

The
GRAY
GWOLF
THRONE



CINDA WILLIAMS
CHIMA

Cinda Chima

The Gray Wolf Throne

«HarperCollins»

Chima C. W.

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The third book in the critically acclaimed Seven Realms epic fantasy series from Cinda Williams Chima Han Alister thought he had already lost everyone he loved. But when he finds his friend Rebecca Morley near death in the Spirit Mountains, Han knows that nothing matters more than saving her. The costs of his efforts are steep, but nothing can prepare him for what he soon discovers: the beautiful, mysterious girl he knew as Rebecca is none other than Raisa ana'Marianna, heir to the Queendom of the Fells. Han is hurt and betrayed. He knows he has no future with a blueblood. And, as far as he's concerned, the princess's family killed his own mother and sister. But if Han is to fulfill his end of an old bargain, he must do everything in his power to see Raisa crowned queen. Meanwhile, some people will stop at nothing to prevent Raisa from ascending. With each attempt on her life, she wonders how long it will be before her enemies succeed. Her heart tells her that the thief-turned-wizard Han Alister can be trusted. She wants to believe it—he's saved her life more than once. But with danger coming at her from every direction, Raisa can only rely on her wits and her iron-hard will to survive—and even that might not be enough. The Gray Wolf Throne is an epic tale of fierce loyalty, unbearable sacrifice, and the heartless hand of fate.

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The Gray Wolf Throne

A Seven Realms Novel
Book Three

Cinda Williams Chima



Dedication

For my maternal grandmother,
Dorothy Downey Bryan, a gifted musician and
indifferent housekeeper who had the second sight. Grandma
had a lap that would accommodate several small children,
but she always kept a shotgun in the closet.
And in memory of Ralph M. Vicinanza,
who left us too soon.



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CHAPTER ONE IN THE BORDERLANDS

Raisa ana'Marianna huddled in her usual dark corner at the Purple Heron, picking at her meat pie. She'd learned to stretch a meal and a mug of cider over an entire evening.

It was risky to sit out in the common room of a tavern every night. Lord Bayar's assassins would be searching for her. They'd failed to kill her at Oden's Ford, thanks to Micah Bayar, Lord Bayar's son. But the High Wizard's spies could be anywhere, even here in the border town of Fetters Ford.

Especially here. Bayar would prefer to intercept Raisa before she crossed the border into the Fells. It would be tidier that way, her murder easier to conceal from her mother the queen and her father's people, the Spirit clans.

Still, she couldn't hide out in her room all the time. She needed to be visible to the people she wanted to find her. Somehow she had to get home, reconcile with Queen Marianna, and confront those who meant to take the Gray Wolf throne away from her.

The name Rebecca Morley was no longer safe. Too many of her enemies knew it. These days she called herself Brianna Trailwalker, a nod to her clan ancestry. Her story was that she was a young trader returning from her first journey south, held up by the turmoil along the border.

After a month in the limbo of Fetters Ford, she knew the regulars at the Heron—mostly pilots from the ferry service on the river, and the blacksmiths, farriers, and stablers who serviced travelers along the road. Locals were in the minority, though. The town churned with the comings and goings of wartime.

Raisa scanned the room, picking out the strangers. Two Tamric ladies occupied a corner table for the second night in a row. One was young and pretty, the other sturdy and middle-aged, both too well dressed for the Heron. Likely a noble lady and her chaperone fleeing the fighting to the south.

Three lean young men in Ardenine civilian garb played cards at a table by the door. Four had come in, but one of them had left a while ago. Several times, Raisa looked up and caught one or another of them staring at her. Apprehension slithered down her spine. Thieves or assassins? Or just young men showing interest in a girl on her own?

There were no easy answers anymore.

Most of the rest of the patrons were soldiers. Fetters Ford swarmed with them. Some bore the Red Hawk of Arden, some the Heron of Tamron, others carried no signia at all—either sell-swords or deserters from King Markus's army.

Any of them could be hunting Raisa. It had been a month since she'd escaped Gerard Montaigne, the ambitious young prince of Arden. Gerard hoped to claim at least three of the Seven Realms by overthrowing his brother Geoff, the current Ardenine king, invading his former ally Tamron, and marrying Raisa ana'Marianna, the heir to the Gray Wolf throne of the Fells.

Any day, they expected to receive word that the capital of Tamron Court had fallen to Gerard. The prince of Arden had laid siege to it weeks ago.

When Raisa arrived in Fetters Ford, she'd planned to ask the local Tamric authorities to send a courier to the garrison house at the West Wall in the Fells. They in turn could send her message on to her father, Averill Lord Demonai, or to Edon Byrne, Captain of the Queen's Guard—perhaps the only two people in the Fells she could trust.

But when she arrived in the border town, there was no authority. The garrison house was empty, the soldiers fled. Some might have gone south to the aid of the beleaguered capital city. Likely, most had melted into the general populace to await the outcome of the war.

Raisa was left with the hope that her best friend, Corporal Amon Byrne, and his Gray Wolves might follow her north and find her here in Fetters Ford. She could travel on, hidden in their midst, as she had in the fall, on her way to the academy at Oden's Ford.

As the future captain of her guard, Amon was magically linked to Raisa, so he should have a rough sense of where she was. But the weeks had dragged on and Amon had not appeared. Surely if he were coming, he'd be here by now.

Her other plan was that she might fall in with a clan trader heading back north. She was a mixed-blood; with her burnt-sugar skin and thick black hair, she could pass for clan. But that hope had also faded as weeks passed with no traders passing through. With Tamron in turmoil, most travelers preferred to avoid the marshy Fens and sinister Waterwalkers and use the more direct path through Marisa Pines Pass and Delphi.

A shadow fell over Raisa's table. Simon, the innkeeper's son, was hovering again, summoning the courage to ask if he could clear away her plate. Most days, it was an hour of hovering to three words of conversation.

Raisa guessed Simon was her age, or even a little older, but these days Raisa felt older than her nearly seventeen years—cynical and jaded, wounded in love.

You don't want to get involved with me, she thought glumly. My advice is to run the other way.

Han Alister still haunted her dreams. She would awaken with the taste of his kisses on her lips, the memory of his scorching touch on her skin. But in the daylight it was difficult to believe their brief romance had ever happened. Or that he still thought of her at all.

The last time Raisa had seen Han, Amon Byrne had driven him off with a sword. And then she'd disappeared from the academy without a word—abducted by Micah Bayar. Han wouldn't have fond memories of the girl he knew as Rebecca. Anyway, it was unlikely she'd ever see him again.

By now it was near closing time, another day squandered while events at home rushed ahead without her. Perhaps she'd been disinherited already. Perhaps Micah had escaped Gerard Montaigne and even now was proceeding with plans to marry her sister Mellony.

Someone cleared his throat right next to her. She flinched and looked up. It was Simon.

"My Lady Brianna," he said for the second time.

Bones, she thought. I have to get better at answering to Brianna.

"The ladies over yonder invite you to join them at their table," Simon continued. "They say as it can be awkward for a lady, dining alone. I told them you'd already eaten, but ..." He shrugged, his hands hanging like twin hams at his sides.

Raisa looked over at the two Tamric women. They leaned forward, watching this exchange with eager expressions. Women in Tamron had the reputation of being pampered hothouse flowers, socially ruthless, but physically delicate beings who rode sidesaddle and carried parasols against the southern sun.

Still, it was tempting. It would be a pleasure to converse with someone other than Simon—someone who could carry one half of a conversation. And perhaps they had more up-to-date news about events at Tamron Court.

But, no. It was one thing to fool Simon with a story of being a trader stranded in a border town. Simon wanted to be fooled. It would be another thing entirely to sit down with highborn ladies with a talent for ferreting out secrets.

Raisa smiled at them and shook her head, gesturing at the remains of her dinner. "Tell them thank you, but I'll be retiring to my room before long," she said.

"I told 'em you'd say that," Simon said. "They said to tell you they have a prop—a job for you. They want to hire you as an escort across the border."

"Me?" Raisa blurted. She wasn't exactly the bodyguard type, being slight and small-boned.

She gazed at the ladies, her lower lip caught behind her teeth, considering. There might be safety in numbers, but they wouldn't be much protection to Raisa. While their social weapons would be finely honed, they would be no good in a physical fight, and they would slow her down.

On the other hand, no one would expect her to be traveling with two Tamric ladies.

"I'll talk to them," Raisa said. Simon went to turn away, but froze when Raisa put her hand on his arm. "Simon. Do you know who those men are?" she asked, nodding toward the card players without looking at them.

Simon shook his head. He was used to such questions from her, and understood what she wanted to know. "Came in first time tonight, but they're not staying here," he said, scooping up her plate. "They speak Ardenine, but they're spending Fellsian coin." He leaned closer. "They asked some questions about you and the Tamric ladies," he said. "I didn't tell them nothing."

Simon's head jerked up as the tavern door opened and closed. It admitted a rush of damp, chilly night air, a splatter of rain, and a half dozen or so new customers—all strangers. They wore nondescript boiled-wool cloaks, but they had a military edge. Raisa shrank back into the shadows, heart flopping like a stranded fish. She strained to catch any stray bit of conversation, hoping to make out what language they spoke.

How long can you keep doing this? she thought. How long could she wait for an escort that might never come? If Gerard gained control of Tamron, how long before he closed the borders completely, bottling Raisa in? Maybe it would be safer to cross the border now, rather than wait for an escort.

But the borderlands swarmed with renegades, thieves, and deserters, and she risked ending up robbed, ravished, and dead at the side of the road.

Stay or go? The question reverberated in her brain like the rain pounding on the tin roof of the tavern.

On impulse, she stood and threaded her way to the Tamric ladies' table.

"I'm Brianna Trailwalker," she said in a gruff, businesslike voice. "I hear you're looking for escort across the border."

The stocky woman nodded. "This is Lady Esmerell," she said, nodding at the younger woman. "And I am Tatina, her governess. Our home has been overrun by the Ardenine Army."

"Why choose me?" Raisa said.

"Traders are known to be skilled with weapons, even the females," Esmerell said. "And we would feel more comfortable with another woman." She shivered delicately. "There are many men on the road who would take advantage of two gently raised ladies."

I don't know, Raisa thought. Tatina looks like she could knock some heads together.

"Did you mean to cross via the Fens or the Fells?" Raisa asked.

"We'll go whatever way you choose," Esmerell said, her lip trembling. "We just want to get away and take refuge in the temple at Fellsmarsh until the Ardenine brigands are driven from our lands."

Don't hold your breath, Raisa thought.

Esmerell groped in her skirts, pulled out a fat purse, and clunked it onto the table. "We can pay you," she said. "We have money."

"Put that away before somebody sees it," Raisa hissed. The purse disappeared.

Raisa gazed down at them, debating. She couldn't wait forever for someone to come fetch her. Maybe it was time to take a chance.

"Please," Tatina said, putting her hand on Raisa's arm. "Sit down. Maybe, if you get to know us, you will—"

"No." Raisa shook her head. She didn't want to be remembered sitting with the ladies in the tavern if anyone came asking questions. "We had better be early to bed if we're going to make an early start tomorrow."

"Then you'll do it?" Esmerell said, clapping her hands with delight.

“Hush,” Raisa said, glancing around, but nobody seemed to be paying attention. “Be at the stables at daybreak, packed and ready to ride all day.”

Raisa left the two ladies and returned to her table, hoping she’d made the right decision. Hoping this would get her home sooner rather than later. Her mind churned with plans. She would ask Simon to pack up bread, cheese, and sausage to carry with them. Once in the Fens, she could make contact with the Waterwalkers, and they might ...

“You look like you could use cheering up, young miss,” a rough male voice said in Ardenine. A bulky stranger dropped heavily into the chair opposite Raisa. It was one of the newly arrived patrons, his face shadowed within his hood. He hadn’t even bothered to remove his cloak, though it dripped puddles on the floor.

“You, there!” he called to Simon. “Bring the lady another of whatever she’s having and a jacket of ale for me. And step lively, now! It’s almost closing time.”

Raisa’s temper flared. One of the hazards of dining alone in a tavern was being seen as fair game by any male who wandered in. Well, she would disabuse him of that notion right away.

“Perhaps you were under the mistaken impression that I wanted company,” Raisa said icily. “I prefer to dine alone. I’ll thank you not to intrude on me again.”

“Don’t be like that,” the stranger complained, loudly enough to be heard across the taproom. “It’s not fitting for a girl like you to be sitting all by herself.”

The soldier leaned forward, and his voice changed, became low and soft, though he still spoke Ardenine like a native. “Are you sure you can’t spare a moment for a soldier long on the road?”

He tugged back his hood, and Raisa looked into the weathered gray eyes of Edon Byrne, Captain of the Queen’s Guard of the Fells. Eyes uncannily similar to his son Amon’s.

It was all Raisa could do to keep her jaw from dropping open. Questions crowded into her mind, threatening to pour out. How had he found her? What was he doing here? Who knew he could speak Ardenine so fluently? Was Amon with him?

“Well,” she managed. “Well, then.” She cleared her throat to speak, but just then Simon brought their drinks, slamming Byrne’s ale onto the table so hard that it sloshed. Byrne waited until Simon slumped away before he spoke again.

“Fetters Ford is no longer safe,” he murmured, still in Ardenine. “We’ve come to take you home.” Byrne looked beyond her, scanning the room. He smelled of sweat and leather, and his face was stubbled from days on the road. Though he slouched back in his chair, Raisa noticed that he’d raked his cloak back to expose the hilt of his sword.

“Let’s talk,” Raisa said, hope blossoming in her heart. “Meet me in the stables behind the inn in ten minutes.”

She rose abruptly. “If you won’t leave, I will. Go and bother someone else.” She turned toward the stairs. The Ardenine ladies fluttered and clucked sympathetically, likely thinking Raisa should have accepted their offer to join them.

“Miss! You forgot your cider,” Byrne called after her, drawing some catcalls and snickering.

Raisa strode past the stairs and through the kitchen, where Simon was kneading bread for the overnight rising. “My lady?” he said, looking up at her.

“I need some fresh air,” Raisa said. Simon stared after her as she walked out the back door and into the rain. Shivering, she drew Fiona Bayar’s wrap more closely around her shoulders. It had come with the horse she’d stolen from the High Wizard’s daughter—one of the few things of Fiona’s that fit.

The stable was warm and dry and smelled of sweet hay and horses. Ghost poked his head out of his stall, snorting and blowing bits of oats at her. She stroked his nose. Two stalls down, she recognized Ransom, Byrne’s large bay gelding, a mountain pony cross.

The stable doors creaked open and Byrne entered, followed by a handful of bluejackets. Though they could hardly be called bluejackets, since they wore a mixture of nondescript cold weather clothing in browns and greens.

Raisa scanned them quickly, but to her disappointment, Amon wasn't there, nor were any of the other Gray Wolves. These soldiers looked more seasoned than Amon's cadets, their still-young faces inscribed by sun and wind.

Byrne carefully latched the stable doors and set one of his company to keep watch. The others went immediately to work, leading out their horses and saddling them up.

"You mean to leave tonight?" Raisa asked, nodding toward the others.

"The sooner the better," Byrne said. He stood gazing down at her, chewing his lower lip, examining her for damage. "It is a relief to find you still alive."

As if he wouldn't have known if she'd been killed. As if he wouldn't have sensed the blow to the all-important Gray Wolf line.

"What's happened?" Raisa said. "How did you know I was here? Where is Amon? Why is Fetters Ford no longer safe?"

Byrne took a step back, retreating from the onslaught of questions. He nodded toward the tack room. "Let's talk in there."

Raisa remembered the Ardenine ladies. "Oh—there's one thing. Those two ladies I was talking to in the taproom—I agreed to travel on with them tomorrow. Could you send someone to let them know my plans have changed?" It was cowardly, she knew, but she was too weary to deal with Lady Esmerell's disappointment.

"Corliss." Byrne motioned to one of his men and sent him back to the inn to give Esmerell and Tatina the bad news.

Unlatching Ghost's stall door, Raisa led the stallion into the tack room and cross tied him, then fetched his saddle and bridle from the rack against the wall.

Byrne followed her in and closed the door. He watched Raisa work for a moment. "Isn't that the flatland stallion Fiona Bayar was riding last time she was home?"

Raisa nodded. Fiona went through horses like her brother Micah went through lovers. "I borrowed him." Dragging over a step stool, she climbed up so she could fling her horse blanket across Ghost's broad back.

"I'd like to hear that story," Byrne said.

"You were about to tell me the story of how you came to be here, Captain Byrne."

"Yes, Your Highness." Byrne inclined his head, giving in. "Your father intercepted a message that suggests Lord Bayar knows where you are and has dispatched assassins to murder you."

"Oh," Raisa said, looking up from her work. "Right. I know about that. He sent four of them to Oden's Ford."

Byrne raised an eyebrow, which so reminded Raisa of Amon that her heart stuttered. "And?" he said dryly.

"I killed one, and Micah Bayar killed the other three," Raisa said.

"Micah?" Byrne said sharply. "Why would he—"

"He'd rather marry me than bury me, apparently," Raisa said. "He kidnapped me from school and was hauling me back home for a wedding when we were overrun by Gerard Montaigne's army on its way into Tamron. That was just north of Oden's Ford. If Micah survived, I think he'd assume I'd go back to school rather than on to the Fells. So it's unlikely Lord Bayar knows where I am now."

"This was a recent message," Byrne said, frowning. "I'm not sure it refers to the earlier attempt."

It's unfortunate, Raisa thought, shivering, when so many people are trying to kill you that you can't sort them out.

Byrne lifted Ghost's saddle and positioned it atop the tall horse. "If you would like to go fetch your belongings, I'll finish him up."

Raisa was familiar enough with Byrne avoidance tactics to know when she was being played. "Corporal Byrne taught me to take care of my own horse," she said, ducking underneath to buckle the cinch strap. "Who else knows that you were coming after me?"

Byrne thought a moment. “Your father,” he said. “And Amon.” He bit down on the last word as if he regretted saying it.

Raisa stood on tiptoes so she could look over Ghost’s back. “Did Amon contact you? Is that how you knew to come here?”

Byrne cleared his throat. “When you disappeared from Oden’s Ford, Corporal Byrne thought perhaps you had gone home, willingly or not. He guessed you might take the western route, since you’d come that way last fall. He sent a bird, suggesting I try to intercept you here in order to avoid a possible ambush at West Gate.” Raisa could tell he had been shining up this story for some time.

“Really?” she said. “How did he know I survived? We left a bloody mess behind at Oden’s Ford.” She buckled Ghost’s bridle while the stallion lipped at the bit, trying to spit it out.

“He ... ah ... had a feeling,” Byrne said. Raisa snorted. He was no better a liar than Amon.

“If he thought I was here, then why didn’t he come here himself?” Raisa tugged at the cinch strap, unconvinced that it was as tight as it could be.

“He thought I could get here sooner,” Byrne said, shifting his weight.

“Why? Where is he now?” Raisa demanded.

Byrne looked away. “I don’t know where he is right now,” he said.

“Well, where was he when he messaged you?” she persisted. “We had no birds at Oden’s Ford that would carry a message to Fellsmarch.”

“He was in Tamron Court, Your Highness,” Byrne said, like an oyster finally yielding up the meat within.

“Tamron Court!” Raisa straightened, swiveling around. “What was he doing there?”

“Looking for you,” Byrne said. “He’d received word that you’d been entangled in a skirmish between Montaigne’s army and a scouting party from Tamron. He thought you might’ve taken sanctuary in the capital. So he and his triple went there to find you.”

Raisa stared at Byrne, her stomach clenching as certainty set in. “He’s still there, isn’t he?” she whispered. “And Gerard Montaigne has the city surrounded.”

“That’s why it’s important that we move quickly, while the Prince of Arden believes that you are in Tamron Court,” Byrne said.

“What?” Raisa whispered. “Why would he think ...?”

“It’s a long story.” Byrne rubbed his chin as if debating whether he could avoid telling it. “Montaigne has threatened to level the capital if they don’t surrender. Whether he can really do that or not is anyone’s guess, but King Markus seems convinced that he can, so he leaked word that you were inside the city, hoping the prince of Arden won’t destroy the city with you inside. Now Montaigne is demanding that King Markus hand you over or he will put everyone in the city to the sword. So Markus sent a message to Queen Marianna, asking her to send an army to rescue you.”

“Isn’t he afraid I’ll surface somewhere and prove him a liar?” Raisa asked.

“Corporal Byrne told him you were killed during the skirmish with Montaigne’s forces.” Byrne grimaced. “In fact, Corporal Byrne was the one who suggested this scheme to Markus after Montaigne laid siege to the city.”

“But why would he do that?” Raisa asked, lost.

“Corporal Byrne guessed you hadn’t yet crossed the border. He’d rather that those hunting you believe you’re in Tamron Court, and not here in the borderlands. So he and his triple have made themselves visible in the city so that any spies working for Montaigne or Lord Bayar see that members of the Queen’s Guard are still there and assume that you are also.”

“No,” Raisa whispered, pacing back and forth. “Oh, no. When Montaigne finds out he’s been tricked, he’ll be furious. There’s no telling what he’ll do.” She stopped and looked up at Byrne. “What about the queen? Will she send help?”

“Given the situation at home right now, we cannot send an army into Tamron,” Byrne said flatly. “It would destabilize a fragile situation. War may break out at home at any moment, depending on what happens with the succession.”

“But . . . if my mother believes that I’m trapped in Tamron Court,” Raisa whispered, “wouldn’t she send an army anyway?” In truth, Raisa wasn’t sure of the answer to that question.

“I told her not to risk it, that you were not there,” Byrne said, his gray eyes steady on hers.

“But—but—but—that means that Amon—and all the Gray Wolves—will die there,” Raisa cried. “In horrible ways.”

“There is that possibility,” Byrne said quietly.

“Possibility? Possibility?” She stood in front of Byrne, hands fisted. “Amon is your son! How could you do that? How could you?”

“Amon made this decision for the good of the line, as is his duty,” Byrne said. “I won’t second-guess him.”

Raisa went up on her toes, leaning toward Byrne, her fury ringing in her ears and freeing her tongue. “Did he even have a choice?” she demanded. “He told me what you did to him—that magical linkage you forced on him.”

Byrne frowned, rubbing the corner of his eye with his thumb. “Really? He said that?”

Raisa didn’t slow down. “Does he even have free will anymore, or is he compelled to sacrifice himself to save the bloody line?”

“Hmmm,” Byrne said, still damnably calm. “Well, I would say he has some free will or he’d not have told you about the bond between queens and captains,” he said.

“What about the Gray Wolves?” Raisa said. “Did they have a choice?” She thought of her friends among Amon’s cadets: Hallie, whose two-year-old daughter waited for her in Fellsmarch. Talia, who would have left her beloved Pearlie behind in Oden’s Ford. And poor Mick, who had offered Raisa his clan-made saddlebag as consolation for losing Amon Byrne.

Tamron Court is standing in for me, she thought. It was arrogant, she knew—the notion that the invasion of Tamron was all about her. Gerard Montaigne wanted Tamron’s wealth, a bigger army, and a throne to sit upon. She was just the filling in the nougat—a chance to claim the Fells as well.

“We have to go after them,” Raisa said. “There has to be a way to get them out of there. What if—if I showed myself and drew Montaigne off. Or if I offered to negotiate. Or maybe there’s a way to slip between their lines, and . . .”

Raisa didn’t really believe any of these things would work as she spoke them. And Byrne knew it, because he just looked at her impassively until she trailed off.

“We don’t even know if he’s still in the city, or if he’s still alive, Your Highness,” Byrne said softly.

“He’s still alive,” Raisa said. “The linkage goes both ways. I would know if he were dead.”

“The city may have fallen by now,” Byrne continued. “How do you think he would feel if you went to the capital and were captured by Montaigne, and all of his efforts were wasted?”

Unable to contain herself, Raisa kicked the door of the tack room, hard enough to splinter it. Ghost tossed his head, yanking at his tether. Furious tears burned in Raisa’s eyes, then spilled down her cheeks as she turned back to Byrne.

“Amon Byrne is better than you, better than me; too valuable to throw away, and you know it,” she said, her voice trembling. “He is—and always has been—my very best friend.”

“Then trust him,” Byrne said. “If anyone can get out of the city, he will.”

Raisa rubbed away her tears with the heels of her hands. “Captain Byrne, if anything happens to Amon, I will never, ever forgive you.”

Byrne took hold of her shoulders, gripping them hard, the light from the lanterns gilding his face. “What you can do for Amon now is survive,” he said, his voice husky and strange. “Don’t let them win, Your Highness.”

Raisa strode back across the stable yard toward the inn, her mind churning with worry about Amon and the Gray Wolves, still trying to devise some kind of rescue plan.

It was after closing time, and with any luck, the taproom would have cleared. She'd pack her few belongings and they'd be on their way.

When she looked ahead, she saw Esmerell and Tatina hustling toward her through the rain, lifting their skirts above the mucky ground.

Great, she thought, rolling her eyes. Just what I need.

Then two of the card players Raisa had noticed earlier burst out the back door, charging after the ladies at a dead run.

Raisa's mind grappled with what she was seeing, and came to a quick conclusion. The men were thieves after all, and likely had seen the purse the wealthy Ardenine ladies had been waving around.

"Look out behind you!" Raisa yelled, sprinting forward.

The women didn't look back, but increased their speed, running faster than Raisa would have expected. The card players were yelling something as they ran. Something Raisa couldn't make out. She heard the stable door bang open, then shouts and pounding feet behind her.

"Get behind me!" she shouted as the ladies closed the distance between them. But then something slammed into her, throwing her sideways to the ground. She rolled to her feet in time to see the Ardenine ladies go down under the card players.

Edon Byrne seized Raisa's shoulders in a viselike grip and held her fast.

It took a moment for Raisa to gather breath enough to speak.

"What are you doing?" she spluttered, struggling to free herself. She was soaked through, muddy and shivering, her teeth chattering.

Slowly, the guards disentangled themselves and stood. The ladies lay flat on their backs, unmoving, blood and rain soaking their fancy dresses.

Run through by the card players.

"Good work," Edon Byrne said gruffly, nodding at them. "But next time don't let them get so close to the princess heir."

The card players yanked their blades free, wiping them on the ladies' voluminous skirts. One of them knelt and efficiently searched the women. He came up with three knives and a small framed picture. He scanned the picture, then mutely extended it toward Raisa.

It was a portrait of Raisa, done for her name day.

Byrne kicked something away from the two bodies, stooped and picked it up with two fingers. It was a dagger, delicate and feminine and deadly sharp.

CHAPTER TWO

PICKING OVER OLD BONES

Han Alister encountered more traffic than he had anticipated on the road to Fetters Ford. Hollow-eyed refugees streamed north as Gerard Montaigne's army scorched the countryside to the south. They looked witch-fixed, some of them, stunned by calamity, still dressed in the ruined finery that said they were bluebloods.

It seemed to Han that all of Tamron was on the move—country folk seeking refuge in the cities, and city dwellers fleeing to the countryside. How likely was it that he could find one girlie amid this chaos—traveling alone or with two wizards?

The road traced the Tamron River north from Oden's Ford. To the east lay Arden and the dense broadleaf trees of Tamron Forest. To the west lay the fertile fields of Tamron, now overrun by fighting. Smoke spiraled up from charred farm buildings and manor houses.

Sword-danglers seemed to like to burn things up.

Tamron might be the breadbasket of the Seven Realms, but these days food was hard to come by even for those with money to spend. Small villages lined the road, a day's ride apart, like knots on a frayed string. Each was guarded by a motley local militia armed with pitchforks, staffs, and longbows, ready to drive off the ravenous hordes—soldiers or citizens—that threatened to overrun them.

Fortunately, Han was used to going hungry.

In every village there was at least one inn. And in every inn, Han would ask the same questions. "Have you seen a girlie, a mixed-blood with green eyes and dark hair? She's small, she'd be this tall." Here he'd hold out his hand below shoulder height. "Her name is Rebecca Morley, and she might be traveling with two charmcasters, a brother and sister. You'd remember them—both tall, and the sister has white-blond hair and blue eyes, the brother has dark hair and eyes."

Some of those he asked tried to make a joke of it. "What's the matter, your girlie run off?" But most seemed to take a cue from Han's expression, or the amulet that hung around his neck, or his travel-weary appearance in these desperate times.

Missing girlies in wartime were no laughing matter.

The dead were everywhere. Bodies hung from trees like grisly fruit, spinning slowly in the southern breezes. Here were battlegrounds littered with the bodies of dead soldiers, lorded over by carrion birds. Clouds of flies rose from the carcasses of animals along the roadside, and bodies fouled many of the waterways.

Han traveled most days with the stench of decay in his nose. It reminded him of Arden, when he and Dancer had traveled through on their way to Oden's Ford. Had it really been nearly a year ago?

This was the poison that had spread into Tamron and threatened to sicken the Fells.

Stay out of it, Alister, Han said to himself. You have enough battles to fight as it is.

One innkeeper thought he remembered a girlie matching Rebecca's description traveling alone, riding a gray flatland stallion far too big for her. It seemed a thin lead at best.

Han could hope that Rebecca's party had passed through unmolested; that the reports that put Rebecca in the way of Gerard's invading army were wrong.

It was possible she'd turned aside and taken refuge in the capital of Tamron Court, now under siege by Gerard Montaigne's army. Han considered detouring west, toward the capital, but there was no way to tell if she was there or not. And nothing to be done if she were.

Han took a deep breath, released it, forcing himself to relax his neck and shoulders, to unclench his fists.

Anyway, Corporal Byrne and his Gray Wolves were headed that way. Han had his own path to follow.

If not for his worries about Rebecca, Han would have been in no hurry to reach the Fells. Why should he be eager to take his place as the magical sell-sword of the upland clans who'd misled and betrayed him? Why should he rush to confront the Wizard Council? Did he really want to play champion to Marianna—the queen responsible for so many of his losses? The queen who likely still had a price on his head.

Even when he reached the Fells, Han couldn't trust the clans to have his back. The Demonai warriors despised him because he was gifted. He was their throwaway piece, intended to buy them a little time.

If not for Rebecca, he could have run the other way. As long as he stayed out of the mountains, he might avoid those he'd pledged to for months or years. He could always find a flatland hidey-hole and lose himself.

He snorted. As if that would ever happen. Han had loved Oden's Ford, but he didn't like the flatlands. Though a city boy, he'd been raised in a mountain town, and it made him uneasy to have vacancy all around him. He wanted to wrap himself in the mountains again.

Anyway, he'd never had much luck lying low. Sooner or later, he'd have a crew, a gang to support, and people depending on him. People who'd pay the price for his failures.

So he hadn't seriously considered breaking his agreement with the clans. Not by running, anyway. It wasn't enough to be on the winning side. He would do whatever was necessary to make sure he, Han Alister, came out on top.

Han and the clans had a common enemy. Lord Gavan Bayar, the High Wizard of the Fells, had engineered the deaths of Han's mother and sister. He'd tortured and killed Han's friends in an effort to find Han and retrieve the amulet he'd taken from the Bayars. The serpent flashpiece had once belonged to Han's ancestor, Alger Waterlow, the notorious Demon King. Han now wore it against his skin.

Then Rebecca Morley had disappeared from Oden's Ford, and Lord Bayar's son Micah with her. If Han found no trace of Rebecca along the way, he would hunt down Micah Bayar and wring the truth from him. If Rebecca were still alive, it was an urgent mission. If she were dead, he would make the Bayars pay.

Han had been overconfident at Oden's Ford. His own words mocked him.

You Bayars need to learn that you can't have everything you want. I'm going to teach you.

He'd spoken truer words to Rebecca, the last time he'd seen her.

When I put things aside for the future, they disappear on me.

He was returning home, like a Ragger streetlord walking into Southbridge, with enemies on every side. Only, this time, if blood spilled, it would be on the other side.

Which meant he needed better weapons. He'd have to risk a return to Aediion and make up with his former tutor, Crow.

Crow had lied to Han, too—had played him for a fool, had ruthlessly used him to try to kill their mutual enemies, the Bayars. But Crow had taught Han more about magic during their late-night tutoring sessions than he'd learned from all of the faculty at Oden's Ford put together.

Han wanted to get a commitment from Crow before he crossed the border into the Fells. He needed to enter Aediion from a secure place, since his abandoned body would be vulnerable during the time he was absent. About a day's ride south of Fetters Ford, Han found a camping place in a small canyon where a creek ran into the larger river.

He spread his blankets on the slope above the stream. Scraping a rude pit in the rocky earth, he built a small, smokeless fire at the bottom, which wouldn't be visible except from directly above.

Han ate his standard supper of waybread, cheese, smoked fish, and dried fruit, washing it down with tea made from water from the stream. Then he paged through his book of charms, leaning close to the fire so he could see.

Crow could create illusion but did not seem to be able to do magic on his own. He lacked flash, the wizard-generated energy that interacted with amulets to make things happen. So if magic was the only tool that could do damage in Aediion, Han should be safe in returning. If.

Han still wore the rowan talisman Fire Dancer had made for him, the one that had prevented Crow from possessing him during his last visit to Aediion. He had to trust that it would protect him again. It was a calculated risk, but Crow shared his hatred for the Bayars, and Han needed an ally. Crow was likely the only one able and possibly willing to teach Han what he needed to win.

Taking a deep breath, Han focused on the Mystwerk Tower room, their meeting place over his months at Oden's Ford. He guessed it didn't matter where he chose, but it was as good a place as any. He visualized the battered floorboards, the huge bells hanging overhead, the pattern of moonlight on the wall. Closing his hand on his amulet, he spoke the traveling charm.

Han opened his eyes to find himself standing in the belfry in Mystwerk Tower, dressed in finely tailored blueblood clothes. Quickly, he scanned his surroundings, keeping his hand on his amulet. He was alone.

He breathed in warm, moist air—southern air. Outside, a cart rattled over cobblestone streets. If he ran to the window, would he see it? If he walked outside and made his way to Hampton Hall, would he find Dancer there? He couldn't quite get his mind around that.

Han waited. A minute passed. Another minute. Maybe he'd been wrong, and Crow wouldn't come. Disappointment swelled within him. Patience, Alister, he thought. It's been a month, and likely Crow doesn't expect you back.

Finally, the air quivered in front of his eyes, brightened, then seemed to compress.

It was Crow, but different from the Crow Han remembered. The image was frail, insubstantial, his clothes rippling around him like angel wings. Han's former tutor stood at a little distance, feet spread, arms raised as if for defense. And his hair, which had been soot black, was now a pale blond, nearly translucent, though his eyes remained the brilliant blue Han remembered.

"Hello, Crow," Han said.

Crow tilted his head, watching Han like he might be jumped at any moment. "Why are you here?" he asked. "I did not think I would see you again."

"This may be the last time," Han said, as if he didn't care either way. "But I thought I'd give you a chance to explain."

"Why should I explain anything to you?" Crow said, eyes narrowed. "You've gained considerably more from our relationship than I have. I handed you the chance to be rid of two of the Bayars and you fumbled it."

"Fine," Han said. "Guess this is a waste of time. Good-bye, then." He took hold of his amulet and opened his mouth as if to say the closing charm.

"Wait." Crow put up his hands, then slowly dropped them to his sides. For once, he'd left off the baubles and the fancy rigging. "Please stay."

Han stood, his hand on his amulet, waiting.

"Was there something specific you wanted me to explain?" Crow said, with a sigh. "In the interest of efficiency?"

"I want to know who you are, why you don't want me to know who you are, why you have a grudge against the Bayars, and why you wanted to partner up with me," Han said. "That's for starters."

Crow rubbed his forehead with his thumb and forefinger, looking done in. "Wouldn't it be sufficient if I promise not to treat you like a fool in the future?"

Han shook his head. "That's not enough."

"Even if I tell you the truth, you won't believe me," Crow said. "That's always the way. People unnecessarily limit themselves, and then they try to limit you."

"I'm not learning what I need to know here," Han said. "I'm not the most patient person."

“Nor am I,” Crow said. “But I have had to be incredibly patient for longer than you can even imagine.” He thought a moment. “Who am I? I was once the Bayars’ enemy. Their greatest rival.”

By now it was clear that the only way Han was going to hear this story was in small bits and riddles. “And now you’re not?” Han said.

Crow smiled faintly. “I suppose you would say I am a shade. A ghost of my former self. A remnant of who I used to be, made up of memory and emotion. The Bayars no longer perceive me as a threat. And yet”—he tapped his temple—“I have something they want very badly.”

“Knowledge,” Han guessed. “You know something they need to know.”

“I know something they need to know, and I intend to use it to destroy them,” Crow said matter-of-factly. “That is the reason for my existence.”

Han was lost. “When you say you are a ghost of your former self, what does that mean, exactly?”

Crow’s image shimmered, dissolved, and then reassembled itself. “This is all that remains of me,” he said. “I am an illusion. I exist in your head, Alister. And in Aediion, the meeting place of wizards. Not in the world you consider real.”

“You’re saying you’re ... dead?” Han stared at Crow. “That doesn’t make sense.” At least, it didn’t fit in very well with what he’d been taught at temple. But then he’d never claimed to be a theologian.

Crow shrugged. “What is death? The loss of a body? The loss of the animating spark? If that’s the case, I am dead.

“Or is life the persistence of memory and emotion, volition and desire?” Crow went on, as if in a debate with himself. “If that’s the case, I am very much alive.”

“But you have no body,” Han said.

Crow smiled. “Precisely. I have no corporeal body, nothing beyond what I conjure up in Aediion. And a body is required in order to get things done in the real world. A body is necessary in order to take revenge on the Bayars. Specifically, a wizard’s body, since that would allow me to use my considerable knowledge of magic.”

“And that’s where I came in,” Han said. “I could provide the flash you needed.”

“That’s where you came in.” Crow eyed Han critically, head cocked. “You seemed perfect. You are extremely powerful—surprisingly so. You’d had little to no training, which made you vulnerable to my influence and eager to spend time with me. You hated the Bayars, and, given your tawdry background, I assumed that you were ruthless and unprincipled. All good.”

“All good?” Han asked, rolling his eyes. This was a bit more honesty than he needed.

Crow nodded. “At first I was able to take control of you fairly easily, particularly when you were actively using your amulet. I even provided support at times, when you seemed in danger of being prematurely killed.”

“You mean the thorn hedge, when we were chased across the border into Delphi,” Han said. “And when we escaped from Prince Gerard at Ardencourt.” Han had immolated several of Montaigne’s soldiers with seemingly little participation on his own part.

“Yes,” Crow said. “But eventually, as you became more adept, you put up rudimentary barriers that kept me out. Very frustrating. I looked for a way back in.”

“And then I came to Aediion,” Han said.

“To my delight, you did.” Crow threw him a sidelong glance. “In Aediion, you were still vulnerable to whatever illusion I conjured up. I could still get into your mind. We could have actual conversations, and I could teach you. That opened a realm of possibilities.”

“But ...” Han frowned. “There were still times, even after we began meeting, that you possessed me in real life, right?” he said. He’d found himself on the upper floors of the Bayar Library amid old dusty books. He’d discovered a map of Gray Lady and a list of incantations in his pocket. Scribbled notes that were now tucked away in his saddlebags. “I kept losing big chunks of time on the days we met.”

“At the end of our tutoring sessions, when you were nearly drained of magic, the barriers came down. I could take possession of you and cross over with you when you left the dreamworld,” Crow said, without a trace of apology.

“Is that why you worked me so hard?” Han asked. “To wear me down so you could seize control?”

“Well, that and, of course, we had considerable work to do,” Crow said. He shrugged. “Unfortunately, you were useless for magical tasks in your depleted condition, or I might have gone after the Bayars then and there. But it did allow me to get out into the world.”

It gave Han the prickly shivers to imagine Crow inhabiting his body. “Yet you chose to spend your time in a dusty old library,” Han said.

Crow frowned at Han, looking dismayed. “You remember that?”

“You left me in the wrong place a few times,” Han said. “In the stacks.”

“I had only a brief window of time before your amulet was drained completely,” Crow said. “Several times we ran out before I could return you to where you were supposed to be.”

“Well, I thought I was losing my mind,” Han said. “What were you looking for?”

“I was only trying to stay ahead of you,” Crow said, biting his lip and shifting his gaze away. “You are a challenging student, Alister, always asking questions and demanding answers.”

“I don’t believe you,” Han said. “I think you were working your own plan. Were you maybe looking for a way to seize control of me permanently?”

Crow’s eyes glittered, signifying that Han had hit on the truth. “That would have been perfect. But impossible, it seems.” Crow closed his eyes, as if reliving it. “Can you imagine it, Alister? Can you imagine what it was like for a shade like me to experience the world again through all of your senses—vision and touch, and smell and taste and hearing?”

“I wouldn’t have gone to the library, I’ll tell you that,” Han said.

Crow laughed. “I like you, Alister. All of this would have been easier if you were unlikable. And stupid. You would have been considerably more tractable.”

“Tractable gets you nothing,” Han said, feeling like a country boy at market. Crow had dumped so much on him that he couldn’t quite see where the holes were. Questions rattled around in his brain.

“So. I have been uncommonly frank with you,” Crow said, interrupting his thoughts. “Now, tell me: why did you come back? Shall I assume that you still want something from me?”

“I’m on my way back to the Fells to go up against the Bayars and maybe the entire Wizard Council,” Han said.

“All by yourself? That seems ambitious even for you,” Crow said dryly. “What, exactly, do you hope to accomplish? Beyond flinging your life away.”

Han knew he had to give a reason that the cynical Crow would understand. A reason that would make Crow his ally, for now, anyway.

“The Bayars want to put Micah Bayar on the Gray Wolf throne,” Han said. “I’m not going to let that happen.”

“Mmm. The Bayars are nothing if not persistent,” Crow murmured. “It’s a pity young Bayar didn’t die in Aediion.” He paused, peering at Han through narrowed eyes to see if he’d felt the poke. “What is it between you and the Bayars? What did they do to you?”

“They murdered my mother and sister a year ago,” Han said. “They were all the family I had. And, recently, there was a girl, Rebecca. My ... ah ... tutor. She’s disappeared, and the Bayars are responsible. I think they did it to get back at me.”

Crow looked into Han’s eyes. “You poor bastard,” he said, shaking his head. “You’re in love with her, aren’t you?”

Damn my readable Aediion face, Han thought, scowling.

Crow laughed. “Let me give you a piece of advice—don’t go to war over a girl. It’s not worth it. Falling in love turns wise men into fools.”

“I didn’t come to you for advice,” Han said. “I came to you for firepower. The odds are against me. Even if you help me.”

“You’re coming back to me for help after what happened the last time?” Crow raised his eyebrows. “I thought you were smarter than that.”

“Everything is a risk,” Han said. “There’s a chance you’ll betray me again, but now I’m on the watch, so you’re less likely to be able to do any real damage. The risk from the Bayars, on the other hand, is real and imminent.”

Crow stood, legs slightly apart, head tilted, regarding Han as if he’d never really seen him before. “My, my, Alister, such big words. This young woman, this teacher of yours, she has polished you up, hasn’t she?”

Rebecca. Han’s gut twisted. In return, he’d likely gotten her killed.

“What’s underneath is still the same,” Han said. “I’m going to get what I want and nobody is going to get in my way. Including you. We do this thing my way or you’re out. Take or leave.”

“All right,” Crow said. “We’ll do things your way. But I will give you advice, and you can choose to use it or ignore it.”

“Fair enough,” Han said, his questions rekindling in his mind. “But first, I need to know—what happened between you and the Bayars, and when did it happen? Where have you been in the meantime? And how did you happen to choose me?”

“Does any of that really matter?” Crow said, turning away so Han couldn’t read his expression. “This is an alliance of convenience, nothing more. Isn’t that enough?”

“I’ve learned that whatever you don’t want to talk about is the thing I want to know,” Han said, thinking, If I know the why, if I know what drives you, I can better predict when I’ll get the blade in the back.

“As I said, if I tell you the truth, you won’t believe me.” Crow paced back and forth, his image rippling again, which Han had come to recognize as a sign of agitation. Was it such a horrible memory that Crow couldn’t stand to surface it?

“Try me,” Han said, as Crow continued to pace. “Come on. At least tell me a really good lie; you might convince me.”

“It doesn’t matter to you what happened,” Crow said. “It was long before you were born.”

You’re not even that old, Han thought, then remembered that Crow could be any age.

“Nothing you say can possibly shock me,” Han said. “But nothing happens until I know what your story is.”

Crow finally swung around to face Han. A bitter smile twisted his features. “We’ll see,” he said. “We’ll see just how foolhardy you are.” His image changed a little, sharpened, came into focus. His hair remained fair, glittering, framing refined blueblood features—eyes the color of mountain asters and a good-humored mouth. As before, he looked to be only a few years older than Han.

His clothing had become more elaborate—a finely cut coat in satin and brocade, oddly old-fashioned, its champagne color a few shades darker than his hair. He was brilliant with power—handsome as a fancy on the make.

“You’ve asked what I really look like,” Crow said, turning in a little circle, extending his arms. “Feast your eyes. This is how I looked when I went up against the Bayars.”

The wizard stoles around his neck bore images of ravens, and his coat was embroidered with a device—a twined serpent and staff, angled through a crown engraved with wolves.

The device was familiar—where had Han seen it before?

“It was an exciting and dangerous time,” Crow said. “I was young and powerful, and I competed with the Bayars in every arena—politically, magically, and in”—here he stumbled over the words a bit—“in all manner of relationships. Just as it seemed that I had beaten them for good, I was betrayed, and the Bayars captured me. When that happened, I took refuge in the amulet I carried for so long.”

Han tapped his amulet with his forefinger. “You’re saying you hid in a jinxpiece?”

Crow smiled. “Immediate disbelief, as I anticipated. I so enjoy being right all the time. As I told you, I was an innovative user of magic. I hoped that the amulet would end up in friendly hands. Unfortunately, the Bayars realized that the key to everything they desired lay in the flashpiece. Though they have been trying to extract its secrets for more than a thousand years, they’ve been spectacularly unsuccessful.”

Han struggled to assemble the bits Crow had given him. It was like working a puzzle that doesn’t reveal its meaning until the last piece is in place.

Except the image that was forming was impossible.

As if Crow had read Han’s mind, an amulet appeared at Crow’s neck, hanging from a heavy gold chain—the mirror image of Han’s serpent amulet.

“I am the original owner of the amulet you carry now,” Crow said. “I had it custom made for me when I was about your age. I needed something powerful enough to conjure magic the world had never seen before. There is not another like it in the world.”

Han stood frozen, each word he might have spoken stillborn on his tongue.

“After Hanalea betrayed me, I dared not reveal myself to the Bayars,” Crow said. “So I’ve been lying imprisoned for a millennium. When the amulet came into your hands, I seized the opportunity. Naturally, I have done my best to make sure they don’t recover it.”

Han looked down at his amulet, tracing the serpent head with his fingers. He looked back up at Crow, his mind traveling to the end of that road. “You can’t be serious,” he whispered. “That can’t be true.”

Crow still smiled, but his blue eyes were hard as glacier ice. “My name was Alger Waterlow,” he said, caressing the serpent flashpiece. “The last wizard king of the Fells.”

Han stared at Crow, speechless, his mind frothing like a potion made with incompatible ingredients.

Crow inclined his head. “You look suitably stricken, Alister. I’ll leave you with that, then, and give you time to think it through before you do or say anything rash. I am, as you’ve no doubt figured out, always here and always available. Come back to Aediion when you are ready to partner with me. If that should ever happen.”

He gazed at Han for another long moment, searching Han’s face as if hoping Han might stay with him. Then he blinked out like a fivepenny candle.

CHAPTER THREE

BAD NEWS AND GOOD NEWS

During the long journey from Fetters Ford to Delphi, Raisa managed to forget, now and then, that she was furious.

Furious with Gerard Montaigne, the monster who held her friends in his grasp.

Furious with those at home who were conspiring to steal her birthright, by murder or other means.

Furious with Captain Edon Byrne, who seemed willing to sacrifice his own son for the Gray Wolf line.

Furious most of all with herself. Had she not left the queendom nearly a year ago, none of this would have happened.

But it's not easy to remain angry while falling asleep in the saddle. Raisa would startle awake to find Captain Byrne's hand on her back, preventing her from toppling to the ground. "Eat something, Your Highness," he would say, handing her a sack of dried fruit and nuts. "Eating will help keep you awake."

She would accept it without thinking, without remembering that she hadn't forgiven him. By the time she remembered, he'd have spurred his horse forward or dropped back behind her, too far away for easy speech. She wasn't speaking to him either, not unless absolutely necessary, since there was no predicting what might come out of her mouth.

Byrne drove them on like a man possessed—Raisa suspected that he'd have ordered them to ride all night if the horses could have stood it. As it was, they rose before light and rode long past dark—even though the days were growing longer as the fields greened around them and the lower slopes of the northern mountains lost their snowy cloaks.

Byrne had chosen to travel east, through northern Arden, and not directly north, as Raisa had thought to do. His reasoning was simple: "If Lord Bayar knows you were in Fetters Ford, he'll expect you to enter the queendom via the West Wall. We need to do the unexpected."

Arden's forces had been drawn south, to fortify the border between Arden and Tamron, as Gerard's sole surviving brother, King Geoff, awaited the results of the siege of Tamron Court. The countryside lay eerily quiet, as if the entire realm were holding its breath.

They couldn't ride through the rough in the dark, so they chanced the Delphi Road through northern Arden, skirting the mountains, meaning to cross the lower Spirits via Marisa Pines Pass.

Raisa understood that speed was of the essence. There was no point in undertaking a long, arduous, dangerous journey through Arden and Tamron only to arrive home and find that her sister Mellony had been named princess heir in her place.

Besides, Captain Byrne wouldn't want to spend any more time with an angry, moody, downhearted princess than he had to. And he was no doubt worried about Raisa's mother, Marianna, the queen he was blood-sworn to serve and protect.

Raisa worried about her mother, too. Worry squeezed her insides like a too-tight corset.

Long days on horseback allowed far too much time for thinking. Raisa's mind traveled faster than the horses—all the way to Fellsmarch, to the fairy castle on an island in the Dyrnnewater, to her mother's privy chamber, where plans were no doubt being laid to take away Raisa's throne.

An image of her mother and Lord Bayar came to her—their heads together over some critical document, Marianna's hair like pale, beaten gold of the purest kind, the High Wizard's silver and black as wood ashes.

When Raisa was at court, she and her mother had been like fire and ice, each intent on changing the form and nature of the other. Now Raisa hoped they could complement each other, each draw on the other's strengths, become an alloy of steel, if only her mother would give her the chance.

Mellony couldn't do it: she was only thirteen, and Mellony and Marianna were too much alike. "Mother, please," Raisa whispered. "Please wait for me."

In her blackest hours, Raisa knew that it was all her fault—the crisis at home, the invasion of Tamron, and what would surely happen to Amon Byrne and the other cadets when Gerard Montaigne breached the walls of Tamron Court. If not for her, Edon Byrne would be home, where he belonged, looking after the queen, and Amon would be commander of his class at Oden's Ford.

She'd lost Han Alister, too—their budding romance had been yanked out by the roots. He was the only sweetheart she'd ever had who hadn't any agenda beyond that of young lovers everywhere. Even though they had no future together, he'd left a huge hole in her heart.

It seemed that everything she touched turned to sand. Everything she cared about slipped through her fingers.

In her dispirited state, she closed her ears to the reasonable voice that said, You'd never have loved Han Alister if you hadn't left the Fells. Or gotten to know Hallie or Talia or Pearlie. Or learned what it meant to be a soldier. If you survive, you'll be a better queen for it.

She nurtured her anger, fed it and indulged it, because it was her best alternative to despair.

She had to hope that Gerard Montaigne was still occupied to the west, keeping Tamron Court under siege. If the city hadn't surrendered, the prince of Arden wouldn't know she'd escaped. And as long as the city resisted, Amon would live.

Some pieces on her mental game board were still unaccounted for—Micah Bayar and his sister Fiona, for instance. She'd last seen them on the border between Tamron and Arden, during the battle between Tamron's brigade and Montaigne's much larger army. Had they escaped as well? Or had they died in the first skirmish of an undeclared war?

Raisa balled her fists inside her gloves, cranky as a badger with its foot in a trap. The Queen's Guard learned to tiptoe around her lest they get an undeserved tongue-lashing.

The landscape grew lovelier as they left the sodden plains of Tamron behind and climbed into the foothills. Cypress turned to maple and oak, brilliant with spring foliage, and then to aspen and pine.

They spent the night in Delphi, the city-state between Arden and the Fells that supplied coal, iron, and steel to all the nations of the Seven Realms. The city seethed with refugees from Arden and Tamron, since only fools and desperate people would venture into the pass when snows still howled around the peaks and piled up in the high valleys.

Byrne took Ghost to a horse trader and swapped him for a sturdy mountain pony, better suited for travel through the pass in this season. The trader was so astonished at the bargain she'd made, she threw in a fine clan-made saddle and bridle with silver fittings.

Raisa's new pony was a shaggy dappled gray mare with a white mane and tail. Raisa promptly renamed her Switcher, as had become her custom. She'd changed horses too many times in the past six months, and this way it was easier to remember.

That night, Raisa slept alone in a lumpy bed in a room rented to all eleven of them at the outrageous price of a crown a head. Her guard sprawled on the floor all around her like a litter of overgrown puppies. They were older than she, but not by much.

Some lay fast asleep, snoring and mumbling in their dreams. She envied their ability to drop off as soon as they stopped moving. Others played at cards or read by candles purchased for another crown apiece. If Raisa even went to the privy, Captain Byrne sent an escort along. She was never sure if this was to protect her or to prevent her running off. When she asked him, he replied, "To protect you, Your Highness. Of course."

They left long before dawn the next morning, while stars still pricked the sky. Byrne hoped to make it through the pass by nightfall. In summer, that would be a challenging and arduous journey. In winter or spring, unlikely. Possibly foolhardy.

Above Delphi, the paved road became wheel-rutted dirt, and finally little more than a game trail, hedged on both sides by great granite boulders, the way so narrow, only one rider could pass between. Before long, patches of snow appeared in the shaded areas to either side of the trail. By midday, the ground was covered, and they traveled over packed snow and ice. By afternoon, the trail was drifted over in places where the wind swirled through.

Snow sifted down on them from junipers that overhung the trail, perfuming the air with their sharp, sweet scent. The forest would break the wind, at least, until they climbed above the tree line.

A storm the night before had glazed each twig and branch with ice, and they glittered in the sunlight as the breeze stirred them. The tracks of snowshoe hares and other small game crisscrossed the trail. Raisa flexed her fingers in her gloves, wondering if she should string the bow Byrne had given her, which she carried in her saddle boot.

They'd probably prefer she be unarmed, given that she was angry enough to shoot someone.

She had missed riding the mountain trails of the Fells more than she'd realized. In Oden's Ford, she'd been consumed by work, with little time for pleasure riding. Her equestrian classes reflected the flatland style of warfare. Flatland cadets rode across a broad, featureless landscape in precise formation, wheeling their horses like so many deadly court dancers, bristling with weapons.

Raisa urged Switcher to greater speed, her lighter weight allowing her to outpace her guard. Up, up, up they climbed, splashing through rippling sunlight and shadow, icy evergreen branches whipping across her face, her breath pluming out and crystallizing in her hair and on her wool hat.

Raisa crested the upslope and reined in her mare.

The Spirit Mountains spread before her across a wide valley, fully visible for the first time: rank upon rank of peaks shrouded in snow and cloud. Green spires of fir and brilliant birch smudged the lower slopes. The cool blue of shadow on snow filled the valleys where the sun had not yet penetrated. Frowning gray granite summits were concealed, then revealed by streaming mist. The cold voice of the Spirits called to her, and something within her answered.

This was the dwelling place of her ancestors, blood and bone of the upland queens. And, somewhere ahead, the city of Fellsmarsh lay hidden in the Vale. Somewhere ahead, her mother waited—the mother who might be planning to disinherit her.

Switcher stood splay-legged and breathing hard, despite Raisa's slight weight. "I'm sorry," she murmured, stroking the mare's neck, knowing they had an even tougher road ahead of them. The southernmost Queen peaks were gentle, ancient matriarchs ground down by the witch winds that stormed down out of the north after solstice. These mountains were so old, their names had been forgotten.

But ahead lay brooding Hanalea, greatest and most terrible of all. Plumes of steam rose from the hot springs, geysers, and mudpots that dotted her shoulders where the fiery Beneath broke through the thin crust of the earth. Her name would never be forgotten, not as long as her people remembered the Breaking, and observed the Næming.

To the south and west lay Tamron Court, where Amon Byrne was trapped by Montaigne's army. Further east was Oden's Ford, where Raisa had left Han Alister without saying good-bye.

Once again, the pain settled beneath her breastbone, squeezing off her breath. Not grief, exactly, but ... well, yes, grief for the words that would never be spoken, for a love that would never be consummated, and for a friend whose life was in desperate peril.

Maybe it was better that way. Better for Han, at least. Assuming Raisa survived, she was destined for a political marriage. Han had already lost his family and most of his friends. Further involvement in the treacherous politics of the Gray Wolf court would likely get him killed. He'd been doing well at the academy in Oden's Ford. Better that he stay there and forget about her.

Maybe he already had.

Gripping the reins hard, she stared straight ahead, drawing deep breaths, biting her lower lip, no longer seeing what lay before her.

As her guard surrounded her, she heard the creak of saddle leather, the rattle of hooves against rock, the soft greetings of horses. She breathed in the scent of damp wool and soldiers too long on the road.

“Your Highness.”

Raisa flinched, still staring straight ahead.

“Your Highness, please,” Byrne said. “I wish you would not insist on racing so far ahead.”

This time, she twisted in her saddle, looking into his wind-burnt face, now etched with concern.

“I thought you said we were in a hurry,” Raisa said.

“Aye. We are. But you should be riding in the middle of the triple, not breaking trail out in front. We cannot protect you if you ride out of sight of us.”

“Am I a prisoner who must be watched constantly?” Unable to control the quaver in her voice, she clapped her mouth shut and stared down at the ground.

Byrne gazed at her for a long moment, then turned in his saddle, waving the others back with his gloved hand, clearly preferring that they not overhear this conversation. “Take fifteen to rest the horses before we push on,” he called.

He dismounted, dropping his reins so his horse could lip at the sparse vegetation. Raisa dismounted also, taking shelter from the wind between the two horses.

“We are here to serve and protect you, Your Highness, not confine you,” Byrne said. The gray eyes reproached her.

Raisa knew she was being unreasonable, but she couldn’t help herself. She couldn’t even trust herself to reply. Instead, she yanked her gloves off with her teeth. Working quickly, before her hands went numb, she tucked in the ends of frosted hair that had been ripped free by the wind. The skin on her cheeks and hands was already chapped, despite the layers of lanolin cream she applied morning and night.

“The Queen’s Guard serves the queen and the princess heir and the Gray Wolf line,” Byrne persisted, squinting into the distance, hunching his broad shoulders against the raw wind.

“And if our interests diverge?” Raisa dabbed at her eyes, hoping the cold would explain her sniffing.

To this the captain made no answer, for there was none. Picking a fight with Captain Byrne was as unrewarding as assaulting a brick wall. He stood, solid and unmovable, while you skinned your own nose.

“Perhaps we should talk about what happens when we arrive,” Byrne suggested, still graciously averting his eyes.

Raisa nodded, pulling her gloves back on. That seemed to be a safe topic, at least—her arrival in the Fells. Since it was beginning to seem like it would actually happen.

“I’ll stay a night, at least, at Marisa Pines Camp, until I know if it’s safe to go down into the city,” Raisa said. That, of course, presented its own risks, if what her mother had believed was true—that the Demonai clan favored setting Marianna aside and putting Raisa on the throne instead. Raisa was suddenly glad they’d decided to take the eastern route, rather than traveling past Demonai Camp. Except ...

“Was my father in residence in the palace when you left, or at Demonai?” Raisa asked. “I’ll want to meet with him as soon as we arrive.” Raisa’s father was a clan trader, and patriarch of Demonai Camp. He split his time between the city, the highland camps, and trading expeditions throughout the Seven Realms. He would fill her in on the latest news.

“The royal consort was staying at Kendall House,” Byrne said. “Or at least he was when I left Fellsmarsh three weeks ago.”

Kendall House, Raisa thought, frowning, wishing he were lodged in the palace. Kendall House was an elaborate mansion within the castle close. It represented a kind of way station in her mother's affections—not exiled entirely, but not admitted to full intimacy, either.

Raisa's father, Averill Lightfoot, Lord Demonai, was a steadying influence on her mother, when she let him get close enough. A counterpoint to Lord Bayar's influence.

“What about the Demonai warriors?” Raisa said. “What have you heard from them?”

Byrne shrugged. “I don't have the connections to the clans that you and your father do.” He paused. “Rightly or wrongly, the Demonai seem convinced that Marianna intends to set you aside. I think we can assume that they are preparing for war.”

Raisa drew her cloak more closely about her. The sun passed behind a cloud, and suddenly the wind seemed more cutting.

This exchange seemed to remind Byrne of the urgency of their mission. “We'd best be on our way so we can make use of the light.” He laced his fingers, offering Raisa a boost up, and this time she accepted.

CHAPTER FOUR

A WELCOME HOME

By late day, they were still climbing toward Marisa Pines Pass, the great southwestern gateway into the Fells. To the east, the blue sky turned indigo, and a few stars appeared, low on the horizon. But Byrne had his eye on a streak of gray cloud to the northwest. “Blood of the demon,” he muttered. “More snow. And it’ll be here before morning. That’s all we need—to be held up by a storm.” He scanned the tops of the trees, judging the wind speed and direction. “There’s no way we’ll make it through the pass tonight, so we’d better be under cover when it hits.”

They increased their pace, making for a way house Byrne knew of at the southern end of the pass that would provide shelter against wind and drifting snow. Raisa rode in a kind of frozen stupor, her hood pulled low over her face, drawing what heat she could from Switcher.

The wind began to rise long before they reached their destination, swirling the fine, powdery snow up from the ground, raking it free from the trees and flinging it into their faces. Soon it was full dark, and then darker than that, as the racing clouds devoured the stars. They never saw the rising moon. It began to snow, lightly at first, and then more heavily, tiny ice pellets that stung their exposed skin and increased their misery.

In Oden’s Ford, Raisa had never needed anything heavier than kidskin gloves. She tucked first one hand, then the other under her cloak, guiding Switcher with her knees alone. But Byrne, who did not miss much, handed her a pair of long woolen riding gloves with deerskin palms. Clanwork, no doubt. Raisa pulled them on gratefully.

The horses were now mere shades in the swirling darkness. Byrne strung a rope between them so they would not lose each other. He seemed to find his way by instinct. They had no choice but to go on—they had to find shelter from the growing storm.

It was oddly reminiscent of the day the previous spring when Raisa, her mother, her sister Mellony, Byrne, and Lord Bayar had gone hunting in the foothills. A forest fire had rushed down from the mountains, and they’d taken refuge in a canyon. They’d ridden, roped together, through the smoke and ash, scarcely able to see the horse in front. Then, it had been blistering hot, the air too thick to breathe. Now the air seemed too thin, lacking sustenance, crackling in their noses. It was numbingly cold.

Last spring, the wizards Lord Bayar and Micah, and Micah’s cousins, the Mander brothers, had saved their lives, magically putting the fire out.

Had it really been less than a year ago?

Switcher plowed forward doggedly in the gelding’s wake, her nose and mane crusted with ice, her flanks steaming in the frigid air. The snow was so powdery fine and deep that it seemed at times the horses were swimming, flank high in a milk-white ocean.

Finally, amazingly, they broke out of the trees and into a small clearing in the shelter of a vertical rock wall. Crouched against the rock face was a sturdy wooden building with a stone chimney and a shake roof layered over with snow. And next to it, a crude lean-to for the horses. Raisa’s mare slowed to a stop of her own accord, as if sensing that relief was at hand. Scrubbing snow from her eyelashes, Raisa stared dumbly at the buildings, afraid they would disappear as quickly as they had appeared.

All around her, the relieved guards were dismounting, shaking off the accumulated snow, and leading their horses toward shelter.

Switcher stamped her foot impatiently, but Raisa made no move to dismount. She squinted at the cabin, thinking there was something out of order about the scene before her. She caught the faint scent of wood smoke, though the air was so cold as to be almost painful to breathe.

And then she saw them. Out of the swirling white, they loped toward her, faces and ruffs crusted with snow, eyes blazing out a warning. Wolves, what seemed like dozens of wolves, the forest boiling with gray-and-white bodies that poured into the clearing, led by the familiar gray she-wolf with gray eyes.

They were her ancestors, the Gray Wolf queens. A warning that the line was in danger.

Still mounted, Byrne edged his gelding up beside her. “Your Highness? Shall I help you down?” The captain was fixed on her, his head tilted as if he were about to ask another question.

She put one hand on his arm to stay him, and with the other pointed toward the cabin. Her teeth were chattering so hard she could scarcely get the words out. “Byrne. No snow ... the chimney ... in front of the door.”

He followed her gaze, took it in quickly. No smoke curled from the chimney, but the snow had melted for a distance all around it. The snow drifted undisturbed against the cabin, but it was gone from in front of the door. Meaning someone was inside, or nearby. Only, no one would willingly leave shelter in such a storm. Nor put out his fire, either, unless he was trying to hide his presence.

Byrne shouted a warning as the first crossbows sounded from the surrounding woods. The soldiers on the ground looked up in surprise. Some of them fell where they stood, their black blood steaming as it splattered into the snow. A few managed to scramble back onto their horses, spurring them into the trees, wrestling weapons out of their saddle boots, struggling with gloved hands to string their bows. But not many.

Raisa sat frozen, watching all this as if it were a drama and she a spectator, until Byrne pushed her head down with his gloved hand. “Lie flat and follow me!” he growled, demonstrating by leaning close into his horse’s neck and slamming his heels into the gelding’s sides. They twisted and turned as they crossed the clearing, Byrne leading the way. Raisa flinched as something whined close to her ear, burning the skin at the back of her neck. She pressed her face into Switcher’s neck, her heart clamoring in fear.

As they reached the first of the trees, a large shape materialized out of the swirling flakes, a man on foot swinging a great sword. Switcher screamed and reared back, and the blade missed taking off Raisa’s head and bit into the mare’s shoulder. Raisa caught a glimpse of a grinning, bearded face as the man reached for her, grabbing a fistful of cloak.

Their eyes met, and a look of startled recognition passed across the man’s scar-puckered face. He looked oddly familiar to Raisa, too.

There was no time to dwell on it. Raisa twisted Switcher’s head around, stood in her stirrups, and slammed her boot into the attacker’s chin. His head snapped back and he disappeared from view as they charged on into the darkness.

The sounds of fighting faded behind them, but Byrne pushed the exhausted horses forward relentlessly. The wind howled, and the swirling flakes reduced the world around them to the space of a few yards, broken by the gray skeletons of trees. Off to the left and right, Raisa could see gray bodies loping through the trees, easily keeping pace with them. So they were still in grave danger.

Raisa prayed. “Sweet Lady in chains, deliver us,” she whispered. It was odd how an attempt on her life could snap her out of her funk.

The weather was a blessing and a curse. It fought them every step of the way, yet between the wind and snow, all traces of their trail would be obliterated within moments of their passing. As the snow deepened, their forward progress slowed as the horses plunged forward through mammoth drifts. Switcher plowed along behind Byrne’s gelding, her head at the other horse’s flank.

Finally, Switcher’s slow plodding stopped. Raisa straightened and pushed back her hood. Byrne had reined in. He peered into the darkness on all sides, listening with his head cocked. Finally he nodded as if satisfied, and turned off the invisible trail into the deep snow to the left, floundering through drifts that were chest high on the horses in some places.

They ended in a grove of snow-covered pines whose weeping branches brushed the ground on all sides. Byrne dismounted on the lee side of one of the great trees and motioned for Raisa to do the same. Sliding her travel bag over her shoulder, she attempted to do so, but found her frozen limbs would no longer obey her commands. Murmuring an apology, Byrne slid his gauntleted arms under her and lifted her off her horse. Using his shoulder, he bulled his way through the drooping branches and into the shelter of the tree.

There, in the pine-scented darkness, it seemed almost temperate, the unrelenting shriek of the wind muted by thick branches with their layering of snow. Byrne set Raisa down on a carpet of pine needles.

“I’ll see to the horses,” he said, and shoved back outside.

Raisa looked around. No wolves in evidence. So they were safe—temporarily, at least.

Resisting the temptation to curl up and go to sleep, she tugged off her gloves and boots and began working her fingers and toes, conscious of the risk of frostbite. The pain as the blood returned was stunning. Using a fallen branch, she swept a small space clean of pine needles and debris, then centered it with a pile of dry twigs and a bit of fireweed. Reaching into the traveler’s bag, she pulled out flint and iron. By the time Byrne returned with the saddlebags and an armful of weapons, she had a hot, smokeless fire going, and was hanging her socks and gloves to dry.

“Were you able to find shelter for the horses?” she asked, sitting back on her heels.

He knelt, pushing the bags into a dry corner. “Aye, I hobbled them out of the wind, under another overhang. Gave them plenty of grain, but we’ll need to melt some snow to—”

“Bones!” Raisa said, sitting up straight. “How is Switcher’s shoulder? I’m sorry. I meant to look at it.”

“It’s not too bad,” Byrne said. “I cleaned it out some, but she wasn’t very patient with me. I’ll take another look when it’s light out.”

“Thank you, Captain,” Raisa said. “I should have seen to it myself.” After an awkward pause, she added, “And thank you for saving my life. Again.”

“I’d rather you held off on thanking me, Your Highness,” Byrne said dryly. “We’re sheltering under a tree in the middle of a blizzard. And if we get out of this, there are lots of other ways to die between here and the capital.”

The Byrnes were pessimistic sorts.

“All right,” she said briskly. “Consider my thanks withdrawn. In the meantime, give me your wet things, and I’ll hang those as well. In the off chance we survive the night, we don’t want to wear wet again tomorrow, with the temperature dropping.”

Byrne shook his head, the corners of his mouth twitching. “Forgive me, Your Highness,” he said. “I had forgotten how capable you are.”

“I spent three years with the Demonai,” she said. “They travel light. If you don’t pull your weight, you’re left in camp with the toddlers and old people.”

“Some would prefer to stay in camp than ride with the Demonai,” Byrne said. He yanked off his gloves and handed them across to Raisa. Pulling off his boots, he peeled off his socks also. Raisa noticed, however, that he replaced them with dry socks from the saddlebags and thrust his feet back into his boots. Obviously, the captain did not mean to be surprised bootless.

Raisa hesitated, rubbing and stretching her recently freed toes, then followed his example. As she leaned forward to lace up her boots, Byrne suddenly gripped her shoulder. The presumption was so out of character that she looked up, startled.

Byrne swore softly. “Blood and bones! You’re wounded! Why didn’t you say anything? What happened?”

Raisa reached up and fingered the wound on her neck, which she had completely forgotten. Her hand came away sticky. “A near miss is all, Captain. It’s not serious.”

“I’ll be the judge of that,” he growled. “I’d better take a look. Assassins sometimes daub their arrow points with poison.” With that, he pressed his lips together as if he’d said too much. He turned her so the heat of the fire was on her back, brushed aside her hair, and poked at the back of her neck with thick fingers. “How d’you feel? Any dizziness, double vision, creeping numbness?”

Raisa shuddered. Given time, she was sure she could conjure any of those symptoms. “Do you know who they were?” she demanded. “You seem to have your suspicions.”

“Valefolk, from what I could tell. Not clan. But I didn’t get a good look at them.” Byrne produced a small iron pot, which he filled with snow and set to heat on the fire. “I don’t see any signs of poison, Your Highness. But we’ll wash it out good, just the same, and apply a poultice to draw it out, and then—”

“You said assassins, Captain,” Raisa snapped, interrupting the medical report.

Byrne released a long breath. “I don’t know for sure,” he admitted. “But I think that’s what they were. Highwaymen don’t come up here. The clan wouldn’t stand for it. Besides, there aren’t enough travelers this time of year to keep ’em in business, not a band that size. Highwaymen wouldn’t attack a triple of soldiers. We don’t carry much money, and there’s easier meat and better weather downslope. They were well fed, well mounted, and well armed. I believe they were expecting us.”

Byrne leaned over the fire, and the flames illuminated the grim planes of his face. “If I’m right, they’re still looking for us, or will be when the weather clears. And they have the advantage of knowing where we’re headed.”

The water had heated to Byrne’s satisfaction, so he lifted the pot off the flame with a heavy stick. He dropped several clean rags into the water, let them steep for a few minutes, and lifted one out with the same stick. When it was cool enough to handle, he squeezed out the excess water and applied it to the back of Raisa’s neck.

“Ow!” she hissed, startled by the heat. “Sorry,” she added, gritting her teeth. Byrne ignored the complaint, kneading her skin and scrubbing away the blood that emerged. He exchanged the bloody cloths twice more, then emptied a pouch of vegetable matter into the water remaining in the pot. Their sanctuary filled with a pungent scent. Snakebite root, Raisa thought. Used to draw poisons of all kinds.

Byrne thrust his stick into the pot and lifted a steaming mass of stinking root. Allowing the excess water to drip away, he dumped it onto a clean square of cloth he’d spread over the pine needles. Folding the cloth over, he pressed out the excess water.

Byrne plastered it over the back of Raisa’s neck. It stung at first, but then felt soothing. He finished by wrapping the whole mess over with linen. “There. We’ll leave that in place for a few hours, then see how it looks.”

Raisa swiped futilely at a trickle of water running down her back.

Byrne scrubbed out the pot with snow, then refilled it and set it on the fire to melt. “I’ll take water out to the horses and have another look around,” he said.

“Will the rest of your triple be able to find us here, do you think? Should we wait for them once the weather clears?”

Byrne shook his head. “We’d better hope they don’t find us, because if they can find us, so can those that ambushed us.” He busied himself packing up his medical kit, avoiding her eyes. “We’d better go forward on our own. Any survivors ... that are able ... will continue the fight and delay them. We’re seriously overmatched, so we’d best avoid them if we can. Two will be harder to spot in these mountains than a triple.”

And then she understood. No one else survived, she thought. Their orders were to stand and fight, once she was away, even though they were outnumbered.

“They’re all dead?” she said. She thought of them, tumbled all around her on the floor of her room in Delphi. “But ... they were so young, most of them,” she whispered.

“This is our job, Your Highness.” Byrne lifted his wineskin, sloshing it gently as if to judge the contents, and offered it to Raisa, who shook her head.

She dug the heels of her hands into her temples, wishing she could grind away the guilt. “No,” she whispered, half to herself. “I will not allow my best soldiers to be wasted like this.”

“We’ve not much in the way of food and supplies,” Byrne said, as if she hadn’t spoken. Obviously, Raisa wasn’t going to be allowed any time for hand-wringing. “Just what you and I were carrying. Our best bet is to get through the pass and push on to Marisa Pines Camp as quickly as we can.”

And that is just what those hunting us will expect us to do, Raisa thought.

“Now, about weaponry,” Byrne said. “As I recall, you are a fair shot with a bow.” He put his hand on Raisa’s bow, which was laid out next to him.

Raisa nodded. It was no time for false modesty. “I’m good with a bow, though I’ve not tried that one. It seems a good size and weight for me, though.”

“Are you any good with a sword?”

“I ... Amon’s worked me hard at swords these past months,” Raisa said. “But it’s not my strong suit.”

“Try this one.” He extended his sword toward her, hilt-first.

Raisa stood, gripping the hilt with both hands. It was fashioned to represent the Sword of Hanalea, the signia of the Queen’s Guard. The cross-guard was cast in heavy metal, to resemble the rippling tresses of the Lady, and the pommel was the figure of the Lady herself.

It was nearly too heavy for her to lift, even with both hands. Shaking her head ruefully, she handed it back and sat down again. “I’m much safer with this in your hands than in mine. It’s lovely, though. The workmanship is exquisite. Is this a family heirloom?”

Byrne cleared his throat. “The queen—your mother—had it made for me when I ... at the time of her coronation. When I was made captain. Marianna said it signifies that I hold Hanalea’s true line in my hands.”

His face, weathered by decades of pain, revealed more than he probably intended.

Raisa stared at the captain, her mouth slack with surprise. Byrne looked away quickly, as if he hoped to extinguish that knowledge in her eyes.

He’s in love with her, Raisa thought. I’ve been stupid blind not to see it.

Raisa recalled what her mother had said when she’d explained why there could never be anything between Raisa and Amon.

He’s a soldier, the queen had said, and his father’s a soldier, and his father ... That’s all they’ll ever be.

Raisa had come close to making the same mistake herself—about her mother’s captain. She’d thought of Edon Byrne as steady, calm, capable, and practical above all else. Not a romantic bone in his body. The Captain Byrne she knew was bluntly honest, not a keeper of secrets.

She’d been wrong about that. She’d been wrong about so many things.

You’ve lived your life with a broken heart, Raisa thought, staring at Byrne. So why did you have to break my heart, too?

And before she knew what she was doing, she was speaking aloud. “Why did you do it?” she said softly. “Why did you take Amon away from me?”

“Your Highness,” he said. His expression, his posture, the way he flexed his hands—it all told her to back off. “I don’t know what you mean.”

“I am not going to keep quiet about this just to make it easier on everyone,” Raisa said. “You are stuck here with me, so you may as well talk about it.”

Byrne came forward on his knees and lifted the pot off the flame. “I’d better go out and water the horses,” he said.

“I’ll still be here when you get back,” she said. “We can talk now or after.”

He sighed noisily and set the pot on the fire. Then sat back on his heels. “You are talking about my choosing of Corporal Byrne as your captain, I suppose?” he said.

“I am perfectly satisfied with Amon as my captain,” Raisa said. “I am talking about the linking, or—or the binding, or whatever you call it.” She shuddered, recalling how a simple kiss between them had caused Amon excruciating pain. When Byrne said nothing, she added, “Why was that necessary? And why has it been such a big secret?”

This is why it’s a secret, Byrne’s expression said. This conversation.

“All of the captains are bound to their queens,” Byrne said finally. “It’s been that way since the Breaking.”

“Did you really think it was necessary to bind Amon to me?” Raisa lifted her hands, palms up. “We’ve been friends since childhood.”

“I did it for the line,” Byrne said, looking into her eyes unapologetically. “I did not do it to keep you away from my son. Or my son away from you.”

“Are you sure?” Raisa felt her mean streak surfacing. She wanted to hurt Byrne to make up for what had been stolen from her. “Are you sure that you weren’t jealous because I loved Amon, while ... while ...”

Byrne continued to look at her, waiting, and she trailed off. No. She couldn’t go there. She wouldn’t go there.

“The linkage protects the line,” Byrne said, when it was clear she wouldn’t go on. “Amon is the best choice to serve as your captain. If it served the line for you to ... be together, the linkage would not interfere.”

“Really,” Raisa said. “Where is that written? Where’s the rule book on all this? I just blunder along, thinking I’m free to make choices, and then I find out they’ve been made for me.”

Byrne inclined his head, acknowledging this, then looked up at her again.

“Where does it tell me what I’m supposed to do now?” she whispered, blinking back tears.

Byrne produced a handkerchief from somewhere and handed it to her. “You serve,” he said. “You find happiness where you can. In love or not, you find a way to continue the line.”

Just as he had done.

And just like that, Raisa’s resentment faded, leaving a dull ache, like the muscle memory of an old injury. She realized that her bitterness had become a habit, that somewhere along the line, she’d accepted that she and Amon would never be together as lovers. That she needed friends as much, or even more, right now.

And then what had she done? She’d fallen for Han Alister—someone else she couldn’t have, in a marriage, anyway.

“None of us are free to follow our hearts,” she said. “Not really. Is that what you’re saying?”

He shook his head. “No one can stop you from loving someone,” he said.

Raisa dabbed at her eyes. “I thought that, for me, it would be different, that I would find a way to make it happen. That I would marry for love.” She cleared her throat and straightened her shoulders. “Now I know,” she said, “like every other Gray Wolf queen, I will settle for a political marriage to someone I don’t love.”

Byrne half smiled. “Somehow I don’t think you will settle, Your Highness.”

I can always emulate Marianna, Raisa thought. And find love outside of marriage. She’d never forgiven her mother for not loving her father more. Now, belatedly, Raisa was beginning to realize that choices are not always as black-and-white as they seem.

Impulsively, Raisa leaned forward and gripped Byrne’s calloused hands. “How is she doing, Captain? The queen, I mean?”

He looked down at their joined hands, and up into her face. “My Lady, I don’t think—”

“You are linked to her. You must know something of her state of mind.”

Byrne grimaced as though she'd strayed onto a forbidden subject, a topic too intimate for discussion. Like love.

"Your Highness, it's not my place to guess what—"

"If I'm going to help her once I return to the capital, I need to know," Raisa said bluntly.

Byrne looked at Raisa, almost defensively. "It's not as if I can read her mind."

Raisa nodded. "I know." She paused. "I just wish I understood her better. She never shared a lot with me, growing up, about herself. We are so different. I don't even look much like her."

He shook his head. "No, you favor your father more. Though she is tall, she has always seemed delicate to me, like ... like maiden's kiss." Maiden's kiss was a spring flower that bloomed for a day and shriveled at a touch.

"Her Majesty has been melancholy lately," Byrne went on. "And no wonder. There is constant pressure from the Spirit clans, from the High Wizard and the Wizard Council. That, along with your absence ..." His voice trailed off. "I did not want to leave her at this time."

"It's my fault you had to leave her, Captain," Raisa said, again feeling the crush of guilt.

"If I were assigning blame, Your Highness, I would not begin with you." Byrne plunked his saddlebags down in front of Raisa. "What food I have is in there. We'd better eat, then get some sleep so we can move when the storm is over."

He stood, lifting the pot of water, and ducked out through the branches to water the horses.

By the time he returned, Raisa had rummaged through his saddlebags, pulled out a loaf of bread and a wedge of cheese, and set them out on cloths. Byrne divided the cheese with his belt dagger and handed half to her, then carved off thick slices of bread. When the food was gone, he slapped the blade thoughtfully across his palm.

"Do you carry a dagger, Your Highness?"

Raisa nodded. "I do, as a rule, but Micah and Fiona took mine."

"Then take this one." He wiped the blade on his breeches, returned the blade to a sheath at his waist, then unbuckled the belt, handing the whole package to her. Raisa slid the blade free, turning it so it caught the light. It was of the same make and design as the Lady sword, with the image of Hanalea worked into the hilt.

"I can't take this!" she protested. "It belongs in your family."

"I've not much use for it, in fact," Byrne replied. "If I let an enemy get close enough to need it, I deserve what I get." He raised his hand to forestall further protest. "At least carry it until we reach Fellsmarch." He yawned. "We're not going anywhere until this storm goes south, so we may as well get some sleep." He unrolled his blankets in front of the makeshift entrance and slid under them.

Raisa crawled into her own bedroll, which was laid close to the fire. She set the knife in its sheath by her left hand. Their frail shelter trembled under the assault of the witch wind, and snow sifted down through the branches. "I'll pray to the Maker that the storm moves on," Raisa said sleepily.

"Be careful what you pray for, Your Highness," Byrne said, his face turned away from her so she couldn't see his expression. "We could use a little wind to move the snow around. We'll be easier to track when the weather clears."

CHAPTER FIVE

OLD ENEMIES

The wind began to dwindle sometime before dawn. Raisa awoke to the sudden quiet and the realization that Edon Byrne was missing. She sat up, shivering, scrubbing the sleep from her eyes with the heels of her hands. Byrne's blankets were rolled and tied, and a pot of tea steamed over the rekindled fire. A breakfast of more bread and cheese was laid out just outside the fire ring. The message was obvious: Byrne meant to make an early start.

Raisa stood and stretched, gingerly massaging her hip bones and backside. She had too little padding to enjoy sleeping on the ground. Unwinding the linen from around her neck, she scraped the poultice free, hoping Byrne wouldn't insist on replacing it. She ate quickly, washing the dry breakfast down with tea, then began layering on clothing. Her socks and gloves were dry, but stiff and uncomfortable.

When she stepped outside, carrying their remaining gear, she was confronted with one of those transformations that are common in the mountains. Stars glittered over the peaks to the west. Where the thick pines blocked the wind, the ground was covered with a thick layer of new snow, pristine and virginal, in some places drifted higher than Raisa's head. More exposed areas were scoured clean, with the wind still teasing the snow free and spinning it off into the darkness. Although it was still dark and very cold, the coming day promised to be a fair one.

"Good morning, Your Highness." Raisa spun around. It was Byrne, leading their horses, both already saddled. Switcher was fighting the bit, ears laid back, protesting the early start. "We can hope our assailants are sleeping in, but I think it wise to travel as far as we can under cover of darkness."

Raisa nodded. She stroked the mare's neck, making soothing noises, examining the gash in the beast's shoulder. Byrne was right: it looked superficial. Strapping her bedroll and saddlebags behind her saddle, she swung up onto Switcher's back, every muscle screaming a protest.

It was slow going. This climb to the pass would have been difficult in good weather with fresh mounts. The footing was treacherous, with hazards and obstacles concealed by the drifts. At times they waded through snow that reached the horses' chests. Where space permitted, they left the trail and walked under the trees to either side. The snow wasn't as deep in the forest, and they would be less visible to anyone who might be watching from a distance. But once the sun spilled over the eastern escarpment, Raisa felt terribly exposed: a dark insect climbing a white wall of snow.

At least they had a clear view of their back trail. Raisa couldn't help looking over her shoulder, expecting at any moment to see a crowd of riders coming fast. But she and Byrne climbed all morning with no sign of pursuit, and Raisa relaxed fractionally. If they could reach Marisa Pines Camp, the clans could provide an escort the rest of the way.

They took their midday meal in the saddle, dismounting only to walk beside the horses where it was steepest, to rest them a bit. The sun shone down from a brilliant blue sky, kindling the ice that coated rock and pine branches. When they were still several miles below the notch, Byrne turned aside into a copse of trees. Raisa followed automatically, reining in when he did.

"Here's where it gets dangerous," he said.

"What do you mean?" Raisa looked about, blinking as her eyes adjusted to the gloom under the pines. Here and there, glittering shafts of sunlight penetrated all the way to the ground. Switcher dropped her head and nibbled hopefully at the pine branches within reach.

"There are many ways to get to the pass, but only one way through. And no cover for the last couple of miles, since we'll be above the tree line."

Branches stirred above their heads, and snow sifted down. Raisa raked it out of her collar. “They can’t possibly have caught up with us, could they?” Would anyone who was not fleeing for his life have braved the storm so long, or pressed on before daybreak?

“Anything’s possible.”

Raisa waited, and when Byrne did not speak, she said, impatiently, “Well, if they’re coming, it doesn’t do us any good to wait for them here, does it?”

He grinned. “A fair hit, Your Highness. And well deserved.” He paused, as if debating whether to go on. He stroked the gelding’s neck, murmuring soft endearments, then said to Raisa, “You’re different from Queen Marianna, if I may say so.”

“So I’ve been told,” Raisa replied dryly. “Usually in the midst of a scolding.”

“Meaning no disrespect to your mother, I think it’s a good thing.”

Raisa flinched in surprise. This was most unexpected, coming from a man who was clearly devoted to Marianna. “What do you mean?”

Byrne cleared his throat. “I told you she was frail and beautiful, like maiden’s kiss. You’re more like juniper. You seem to thrive in the worst weather, and I’d guess you’d be impossible to uproot once you’ve set yourself.”

“You’re saying I’m tough, prickly, and stubborn.” She’d heard that often enough, most recently from her teachers at Oden’s Ford.

“Aye, but because you’re small, they’ll underestimate you. And that’s not a bad thing, in these dangerous times. Keep ’em guessing, is my advice, and you’ll survive in the capital.”

Raisa smiled, knowing she was being paid a compliment. “Thank you, Captain. But first, I have to survive the afternoon.”

“Look you, if there’s trouble, you lay down on that horse and ride for the notch and don’t look back. I’ll follow after as soon as I can.”

Right. Just like the rest of the triple.

In response, Raisa set her heels hard in Switcher’s sides. The startled mare tossed her head and stumbled forward, out of the grove of trees and back onto the trail.

The brief winter’s day was failing when they passed the tree line. Long blue shadows extended before them as the sun declined behind the West Wall. Out of cover of the trees, the wind daggered right through Raisa. She leaned forward, as if by doing so she could urge the mare along faster. Byrne took the lead most of the time, breaking trail. On this last long push to the top, they simply made all the speed they could.

As they neared the notch, the snow cover dwindled, scoured away by the relentless wind. The sun plunged behind the West Wall. The stone escarpment flamed momentarily, then night fell with the suddenness of the high country.

Finally, there was no more trail above them, only a long steep slope behind them. On either side, great granite slabs framed Marisa Pines Pass. At its narrowest, it was no wider than a horse trail. It was said that, years ago, a small band of Demonai warriors had held a thousand southern soldiers in the pass.

“Wait here,” Byrne ordered. Raisa did as she was told, while Byrne rode on at a quick walk to scout the pass ahead. Raisa shivered, even though the great stones blocked the rising wind. Moments later, Byrne returned, appearing nearly silently out of the gloom. “Come on.”

They rode ahead slowly, single file, through the narrow waist of the pass. Raisa squinted up at the sheer walls on either side, the slice of sky between. Beyond, the way broadened into what would be a lovely alpine meadow in summertime, now hidden under a shroud of snow. The moon was already rising. As it cleared the mountains to the east, the meadow was flooded with a silver brilliance, as cold and pure and unforgiving as any breath of mountain air. She felt the prickle of magic all around her.

They were home.

Somewhere behind her, a wolf howled, its voice raking up gooseflesh on the back of her neck. Ahead and to the right, its packmate answered, its voice a cold, heartless note in the dark.

Raisa's heart began to hammer.

Byrne was just ahead and to the right, horse and rider a dark silhouette against the shield of the moon. He half turned to face her, as if to inquire what the matter was.

And then she heard it, like a bad memory from the night before, the sound of crossbows, the thwack of bolts hitting home. Byrne's body shuddered with the impact of multiple blows. The gelding reared nervously, shaking his head, then screamed as he, too, was struck. Byrne clung for an instant like a thistle to his back, then toppled sideways from the saddle.

"BYRNE!" Raisa's scream reverberated in the small canyon. Heedless of the volleys of arrows that hissed past her and clattered against rock, she spurred Switcher forward to where her captain lay on his back in the snow. Sliding from the saddle, she knelt next to him, lifting his head. His body bristled with shafts, and one transfixing his throat. He tried to speak, but produced only a gush of blood. Lifting one arm, he weakly waved her off. Only the confusion and the wildly plunging horses had saved her thus far.

Someone grabbed her by the hair and yanked her upright. A gauntleted arm circled her waist and dragged her off her feet, shoving her belly-down across the saddle in front of him. Her captor kept her pinned in place with one arm while he spurred his mount to a gallop.

With the horror of Byrne's murder and the helpless jouncing against the horse's back and the kaleidoscopic view of the ground, Raisa nearly lost the contents of her stomach. No! she said furiously to herself. I'll find a way to make the bastards pay if it's the last thing I do! She concentrated on that thought, and made what plans she could.

The scent of pine and a reduction in the force of the wind told her they'd reentered the forest. Which side of the pass? she wondered. Her captor slowed his horse to a walk, apparently looking for some landmark. Finally he grunted in satisfaction and turned to the left. Another hundred yards, and he yanked on the reins, bringing the horse to a halt. He slid out of the saddle, then dragged Raisa down also, setting her on her feet, but keeping one beefy hand on her shoulder. She swung around to look at him.

She took in the stringy brown hair, the cruel slash of a mouth, the tobacco-spit eyes. He was the same soldier who had gashed Switcher's shoulder, but this time she recognized him.

Blood of the demon! Raisa thought. Can things get any worse?

One side of his face was puckered and scarred, evidence of a serious burn.

Raisa had been responsible for that.

He was clad in what looked like army-issue winter garb, but there was no signia on it anywhere. A discolored stubble covered the lower half of his face, lorded over by a broken nose.

Raisa knew where and how it had been broken.

Mac Gillen, she thought, and all the hope drained out of her.

She'd last seen Gillen at Southbridge Guardhouse, when she'd rescued members of the Ragers street gang from the dungeons where he'd been torturing them. She was the one who'd smashed a burning torch into his face. The other gang members had beaten him badly, payback for the treatment they'd received at his hands.

His belly cascaded over his sword belt, but Raisa had no illusions. He'd be all muscle underneath. He smelled of horse and sweat and general poor hygiene. He grinned wolfishly, revealing intermittent teeth stained with kafta nut in a jaw swollen and discolored where her boot had connected the night before.

Raisa looked about. They stood in front of a kind of rude cave, created where two slabs of rock leaned together. His horse was an upland breed, shaggy and wiry enough to negotiate mountain trails. Standard issue for the Queen's Guard.

A dozen wolves sat on their haunches in a semicircle around them, whining uneasily.

Gillen stared at her expectantly, waiting for her to speak. Raisa said nothing, knowing that nothing she said could possibly do her any good.

Finally, Gillen couldn't stand it any longer. "You wondering why you an't dead yet, girlie?" he said, scratching his privates.

None of the possibilities that came to mind were appealing. Raisa stood, feet spread slightly apart, and said nothing.

"I'm curious, y'see," Gillen said. "That's why I carried you off. I wanted to ask a few questions—just you and me." He took a step toward her, and she took one back. "We was told the Princess Raisa would be riding through here. But the only girlie that's come through here is you." He lifted his hands, palms up, in mock confusion. "The thing is, I know you, but you wasn't no princess when we met before."

Raisa shook her head. "You're mistaken," she said. "We've never met."

"You sure?" he said, crowding her back toward the entrance to the cave. "Maybe I looked different when you saw me before."

The gray wolves swarmed in around them, growling and snapping their jaws.

Right. I'm in danger, Raisa thought. Like I couldn't figure that out on my own.

"You sure your name an't Rebecca? Rebecca, sister to Sarie, the Ragmarket streetrat?" He pressed his palm against his ruined cheek. "The Rebecca what did this to me?"

Raisa continued to back away, shaking her head.

"You know, the girlies don't like me so well as they did," Gillen said, "with my face all scarred up like this."

You couldn't have been all that charming before, Raisa thought, but didn't say it aloud.

"I'm not who you think I am," she said. "Surely you can see that." She'd decided it was best not to be Rebecca just now. The only thing she could do was deny it, and keep denying it.

"You do talk different than before," Gillen said. He gave her a push, and she stumbled backward, barely keeping her feet. "You're like a whole different person, know what I mean?"

The wolves set up a chorus of yips.

Raisa glared at them. Either shut up or attack, she thought. Make yourselves useful.

"So what were you doing in Southbridge, Your Highness?" Gillen breathed, his hand closing around her throat. He pushed her back against the rock slab, pinning her. "You go down there to see how the other half lives? You got a soft spot for streetrats, is that it? You one of those blueblood ladies likes to walk on the wild side?"

Raisa pulled at Gillen's hand, trying to release the pressure. "If I'm like a different person, maybe it's because I'm not who you think I am." It wasn't easy to force her voice past Gillen's grip on her throat.

Desperately, she sorted through the street moves that Amon had taught her. Gillen's clothing was heavy enough to deflect some of the body blows she knew. And anything she did, it would have to take him down for good. She'd find no escape or rescue in the middle of the woods. She couldn't risk making him angrier than he was.

All this thinking took no more than a fraction of a second. Time seemed to have slowed to a creep, as if to stretch out what little remained of her life.

"Our orders are to kill you, Your Highness, but there's no reason I have to do it right off," Gillen said, his foul breath washing over her face. "So long as you end up dead, it don't matter. I think you owe me for what you done, and I'm going to make you pay."

"Sir. Whoever you are. I am not without resources. If you free me unharmed, my family will make it worth your while," Raisa said.

Gillen released a loud bray of laughter. "Your family? How do you know they an't the ones that hired us?" He slammed her head against the rock to emphasize his point.

Stars circled in front of her eyes. Her pulse pounded in her ears, and a bitter, metallic taste swelled in the back of her throat.

“Listen to me. I don’t have much money with me, but if you take me safely home, there’s a reward in it for you. If you kill me, you won’t have a moment’s peace for the rest of your life.”

He laughed. “I know better than to cross the one that hired me,” he said. “I learned my lesson on that. I’ll take my reward here and now.”

“Who hired you?” Raisa asked, thinking maybe he’d actually tell her.

Gillen just shook his head, grinning.

“Well, whoever it was, he won’t be happy when he finds out you killed the wrong person,” Raisa said.

Gillen gazed at her, brows drawn together, and she could see the wheels turning behind the piggy eyes. “I’m gonna take my time on this, know what I mean? I don’t want them others to come and interrupt.” He turned to his horse, dug into his saddlebag, and pulled out a coil of cording.

“Come on.” He shoved her roughly, sending her stumbling toward the cave. Another shove and she was inside, on her hands and knees, the rock and ice on the floor of the cave slicing into her palms. She quickly turned and gathered herself into a crouch. He loomed in the doorway, blotting out what little light there was.

“I’m going to tie you up and come back later,” he said, walking toward her, slapping the coil of cord against his hip. “I want to give you time to think about what’s gonna happen.”

Raisa debated, her thoughts seeming to reverberate inside her skull. There was the unlikely chance she could get free before Gillen returned. There was also a chance she’d freeze to death before he came back.

Freezing to death wasn’t a bad way to die. It seemed preferable to what Gillen had in mind.

But if she allowed herself to be bound up, she’d have given up any chance of fighting free. She was the descendant of Hanalea, the warrior queen. She would not die bound hand and foot in a cave. Or ravished and tortured to death by this traitorous lowlife.

She lifted both hands in appeal. “All ... all right. Just don’t hurt me.”

Gillen focused on her left hand, on the heavy gold wolf ring on her forefinger. “Gimme that ring,” he said. “I need something to take back, to prove you’re dead.”

Raisa pulled on the ring, struggling with it. “It’s too tight,” she said. “It won’t come off.”

“We’ll see about that,” Gillen said. “I’ll cut it off if I have to.” His hand snaked out, and he seized her left wrist, yanking at the ring with his right hand.

Raisa straightened her arm, allowing Byrne’s dagger to fall free of her right sleeve. She had to catch it, and she did, gripping the Lady hilt. Gillen was focused on the ring, wrenching at it, swearing.

Raisa rammed the blade through soiled wool and the soft flesh of his belly, up under the rib cage, as far as it would go, until the crosspiece rested against his shirt.

He screeched and let go of her hand. He tried to shove back from her, but she followed, keeping pressure on the blade with both hands now, twisting it with all her strength, knowing she’d have one chance, and one chance only, to deliver a killing stroke. If he survived the first one, she’d live to regret it, but not for very long.

Mac Gillen’s fist slammed into the side of her face and she flew backward, colliding with the stone wall of the cave. She lay there stunned for a few moments, swallowing blood from her bitten tongue, half expecting Gillen to come and finish her. But he didn’t. Finally, she lifted herself upright, propping herself against the wall to keep from falling over.

Gillen still lived, though he probably wouldn’t for long. The sergeant lay sprawled on his back on the floor of the cave, breathing wetly, an expression of sick bewilderment on his face, blood bubbling on his lips. He’d managed to yank out Raisa’s dagger, and it lay next to him, caked with blood and dirt.

She recalled what Cuffs Alister had said a lifetime ago: Next time you go to stab someone, do it quick. Don’t study on it so long.

He'd be proud, she thought. She hadn't hesitated with the blade, and she'd struck true. Was this progress—that a street killer would be proud of her?

And then she knelt on the floor of the cave and heaved out her midday meal. After, she cleaned out her mouth with a fistful of snow.

That's all right, she thought. Killing should never come easy, not even for a warrior princess. Gillen finally lay quiet, his eyes wide and fixed.

Retrieving her dagger, Raisa wiped it clean in the snow at the cave's entrance. She restored it to its sheath and tucked it into her breeches. She forced herself to search Gillen, hoping for clues or proofs of who'd hired him, but found nothing of consequence. A purse with a few coppers and crowns, and a hip flask—that was it.

It was unlikely he'd be carrying that kind of evidence anyway. What did she expect, a death warrant from the queen her mother? A scribbled note from Gavan Bayar? These were the kinds of orders that were whispered in the dark corners of the world.

Her head pounded and her right eye would no longer open properly. She pressed a fistful of snow against the side of her face, hoping it would reduce the swelling. All the while she tried to ignore the small voice that whispered, What's the use? You may as well surrender. You are totally alone now, and these hills are filled with your enemies. What was it Byrne had said? Well fed, well mounted, and well armed. And you have a dagger against them.

Recalling Gillen's concern about being interrupted, she knew she had to go, and quickly. Their trail would be easy enough to follow. Gillen's comrades might arrive at any moment.

Gillen's horse waited outside, apparently a well-trained military mount. The gelding rolled his eyes at her approach, but did not protest when she searched through the saddlebags. He was even more cooperative when she fished out an apple and fed it to him, stroking his nose.

Gillen's gear included a large heavy sword in a scabbard, a crossbow and a quiver of bolts. A bedroll and a canvas tent. One entire saddlebag was packed with trail food, which would prove useful, assuming she lived long enough to get hungry.

She fingered the crossbow. Unlike Byrne's longbow, it required no great strength to draw it. A memory came back to her: her eight-year-old self trailing Amon to the archery field. She'd refused to leave the butts until he gave her a chance at the crossbow. At first, the quarrels had gone wide of the straw target, but her aim improved quickly. Amon had loaded the first few bolts for her, then shown her how to cock it herself, his patient hands over hers.

On her next name day, her father, Averill, had gifted her with a longbow, made to fit her size and strength. That was her preferred weapon, but her bow had been left in the pass.

Fitting her foot into the weapon's stirrup, she spanned it, grateful for the muscles her year at Oden's Ford had built. She clipped the bolt into its channel. She'd have one shot, at least.

Methodically, she adjusted the stirrups to her small frame, wanting to hurry, but making sure she did it right. Leading the gelding alongside a fallen tree, she used the trunk to vault aboard.

A glance at the sky told her that dawn was not far away. By then she needed to get a better fix on her location and find a hiding place. If she weren't already dead or in the enemy's hands.

CHAPTER SIX

SIMON SAYS

The day after his meeting with Crow, Han rode in a kind of worried stupor. His head ached and his stomach churned, like he'd been drinking stingo and chasing it with blue ruin.

He would have made an easy target, had any of his enemies happened by. Fortunately, most of his fellow travelers were refugees simply intent on making it to a place of shelter for the night. If he nearly rode over a few, well, they managed to get out of the way.

Could it possibly be true, what Crow claimed—that the infamous Demon King of the Fells had lain fallow in the serpent jinxpiece that Han now carried? That the powerful evil he represented had never gone out of the world?

Han had been overconfident—even smug about his ability to manage risk when it came to Crow. His theories had been true—as far as they went—but nothing had prepared him for this. How could it possibly be safe to partner up with the Demon King?

The mean streets of Ragmarket seemed friendly and welcoming, their dangers completely manageable, next to this.

All of Han's life, the specter of the Demon King had been used as a cautionary tale to frighten misbehaving children and would-be sinners. He had been the club held over everyone's head, the justification for a peculiar system of rules and boundaries restricting the queen, the Wizard Council, and the clans.

Alger Waterlow was the reason the clans kept wizards on such a tight leash; the reason their amulets and talismans were no longer permanent. He'd done more than anyone else to birth the Church of Malthus, with its interdiction of magic. He'd been the reason the Seven Realms had fractured into seven warring pieces.

He'd broken the world.

And there was that connection of blood. How diluted could that bloodline be if Han carried such a virulent strain of magic? What else had he inherited?

Demon-cursed, Han's mother had called him. And it turned out she was right.

Would it be better or worse if Crow knew they were related? If he knew that Han Alister, a streetlord and thief, was his descendent? If he knew how far the family fortunes had fallen?

How could it be a good thing to forge a link to Waterlow that could never be broken? It was one thing to be related to a Demon King who had died a thousand years ago, and whose tainted blood had been diluted by centuries of intermarriage. It was quite another for him to be resurrected and entwined in Han's life.

Then again, Han was beginning to question everything he'd always believed. Who was he to preach sermons, after all? If Alger Waterlow and the Bayars were enemies, who would he choose between them? And Lucius—Lucius Frowsley had been Waterlow's best friend—a thousand years ago. He'd believed in him. Defended him to Han.

It had been difficult enough to go back to Aediion. Now Han was more confused than ever.

He arrived in Fetters Ford in early afternoon, on an unusually warm early spring day. He made his usual rounds of inns and taverns, asking after Rebecca. In one called the Purple Heron, the taproom was deserted, save a sturdy-looking boy wiping down tables.

The boy looked up at Han's approach, his round face wary. "If you're hungry, we got a ham we can slice down, and the bread's fresh made," he said, swiping sweat from his face with his sleeve. "If you're looking for a hot supper, you'll have to wait."

"I'm looking for a girlie," Han said.

“We don’t host that kind of trade,” the boy said. “You might try Dogbottom’s, down the high street.”

Han shook his head. “I’m looking for a particular girlie,” he said, wishing he had an image of Rebecca to show. “She’s small, with green eyes and black hair, maybe chin-length.” He stuck out his hand, indicating her height. “A mixed-blood. Pretty.”

The server’s head came up, and he glared at Han, his cheeks smudged pink. Then he turned away and resumed scrubbing like he meant to take the finish right off. “Don’t remember nobody like that,” he said.

Han stared at his broad back, made temporarily speechless by the server’s reaction. “Ah. Are you sure? She might have been with two charmcasters, tall ones, a girlie and a boy, about our age.”

“Nope.” The boy flung down his rag and moved to the hearth. Snatching up the iron poker, he thrust it into the flames. “If you’re not here for food and drink, you’d best move on.”

Han threaded his way between the tables, moving in closer. “Could have been a few weeks ago,” he persisted. “Are you sure you haven’t—?”

With a roar, the boy wheeled around and charged at Han, wielding the heated poker.

Han danced aside, hooking his foot around the boy’s ankle so he sprawled forward onto the stone floor, the poker pinwheeling across the room and clattering against the wall.

Han guessed this tavern boy hadn’t been in many street fights.

In a heartbeat, Han had planted his knee above the server’s tailbone and twisted his arm behind him until the boy cried out in pain.

“Twitch, and I’ll break your arm,” Han said through gritted teeth.

The boy said nothing, but he didn’t move, either.

“Now, then,” Han said softly. “Let’s have the truth. Start with your name.”

The server turned his head so Han could see one round eye. “S-Simon,” he said. “It’s Simon.”

“All right, Simon,” Han said. “Don’t waste my time. What do you know? When was she here, and who with?”

Simon shook his head carefully. “Do what you want, but I’m not telling you nothing,” he mumbled. “I’m not talking to any cutthroat, thieving highwayman.”

Han took a deep breath, his pulse accelerating. Keeping pressure on the arm, he put his free hand on Simon’s shoulder, allowing unchanneled flash to trickle into the tavern boy.

Simon twitched. “Hey! What do you think you—?”

“Simon,” Han said, lacing his speech with persuasion. “I don’t want to hurt her. I only want to find her and keep her safe.”

“You’re—you’re—you’re ...” And then he seemed to forget what he was about to say. Simon’s visible eye was going droopy-lidded. “I don’t know anything about any girlie. I don’t trust you.”

“There isn’t much time,” Han said. “She’s in danger. You have to help me.”

Tears pooled in Simon’s eyes, spilling down his cheeks. “It’s too late anyway. She’s dead.” He sniffled wetly. “It’s your fault.”

“What do you mean—she’s dead?” Han demanded, louder than he’d intended.

“Ow!” Simon said, thrashing under Han’s weight. “You’re burning me.”

Han let go of Simon’s shoulder and gripped his amulet, channeling the power torrenting through him. He lowered his voice, but somehow it came out sounding deadlier than before. “I’m going to let you sit up,” he said. “And then you’re going to tell me what happened. Right now.”

Han sat back on his heels, one hand on his amulet. Simon sat up, facing him, his expression sullen and wary and frightened. Han reached out and gripped the boy’s wrist and opened the flow of power.

Simon’s eyes fastened on Han’s face like he was witch-fixed as he stumbled into speech. “She stayed here three or four weeks. I could tell she was running from somebody, but it was like she was waiting for somebody, too—somebody to help her. She always wanted to know about who else was

in the taproom. Now I know. She was running from you,” Simon said bluntly, persuasion freeing his tongue.

Han said nothing, and Simon continued. “Two days ago, a group of rovers came in, and one of them—scruffy-looking, he was—he was bothering her, trying to buy her drinks and like that. Well, she’d have none of that. She told him off, then walked out in the stable yard, said she needed some air.” Simon gulped in some air himself. “An’ that’s the last I saw of her. I know she didn’t leave on her own. She left her things in her room, but her horse was gone, and them rovers that was bothering her, too.”

“What kind of rovers?” Han said. “Were they charmcasters? Soldiers?”

“I don’t know,” Simon said. “Could’ve been soldiers. Lots of sell-swords come and go these days, most not wearing colors. Not so many jinxfl—charmcasters. And the borderlands is full of thieves, murderers, and worse. These spoke Ardenine, but spent Fellsian coin.”

“Did she give a name?” Han persisted.

“Brianna. It was Lady Brianna. A trader.” Simon swiped at his nose.

Brianna. Well, Rebecca would have reason not to give her real name if she thought the Bayars were still after her.

“Describe her again,” Han said.

“She had copperhead blood,” Simon said, “but still you could tell she was a lady—not the kind that usually dines in taverns. She was gracious and kind—always a good word for ... for anybody.”

Simon was smitten—any fool could tell. But Han knew there was something Simon wasn’t saying.

“What else?” Han said, trickling more power into Simon. “What happened? Why do you think she’s dead?”

“Th—there was two other Tamron ladies were going to travel with her. Bluebloods. They followed her outside. We found them in the yard—stabbed to death and robbed. I’m guessing ’twas the same bunch.”

Han’s hopes turned to lead inside him. Was it possible Rebecca had come all this way on her own, only to be murdered or kidnapped by bully ruffins?

“But you didn’t find Lady Brianna’s body?” Without meaning to, Han tightened his grip on the boy’s arm.

Simon shook his head, his lip quivering. “N-no, but—there was blood everywhere. And she wouldn’t just leave, would she? Not without a good-bye. Not without her belongings.”

“Where are they now? Her belongings, I mean.”

Simon pressed his lips together and hung his head.

“Tell me,” Han said, beginning to lose patience.

“They’re in my room, but I didn’t steal them, if that’s what you’re thinking,” Simon added defensively. “I put them away for safekeeping. In case she came back.”

Only, Simon didn’t expect her to come back. Han could see it in his eyes.

“Show me,” Han growled, knowing Simon wasn’t at fault, but somehow unable to apologize.

Simon led Han back to a cubbyhole-size room behind the fireplace that might once have been the woodbin. The furnishings consisted of a pallet on the floor, a wooden trunk, and a small, sad shrine in the corner consisting of candles, flowers, and the missing girl’s belongings.

Simon pointed to the shrine. “There. That’s them.”

Han knelt next to it and sorted through the muddle. There wasn’t much—a few articles of clothing that seemed too big for Rebecca, and fancier than anything he’d ever seen her wear. Nothing looked familiar. But then, she’d left her belongings behind when she disappeared from Oden’s Ford.

Her horse was gone, Simon had said. So maybe she was still alive. It was the best clue he’d had so far. The only clue. If it was really her.

“What kind of horse did she ride?” Han asked.

“A flatland stallion,” Simon said. “A gray.”

A stallion. Traders rode ponies, as a rule. Someone else had seen a girlie matching Rebecca’s description riding a gray. But Rebecca had kept an upland pony cross in Oden’s Ford. A mare that had disappeared along with her.

If she’d been carried off alive by someone other than the Bayars, there was no telling where they’d gone.

Nothing fit together. Frustration boiled inside him, but there was nothing to do but press on.

Han finally arrived in Delphi in early afternoon. The city was, if anything, more crowded than he remembered. Now there were refugees from Tamron as well as Arden.

At least these were problems he didn’t have to solve. There was little news from the Fells, save the old story that the princess heir was still missing and that her younger sister might be made heir in her place. Of greatest interest to Delphi were the threats from the “copperhead savages” that they would close the border and interrupt trade between Delphi and Fellsmarch if the princess were set aside.

Han bypassed the Mug and Mutton, where he’d met up with Cat and outsharped the needle point. Had it been less than a year ago? He hoped Cat and Dancer were still walking out, immersed in their summer studies, far from the turmoil of his life.

He paid top-shelf prices for room and board at another inn, and replenished his supplies, enough to get him to Marisa Pines Camp, anyway. He wondered if the matriarch Willo Watersong would be there.

He regretted their strained parting when he left for Oden’s Ford. Yes, she had lied to him, she’d conspired with those who meant to use him. In a way it was a relief to learn that she wasn’t perfect. Maybe the hardest lesson Han had learned was that nobody is purely bad or good. Everybody seemed to be a mixture of both.

Han meant to set out for Marisa Pines Pass the next morning, but a spring storm came howling down from the north. A foot of snow fell in Delphi, and the livery man said that meant three or four feet would have fallen in the pass, and only an idiot would try to make it through before the weather settled.

Han knew about spring storms in the mountains, so he delayed a day. He spent that time walking from inn to inn to stable, asking if anyone had seen a green-eyed girlie traveling with two charmcasters. Or a pack of rovers. Or a girlie on her own. One tavern maid recalled a pair of charmcasters resembling Micah and Fiona passing through some weeks before. Nobody recalled anyone resembling Rebecca, with or without rovers.

She’s not dead, Han repeated to himself over and over. Delphi is a madhouse. It’s not surprising she wouldn’t be remembered.

When had she become so important to him?

He paid the stableman for extra grain rations for Ragger, and the pony stuffed himself.

“Don’t get used to the soft life,” Han murmured, more to himself than to the rugged pony. He bought himself a pair of snowshoes at the market in Delphi, gritting his teeth at the price.

He left Delphi before dawn the day after the storm, a day that promised to be brilliantly clear. He’d debated waiting another day, letting other travelers break trail for him through the pass. But more bad weather was closing in, another early spring storm, and he decided he’d better travel while he could. By the time that weather hit, he hoped to be snug in Marisa Pines.

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE LADY SWORD

The crossing into the Fells was anticlimactic, compared to last time. Han kept hold of his amulet, his hand stuffed into his coat as if for warmth. A bundled-up bluejacket pried himself out of his warm guardhouse to give Han the once-over and wave him on. It seemed that Fellsian eyes were turned inward now, focusing on the drama surrounding the princesses. No one seemed to care if a lone rider crossed into the north.

Han was oddly disappointed. He'd almost hoped for a confrontation, like any sword-dangler wanting to try out his shiny new weapons.

Ragger was downright frisky as they began the gentle climb that led to the pass, crow-hopping and tossing his head, trying to wrench the reins out of Han's hands.

"Better save your strength," Han said. "You'll be complaining before long."

It was the same road he'd traveled with Dancer eight months before, transformed by the recent snowfall. It was hard to say how much had fallen. In some places the wind had piled it into drifts higher than Han's mounted height. Other places were scoured clean, down to bare rock. Once the sun rose, light glittered on the peaks, setting every twig and icy rock face aflame.

Han hadn't much experience traveling in early spring in the mountains. He'd spent his summers in the mountain camps, his winters running the streets of Fellsmarsh. As they climbed, the temperature dropped, the clear sky seeming to suck up the heat of Han's body, no matter how many clothes he layered on. He drew heat from his amulet, using bits of flash to warm his hands and frozen face.

Even in summer, the weather in the mountains was changeable and treacherous, but Han was surprised how much the deep snow slowed him down. The road became a trail, threading between great blocks of stone that blocked the wind and drifting snow, at least.

It wasn't long before Ragger stopped his prancing and dancing and bore down for the long haul, laying his ears back along his head. Han rested him frequently, graining him at every stop from an already dwindling supply.

It was past midday when Han came on a clan way house, called Way Camp, which lay a few hundred yards off the main road. He and Dancer had stayed there on their way south back in autumn. Han turned off the road toward the camp, thinking he could rest Ragger under shelter this time.

Han was tempted to stay the night. The Demonai often stocked the way camps with food and other supplies, especially this time of year. Han had chosen to travel light since he'd assumed he'd reach Marisa Pines by nightfall.

But if they stayed, they might be overtaken by the next storm, and then there was no telling how long they'd be stranded there. He decided that if the camp were provisioned, they'd stay and weather the storm under shelter. Otherwise, they'd push on through the pass, hoping to beat the snow.

When they reached the clearing, Han recognized the small cabin and attached lean-to for horses, layered with snow. Ragger went balky at the edge of the trees. He skidded to a stop, tossing his head, nostrils flaring as if picking some dangerous scent out of the razor-sharp air.

That was when Han noticed the bodies.

There were eight or ten scattered in bunches, like they'd gone down fighting together. Snow shrouded them in a rumpled coverlet as if the Maker had tried to put them to rest.

Easing his bow from his saddle boot, Han fumbled with the bowstring with half-frozen fingers, drew an arrow from his quiver, and nocked it, all the while scanning the camp for signs of life.

Nothing—no disturbance in the pristine snow cover. The snow frosted the corpses, unmelted, so the bodies were cold. This killing had happened at least a day ago.

It reminded Han of the time he'd passed through a dark cemetery in Ragmarket after the resurrection men had been at work. He'd realized to his horror that he was surrounded by linen-wrapped corpses, spilled everywhere on the ground, shallow graves yawning beside them. He'd fled the burying ground, screaming. He'd been seven years old at the time, the same age as his sister Mari when she burned to death.

When Ragger finally settled, Han heeled him into a walk, circling the clearing, staying within the fringe of trees, alert for any movement in the surrounding forest. The cabin seemed deserted. The snow billowed up against the door undisturbed.

Han dismounted and led Ragger forward. Keeping hold of the reins, he knelt next to the first body, brushing away the snow.

It was a tall, sturdy girlie, a little older than Han. She had the look of a sword-dangler, though she wore no emblem of allegiance. Her coat was crusted with frozen blood, and a crossbow bolt centered her chest.

Could she be a mercenary come up from the south? Had she run into a Demonai scouting party? No, the Demonai used longbows as a rule, and black-fletched arrows.

Ragger's head came up and he whinnied out a challenge. Han swiveled on his knees, aiming his arrow into the woods in the direction the horse was pointing.

A riderless bay horse stood at the edge of the trees, ears pricked forward, watching them.

Han lowered his bow. Once he'd assured himself the horse was on his own, he called out softly, "You there. Where's your owner?"

The horse staggered toward them, nearly going down, and that was when Han noticed the bolts feathering the gelding's shoulder and neck. He was sturdy, standard Fellsian military issue, with a shaggy winter coat. He was fully tacked—obviously a casualty of the recent battle, or ambush, or whatever it was.

When the horse came within reach, Han held out his hand and the gelding lipped at it. There was a carry bag slung over the saddle, and Han lifted it down, murmuring soothingly to the badly wounded animal.

Han poked through the contents of the bag—a soldier's kit. In a side pocket was a pay voucher from the Queen's Guard of the Fells, made out to one Ginny Foster, Private.

What were bluejackets doing out here in the middle of a storm, all out of uniform?

Han made a quick circuit of the killing field, clearing snow away from two or three more bodies. All were dressed in nondescript traveling garb, most young.

Whose side were they on? Who had killed them? Had any of them escaped? And where were the killers now?

It didn't seem wise to linger here, even though the battle was long over. If the killers were still in the area, they might return to this shelter when the new storm hit.

Han came up alongside the injured horse. It stood, head down, breathing hard. It would probably go down for good after a day or two of suffering.

"Hey, now," he said, reaching around under the bay's neck, probing with his fingers, finding the hot vein, gripping his amulet with his other hand.

"It's all right," he whispered, following with one of the deadly charms Crow had taught him.

The bay went down easily, but Han still shivered. It was the second time he'd killed with magic, the first he'd killed intentionally. Maybe it would get easier with time.

Han took a quick look inside the cabin, finding nothing of value except a sack of frozen oats in the lean-to, which he took.

Mounting up again, Han pulled his serpent amulet free, letting it rest on the outside of his coat. He slid his bow into his saddle boot, within easy reach, though he hoped the raiders or invaders or whoever they were had moved on.

For the rest of the afternoon, Han climbed as the sun descended toward the West Wall. As he approached the pass, he saw that others had come this way since the storm. Though the trail was drifted over in spots, elsewhere the snow was beaten down, pockmarked with hoofprints.

Han pressed on cautiously, acutely aware that anyone ahead of him could look back down the mountain and see him crawling up the slope behind them. In fair weather, he'd have given the strangers plenty of time to put distance between them, but a scrim of cloud had appeared on the horizon. He had no choice. The next storm was closing in, and there was no other path through this side of the West Wall.

As he passed through the narrowest part of the pass, his nerves screamed and his skin prickled. He knew it was a prime place for an ambush. Magic or not, a bolt between his shoulder blades would take him down quick.

Arrows were faster than jinxes—isn't that what he'd told Micah Bayar a century ago?

He navigated the pass unmolested, pausing a moment at the highest point to scan the long descent in front of him. The snow was scuffed up and tumbled about, and it had happened recently. Something lay across the trail just ahead, black against the snow.

It was another body, bristling with arrows. A fresher kill, and clean of snow, so it must have happened since the storm.

Han sat motionless for a long moment, his eyes searching the downslope ahead of him. He scanned the masses of stone to either side of the trail, in case archers waited to ambush him there. The wind pitched fine snow into his face, stinging like glittery ground glass.

He was getting much too close to this action. He had no intention of dying here, within a day of his destination. But he couldn't stay here either, not with bad weather coming.

He nudged Ragger forward at a slow walk, murmuring reassurances he didn't believe himself. He rode up alongside the body and sat looking down at him.

The man lay on his face, arms stretched out ahead of him as if he hoped he could still go forward. Blood spattered the snow all around him. He was tall, broad-shouldered, dressed like the dead soldiers back at Way House. Whoever had attacked him meant to make sure of him—Han counted eight arrows sticking out of him before he left off numbering them.

The snow surrounding the body was trampled down, boot-prints and hoofprints of at least a dozen riders. Han examined the tracks descending toward Marisa Pines Camp. They'd left at a dead run. Afraid they'd be caught? Or still chasing someone?

Was this one last straggler from the attack at Way Camp? Why had they been so eager to finish him off? It was almost as if this man was such a dangerous person that they wanted to kill him extra dead.

Robbers or southern renegades wouldn't worry about one survivor, would they? Soldiers never carried much money, not even right after payday. In Ragmarket, everybody knew they were not worth slide-hand, let alone a hard rush.

Anyway, they'd left Ginny Foster's pay voucher behind.

It didn't make sense—unless they'd served as guard to something valuable—trade goods, maybe. Maybe whoever had attacked them didn't want anyone carrying tales back to the capital.

Wary as he was of being ambushed, Han would have ridden on by, except that he saw something glittering in the snow next to the dead soldier.

Taking a quick look around, Han dismounted and knelt next to the body. It was a sword, lying half under the dead man.

Made itchy by the notion of stealing from the dead, Han gently turned the body over, freeing the sword.

It was a beautiful piece, the hilt and cross-guard worked in gold, in the form of a lady with flowing hair.

His attackers must've been in a real hurry, to leave it behind.

No simple soldier carried a blade like this. It was the kind of movable that was handed down in blueblood families. Could this man be a noble in disguise?

He studied the man's face for clues. He was older than the others he'd seen—of middle age, with graying hair in a military cut, his gray eyes staring out accusingly. There was something familiar about that face, about those gray eyes.

Han shivered, making the Maker's sign, as if someone had walked over his own grave. Ah, Alister, he thought, shaking his head. You're likely going all romantic about a thief and his stolen sword.

With his thumb and forefinger, Han gently closed the soldier's eyes. The body was still faintly warm, and hadn't stiffened up completely. He lifted the soldier's hands and pressed them together across his chest. Then sat back, staring, his heart thumping.

The soldier wore a heavy gold ring on his right hand, engraved with circling wolves.

He'd seen rings like that before.

A memory came back to him: Rebecca's Corporal Byrne smashing him up against a wall in Oden's Ford, his hand in a choke hold around his neck, demanding to know where Rebecca was.

When Byrne had released him, Han had noticed the ring he wore. Wolves. Just like this one. Just like the ring Rebecca Morley had worn. At the time, Han had thought maybe she and her corporal had exchanged love tokens.

Now when he looked into the dead man's face, he saw a reflection of the younger Byrne—the same gray eyes, the same bone structure. This was Corporal Byrne's father. It had to be.

"Blood and bones," Han said. The knowledge birthed more questions than it answered.

The elder Byrne was captain of the bluejackets. Han recalled that day in Southbridge when the younger Byrne had saved him from a beating by Mac Gillen, a brutal sergeant in the guard.

Maybe you're the son of the commander, and maybe you go to the academy. That don't mean nothin', Gillen had sneered.

The dead soldiers—they were bluejackets for sure, then. Members of the Queen's Guard traveling without uniforms.

So somebody had murdered a party of bluejackets in Marisa Pines Pass? But why? And who? Only the Demonai came to mind—if tensions between the clans and the Valefolk had erupted into conflict—but the Demonai warriors didn't use crossbows.

And why would the guard ride unbadged? They must have crossed the border at Marisa Pines Pass. Were they coming back from some secret mission in the south?

Han didn't know much about military matters, but he'd thought the Highlander army was supposed to handle spats across borders. Not the Queen's Guard, who were more like bodyguards or constables. Their natural enemies were thieves, assassins, and other city criminals who would never attack soldiers traveling in a pack.

Whoever it was, whatever their purpose, it wasn't Han's fight. He had no use for bluejackets. They'd killed his mother and sister, had burned them to death in a stable. They'd hunted Han relentlessly for murders he didn't commit. He didn't owe them anything. He told himself this while he tried to put poor dead Ginny Foster out of his mind. While he tried to ignore Captain Byrne's body lying in the middle of the trail.

Han and Amon Byrne had had their differences, mostly over Rebecca, but Byrne the Younger had stuck up for Han when nobody else did. Corporal Byrne seemed to have scruples at a time when scruples were scarce.

Han considered the blade, thinking he should leave it with Byrne, lay it next to him or press it into his hands. It seemed to belong with him, somehow.

But if he left it there, the next traveler through the pass would just take it and sell it in the markets.

I should take this to lytling Byrne, Han thought. He should have it—and the ring—along with the story of how his father had died.

Carefully, he slipped the gold ring off Byrne's finger and tucked it into his purse.

That done, Han knew he'd better be on his way. He felt exposed, perched on high ground as he was. Danger thickened the air in the pass, making it hard to breathe.

But somehow it didn't seem right to leave without some sort of ceremony.

Captain Byrne had died fighting. What did a person do for a soldier? After a moment's thought, Han drew his own knife and put it between the dead man's hands, the hilt pointing toward his head. He wasn't much for praying, but he bowed his head over the body and commended Captain Byrne to the Maker and the Lady.

Han carried the sword back to Ragger, who was looking on disapprovingly. He slid the blade into his saddle boot next to his longbow and mounted up, thinking his home country was shaping up to be more dangersome than foreign places had ever been.

CHAPTER EIGHT

ENDINGS AND BEGINNINGS

Raisa found her hiding place at daybreak in a small ravine a few hundred yards off the main trail down into Marisa Pines Camp. There the trail ran over solid rock, and the wind had swept it clean of snow, making it hard for anyone following to tell where she'd turned off. After she stowed Gillen's gelding at the head of the ravine, she went back with a pine bough and did her best to brush away the tracks leading away from the road.

She fed and watered the horse, but left him saddled and ready to ride. She built a fire under an overhang, and huddled next to it, eating Gillen's hardtack and sausage.

This might be your last meal, she thought, recalling all the elaborate banquets she'd attended at Fellsmarch Castle.

In fact, she was ravenous, and it tasted wonderful. She loved eating while breathing in the cold clear air, and being alive. She'd never really appreciated it before.

She'd learned so much in the past year—would it all go to waste now?

I'm only sixteen, she thought. I've got plans.

If she died in the mountains, Han Alister would never know what had happened to her.

And Amon. He was still alive—he had to be. She could feel energy singing along the connection between them. He would know she was in danger. He'd be frantic to get to her.

"I'm sorry," she whispered. "I'm so sorry about your father. Stay alive and hurry home. I need you more than ever now."

It was tempting to press on when safety seemed within her grasp. Marisa Pines Camp was an easy day's ride away, if the weather stayed clear. She was tempted to make a run for it, to trust that she could evade her would-be assassins a little while longer.

But they would be waiting for her somewhere along the trail. They knew exactly where she was going, and they would bend all their efforts toward preventing her safe arrival. It was a bright sunny winter day. Everywhere she went she left tracks over the virgin snow cover. Each time she broke out of the trees she'd be visible for miles, a dark spot on white. Better to wait for the cover of darkness and then proceed cautiously, creeping off-trail whenever she could. Perhaps one person, alone in the dark, could slide through the traps they'd no doubt laid for her.

Sometimes inaction demanded more strength from a person than action.

She tried to look ahead, tried to convince herself she would make it to safety, that all of this struggle would not be in vain. She was determined to stay alive, to take vengeance on those who had murdered Edon Byrne. Who had tried their best to murder her.

At Marisa Pines, she could finally rest under the protection of the clans, and properly mourn those who had paid for her passage with their lives. Once there, she could send word to her mother the queen about the attack in the pass and the loss of her captain.

It was a grave attack on the queen's authority. Maybe it would wake Queen Marianna to the real dangers circling the Gray Wolf throne. Perhaps Marianna would be willing to travel to Demonai Camp, as Elena had suggested, and allow clan healers to verify whether the High Wizard was still bound to the queen. They could determine how much damage Gavan Bayar had done and find a way to undo it.

If Raisa survived, she swore that she would bend all her efforts to helping her mother win this most important of battles. They would join together—mother and daughter, queen and princess heir. If Marianna would allow that, after Raisa's year in exile.

They represented the Gray Wolf line—and nothing could stand against them.

Even Mellony could have a role to play. Raisa would seek out her younger sister, would quit seeing her only as a rival for power and her mother's affections.

A brush with death could be the midwife to wisdom and good intentions. She prayed she would live long enough to carry them out.

Thus resolved, Raisa curled up next to the fire. She should sleep—she would need to be clearheaded tonight.

But sleep was long in coming. Danger pressed in on her from all sides. It weighed her down, flattening her against the ground. Several times, her eyes flew open when some small sound startled her.

When she finally fell asleep, she dreamed a series of vivid scenes, like fever dreams, or the images in a clan memory stone.

She lay next to Han Alister on the roof of the Bayar Library at Oden's Ford, her head pillowed on his shoulder. Fireworks burst overhead, raining flame down on them. Suddenly, he rolled over, pressing her onto the roof tiles, his knife at her throat. "What are the rules for walking out?" he demanded. "Who can you kiss, and how often, and who starts?"

"I don't know," she said. "I don't know the rules."

And he looked at her with those riveting blue eyes, brushed her cheek with his hot fingers, and whispered, "What are you afraid of? Thieves or wizards?"

The scene dissolved, and she was a small child again, cuddled on her mother's lap. Marianna read through a picture book while Raisa tangled her fingers in her mother's glittering hair.

After that, she dreamed of a long-ago picnic on Hanalea. Her mother pelted her father with hard rolls when he teased her. "Next time I'll choose a wife whose aim is not so good," Averill said, laughing.

The scene shifted. Marianna sat next to the pompous Duke of Chalk Cliffs, who thought himself quite the ladies' man. The duke chattered on and on about his hunting lodge in the Heart-fangs and how she should come visit. Marianna looked down the long table to where Raisa sat, and raised an eyebrow, her mouth quirking in a half-smile. Her mother could say more with one small gesture, one shift in expression, than Speaker Redfern in an hour-long sermon.

Finally, Raisa, Mellony, Marianna, and Averill snuggled together in a sleigh, riding out at solstice to see the fireworks. Marianna's cheeks were rosy with the cold, and she laughed like a young girl. Raisa sat between her parents, holding their hands, the link between them. It made her feel cozier than the fur throws tucked in around them.

There followed more visions, new and unfamiliar. Not her own memories, then. Clairvoyance? Foretelling? Or the recent past?

Her mother knelt in the Cathedral Temple, head bowed, hands clasped in front of her, tears running down her face. Speaker Jemson knelt next to her, one hand on her shoulder, speaking softly. Marianna was nodding, she was speaking, too, but Raisa could not make out the words.

Marianna at her desk in her privy chamber, scrawling words across a page, spattering ink in her haste. Speaker Jemson and Magret stood by as witnesses. The queen signed her name, blew on the page to dry the ink, rolled and tied it, and handed it to Jemson.

Queen Marianna stood on her balcony in her tower bedroom, looking out over the city, her hands resting on the stone railing. The city sparkled under a light blanket of snow, the spring bulbs poking through. It was late afternoon, and the sun was descending, casting long blue shadows wherever it could slide between the buildings.

Beyond the castle close, children played in the park, and Marianna watched them in their brilliant colors spin and collide and pop up again, the sound of their laughter carrying in the softening spring air. Marianna smiled to see them, tucking her hands under her arms to warm them.

The queen heard another sound, this time behind her, and she started to turn.

“Mother!” Raisa jackknifed to a sitting position, suddenly wide awake, her heart flailing painfully in her chest. She’d slept the whole day through, and it was nearly dusk. The fire had long since died, and what heat the spring sun had provided was rapidly dissipating. Gillen’s horse looked at her, snorting clouds of vapor.

Her cry seemed to echo, reverberating among the peaks, the tombs of the dead queens all around her. At first it was Mother! and then it seemed to change to Marianna! Repeated over and over and over until it faded to silence.

“Mother,” Raisa repeated, softly this time, and yet still the mountains heard. They took up the refrain again. Marianna! Only this time they named off the line of queens.

Marianna ana’Lissa ana’Theraise ana’ ... and so on, all the way back to Hanalea. The names echoed and clamored through the mountains like the tolling of a great bell. There had been thirty-two queens in the millennium since Hanalea healed the Breaking. The mountains named them all.

Raisa had always felt embedded, safe in these mountains, connected to the future and the past. Now she felt like a loose thread dangling, the entire web threatening to unravel. Or like a sapling ripped out of the soil and left to die. She closed her eyes, sending up a wordless prayer.

When she opened her eyes, she was ringed by wolves, larger than any she had ever seen before. Gray wolves in all the colors that gray can be. Their eyes were blue and green and golden and black.

“Go away,” she whispered, putting up her hands for defense. “Leave me alone.”

One wolf padded forward, stepping lightly over the snow, regarding Raisa with wise gray eyes. The others parted to give her room.

“Greetings, Raisa ana’Marianna,” the wolf said. “We are your sisters, the Gray Wolf queens.” The she-wolf sat down, curling her fluffy tail around her feet. “Isn’t it a shame,” she said, cocking her head, “that we become queens only in the pain of losing our mothers?”

“I need to rest,” Raisa said. “I have a long way to go tomorrow.” She drew her knees up, wrapping her arms around them. “I’ve had enough dreams for one night.”

“And we as queens birth our successors only in the pain of our own deaths,” a green-eyed wolf said, as if Raisa hadn’t spoken. “But the knowledge that our daughters follow us eases our passage.”

The gray-eyed wolf nudged Raisa’s knee with her nose. “You are not alone. If you concentrate, you can feel the connection all the way back through the Gray Wolf line.”

“We serve as advisers to the reigning queens,” the green-eyed wolf said, “only when the situation is dire. Like now.”

“Well, I’ve been seeing you for months,” Raisa said, shivering. “Why haven’t you spoken to me before?”

“Your mother could no longer hear us,” the green-eyed wolf said. “That’s why we came to you.”

“Althea,” the gray-eyed wolf said reprovingly.

“Well, it’s true,” Althea said. “Raisa may as well know. The Bayar blocked up Queen Marianna’s ears so she could not hear our warnings.”

“Why should I listen to you?” Raisa said. “You might be hallucinations, or demons conjured by my enemies. Or a bad dream,” she said hopefully.

“You must listen to us,” the gray-eyed wolf said. “You have many enemies. Unless you take action, they will destroy the Gray Wolf line.”

“That’s why I’m going home,” Raisa said. “To help my mother the queen. For too long we have not heard each other.”

The wind stirred the treetops, whispering, Marianna.

The wolves stirred, too, looking at each other, snapping their jaws and whining.

“The line now hangs by a thread,” the gray-eyed wolf said. “And you are that thread, Raisa ana’Marianna.”

It was so close to her thoughts that Raisa shivered again.

“My mother and I are in danger,” Raisa said. “Is that what you’re saying?”

“Beware of someone who pretends to be a friend,” Althea said. “Look close to home for your enemies.”

“Why is prophesy always so bloody cryptic?” Raisa said. “Why can’t you just flat-out tell me what’s going on?”

The wolves rose, as if at a common signal.

“This is the message we bring you, Raisa ana’Marianna, descendent of the queens of the Seven Realms,” Althea said. “You must fight for the throne. You must fight for the Gray Wolf line. You must not allow yourself to be ensnared as Marianna was. The future of the realm balances on a knife’s edge.” She bowed her head and turned away, moving off at a trot.

The others followed, all but the gray-eyed wolf. She tilted her head, regarding Raisa thoughtfully, as if taking her measure. Raisa thought she saw sympathy in the she-wolf’s eyes.

“Raisa ana’Marianna, my sisters speak the truth, but it is incomplete. Do not make the mistakes that I made. Choose your friends carefully. Never forget that two threads spun together are stronger than one of double thickness.”

“My mother and I,” Raisa whispered. “Is that what you mean?”

The she-wolf glanced over her shoulder, as if worried about being overheard by her sister queens, then turned back to Raisa. “Know that sometimes you must choose duty over love. Do not forget duty. But choose love when you can.”

Raisa stared at her. “Who are you?” she whispered.

“I am Hanalea ana’Maria, who shattered the world.”

“But . . .” As Raisa groped for words, Hanalea bowed her head and turned away. She broke into a lope, ears back, tail streaming behind her, disappearing into the shadows under the trees.

Raisa opened her eyes again. She lay on her back, staring up at the treetops. The cold and wet had seeped through her coat. Snow sifted down on her as the wind stirred the branches.

Marianna, they whispered.

She sat up, her head still clouded by the remnants of dreams, a knot of dread in her middle.

So it was a dream. But what did it mean, this twilight visitation? Was it a nightmare born of worry? A premonition of something that might occur? An obscure parable symbolizing something completely different?

It was said that the Gray Wolf queens had the gift of prophesy, but she’d never seen it in her mother, Marianna. Was this how the messages came—from gray wolves in a dream?

Or perhaps it was just that—a dream. The remnant and consequence of a tragic day.

Could she trust in a tradition of magic that seemed to have gone dormant—relics of a past when wizards behaved, amulets lasted forever, and queens knew what they were doing.

What would she find when she returned to Fellsmarch? What was the danger so potent that the wolves had issued this warning?

She had to know. She had to know now.

She scrambled to her feet. As she did so, she saw that the snow all around her campsite was pocked with pawprints the size of luncheon plates.

Wolfprints.

Bloody bones, she thought. Maybe she was losing her mind.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered to Gillen’s horse, who’d stood saddled all this time. He’d managed to scrape his back against a tree, knocking the saddle askew. She released the bit long enough to feed and water him again, then tightened the girth and mounted up.

When she emerged from the dark narrow canyon, more daylight remained than she expected. The last rays of the sun reflected back from the snow, illuminating the road before her. She looked up and down the trail, then turned north, toward Marisa Pines Camp.

Raisa walked the gelding off the trail when she could, though it made for slower going, hoping it would prevent her being spotted by anyone looking down from above. She kept Gillen's cocked crossbow next to her, knowing that her one shot was unlikely to save her.

It was all she could do to keep the gelding reined in, when what she wanted to do was break into a gallop, to race all the way to safety. Occasionally she stopped and listened, hearing only the movement of branches overhead and the hiss of snow on snow.

Those hunting her would be proceeding cautiously also, not wanting to miss her in their haste. Or maybe they had set a trap and were sitting like spiders, waiting for her to fall into it.

She did her best to stay alert to her surroundings, to live outside of her head. She couldn't afford to dwell on all the decisions that had brought her to this place, where life and death intersected. Her future—her life depended on this small space of time on this narrow road that led from Delphi, through Marisa Pines Pass, and down to the camp.

Where are the Demonai? she thought. Why couldn't they be patrolling this stretch of road?

Raisa eased her white-knuckled grip on the reins as the light dwindled. Perhaps she could move a little faster now, at least until the moon rose. But the lack of light made traveling off-trail more dangerous. If her horse sprained his leg, she was done. So she risked the trail more often, making better speed in places where the trees closed overhead and hid her from prying eyes.

How many of them were out there, she wondered. How many had died at the hands of her guard? Would they split up or stay together? Would some ride the trail, hoping to overtake or intercept her, while others lay hidden along the way?

Raisa scanned the forward trail, trying to spot likely ambushes, but the darkness hid them as well as it hid her. Ahead, the trail threaded through a narrow gorge, running alongside the frozen-over stream at the bottom. She could see tracks—evidence that horses had passed this way since the storm.

She told herself that just because horses had passed this way didn't mean they were still here. Anyway, there was no other way through. Keeping close to the canyon wall, lying flat so she wouldn't be silhouetted against the entrance, she walked the gelding into the gorge.

The element of surprise was what saved her. The men waiting in the canyon had likely been waiting for hours with nobody to kill, and so were less alert than they might have been.

Halfway through the gorge, Raisa saw a flicker of movement against the opposite canyon wall. A horse whinnied a greeting, and Gillen's horse answered.

Boots scraped against rock as soldiers scrambled for the weapons they'd laid aside.

She drove her heels against the gelding's sides, and he spurted forward. Behind her, somebody swore a Northern oath. A shout went up, clamoring against stone.

As they exploded from the mouth of the canyon, Raisa urged her horse to even greater speed. They flew down the narrow corridor between the trees, risking life and limb in the near-darkness. Behind her, she could hear the rattle of hooves on stone evolve into the thunder of pursuit.

The gelding seemed eager to run after his long night hobbled in one spot, and Raisa gave him his head. Trees blurred by, the wind of their passing fierce against her face. She might end up thrown over a precipice, but she'd be dead if they were overtaken anyway.

She considered her chances of making it all the way to Marisa Pines Camp ahead of her pursuers. Her gelding was fresh, and she was lightweight compared to those chasing her. But she didn't know the trail, and she didn't know whether they'd laid other traps for her. Anyone could hear them coming a mile away.

They broke out of the trees and crossed a broad meadow. Hearing crossbows behind her, she ripped back and forth across the meadow, something the Demonai had taught her. The bolts hissed past, none coming close. But her zigzag pattern slowed her down, and when she looked back, the assassins had gained on her.

Once again, she regained the shelter of the trees, but couldn't seem to open more space between her and the riders behind her. At a rough count, there seemed to be a half dozen.

To either side she saw wolves loping through the woods, ears back, legs extending and bunching, easily keeping pace.

Couldn't you cross in front of them, scare their horses or something? she thought.

Foam flew from the gelding's mouth, and his pace dwindled a bit. How long could he keep going? The other horses had to be tiring as well. More so than hers.

They funneled between two great slabs of rock into another canyon.

Blood and bones! Up ahead, two riders on either side of the trail angled forward to block her way, crossbows dangling loosely in their hands, grinning.

Raisa looked wildly to either side. The canyon was narrow here, and there was no way to ride around them. She heard shouts of victory from the riders behind her when they saw that she was trapped between them.

Anger sparked within her. These were cowards and traitors, attacking her eight on one.

She wrestled Gillen's heavy sword free of its scabbard. Extending it ahead of her like a pike, she drove her heels into the gelding's sides.

"For Hanalea the Warrior!" she shouted, barreling forward, straight at the riders in her way. The grins fell from their faces, replaced by surprise and panic. They wrenched at their horses' reins, trying to drag their mounts out of the way.

The sword point drove into the neck of one of the horses as Raisa thundered by. The horse screamed, and Raisa let go immediately to avoid being dragged from her own mount.

A crossbow sounded at close range, and something slammed into her upper back, pitching her to the ground. She landed flat on her face, and the gelding came and stood over her, dripping foam on her neck. She pushed to her feet, trying to ignore the pulsing pain in her back and the numbness and tingling in her left arm.

The other assassins were bottled up behind the two who'd ambushed her, but they'd be on top of her in no time. Reaching for the pommel of the saddle, Raisa tried to remount but found her arm nearly useless, the pain too stunning to manage it. Instead, she hooked down the crossbow and raced in among the tumble of rocks at one end of the canyon. She began to climb, her breath hissing between her teeth, tears running down her face. Whenever she stretched and moved and reached up, the bolt in her back shifted and the wound blazed with pain and her head swam.

She was putting off the inevitable, but she was too angry to care. To be taken so close to her destination by the traitors who'd murdered Edon Byrne was unacceptable. The only way to avenge his death was to survive, but just now that was looking less and less possible.

She climbed until she could climb no further, then wedged herself into a crevice. She set her crossbow next to her right side, her Lady dagger on her left. They could pry her out like a mollusk from the cliffs along the Indio. She'd make them pay a small price, at least.

Did they know she was wounded? Maybe not.

She felt blood trickling down her back from the entry point under her left shoulder blade. Oddly, the pain in her back was diminishing, replaced by a spreading numbness. Had the point damaged a nerve?

She heard someone shouting from below, someone she couldn't see.

"Let's not prolong this. You'll never get away on foot. Surrender now, and you'll not be harmed. Resist, and I make no guarantees."

Right, Raisa thought. We do have our faults, but stupidity doesn't run in the Gray Wolf line. She made no response.

After a long moment, she heard the officer shouting out orders. The men would be spreading out, searching the canyon. She heard rock clattering on rock, men swearing, the sound of them climbing all around her.

Then, across the canyon, one of the renegade soldiers came into view, hoisting himself onto a small ledge. Straightening, he looked around. When he saw Raisa, he grinned, crooking a finger at her.

“Merkle!” he shouted, looking back the way he’d come. “Up here! She’s—”

Raisa lifted the crossbow and shot him through the mid chest, as she’d been taught. He stumbled backward, disappearing from sight. She heard the others shouting when he hit the ground.

That might slow them down a bit, anyway, she thought. She felt peculiar, her thoughts tangled and slow. Her lips and tongue were numb, and she could no longer feel her fingers on her left hand.

She blinked away a double image, and then she knew. Poison. The arrow point was daubed with poison.

Eight on one isn’t enough, then, she thought. No. We have to use poison. So much for notions of fair play. If she’d had any to start with.

Her stubborn confidence drained away. How could she fight poison? It would be plant-based, likely of clan make. The clans produced some remarkable poisons.

She’d bled a lot at first, but she no longer felt blood trickling down her back. Was that good or bad? If she kept bleeding, might she bleed out some of the poison?

It was potent, all right. Her vision blurred and rippled, and her muscles twitched. The rocks around her shivered and quaked. Wolves moved like shadows through the darkness, whining, pressing their warm bodies against her as if somehow they could keep her in the world.

She could only hope she’d be dead before they found her.

Now she heard more commotion down below, men shouting at each other. What was that all about?

Time passed—in her muddled state, she wasn’t sure how much. She thought they would have found her by now. It had gone quiet in the canyon.

She fingered the Lady knife. When someone comes, you stick them. When someone comes, you stick them. Raisa repeated it over and over so she wouldn’t forget.

Amon always said that was the purpose of weapons practice—to train the muscles and nerves so that in a fight they do what they’re supposed to do without conscious thought.

She heard Amon’s voice in her head, low and desperate. Rai. Don’t you die. Don’t you die on me, Rai. Stay alive. Stay alive. Stay alive.

Her hand fluttered helplessly. I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I did my best.

Most of all, she regretted her parting with Han. There was so much she’d wanted to say to him, confess to him. She’d wanted to create a truth between them to replace the lies. Now he’d likely never know what had happened to her. How she really felt about him. Who she really was.

She tried to fix on Han’s face, to hold it in her mind—the brilliant blue eyes under fair brows, the oddly aristocratic nose, the pale scar jagging down one side.

Tiny pebbles cascaded past her, pinging on rock. Someone was coming, climbing down from above. Her hand scrabbled through the dirt and closed on her dagger.

CHAPTER NINE

A HUNT INTERRUPTED

Sometimes a descent is trickier than the climb. Ragger wanted to move faster on the downhill side of the pass—not a good idea where snowdrifts concealed imperfections in the trail that ranged from small ravines to major boulders.

The beaten-down trail continued. The horsemen seemed to be traveling at a breakneck speed. Some of them split off into the surrounding woods, while others continued on. Were they still chasing someone? Or splitting up so they'd be harder to track themselves?

Finally the trail dropped below the tree line, and the relentless wind abated somewhat. Han was grateful and apprehensive at the same time. The pine forest closing in tight around him made him jumpy.

He came up on a small rise overlooking a series of ridges that sloped away to the Vale, like waves on a frozen sea. He'd have to find a camping place soon, despite his worries about weather. Clouds piled up to the north, but the sun still glittered over the horizon, streaming over the razor-sharp western peaks. The wrinkles in the landscape cast long blue shadows over the snow. It was already dark in the canyons. The firs had faded to black smudges in the shadows of the peaks.

Han heard the sounds of the chase before he saw the hunters. A trick of the landscape amplified sound so it reverberated up from below: the clatter of hooves over rock, men shouting to one another, even the thwack of crossbows.

It must be the raiding party whose tracks he'd been following all day—the ones who'd killed Captain Byrne and the other bluejackets. He'd guessed right—they'd been on the hunt, and now they must have flushed their quarry.

Was it one last surviving bluejacket? They couldn't let even one win free?

Fighting off the voice that said, *Not your business, Alister*, Han edged Ragger forward until he could look down over the valley below. It was deep and bowl-shaped, dropping to an iced-over streambed at the bottom. It had burned over at some time in the recent past, so it was relatively clear of trees.

As he watched, a single horse and rider emerged from the trees and galloped across the clearing, the rider practically horizontal in the saddle. She was a woman, by the size of her, dressed like the dead soldiers and riding a similar horse. She stuck to its back like a burr, and horse and rider zigzagged across the clearing, confounding the aim of the archers behind.

Six more riders appeared, perhaps a hundred yards behind the girlie, baying like hounds on the scent of blood. The crossbows sounded again, and bolts arced overhead and slammed into the ground all around the girlie and her horse before they disappeared into the forest on the far side.

Han watched, transfixed, until they were lost in the trees. The sounds of the chase diminished until the clearing was once again quiet and empty, save the bolts that stood quivering, black against the snow, evidence that it hadn't been a dream.

Ragger snorted impatiently and tossed his head. Han spoke to the gelding, absently soothing him as he tried to make sense of what he'd just seen.

Those in pursuit rode upland military horses with shaggy winter coats. They had the look of unbadged bluejackets, too—carefully nondescript. They'd be trying to prevent the girlie from reaching safety in Marisa Pines, just a few miles away.

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