective.

Safiyya Gil [sah-FEE-ya GIHL] (Character)

Gantish. Owner of the Nalta Inn & Brothel. Black hair.

Safwyn Province [SAHF-win] (Location)

Location: Southeasternmost province in Norin.

Flag: Yellow nautilus shell on a purple field.

Primary Industry: Tadsyn Port.

Ceremonial Markings: Indigo and green waves on the right cheek.

Sailor's Knot (Shipping):

Rope bracelet worn by sailors to wipe away sweat. Cannot be removed without cutting.

Salt (Shipping)

Sailor.

Sasha [SAH-shuh] (Character):

Norinian. Wyclythe Province. A member of the Wyclythe fyos team.

Schooner (Shipping)

Ship with two masts. Foremast is shorter than the mainmast.

Scuffing (Dialect)

Climbing, bustling.

Sel Rhyshga [SEL RY-shga] (Ritual)

Norinian. An intricate ritual used to test the opinions of the provinces prior to an important vote, culminates in the throwing of a sacred knife.

Serk [SERK] (Clothing)

A simple dress, like a shift, designed to form the foundation for the rest of the outfit.

“Set to Dance” (Dialect)

Intend to be married.

Seth Dasveld (Character)

Norinian. Wyclythe Province. Timber importer and wood carver. Graying hair and beard. Blue eyes. Husband of Marcy Dasveld. Father of Erling and Brynna Dasveld.

Seven Words (Religious Concept)

Guiding principles of Norin: truth, stewardship, equality, community, integrity, simplicity, and peace.

Shalash [SHAH-lash] (Location)

Capital of Hykos. Port town on Lake Iona.

Sheets (Shipping)

Rope rigging.

Shelly [SHEL-ee] (Character)

Norinian. Safwyn Province. Runs a bed and breakfast for secretive travelers. Long, graying hair.

Shialor [SHEE-ah-lor] (Location)

Small island in the southern seas to the southeast of Gavony. Shialorians tend to have copper skin and long, dark hair that is braided into a one plait.

Shiver (Shipping)

To release tension and allow the sails to shake.

Shyan Shit Yentera [SHY-an SHIT yin-TER-ah] (Dialect)

Gantish. A scatological expletive. Can be shortened to decrease the intensity.

Signet (Item)

Ring with a seal on it, designed to be impressed into wax.

Signy (Shipping)

A sloop.

Siramy [SEER-ah-mee] (Location)

Shallow-water port in Lincanly.

Sissel [SIS-uhl] (Character)

Canonical witch. Second in command.

Sitilia [sih-TIHL-ee-ah] (Location)

Location: Country on the western side of Gavony.

Flag: White and teal off-center cross on a green field

Siv Nilsyn [SIHV NIL-sin] (Character)

Norinian. Elidel Province. Treasury secretary. Brown hair.

Skipper (Character)

Sailor of the Andersyn Shipping Company. Golden-brown skin. Captain of *Signy* and other small boats.

“Slip the anchor” (Shipping)

To release all of the anchor chain so that the anchor and chain fall into the water. Allows a ship to sail unencumbered.

Sloop (Shipping)

Sailboat with one mast.

Smack (Shipping)

Small fishing boat.

Sol Frontyn [SAWL FROHN-tin] (Character)

Norinian. Wyclythe Province. Shialorian and Norinian ancestry. Royal huntsman. In love with Meela. Long, jet-black hair. Brown eyes. Golden-brown skin.

Southern Seas (Location)

Oceans south of Gavony.

Spring Tide (Shipping)

A higher than normal tide at the new or full moon

Starboard (Shipping)

Right side of the ship

Squallie (Dialect)

Stormy

Spanker Boom (Shipping)

A support for the sail at the back of a ship.

Standard-Class Slave (Concept)

Slaves for labor.

Stun (Dialect)

Stupid

Sunna [SOON-ah] (Character)

Gantish. Wife of Elias. Bronze skin. Long salt-and-pepper hair. Three fingers on left hand.

Tack (Shipping)

Windward corner of a sail.

Tack (Shipping)

To turn a ship.

Tackles [TAY-kles] (Shipping)

A system of pulleys.

Tadsyn [TAD-sin] (Location)

Primary town in Safwyn province. Largest port and town in Norin.

Taffrail (Shipping)

Rail around a ship's stern

Tafu [TAH-foo] (Item)

Most excellent stuffed cow.

Tahkeen [tah-KEEN] (Character)

Gantish. Second in command of the Nalta Guards.

Tahlam [tah-LAHM] (Location)

Island in the southern seas.

Tahlamese Oleander [tah-lah-MEEZ OH-lee-AN-der] (Plant)

A flower with a poisoned blossom. Found in Tahlam.

Taleja [tah-LAY-ha] (Character)

Gantish. Norinian, Sitalian, and Tivixian ancestry. White-blond hair.

Talmi Ridge [TAHL-mee] (Location)

A line of low mountains on the western side of Norin.

Tanan [TAN-an] (Animal)

Asa Nyok's horse.

Tar (Dialect)

A sailor.

Taylasan [TAY-lah-san] (Clothing)

Gantish. A fringed shawl worn by all sabhirim. It is usually worn about the shoulders, clasped at the neck or chest, then thrown back over the arms. Grand sabhrim wear taylasans that are lined with gold threads or embroidery.

Teerlagee [TEER-lah-gee] (Ritual):

Norinian. Ritual marriage dance.

Teva [TEH-vah] (Character)

Gantish. Sister of Joby.

Thackery [THAK-er-ee] (Character)

Tahlamese. Director of the Andersyn Shipping Company. Second only to Cadoc Andersyn. Gray hair. Ebony skin.

The Dusty Toad (Location)

Roadside establishment in Robynton. Pub. Bar.

The Eleven Lands (Location)

Archaic term for Norin.

Tivix [TIH-viks] (Location)

An island in the southern seas. Furthest from Gavony.

“Toe a Seam” (Idiom)

To line up, using a crack in the decking as a guide.

Tree Rat (Idiom)

A squirrel. Also a term of endearment from Erling to Brynna.

Trinan Dalby Walyss [TRIH-nan DAL-bee WAHL-ihs] (Character)

Norinian, Wyclythe Province. Chancellor of Wyclythe. Brown hair, blue eyes.

Tug (Shipping)

A shipping vessel that maneuvers other vessels.

Tuli [TOO-lee] (Concept)

People, usually Gantish, who have been branded and sent to mine valsydian. Implies death at a young age.

Tuli Camp (Location)

Basecamp near the valsydian mine in the foothills on the Gantish side of the Padyd mountains.

Udad Corti [oo-DAD KOR-tee] (Character)

Gantish. Grand Sabhir.

Valdemar Amiman [VAL-de-MAR AH-mi-MAN] (Character)

King of Amiman Province.

Valsydian [val-SIH-dee-an] (Item)

Magical mineral mined by the Tuli, shipped by the Norinians, and delivered to the witches by the Hykosi.

Valsydian Conventions (Concept)

A set of laws decided upon by an international body for the regulation of valsydian. Facilitated by the Sitalians.

Valsydian Cycle (Concept)

A system of survival and healing. Injuries and sickness produce ondilska. This is absorbed by canonical witches who are then purified by cardinal witches. The remaining ondilska is sent into the universe through the use of valsydian in a ritual.

Victor Timda [VIK-tor TIM-dah] (Character)

Norinian. Robynton Branch Secretary of the Andersyn Shipping Company. Russet-brown skin. Graying temples. Served on *Reliance*.

Viska [VIH-skah] (Location)

Capital of Sitalia.

Waryn [WAH-rin] (Character)

Norinian. Wyclythe Province. Member of the Wyclythe fyos team. Boyfriend of Peetra.

“Wear Ship” (Shipping)

To turn away from the wind

West Tadsyn (Location)

Industrial center of the Tadsyn port on the western side of the Padyne River

Wharf Rats (Animal)

Large gray rats that infest ships and areas on land near ships.

Wheat Berries (Plant)

Kernels of wheat grain.

White Veil (Clothing)

Indicates that the woman wearing it is a business owner with additional privileges.

“Who knit you?” (Idiom)

Direct translation: Who are your parents?

Implied translation: I’m reminding you of who your parents are because they would be ashamed of your behavior.

Wild Carrot (Plant)

An herb used for birth control (anti-implantation). Carmi-native. Galactagogue.

Windward (Shipping)

Upwind from a point of reference.

Winsen Luna [WIN-sin LOON-ah] (Character)

Gantish. Grand Sabhir. Has a reputation for depravity.

Witches’ Circle (Location)

Sacred ground, approved by the Chief Cardinal Witch, where rituals are performed.

Wiwul [WEE-wuhl] (Character)

Gantish. A slave.

“Worm the barrel” (Shipping)

To remove unspent powder bag remnants from the barrel of a cannon.

Writ of Marriage (Item)

Norinian legal document binding two individuals in marriage regardless of Teerlagee. Used alone in times when the Circle is unavailable for Teerlagee.

Wyclythe [WY-clihth] (Character)

King of Wyclythe Province.

Wyclythe Forest (Location)

A forest with streams and waterfalls in Wyclythe Province. Known preferred location for canonical witches.

Wyclythe Fortress (Structure)

Palace of King Wyclythe. Located outside of Robynton, on the cape.

Wyclythe Province (Location)

Location: Southwesternmost province in Norin, on the cape.

Flag: Yellow sailboat on a royal blue field.

Primary Industry: Robynton Harbor.

Ceremonial Markings: Three curved lines on the left cheek and seven blue dots at the hairline.

“Ya none but got me drove” (Idiom)

Extreme annoyance.

Direct Translation: You have done nothing but driven me crazy.

Yawl (Shipping):

Two-masted sailboat with the mizzenmast aft enough that the boom overhangs the stern.

“Your loss is mine” (Idiom)

Standard Norinian expression of condolence.

Zdan [zih-DAN] (Character)

Gantish. Ferrier.

Ziri Yildiz [ZEE-ree yihl-DEEZ] (Character)

Gantish. Footman at the Nalta Inn. Olive skin. Dark brown eyes. Curly brown hair.

About the Author



Joy Slaughter

Bestselling author of contemporary medical romance, surreal literary fiction, and epic political fantasy

Joy Slaughter spends too much time daydreaming. She has a stack of dusty degrees shoved in a closet somewhere, a strange mixture of medicine, psychology, and philosophy with a minor in fine art photography. She married Prince Charming, and they have seven phenomenal children. Her home is cleaned by woodland animals, which explains the mess.

She rode on ambulances and flew in helicopters and blew whistles telling people to walk, and sometimes she writes about that. She likes to sit at large windows and imagine strange worlds, and sometimes she writes about that, too.

She has a blue belt in taekwondo. Her third-favorite reptile is a gecko, and she hopes to one day be abducted by friendly pirates and sail to the edge of the world.

"JOY SLAUGHTER is a virtuosa in phraseology and drama."

~David Reyes

The Book Commentary

Acknowledgments

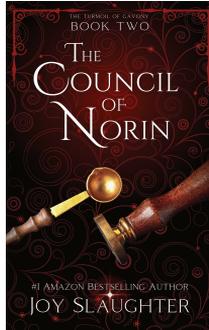
I wrote the first words of *The Turmoil of Gavony* while sitting on the bleachers in middle school. It would be impossible to list everyone who has helped me with this project over the years as I hammered out the storyline and honed my craft such that I am now able to tell it the way it deserves to be told.

Would I start with the gaggle of girls who shared scribbled notebooks? The writing group that heard the first phrases about Norin written by an adult? The ones who sent me back to the computer with the words, "You can do better," ringing in my ears? Too many have come and gone, each generously offering their own piece of the puzzle. I am grateful.

For this final round, Mike Smertka was my invaluable alpha reader and subject-matter expert, offering advice on everything from plot to character details. Marie Lehtonen was my cheerleader. Both were critical to the process.

My beta team included Chandra Marcoux, Andrea Weber, Crystal Miner, and Laura Schappert, with Monica Iliff pulling the extra weight of developmental editor.

Thank you all so very much!



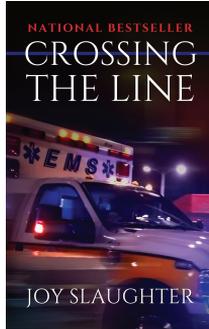
THE COUNCIL OF NORIN

The Turmoil of Gavony Book Two

When multiple assassinations rock the capital city of Lonara, the secretive Council of Norin claims responsibility. Brynna must uncover those involved, or Norin will be thrown into chaos even before arriving on the battlefield.

Yet the Council may be closer than she thinks, and its work, more tempting than she ever imagined.





CROSSING THE LINE
A Romantic Medical Thriller

A combat medic falls for his paramedic partner, but a rogue cop threatens to tear them apart.

Sergeant Nathan Thompson lost his leg in Afghanistan. Megan hides a secret. When they are assigned as a paramedic team, tempers flare. He thinks she's a condescending know-it-all, and she resents a partner she can't trust. Then he notices bruises on her arms, and her excuses don't add up. The next life Nathan must save may be that of his own partner.





WHITE CLOUD
A Strange & Surreal Novella

SHORT-LISTED FOR THE
2022 BOTTOM DRAWER PRIZE
(Black Spring Press Group)

"Alice in Wonderland meets Kafka's Metamorphosis for this jolting journey from the ambulance to the morgue."

When Ella accidentally resurrects a patient, not everyone is pleased with her new-found ability.

Ella is the worst paramedic to ever ride an ambulance, yet somehow she's a "white cloud," a medic for whom everything seems to turn out rosy. She floats through her surreal existence, dodging her ambulance partner's constant insults, until she notices her chilly fingers and resurrects a man from the dead. Startled by her discovery, she turns to the morgue, but Dr. Judah Azriel, pathologist, challenges both her desire to save the world and her understanding of death.

