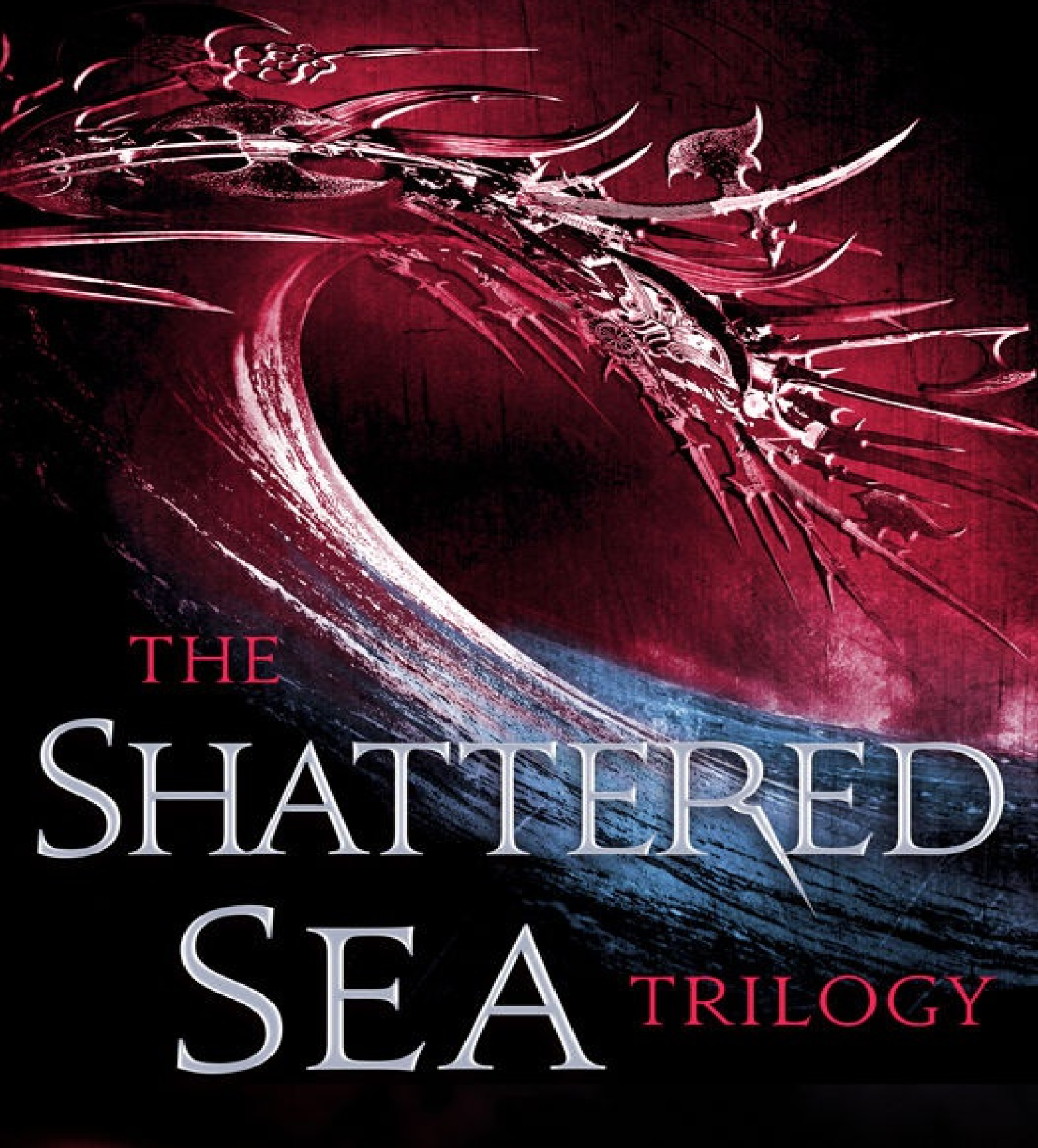


JOE ABERCROMBIE



THE
SHATTERED
SEA TRILOGY

Joe Abercrombie

The Shattered Sea Series

**Half a King
Half the World
Half a War**



Del Rey
New York

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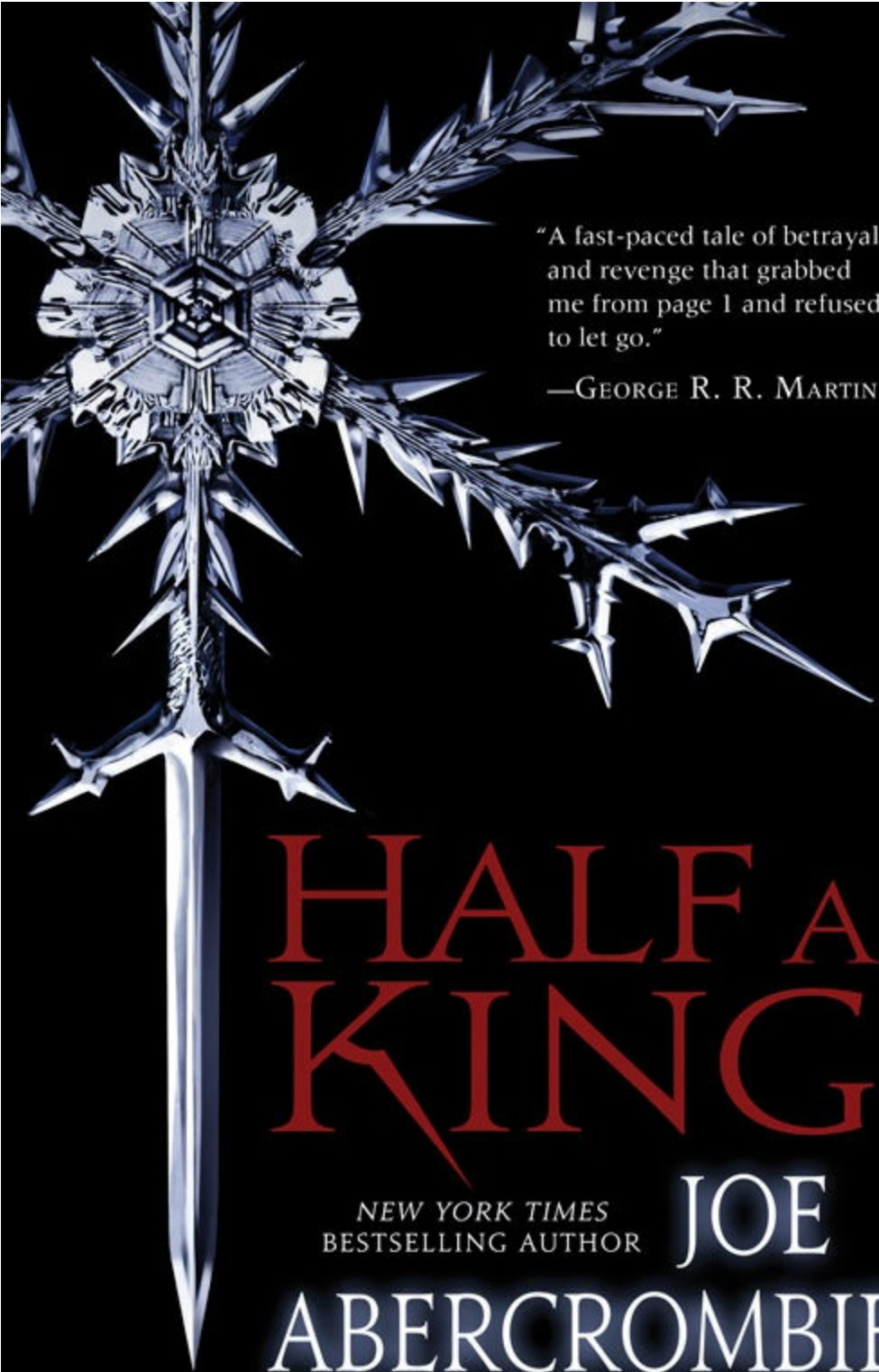
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"A fast-paced tale of betrayal
and revenge that grabbed
me from page 1 and refused
to let go."

—GEORGE R. R. MARTIN

HALF A KING

NEW YORK TIMES
BESTSELLING AUTHOR

JOE
ABERCROMBIE

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HALF
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BETTER GEAR
THAN GOOD SENSE
A TRAVELER CANNOT CARRY

FROM HÁVAMÁL,
THE SPEECH OF THE HIGH ONE

I.

THE
BLACK
CHAIR

THE GREATER GOOD

There was a harsh gale blowing on the night Yarvi learned he was a king. Or half a king, at least.

A seeking wind, the Gettlanders called it, for it found out every chink and keyhole, moaning Mother Sea's dead chill into every dwelling, no matter how high the fires were banked or how close the folk were huddled.

It tore at the shutters in the narrow windows of Mother Gundring's chambers and rattled even the iron-bound door in its frame. It taunted the flames in the firepit and they spat and crackled in their anger, casting clawing shadows from the dried herbs hanging, throwing flickering light upon the root that Mother Gundring held up in her knobbled fingers.

"And this?"

It looked like nothing so much as a clod of dirt, but Yarvi had learned better. "Black-tongue root."

"And why might a minister reach for it, my prince?"

"A minister hopes they won't have to. Boiled in water it can't be seen or tasted, but is a most deadly poison."

Mother Gundring tossed the root aside. "Ministers must sometimes reach for dark things."

"Ministers must find the lesser evil," said Yarvi.

"And weigh the greater good. Five right from five." Mother Gundring gave a single approving nod and Yarvi flushed with pride. The approval of Gettland's minister was not easily won. "And the riddles on the test will be easier."

"The test." Yarvi rubbed nervously at the crooked palm of his bad hand with the thumb of his good.

"You will pass."

"You can't be sure."

"It is a minister's place always to doubt—"

"But always to seem certain," he finished for her.

"See? I know you." That was true. No one knew him better, even in his own family. Especially in his own family. "I have never had a sharper pupil. You will pass at the first asking."

"And I'll be Prince Yarvi no more." All he felt at that thought was relief. "I'll have no family and no birthright."

"You will be Brother Yarvi, and your family will be the Ministry." The firelight found the creases about Mother Gundring's eyes as she smiled. "Your birthright will be the plants and the books and the soft word spoken. You will remember and advise, heal and speak truth, know the secret ways and smooth the path for Father Peace in every tongue. As I have tried to do. There is no nobler work, whatever nonsense the muscle-smothered fools spout in the training square."

"The muscle-smothered fools are harder to ignore when you're in the square with them."

"Huh." She curled her tongue and spat into the fire. "Once you pass the test you only need go there to tend a broken head when the play gets too rough. One day you will carry my staff." She nodded toward the tapering length of studded and slotted elf-metal which leaned against the wall. "One day you will sit beside the Black Chair, and be Father Yarvi."

"Father Yarvi." He squirmed on his stool at that thought. "I lack the wisdom." He meant he lacked

the courage, but lacked the courage to admit it.

“Wisdom can be learned, my prince.”

He held his left hand, such as it was, up to the light. “And hands? Can you teach those?”

“You may lack a hand, but the gods have given you rarer gifts.”

He snorted. “My fine singing voice, you mean?”

“Why not? And a quick mind, and empathy, and strength. Only the kind of strength that makes a great minister, rather than a great king. You have been touched by Father Peace, Yarvi. Always remember: strong men are many, wise men are few.”

“No doubt why women make better ministers.”

“And better tea, in general.” Gundring slurped from the cup he brought her every evening, and nodded approval again. “But the making of tea is another of your mighty talents.”

“Hero’s work indeed. Will you give me less flattery when I’ve turned from prince into minister?”

“You will get such flattery as you deserve, and my foot in your arse the rest of the time.”

Yarvi sighed. “Some things never change.”

“Now to history.” Mother Gundring slid one of the books from its shelf, stones set into the gilded spine winking red and green.

“Now? I have to be up with Mother Sun to feed your doves. I was hoping to get some sleep before —”

“I’ll let you sleep when you’ve passed the test.”

“No you won’t.”

“You’re right, I won’t.” She licked one finger, ancient paper crackling as she turned the pages. “Tell me, my prince, into how many splinters did the elves break God?”

“Four hundred and nine. The four hundred Small Gods, the six Tall Gods, the first man and woman, and Death, who guards the Last Door. But isn’t this more the business of a prayer-weaver than a minister?”

Mother Gundring clicked her tongue. “All knowledge is the business of the minister, for only what is known can be controlled. Name the six Tall Gods.”

“Mother Sea and Father Earth, Mother Sun and Father Moon, Mother War and—”

The door banged wide and that seeking wind tore through the chamber. The flames in the firepit jumped as Yarvi did, dancing distorted in the hundred hundred jars and bottles on the shelves. A figure blundered up the steps, setting the bunches of plants swinging like hanged men behind him.

It was Yarvi’s uncle Odem, hair plastered to his pale face with the rain and his chest heaving. He stared at Yarvi, eyes wide, and opened his mouth but made no sound. One needed no gift of empathy to see he was weighed down by heavy news.

“What is it?” croaked Yarvi, his throat tight with fear.

His uncle dropped to his knees, hands on the greasy straw. He bowed his head, and spoke two words, low and raw.

“My king.”

And Yarvi knew his father and brother were dead.

They hardly looked dead.

Only very white, laid out on those chill slabs in that chill room with shrouds drawn up to their armpits and naked swords gleaming on their chests. Yarvi kept expecting his brother's mouth to twitch in sleep. His father's eyes to open, to meet his with that familiar scorn. But they did not. They never would again.

Death had opened the Last Door for them, and from that portal none return.

"How did it happen?" Yarvi heard his mother saying from the doorway. Her voice was steady as ever.

"Treachery, my queen," murmured his uncle Odem.

"I am queen no more."

"Of course.... I am sorry, Laithlin."

Yarvi reached out and gently touched his father's shoulder. So cold. He wondered when he last touched his father. Had he ever? He remembered well enough the last time they had spoken any words that mattered. Months before.

A man swings the scythe and the ax, his father had said. A man pulls the oar and makes fast the knot. Most of all a man holds the shield. A man holds the line. A man stands by his shoulder-man. What kind of man can do none of these things?

I didn't ask for half a hand, Yarvi had said, trapped where he so often found himself, on the barren ground between shame and fury.

I didn't ask for half a son.

And now King Uthrik was dead, and his King's Circle, hastily resized, was a weight on Yarvi's brow. A weight far heavier than that thin band of gold deserved to be.

"I asked you how they died," his mother was saying.

"They went to speak peace with Grom-gil-Gorm."

"There can be no peace with the damn Vanstermen," came the deep voice of Hurik, his mother's Chosen Shield.

"There must be vengeance," said Yarvi's mother.

His uncle tried to calm the storm. "Surely time to grieve, first. The High King has forbidden open war until—"

"Vengeance!" Her voice was sharp as broken glass. "Quick as lightning, hot as fire."

Yarvi's eyes crawled to his brother's corpse. There was quick and hot, or had been. Strong-jawed, thick-necked, already the makings of a dark beard like their father's. As unlike Yarvi as it was possible to be. His brother had loved him, he supposed. A bruising love where every pat was just this side of a slap. The love one has for something always beneath you.

"Vengeance," growled Hurik. "The Vanstermen must be made to pay."

"Damn the Vanstermen," said Yarvi's mother. "Our own people must be made to serve. They must be shown their new king has iron in him. Once they are happy on their knees you can make Mother Sea rise with your tears."

Yarvi's uncle gave a heavy sigh. "Vengeance, then. But is he ready, Laithlin? He has never been a fighter—"

"He must fight, ready or not!" snapped his mother. People had always talked around Yarvi as though he was deaf as well as crippled. It seemed his sudden rise to power had not cured them of the habit. "Make preparations for a great raid."

"Where shall we attack?" asked Hurik.

"All that matters is that we attack. Leave us."

Yarvi heard the door closing and his mother's footsteps, soft across the cold floor.

"Stop crying," she said. It was only then that Yarvi realized his eyes were swimming, and he wiped them, and sniffed, and was ashamed. Always he was ashamed.

She gripped him by the shoulders. "Stand tall, Yarvi."

"I'm sorry," he said, trying to puff out his chest the way his brother might have. Always he was sorry.

"You are a king now." She twisted his crooked cloak-buckle into place, tried to tame his pale blond hair, close-clipped but always wild, and finally laid cool fingertips against his cheek. "You must never be sorry. You must wear your father's sword, and lead a raid against the Vanstermen."

Yarvi swallowed. The idea of going on a raid had always filled him with dread. To lead one?

Odem must have seen his horror. "I will be your shoulder-man, my king, always beside you, my shield at the ready. However I can help you, I will."

"My thanks," mumbled Yarvi. All the help he wanted was to be sent to Skekenhouse to take the Minister's Test, to sit in the shadows rather than be thrust into the light. But that hope was dust now. Like badly-mixed mortar, his hopes were prone to crumble.

"You must make Grom-gil-Gorm suffer for this," said his mother. "Then you must marry your cousin."

He could only stare into her iron-gray eyes. Stare a little upward as she was still taller than he. "What?"

The soft touch became an irresistible grip about his jaw. "Listen to me, Yarvi, and listen well. You are the king. This may not be what either of us wanted, but this is what we have. You hold all our hopes now, and you hold them at the brink of a precipice. You are not respected. You have few allies. You must bind our family together by marrying Odem's daughter Isriun, just as your brother was to do. We have spoken of it. It is agreed."

Uncle Odem was quick to balance ice with warmth. "Nothing would please me more than to stand as your marriage-father, my king, and see our families forever joined."

Isriun's feelings were not mentioned, Yarvi noticed. No more than his. "But ..."

His mother's brow hardened. Her eyes narrowed. He had seen heroes tremble beneath that look, and Yarvi was no hero. "I was betrothed to your uncle Uthil, whose sword work the warriors still whisper of. Your uncle Uthil, who should have been king." Her voice cracked as though the words were painful. "When Mother Sea swallowed him and they raised his empty howe above the shore, I married your father in his place. I put aside my feelings and did my duty. So must you."

Yarvi's eyes slid back to his brother's handsome corpse, wondering that she could plan so calmly with her dead husband and son laid out within arm's reach. "You don't weep for them?"

A sudden spasm gripped his mother's face, all her carefully arranged beauty splitting, lips curling from her teeth and her eyes screwing up and the cords in her neck standing stark. For a terrible

moment Yarvi did not know if she would beat him or break down in wailing sobs and could not say which scared him more. Then she took a ragged breath, pushed one loose strand of golden hair into its proper place, and was herself again.

“One of us at least must be a man.” And with that kingly gift she turned and swept from the room.

Yarvi clenched his fists. Or he clenched one, and squeezed the other thumb against the twisted stub of his one finger.

“Thanks for the encouragement, Mother.”

Always he was angry. As soon as it was too late to do him any good.

He heard his uncle step close, speaking with the soft voice one might use on a skittish foal. “You know your mother loves you.”

“Do I?”

“She has to be strong. For you. For the land. For your father.”

Yarvi looked from his father’s body to his uncle’s face. So like, yet so unlike. “Thank the gods you’re here,” he said, the words rough in his throat. At least there was one member of his family who cared for him.

“I am sorry, Yarvi. I truly am.” Odem put his hand on Yarvi’s shoulder, a glimmer of tears in his eyes. “But Laithlin is right. We must do what is best for Gettland. We must put our feelings aside.”

Yarvi heaved up a sigh. “I know.”

His feelings had been put aside ever since he could remember.

“Keimdal, you will spar with the king.”

Yarvi had to smother a fool’s giggle when he heard the master-at-arms apply the word to him. Probably the four score young warriors gathered opposite were all stifling their own laughter. Certainly they would be once they saw their new king fight. No doubt, by then, laughter would be the last thing on Yarvi’s mind.

They were his subjects now, of course. His servants. His men, all sworn to die upon his whim. Yet they felt even more a row of scornful enemies than when he had faced them as a boy.

He still felt like a boy. More like a boy than ever.

“It will be my honor.” Keimdal did not look especially honored as he stepped from his fellows and out into the training square, moving as easily in a coat of mail as a maiden in her shift. He took up a shield and wooden practice sword and made the air whistle with some fearsome swipes. He might have been less than a year older than Yarvi but he looked five: half a head taller, far thicker in the chest and shoulder, and already boasting red stubble on his heavy jaw.

“Are you ready, my king?” muttered Odem in Yarvi’s ear.

“Clearly not,” hissed Yarvi, but there was no escape. The King of Gettland must be a doting son to Mother War, however ill-suited he might be. He had to prove to the older warriors ranged around the square that he could be more than a one-handed embarrassment. He had to find a way to win. *There is always a way*, his mother used to tell him.

But despite his undoubted gifts of a quick mind, empathy, and a fine singing voice, he could not think of one.

Today the training square had been marked out on the beach, eight strides of sand on a side and a spear driven into the ground at each corner. Every day they found different ground for it—rocks, woods, bogs, Thorlby’s narrow streets, even in the river—for a man of Gettland must be equally ready to fight wherever he stands. Or equally unready, in Yarvi’s case.

But the battles around the Shattered Sea were fought most often on its ragged shore, so on the shore they practiced most often, and Yarvi had taken enough mouthfuls of sand in his time to beach a longship. As Mother Sun sank behind the hills the veterans would be sparring up to their knees in the brine. But now the tide was out across flats streaked with mirror-puddles, and the only dampness came from the hard spray on the salt wind, and the sweat leaking from Yarvi at the unfamiliar weight of his mail.

Gods, how he hated his mail. How he hated Hunnan, the master-at-arms who had been for so many years his chief tormentor. How he loathed swords and shields, and detested the training square, and despised the warriors who made it their home. And most of all how he hated his own bad joke of a hand, which meant he could never be one of them.

“Watch your footing, my king,” murmured Odem.

“My footing won’t be my problem,” snapped Yarvi. “I have two feet, at least.”

For three years he had scarcely touched a sword, spending every waking hour in Mother Gundring’s chambers, studying the uses of plants and the tongues of far-off places. Learning the names

of the Small Gods and taking such very special care over his penmanship. While he had been learning how to mend wounds these boys—these men, he realized with a sour taste in his mouth—had put all their efforts into learning how to make them.

Odem gave him a reassuring clap on the shoulder which nearly knocked him over. “Keep your shield up. Wait for your chance.”

Yarvi snorted. If they waited for his chance they would be here until the tide drowned them all. His shield was lashed tight about his withered forearm with a sorry mass of strapping, and he clung to the handle with his thumb and one stub of finger, arm already burning to the shoulder from the effort of letting the damn thing dangle.

“Our king has been away from the square for some time,” called Master Hunnan, and worked his mouth as though the words were bitter. “Go gently today.”

“I’ll try not to hurt him too badly!” shouted Yarvi.

There was some laughter, but he thought it had an edge of scorn. Jokes are a poor substitute in a fight for strong sinews and a shield-hand. He looked into Keimdal’s eyes, and saw his easy confidence, and tried to tell himself that strong men are many and wise men few. Even in his own skull the thought rang hollow.

Master Hunnan did not smile. No joke was funny, no child lovable, no woman beautiful enough to bend those iron lips. He only gave Yarvi that same long stare he always used to have, as full of quiet contempt for him whether prince or king. “Begin!” he barked.

If quickness was a mercy, it was a merciful bout indeed.

The first blow crashed on Yarvi’s shield, tore the handle from his feeble grip so that the rim caught him in the mouth and sent him stumbling. He managed by some shred of instinct to parry the next so that it glanced from his shoulder and numbed his arm, but he never even saw the third, only felt the sharp pain as his ankle was swept from under him and he crashed down on his back, all his breath wheezing out like the air from a split bellows.

He lay blinking for a moment. They still told tales of his uncle Uthil’s matchless performances in the square. It seemed his own might live just as long in the memory. Alas, for very different reasons.

Keimdal thrust his wooden sword into the sand and offered his hand. “My king.” Far better disguised than it used to be, but Yarvi thought there was a mocking curl to the corner of his mouth.

“You’ve got better,” Yarvi forced through his clenched teeth, twisting his crippled hand free of the useless shield-straps so Keimdal had no choice but to grasp it to pull him to his feet.

“As have you, my king.” Yarvi could see Keimdal’s disgust as he touched the twisted thing, and made sure to give him a parting tickle with the stub of his finger. A petty gesture, perhaps, but the weak must thrive on small revenges.

“I’ve got worse,” muttered Yarvi as Keimdal walked back to his peers. “If you can believe it.”

He caught sight of a girl’s face among the younger students. Thirteen years old, maybe, fierce-eyed, dark hair flicking around her sharp cheeks. Probably Yarvi should have been grateful Hunnan had not picked her to give him his beating. Perhaps that would be next in the procession of humiliations.

The master-at-arms gave a scornful shake of his head as he turned away and the anger surged up in Yarvi, bitter as a winter tide. His brother might have inherited all their father’s strength, but he had got his full share of the rage.

“Shall we have another bout?” he snapped across the square.

Keimdal’s brows went up, then he shrugged his broad shoulders and hefted his sword and shield.

“If you command.”

“Oh, I do.”

A grumbling passed around the older men and Hunnan frowned even harder. Must they endure more of this demeaning farce? If their king was embarrassed they were embarrassed, and in Yarvi they could see embarrassments enough to crowd the rest of their days.

He felt his uncle gently take his arm. “My king,” he murmured, soft and soothing. Always he was soft and soothing as a breeze on a summer day. “Perhaps you should not exert yourself too much—”

“You’re right, of course,” said Yarvi. *A fool is his anger’s slave*, Mother Gundring once told him. *The wise man’s anger is his tool*. “Hurik. You stand for me.”

There was a silence as all eyes turned to the queen’s Chosen Shield, sitting huge and silent on the carved stool that marked him out among Gettland’s most honored warriors, the great scar down his cheek becoming a white streak where it touched his beard.

“My king,” he rumbled as he stood and worked one arm through the tangled strapping of the fallen shield. Yarvi handed him his training sword. It looked like a toy in Hurik’s great, scarred fist. You could hear his footsteps as he took his place opposite Keimdal, suddenly looking very much his sixteen years. Hurik crouched, twisting his boots into the sand, then bared his teeth and made a fighting growl, deep and throbbing, louder and louder until the square seemed to shake with it, and Yarvi saw Keimdal’s eyes widen with doubt and fear, just as he had always dreamed of seeing them.

“Begin,” he said.

This bout was over even quicker than the last, but no one could have called it merciful.

To give Keimdal his due, he leapt in bravely enough, but Hurik caught the blow on his sword, wooden blades scraping, then darted in quick as a snake despite his size and kicked Keimdal’s feet away. The lad whooped as he fell, but only until Hurik’s shield rim caught him above the eye with a hollow ping and knocked him half senseless. Hurik frowned as he stepped forward, planted his boot on Keimdal’s sword hand, and ground it under his heel. Keimdal groaned, one half of his grimace plastered with sand, the other blood-streaked from the gash on his forehead.

The girls might not have agreed, but Yarvi thought he had never looked better.

He swept the warriors with a glare, then. The kind his mother gave a slave who displeased her. “One to me,” he said, and he stepped over Keimdal’s fallen sword as he strode from the square, choosing a path that forced Master Hunnan to shuffle awkwardly aside.

“That was ungenerous, my king,” said Uncle Odem, falling into step at his shoulder. “But not unfunny.”

“I’m glad I made you laugh,” grunted Yarvi.

“Much more than that, you made me proud.”

Yarvi glanced sideways and saw his uncle looking back, calm and even. Always he was calm and even as fresh-fallen snow.

“Glorious victories make fine songs, Yarvi, but inglorious ones are no worse once the bards are done with them. Glorious defeats, meanwhile, are just defeats.”

“On the battlefield there are no rules,” said Yarvi, remembering something his father told him once when he was drunk and bored with shouting at his dogs.

“Exactly.” Odem put his strong hand on Yarvi’s shoulder, and Yarvi wondered how much happier his life might have been had his uncle been his father. “A king must win. The rest is dust.”

BETWEEN GODS AND MEN

“... Mother Sun and Father Moon, shine your gold and silver lights upon this union between Yarvi, son of Laithlin, and Isriun, daughter of Odem ...”

The towering statues of the six Tall Gods glowered down with pitiless garnet eyes. Above them, in niches ringing the dome of the ceiling, the amber figures of the Small Gods gleamed. All judging Yarvi’s worth and no doubt finding him as horribly wanting as he did himself.

He curled up his withered hand and tried to work it further into his sleeve. Everyone in the Godshall knew well enough what he had on the end of his arm. Or what he hadn’t.

Yet still he tried to hide it.

“Mother Sea and Father Earth, grant them your harvests and your bounty, send them good weatherluck and good weaponluck ...”

In the center of the hall the Black Chair stood upon its dais. It was an elf-relic from the time before the Breaking of God, forged by unknown arts from a single piece of black metal, impossibly delicate and impossibly strong, and countless years had left not a single scratch upon it.

Seat of kings, between gods and men. Far too high for such a wretched thing as Yarvi to sit in. He felt unworthy even to look upon it.

“Mother War and Father Peace, grant them the strength to face whatever Fate brings ...”

He had expected to be a minister. To give up wife and children with hardly a thought. Kissing the aged cheek of Grandmother Wexen when he passed the test was the closest he had hoped to come to romance. Now he was to share his life, such as it was, with a girl he hardly knew.

Isriun’s palm was clammy against his, sacred cloth wrapped about their clasped hands to make a clumsy bundle. They gripped each other, and were tied together, and pressed together by the wishes of their parents, and bound together by the needs of Gettland, and still it felt as if there was an unbridgeable chasm between them.

“Oh, He Who Sprouts the Seed, grant them healthy issue ...”

Yarvi knew what every guest was thinking. *Not crippled issue. Not one-handed issue.* He stole a glance sideways at this small, slight, yellow-haired girl who should have been his brother’s wife. She looked scared and slightly sick. But who wouldn’t, being forced to marry half a man?

This was everyone’s second best. A day of celebration mourned by all. A tragic compromise.

“Oh, She Who Guards the Locks, keep safe their household ...”

Only Brinyolf the Prayer-Weaver was enjoying himself. He had spun one ponderous blessing for Isriun at her betrothal to Yarvi’s brother and now—to his delight if not hers—got the chance to construct a second. His voice droned on, exhorting Tall Gods and Small Gods to grant fertility in their fields, and obedience in their slaves, and no one would have been surprised by a plea for regularity in their bowels next. Yarvi hunched his shoulders, swamped by one of the heavy furs his father used to wear, dreading the magnitude of Brinyolf’s blessing at the wedding itself.

“Oh, She of the Ewer, pour prosperity upon this royal couple, upon their parents and their subjects, and upon all of Gettland!”

The prayer-weaver stepped back, smug as a new parent, his chin vanishing into the roll of fat

beneath it.

“I shall be brief,” said Mother Gundring, with the slightest knowing glance at Yarvi. He spluttered on a stifled laugh, then caught his mother’s eye upon him, cold as the winter sea, and had no need to stifle another.

“A kingdom stands upon two pillars,” spoke the old minister. “We already have a strong king.” No one laughed. Admirable self-control. “Soon, gods willing, we will have a strong queen also.” Yarvi saw Isriun’s pale throat flutter as she swallowed.

Mother Gundring beckoned forward Yarvi’s mother and his uncle Odem, the one person who looked happy to be in attendance, to give their blessing by placing their hands upon the bundle. Then with an effort she lifted high her staff, tubes and rods of the same elf-metal as the Black Chair gleaming, and called out, “They are promised!”

So it was done. Isriun was not asked for an opinion on the matter, and neither was Yarvi. It seemed there was little interest in the opinions of kings. Certainly not of this one. The audience, a hundred strong or more, served up restrained applause. The men—heads of some of Gettland’s greatest families, sword-hilts and cloak-buckles set with gold—beat approval on broad chests with heavy fists. On the other side of the hall the women—hair glistening with fresh oil and their household keys hung on best jewel-lustered chains—tapped fingers politely in their scented palms.

Mother Gundring unwrapped the sacred cloth and Yarvi snatched free his good hand, sticky-pink and tingling. His uncle seized him by the shoulders and said into his ear, “Well done!” though Yarvi had done nothing but stand there and sing some promises he hardly understood.

The guests filed out, and Brinyolf closed the doors of the hall with an echoing clap, leaving Yarvi and Isriun alone with the gods, the Black Chair, the weight of their uncertain future, and an ocean of awkward silence.

Isriun rubbed gently at the hand that had held Yarvi’s, and looked at the floor. He looked at the floor too, not that there was anything so very interesting down there. He cleared his throat. He shifted his sword-belt. It still hung strangely on him. He felt as if it always would. “I’m sorry,” he said, at last.

She looked up, one eye shining in the heavy darkness. “Why are you sorry?” Then she remembered to add uncertainly, “my king?”

He almost said *That you’ll have half a man for a husband*, but settled for, “That you’re passed around my family like a feast-day cup.”

“On feast-day, everyone’s happy to get the cup.” She gave a bitter little smile. “I’m the one who should be sorry. Imagine me a queen.” And she snorted as though there never was a more foolish joke.

“Imagine me a king.”

“You are a king.”

He blinked at that. He had been so fixed on his shortcomings it had never occurred to him she might be fixed on her own. That thought, as the misery of others often can, made him feel just a little better.

“You manage your father’s household.” He looked down at the golden key hanging on her chest. “That’s no small task.”

“But a queen manages the business of a country! Everyone says your mother has a high art at it. Laithlin, the Golden Queen!” She spoke the name like a magic spell. “They say she’s owed a thousand thousand favors, that a debt to her is a matter for pride. They say her word is valued higher than gold among merchants, because gold may go down in worth but her word never does. They say some

traders of the far north have given up praying to the gods and worship her instead.” She spoke faster and faster, and chewed at her nails, and tugged at one thin hand with the other, eyes opening very wide. “There’s a rumor she lays silver eggs.”

Yarvi had to laugh. “I’m reasonably sure that one’s false.”

“But she’s raised granaries and had channels dug and brought more earth under the plow so there’ll never again be a famine that forces folk to draw lots to see who must find new homes across the sea.” Isriun’s shoulders drifted up as she spoke until they were hunched about her ears. “And people flock to Thorlby from across the world to trade, so the city’s tripled in size and split its walls and your mother’s built new walls and split them again.”

“True, but—”

“I’ve heard she has a mighty scheme to stamp every coin of one weight, and these coins will pass through all the lands about the Shattered Sea, so that every trade will be made with her face, and make her richer even than the High King in Skekenhouse! How will ... *I*?” Isriun’s shoulders slumped and she flicked at the key on her chest and set it swinging by its chain. “How can the likes of *me*—”

“There’s always a way.” Yarvi caught Isriun’s hand in his before she could get her vanishing nails to her teeth again. “My mother will help you. She’s your aunt, isn’t she?”

“*She’ll help me?*” Instead of pulling her hand away she drew him closer by it. “Your father may have been a great warrior but I rather think he was your less fearsome parent.”

Yarvi smiled, but he did not deny it. “You were luckier. My uncle’s always as calm as still water.”

Isriun glanced nervously toward the door. “You don’t know my father like I do.”

“Then ... I’ll help you.” He had held her hand half the morning and it could have been a dead fish in his clammy palm. Now it felt like something else entirely—strong, and cool, and very much alive. “Isn’t that the point of a marriage?”

“Not just that.” She seemed suddenly very close, taper-light reflected in the corners of her eyes, teeth shining between parted lips.

There was a smell to her, not sweet and not sour, he could not name it. Faint, but it made his heart jump.

He did not know if he should close his eyes, then she did, so he did, and their noses bumped awkwardly.

Her breath tickled his cheek and made his skin flush hot. Frighteningly hot.

Her lips just barely brushed his and he broke away with all the dignity of a startled rabbit, caught his leg on his sword and nearly fell over it.

“Sorry,” she said, shrinking back and staring at the floor.

“It’s me who should be sorry.” For a king Yarvi spent a great deal of his time apologizing. “I’m the sorriest man in Gettland. No doubt my brother gave you a better kiss. More practice ... I suppose.”

“All your brother did was talk about the battles he’d win,” she muttered at her feet.

“No danger of that with me.” He could not have said why he did it—to shock her, or as revenge for the failed kiss, or simply to be honest—but he held up his crooked hand, shaking his sleeve free so it was between them in all its ugliness.

He expected her to flinch, to pale, to step away, but she only looked thoughtfully at it. “Does it hurt?”

“Not really ... sometimes.”

She reached out, then, sliding her fingers around his knobbled knuckles and pressing at the crooked

palm with her thumb while the breath stopped in his throat. No one had ever touched that hand as if it was just a hand. A piece of flesh with feelings like any other.

"I heard you beat Keimdal in the square even so," she said.

"I only gave the order. I learned a long time ago that I'm not much good at fair fights."

"A warrior fights," she said, looking him in the eye. "A king commands." And with a grin she drew him up the dais. He went uneasily, for even though this was his hall, with every step he felt more like a trespasser.

"The Black Chair," he muttered as they reached it.

"Your chair," said Isriun, and to his horror she reached out and swept her fingertips down the perfect metal of the arm with a hiss that made Yarvi's skin prickle. "Hard to believe it's the oldest thing here. Made by the hands of elves before the Breaking of the World."

"You're interested in the elves?" he squeaked, terrified she might make him touch it or, more awful yet, sit in it, and desperate for a distraction.

"I've read every book Mother Gundring has about them," she said.

Yarvi blinked. "You read?"

"I once trained to be a minister. I was Mother Gundring's apprentice, before you. Bound for a life of books, and plants, and soft words spoken."

"She never said so." It seemed they had more in common than he had imagined.

"I was promised to your brother, and that was the end of it. We must do what's best for Gettland."

They gave much the same sigh at much the same time. "So everyone tells me," said Yarvi. "We've both lost the Ministry."

"But gained each other. And we've gained this." Her eyes shone as she gave the perfect curve of the Black Chair's arm one last stroke. "No mean wedding present." Her light fingertips slipped from the metal and onto the back of his hand, and he found that he very much liked having them there. "We were meant to discuss when we'll be married."

"As soon as I get back," he said, voice slightly hoarse.

She gave his withered hand one last squeeze, then let it fall. "I'll expect a better kiss after your victory, my king."

As he watched her walk away Yarvi was almost glad neither one of them had joined the Ministry. "I'll try not to trip over my sword!" he called as she reached the doorway.

She smiled at him over her shoulder as she slipped through, the daylight setting a glow in her hair. Then the doors shut softly behind her. Leaving Yarvi marooned on the dais, in the midst of all that silent space, his doubts suddenly looming even higher than the Tall Gods above. It took a fearsome effort to turn his head back toward the Black Chair.

Could he truly sit in it, between gods and men? He, who could hardly bring himself to touch it with his crippled joke of a hand? He made himself reach out, his breath coming shallow. Made himself lay his one trembling fingertip upon the metal.

Very cold and very hard. Just as a king must be.

Just as Yarvi's father used to be, sitting there with the King's Circle on his furrowed brow. His scarred hands gripping the arms, the pommel of his sword never far out of reach. The sword that hung at Yarvi's belt now, dragging at him with its unfamiliar weight.

I didn't ask for half a son.

And Yarvi shrank from the empty chair with even less dignity than when his father still sat in it. Not

toward the doors of the Godshall and the waiting crowd beyond, but away toward the statue of Father Peace, pressing himself to the stone and working his fingers into the crack beside the giant leg of the patron god of ministers. In silence the hidden door sprang open, and like a thief fleeing the scene of his crime Yarvi slipped into the blackness beyond.

The citadel was full of secret ways, but nowhere so riddled as the Godshall. Passages passed under its floor, inside its walls, within its very dome. Ministers of old had used them to show the will of the gods with the odd little miracle—feathers fluttering down, or smoke rising behind the statues. Once blood had been dripped on Gettland's reluctant warriors as the king called for war.

The passageways were dark and full of sounds, but Yarvi had no fear of them. These tunnels had long been his domain. He had hidden from his father's blazing anger in the darkness. From his brother's crushing love. From his mother's chill disappointment. He could find his way from one end of the citadel to the other without once stepping into the light.

Here he knew all the ways, as any good minister should.

Here he was safe.

DOVES

The dovecote was perched in the top of one of the citadel's highest towers, streaked inside and out with centuries of droppings, and through its many windows a chill wind blew.

As Mother Gundring's apprentice, Yarvi had the task of feeding the doves. Feeding them, and teaching them the messages they were to speak, and watching them clatter into the sky to take news, and offers, and threats to other ministers about the Shattered Sea.

From the many cages ranked around the walls they looked down on him now, the doves, and one great bronze-feathered eagle which must have brought a message from the High King in Skekenhouse. The one person in the lands around the Shattered Sea who had the right to make requests of Yarvi now. Yet here he sat against the dropping-speckled wall, picking at the nail on his shriveled hand, buried beneath a howe of demands he could never fulfill.

He had always been weak, but he never felt truly powerless until they made him a king.

He heard shuffling feet on the steps and Mother Gundring ducked through the low doorway, breathing hard.

"I thought you'd never get here," said Yarvi.

"My king," replied the old minister once she had the breath. "You were expected before the Godshall."

"Aren't the tunnels meant for a king's escape?"

"From armed enemies. From your family, your subjects, not to mention your bride-to-be, less so." She peered up at the domed ceiling, at the gods painted there as birds, taking to a brilliant sky. "Were you planning to fly away?"

"To Catalia, perhaps, or the land of the Alyuks, or up the Divine River to Kalyiv." Yarvi shrugged. "But I don't have two good hands, never mind two good wings."

Mother Gundring nodded. "In the end, we must all be what we are."

"And what am I?"

"The King of Gettland."

He swallowed then, knowing how disappointed she must be. How disappointed he was himself. In the songs great kings rarely crawled off to hide from their own people. He caught sight of the eagle as he looked away, huge and serene in its cage.

"Grandmother Wexen has sent a message?"

"A message," echoed one of the doves in its scratching mockery of a voice. "A message. A message."

Mother Gundring frowned up at the eagle, still as a stuffed trophy. "It came from Skekenhouse five days ago. Grandmother Wexen sent to ask when you would arrive for your test."

Yarvi remembered the one time he had seen the First of Ministers, a few years before when the High King had visited Thorlby. The High King had seemed a grim and grasping old man, offended by everything. Yarvi's mother had been obliged to soothe him when someone did not bow in quite the manner he liked. Yarvi's brother had laughed that such a feeble little wisp-haired man should rule the Shattered Sea, but his laughter died when he saw the number of warriors that followed him. Yarvi's

father had raged because the High King took gifts and gave none. Mother Gundring had clicked her tongue and said, *The wealthier a man is, the more he craves wealth.*

Grandmother Wexen had scarcely left her proper place at the High King's side, ever smiling like a kindly grandparent. When Yarvi knelt before her she had looked at his crippled hand, and leaned down to murmur, *My prince, have you considered joining the Ministry?* And for a moment he had seen a hungry brightness in her eye which scared him more than all the High King's frowning warriors.

"So much interest from the First of Ministers?" he muttered, swallowing an aftertaste of that day's fear.

Mother Gundring shrugged. "It is rare to have a prince of royal blood join the Ministry."

"No doubt she'll be as disappointed as everyone else that I've taken the Black Chair instead."

"Grandmother Wexen is wise enough to make the best of what the gods serve her. As must we all."

Yarvi's eyes slid across the rest of the cages, seeking a distraction. Pitiless though they were, the eyes of the birds were easier to bear than those of his disappointed subjects.

"Which dove brought the message from Grom-gil-Gorm?"

"I sent it back to Vansterland. To his minister, Mother Scaer, carrying your father's agreement to a parley."

"Where was the meeting to be?"

"On the border, near the town of Amwend. Your father never reached the place."

"He was ambushed in Gettland?"

"So it appears."

"It does not seem like my father, to be so keen to end a war."

"War," croaked one of the doves. "End a war."

Mother Gundring frowned at the gray-spattered floor. "I counseled him to go. The High King has asked for all swords to be sheathed until his new temple to the One God is completed. I never suspected even a savage like Grom-gil-Gorm would betray the sacred word given." She made a fist, as though she would strike herself, then slowly let it uncurl. "It is a minister's task to smooth the way for Father Peace."

"But had my father no men with him? Had he—"

"My king." Mother Gundring looked at him from under her brows. "We must go down."

Yarvi swallowed, his stomach seeming to jump up his throat and wash his mouth with sour spit. "I'm not ready."

"No one ever is. Your father was not."

Yarvi made a sound then, half a laugh, half a sob, and wiped tears on the back of his crooked hand. "Did my father weep after he was betrothed to my mother?"

"In fact, he did," said Mother Gundring. "For several years. She, on the other hand ..."

And Yarvi gurgled up a laugh despite himself. "My mother's even meaner with her tears than her gold." He looked up at the woman who had been his teacher, would now be his minister, that face full of kindly lines, the bright eyes filled with concern, and found he had whispered, "You've been like a mother to me."

"And you like a son to me. I am sorry, Yarvi. I am sorry for everything but ... this is the greater good."

"The lesser evil." Yarvi fussed at his stub of a finger, and blinked up at the birds. The many doves,

and the one great eagle. “Who will feed them now?”

“I will find someone.” And Mother Gundring offered her bony hand to help him up. “My king.”

PROMISES

It was a great affair.

Many powerful families in the far reaches of Gettland would be angered that news of King Uthrik's death had barely reached them before he was burned, denying them the chance to have their importance noted at an event that would live so long in the memory.

No doubt the all-powerful High King on his high chair in Skekenhouse, not to mention the all-knowing Grandmother Wexen at his elbow, would be far from delighted that they received no invitation, as Mother Gundring was keen to point out. But Yarvi's mother forced through her clenched teeth, "Their anger is dust to me." Laithlin might have been queen no longer but no other word would fit her, and Hurik still hovered huge and silent at her shoulder, sworn forever to her service. Once she spoke it was a thing already done.

The procession passed from the Godshall through the yard of the citadel, grass littered with the sites of Yarvi's many failures, under the limbs of the great cedar his brother used to mock him for being unable to climb.

Yarvi went at the fore, of course, his mother overshadowing him in every sense at his shoulder and Mother Gundring struggling to keep up behind, bent over her staff. Uncle Odem led the king's household, warriors and women in their best. Slaves came behind, collars rattling and their eyes on the ground where they belonged.

Yarvi glanced up nervously as they passed through the one entrance tunnel, saw the bottom edge of the Screaming Gate gleam in the darkness, ready to drop and seal the citadel against any enemy. It was said to have been let fall only once, and that long before he was born, but still he swallowed as he always did when he passed beneath it. A mountain's weight of polished copper hanging by a single pin tended to rattle the nerves.

Especially when you were about to burn half your family.

"You're doing well," Yarvi's uncle whispered in his ear.

"I am walking."

"You are walking like a king."

"I am a king and I am walking. How could it be otherwise?"

Odem smiled at that. "Well said, my king."

Over his uncle's shoulder Yarvi caught Isriun smiling at him too, the torch she carried setting a gleam to her eyes and the chain about her neck. Soon the key to the treasury of Gettland would hang upon it, and she would be queen. *His* queen, and the thought gave him hope amid his fears like a spark in the darkness.

They all carried torches, a snake of lights through the gathering gloom, though the wind had snatched out half the flames by the time the procession passed through the city's gates and onto the bare hillside.

The king's own ship, the best in Thorlby's crowded harbor, twenty oars upon a side and its high prow and tail carved as finely as anything in the Godshall, was dragged by honored warriors to the chosen place among the dunes, keel grinding out a snaking trench in the sand. The same ship in which

King Uthrik had sailed across the Shattered Sea on his famous raid to Sagenmark. The same ship which had wallowed low in the water with slaves and plunder when he returned in triumph.

On its deck they laid the pale bodies of the king and his heir upon a bier of fine swords, for Uthrik's fame as a warrior had stood second only to his dead brother Uthil's. All Yarvi could think was how that showed great warriors die no better than other men.

And usually sooner.

Rich offerings were placed about the dead in the manner the prayer-weaver judged the gods would most appreciate. Weapons and armor the king had won in battle. Armrings of gold, coins of silver. Treasures heaped glittering. Yarvi put a jeweled cup in his brother's fists, and his mother put a cloak of white fur over the dead king's shoulders, and placed one hand upon his chest, and stood looking down, her jaw clenched tight, until Yarvi said, "Mother?"

She turned without a word and led him to the chairs on the hillside, the sea wind catching the brown grass and setting it thrashing about their feet. Yarvi squirmed for a comfortable position in that hard, high seat, his mother motionless on his right with Hurik a huge shadow behind her, Mother Gundring perched on a stool at his left hand, her staff clutched in one bony fist, the twisted elf-metal alive with reflected flames from the rustling torches.

Yarvi sat between his two mothers. One who believed in him. One who had given birth to him.

Mother Gundring leaned close then and said softly, "I am sorry, my king. This is not what I wanted for you."

Yarvi could show no weakness now. "We must make the best of what the gods serve us," he said. "Even kings."

"Especially kings," grated out his mother, and gave the signal.

Two dozen horses were led onto the ship, hooves clattering at the timbers, and slaughtered so their blood washed the deck. All agreed Death would show King Uthrik and his son through the Last Door with respect, and they would be acknowledged great among the dead.

Uncle Odem stepped out before the ranks of battle-ready warriors massed upon the sand, a torch in one hand. With his silvered mail and winged helm and red cloak snapping he looked like a son, and brother, and uncle of kings indeed. He nodded solemnly to Yarvi, and Yarvi nodded back, and he felt his mother clutch his right hand and squeeze it hard.

Odem set the torch to the pitch-soaked kindling. The flames licked about the ship and in a moment it was all ablaze, a sorrowful moan drawn from the crowds—from the honored and wealthy upon the high terraces before the walls of Thorlby, the crafters and merchants below them, the foreigners and peasants below them, the beggars and slaves scattered in whatever crevices the wind allowed them, each person in the place the gods had reckoned proper.

And Yarvi had to swallow, because he realized all of a sudden that his father would never come back and he truly would have to be king, from now until he was burned himself.

He sat there, cold and sickly, a drawn sword across his knees, as Father Moon showed himself and his children the stars came out, and the flames of the burning ship, and the burning goods, and his burning family lit up the faces of the hundred hundred mourners. As scattered lights showed in the stone buildings of the city, and the wattle hovels huddled outside the walls, and in the towers of the citadel upon the hill. His citadel, although to him it had always had the look of a prison.

It took a hero's struggle to stay awake. He had barely slept last night, or any night since they put the King's Circle on him. The shadows in the cold depths of his father's yawning bedchamber seemed

crowded with fears, and by ancient tradition there was no door he could bolt since the King of Gettland is one with the land and the people and must hide nothing from them.

Secrets, and bedroom doors, were luxuries reserved for luckier folk than kings.

A queue of proud men in their war gear and proud women with keys polished, some of them sore trouble to King Uthrik while he lived, filed past Yarvi and his mother to wring their hands, and press gaudy grave gifts on them, and speak in swollen terms of the dead lord's high deeds. They lamented that Gettland would never see his like again, then remembered themselves and bowed and mouthed "my king" while behind their smiles no doubt they wondered how it might be made to profit them to have this one-handed weakling in the Black Chair.

Only the occasional hiss passed between Yarvi and his mother. "Sit up. You are a king. Do not apologize. You are a king. Straighten your cloak-buckle. You are a king. You *are* a king. You are a *king*." As if she was trying to convince him, and herself, and the world of it against all the evidence.

Surely the Shattered Sea had never seen so cunning a merchant, but he doubted even she could sell this.

They sat until the flames sank to a flickering, and the dragon-carved keel sagged into whirling embers, and the first muddy smear of dawn touched the clouds, glittering on the copper dome of the Godshall and setting the seabirds calling. Then his mother clapped her hands and the slaves with clinking collar-chains began to dig the earth over the still-smoldering pyre, raising a great howe that would stand tall beside that of Yarvi's uncle Uthil, swallowed in a storm, and his grandfather Brevaer, and his great-grandfather Angulf Clovenfoot. On down the coast marched the grassy humps until they were lost among the dunes, diminishing into the fog of time before She Who Writes entrusted woman with the gift of letters, and ministers trapped the names of the dead in their high books.

Then Mother Sun showed her blinding face and put fire upon the water. The tide would soon be draining, carrying with it the many ships drawn up upon the sand, sharp-tailed so they could slip away as swiftly as they arrived, ready to sweep the warriors to Vansterland to rip their vengeance from Grom-gil-Gorm.

Uncle Odem climbed the hill with fist firm on sword's hilt and his easy smile traded for a warrior's frown.

"It is time," he said.

So Yarvi stood, and stepped past his uncle, and held high his borrowed sword, swallowing his fears and roaring into the wind as loud as he could. "I, Yarvi, son of Uthrik and Laithlin, King of Gettland, swear an oath! I swear a sun-oath and a moon-oath. I swear it before She Who Judges, and He Who Remembers, and She Who Makes Fast the Knot. Let my brother and my father and my ancestors buried here bear witness. Let He Who Watches and She Who Writes bear witness. Let all of you bear witness. Let it be a chain upon me and a goad within me. I will be revenged upon the killers of my father and my brother. This I swear!"

The gathered warriors clashed the bearded heads of their axes against their helmets, and their fists against their painted shields, and their boots against Father Earth in grim approval.

Yarvi's uncle frowned. "That is a heavy oath, my king."

"I may be half a man," said Yarvi, struggling to get his sword back into its sheepskin-lined sheath. "But I can swear a whole oath. The men appreciated it, at least."

"These are men of Gettland," said Hurik. "They appreciate deeds."

“I thought it was a fine oath.” Isriun stood near, yellow hair streaming in the wind. “A kingly oath.”

Yarvi found he was very glad to see her there. He wished no one else had been, then he could have kissed her again, and probably made a better effort at it. But all he could do was smile, and half-raise his half-hand in an awkward farewell.

There would be time for kisses when they next met.

“My king.” It seemed even Mother Gundring’s eyes, forever dry in any smoke or dust or weather, held tears. “May the gods send you fine weatherluck, and even better weaponluck.”

“Don’t worry, my minister,” he said, “there’s always the chance I’ll survive.”

His true mother shed no tears. All she did was fasten his twisted cloak-buckle yet again and say, “Stand like a king, Yarvi. Speak like a king. Fight like a king.”

“I am a king,” he said, however much of a lie it felt, and he forced through his tightened throat, “I’ll make you proud,” even though he had never known how.

But he looked back, as he walked with his uncle’s gently steering hand upon his shoulder, the warriors forming snakes of glimmering steel as they filed toward the water, and he saw his mother clutch Hurik by his mail and drag him close, strong man though he was.

“Watch over my son, Hurik,” he heard her say in a choking voice. “He is all I have.”

Then the Golden Queen was gone with her guards and attendants and her many slaves toward the city, and Yarvi was striding through the colorless dawn toward the ships, their masts a swaying forest against the bruising sky. Trying to walk the way his father used to, eager for the fight, even though he was weak-kneed, and sore-throated, and red-eyed, and his heart was crowded with doubts. He could still smell the smoke.

He left Father Peace to weep among the ashes, and hastened to the iron embrace of Mother War.

MAN'S WORK

Each wave born of Mother Sea would lift him, roll him, tug his sodden clothes, make him twitch and stir as if struggling to rise. Each wave hissed back out would drag the body down the beach and leave it grounded, tangled hair stuck with froth and sand, limp as the knots of seaweed on the shingle.

Yarvi stared at him, wondering who he was. Or had been. Boy or man? Had he died running or fought bravely?

What was the difference now?

The keel ground against sand, the deck shuddered. Yarvi stumbled and had to clutch at Hurik's arm to steady himself. With a clunk and clatter the men unshipped their oars, unhooked their shields, and sprang over the ship's sides into the surf, sullen at being last to land, too late for any glory or plunder worth the taking. Crewing the king's ship would have been a high honor in King Uthrik's reign.

No honor at all in King Yarvi's.

Some men took the prow-rope and hauled the ship past the floating corpse and higher up the beach, others unslung their weapons and hurried toward the town of Amwend. It was already burning.

Yarvi chewed at his lip as he made ready to clamber over the side with some shred of kingly composure, but the handle of his gilded shield twisted in his weakling's grip, tangled with his cloak and nearly dumped him face-first in the brine.

"Gods damn this thing!" Yarvi tugged the straps loose, dragged the shield from his withered arm and flung it away among the sea-chests the men sat on while they rowed.

"My king," said Keimdal. "You should keep your shield. It's not safe—"

"You've fought me. You know what my shield's worth. If someone comes at me I can't stop with sword alone I'm better off running. I'll run faster without my shield."

"But, my king—"

"He is king," rumbled Hurik, pushing his thick fingers through his white-streaked beard. "If he says we all put aside our shields, it must be so."

"Those with two good hands are welcome to theirs," said Yarvi, slithering into the surf, cursing as another cold wave soaked him to the waist.

Where sand gave way to grass some new-made slaves were roped together, waiting to be herded aboard one of the ships. They were hunched and soot-smeared, wide eyes full of fear or pain or disbelief at what had surged from the sea and stolen their lives. Beside them, a group of Yarvi's warriors dined on their clothes.

"Your uncle Odem asks for you, my king," said one, then got up frowning and kicked a sobbing old man onto his face.

"Where?" asked Yarvi, his tongue sticking in his mouth, it was suddenly so dry.

"On top of the holdfast." The man pointed up toward a drystone tower on a sheer rock above the town, waves angry about its base on one side, a frothing inlet on the other.

"They didn't close the gates?" asked Keimdal.

"They did, but three of the headman's sons were left in the town, and Odem slit one's throat and said he'd kill the next if the gate wasn't opened."

“It was,” said one of the other warriors, then chuckled as his number came up. “New socks!”

Yarvi blinked. He had never thought of his smiling uncle as a ruthless man. But Odem had sprouted from the same seed as Yarvi’s father, whose rages he still carried the marks of, and their drowned brother Uthil, at the memory of whose peerless swordsmanship old warriors in the training square still came over dewy-eyed. Sometimes calm waters hide fierce currents, after all.

“A curse on you!”

A woman had tottered from the line of slaves as far as the ropes would allow, bloody hair plastered against one side of her face.

“Bastard king of a bastard country, may Mother Sea swallow—”

One of the warriors cuffed her to the ground.

“Cut her tongue out,” said another, jerking her back by her hair while a third drew a knife.

“No!” shouted Yarvi. The men frowned at him. If their king’s honor was questioned so was theirs, and mercy would not do as an explanation. “She’ll fetch a better price with her tongue.” And Yarvi turned away, shoulders chafing under the weight of his mail, and struggled on toward the holdfast.

“You are your mother’s son, my king,” said Hurik.

“Who else’s would I be?”

His father’s eyes and his brother’s used to glow as they told tales of past raids, of great deeds done and grand prizes taken, while Yarvi lurked in the shadows at the foot of the table and wished he could have taken a man’s part in the man’s work. But here was the truth of it, and a place on a raid did not seem enviable now.

The fighting was over, if there had been any worthy of the name, but still it seemed Yarvi labored through a nightmare, sweating in his mail and chewing at the inside of his mouth and startling at sounds. Screams and laughter, figures darting through the wriggling haze of fires, smoke scratching at his throat. Crows pecked and circled and cawed their triumph. Theirs was the victory, most of all. Mother War, Mother of Crows, who gathers the dead and makes the open hand a fist, would dance today, while Father Peace hid his face and wept. Here, near the shiftless border between Vansterland and Gettland, Father Peace wept often.

The tower of the holdfast loomed black above them, the noise of waves crashing on both sides of its foundations loud below.

“Stop,” said Yarvi, breathing hard, head spinning, face tickling with sweat. “Help me out of my mail.”

“My king,” frothed Keimdal, “I must object!”

“Object if you please. Then do as I tell you.”

“It’s my duty to keep you safe—”

“Then imagine your dishonor when I die of too much sweating halfway up this tower! Undo the buckles, Hurik.”

“My king.” They stripped his mail shirt off and Hurik threw it over one great shoulder.

“Lead on,” Yarvi snapped at Keimdal, struggling to fasten his father’s clumsy golden cloak-buckle with his useless lump of a hand, too big and too heavy for him by far and the hinge all stiff as—

He was stopped dead by the sight that greeted them beyond the open gates.

“Here is a harvest,” said Hurik.

The narrow space in front of the tower was scattered with bodies. So many that Yarvi had to search for patches of ground between to put his feet. There were women there, and children. Flies buzzed,

and he felt the sickness rising, and fought it down.

He was a king, after all, and a king rejoices in the corpses of his enemies.

One of his uncle's warriors sat beside the entrance to the tower, cleaning his ax as calmly as he might have beside the training square at home.

"Where is Odem?" Yarvi muttered at him.

The man gave a squint-eyed grin and pointed upward. "Above, my king."

Yarvi ducked past, breath echoing in the stairway, feet scraping on the stones, swallowing his surging spit.

On the battlefield, his father used to say, *there are no rules*.

Up, and up in the fizzing darkness, Hurik and Keimdal toiling behind him. He paused at a narrow window to feel the wind on his burning face, saw water crash on rock at the bottom of a sheer drop and pushed down his fear.

Stand like a king, his mother had told him. *Speak like a king. Fight like a king.*

There was a platform at the top, propped on timbers, a wooden parapet about the edge no taller than Yarvi's thigh. Low enough to bring the giddy sickness flooding back when he saw how high they had climbed, Father Earth and Mother Sea spread out small around them, the forests of Vansterland stretching off into the haze of distance.

Yarvi's uncle Odem stood calmly watching Amwend burn, columns of smoke smudging the slate-gray sky, the tiny warriors bent to the business of destruction, the little ships lined up where surf met shingle to collect the bloody harvest. A dozen of his most seasoned men were around him, and kneeling in their midst a prisoner in a fine yellow robe, bound and gagged, his face swollen with bruises and his long hair clotted with blood.

"A good day's work!" called Odem, smiling at Yarvi over his shoulder. "We have taken two hundred slaves, and livestock, and plunder, and burned one of Grom-gil-Gorm's towns."

"What of Gorm himself?" asked Yarvi, trying to catch his breath after the climb and—since standing and fighting had never been his strengths—at least speak like a king.

Odem sucked sourly at his teeth. "The Breaker of Swords will be on his way, eh, Hurik?"

"Doubtless." Hurik stepped from the stairway and straightened to all his considerable height. "Battle draws that old bear surely as it draws the flies."

"We must round up the men and be back at sea within the hour," said Odem.

"We're leaving?" asked Keimdal. "Already?"

Yarvi found he was angry. Tired, and sick, and angry at his own weakness and his uncle's ruthlessness and the world that was this way. "Is this our vengeance, Odem?" He waved his good hand toward the burning town. "On women and children and old farmers?"

His uncle's voice was gentle, as it always was. Gentle as spring rain. "Vengeance is taken piece by piece. But you need not worry about that now."

"Did I not swear an oath?" growled Yarvi. For the last two days he had been prickling whenever someone used the words *my king*. Now he found he prickled even more when they did not.

"You swore. I heard it, and thought it too heavy an oath for you to carry." Odem gestured at the kneeling prisoner, grunting into his gag. "But he will free you of its weight."

"Who is he?"

"The headman of Amwend. He is the one who killed you."

Yarvi blinked. "What?"

“I tried to stop him. But the coward had a hidden blade.” Odem held up his hand and there was a dagger in it. A long dagger with a pommel of black jet. In spite of the heat of the climb Yarvi felt suddenly very cold, from the soles of his feet to the roots of his hair.

“It shall be my greatest regret that I moved too late to save my much-loved nephew.” And carelessly as cutting a joint of meat Odem stabbed the headman between his neck and his shoulder and kicked him onto his face, blood welling across the rooftop.

“What do you mean?” Yarvi’s words came shrill and broken and he was suddenly aware how many of his uncle’s men were about him, all armed, all armored.

As Odem stepped calmly, so calmly toward him he stepped back, stepped back on shaky knees to nowhere but the low parapet and the high drop beyond.

“I remember the night you were born.” His uncle’s voice was cold and level as ice on a winter lake. “Your father raged at the gods over that thing you have for a hand. You’ve always made me smile, though. You would have been a fine jester.” Odem raised his brows, and sighed. “But is my daughter really to have a one-handed weakling for a husband? Is Gettland really to have half a king? A crippled puppet dangling on his mother’s string? No, nephew, I ... think ... *not*.”

Keimdal snatched Yarvi’s arm and dragged him back, metal scraping as he drew his sword. “Get behind me, my—”

Blood spattered in Yarvi’s face and half-blinded him. Keimdal fell to his knees, spitting and gurgling, clutching at his throat, black leaking between his fingers. Yarvi stared sideways and saw Hurik frowning back, a drawn knife in his hand, the blade slick with Keimdal’s blood. He let Yarvi’s mail drop jingling to the floor.

“We must do what is best for Gettland,” said Odem. “Kill him.”

Yarvi tottered away, his jaw dropping wide, and Hurik caught a fistful of his cloak.

With a ping his father’s heavy golden buckle sprang open. Suddenly released, Yarvi reeled back.

The parapet caught him hard in the knees and, breath whooping, he tumbled over it.

Rock and water and sky spun about him, and down plummeted the King of Gettland, and down, and the water struck him as a hammer strikes iron.

And Mother Sea took him in her cold embrace.

THE ENEMY

Yarvi came to himself in the darkness, smothered by rushing bubbles, and he writhed and thrashed and twisted with the simple need to stay alive.

The gods must yet have had some use for him, for when it seemed his ribs would burst and he must breathe in whether it was sea or sky, his head broke from the water. Spray blinded him, and he coughed and kicked, was sucked under, tossed and tumbled by the current.

A surging wave flung him onto rock, and he clutched at shredding barnacle and green-slick weed, just long enough to find another breath. He fought with the buckle, freed himself of the drowning embrace of his sword-belt, legs burning as he struggled at the merciless sea, kicking free of his leaden boots.

He gathered all his strength and as the swell lifted him he hauled himself up, trembling with effort, onto a narrow ledge of stone washed by the salt spray, speckled with jellies and sharp-shelled limpets.

No doubt he was lucky still to be alive, but Yarvi did not feel lucky.

He was in the inlet on the north side of the holdfast, a narrow space walled in by jagged rocks into which the foaming waves angrily surged, chewing at the stone, slopping and clapping and flinging glittering spray. He scraped the wet hair from his eyes, spat salt, his throat raw, good hand and bad grazed and stinging.

His foolhardy decision to strip off his mail had saved his life, but the padded jacket underneath was bloated with seawater and he pawed at the straps, finally shrugged it free and hunched shivering.

“D’you see him?” he heard, the voice coming from so close above that he shrank against the slick rock, biting his tongue.

“Got to be dead.” Another voice. “Dashed on the rocks. Mother Sea has him for sure.”

“Odem wants his body.”

“Odem can fish for it, then.”

A third voice now. “Or Hurik can. He let the cripple fall.”

“And which’ll you be telling first to swim, Odem or Hurik?”

Laughter at that. “Gorm’s on his way. We’ve no time to dredge for one-handed corpses.”

“Back to the ships, and tell King Odem his nephew adorns the deep ...” And the voices faded toward the beach.

King Odem. His own uncle, who he had loved like a father, always there with a soothing word and an understanding smile and a steering hand on Yarvi’s shoulder. His own blood! Yarvi was clinging with his good hand but the bad one he bunched into a trembling fist, his father’s anger stealing up on him so strong he could hardly breathe for it. But his mother had always said, *Never worry about what has been done, only about what will be.*

His mother.

He gave a needy sob at the thought of her. The Golden Queen always knew what should be done. But how to reach her? The ships of Gettland were already leaving. The Vansternen would soon arrive. All Yarvi could do was wait for dark. Find some way back over the border and south to

Thorlby.

There is always a way.

If he had to walk a hundred miles through the forest without boots he would do it. He would be revenged on his bastard uncle, and on that traitor Hurik, and he would take back the Black Chair. He swore it, over and over, as Mother Sun hid her face behind the rocks and the shadows lengthened.

He had not reckoned on that most ruthless of revengers, though, the tide. Soon the icy waves washed the shelf on which he clung. Over his bare feet rose the cold water, over his ankles, over his knees, and before long the sea was surging into that narrow space even more fiercely than before. He would have liked to weigh his choices, but for that you need more than one.

So he climbed. Shivering and weary, aching and cold, weeping and cursing the name of Odem with every slippery foot or handhold. It was an awful risk, but better than throwing himself on the mercy of Mother Sea for, as every sailor knows, she has none.

With a last effort he hauled himself over the brink and lay for a moment in the scrub, catching his breath. He groaned as he rolled over, began to stand.

Something cracked him on the side of the head, tore a cry from him and filled his skull with light. The land reeled and struck him on the side. He crawled up groggy, drooling blood.

“A Gettland dog, judging by his hair.” And he squealed as he was dragged up by it.

“A pup, at least.” A boot caught Yarvi’s arse and dumped him on his face. He scrambled a pace or two and was kicked down again. Two men were herding him. Two mailed men with spears. Vanstermen, no doubt, though apart from the long braids about their hard faces they looked little different to the warriors who had frowned at him in the training square.

To the unarmed, armed men all look the same.

“Up,” said one, rolling him over with another kick.

“Then stop kicking me down,” he gasped.

They gave him a spear butt on the other side of his face for that, and he resolved to make no more jokes. One of them hauled him up by the collar of his torn shirt and half-dragged him, half-marched him on.

There were warriors everywhere, some on horseback. Peasants too, perhaps townsfolk who had fled at the sight of ships, returned to the ruins of their homes, soot-smeared and tear-streaked, to dig through the wreckage. Bodies were laid out for burning: their shrouds flapped and tugged in the sea wind.

But Yarvi needed all his pity for himself.

“Kneel, dog.” He was sent sprawling once more and this time saw no pressing need to rise, moaning with each breath and his battered mouth one great throb.

“What do you bring me?” came a clear voice, high and wandering, as if it sang a song.

“A Gettlander. He climbed from the sea beside the holdfast, my king.”

“The Mother of Waters washes up strange bounty. Look upon me, sea creature.”

Yarvi slowly, fearfully, painfully raised his head and saw two great boots capped with scuffed steel. Then baggy trousers, striped red and white. Then a heavy belt with a golden buckle, the hilts of a great sword and four knives. Then mail of steel with zigzag lines of gold forged in. Then a white fur about great shoulders, the wolf’s head still on, garnets set into its empty eyes. Upon it, a chain of jumbled lumps of gold and silver, precious stones winking: pommels twisted from the swords of fallen enemies, so many that the chain was looped three times about a trunk of a neck and still hung

low. Finally, so high above Yarvi that the man stood a giant, a craggy face, lopsided as a wind-blown tree, long hair and beard hanging wild and streaked with silver-gray, but about the twisted mouth and eyes a smile. The smile of a man who studies beetles, wondering which to squash.

“Who are you, person?” asked the giant.

“A cook’s boy.” The words were clumsy in Yarvi’s bloodied mouth, and he tried to work his crippled hand into his damp shirt sleeve so it could not betray him. “I fell into the sea.” *A good liar weaves as much truth into the cloth as they can*, Mother Gundring once told him.

“Shall we play a guessing game?” the giant asked, winding a strand of his long hair around and around one finger. “Of what my name might be?”

Yarvi swallowed. He did not need to guess. “You are Grom-gil-Gorm, Breaker of Swords and Maker of Orphans, King of the Vanstermen.”

“You win!” Gorm clapped his massive hands. “Though what you win remains to be seen. I *am* King of the Vanstermen. Lately including these ill-doomed wretches that your countrymen of Gettland have so freely robbed, butchered, and stolen as slaves, against the wishes of the High King in Skekenhouse, who has asked that swords stay sheathed. He loves to spoil our fun, but there it is.” Gorm’s eyes wandered over the scene of ruin. “Does this strike you as just, cook’s boy?”

“No,” croaked Yarvi, and he did not have to lie.

A woman stepped up beside the king. Her hair was shaved to black-and-gray stubble, her long, white arms covered from shoulder to finger with blue designs. Some Yarvi recognized from his studies: charts for the reckoning of the future in the stars, circles within circles in which the relationships of the Small Gods were plotted, runes that told of times and distances and amounts permitted and forbidden. About one forearm five elf-bangles were stacked, relics of great age and value, gold and steel and bright glass flashing, talismans worked with symbols whose meanings were drowned in the depths of time.

And Yarvi knew this must be Mother Scaer, Gorm’s minister. She who sent the dove to Mother Gundring, luring Yarvi’s father to his death with promises of peace.

“What King of Gettland ordered such slaughter?” she asked, her voice every bit as harsh as a dove’s.

“Odem.” And Yarvi realized with some pain it was the truth.

Her lip wrinkled as if at a sour taste. “So the fox killed his brother the wolf.”

“Treacherous beasties.” Gorm sighed, turning a pommel absently around and around on his chain. “It was sure to come. As surely as Mother Sun follows Father Moon across the sky.”

“You killed King Uthrik,” Yarvi found he’d spat from his bloody mouth.

“Do they say so?” Gorm raised his great arms, the weapons at his belt shifting. “Then why do I not boast of it? Why are my skalds not setting the story to song? Would my triumph not make a merry tune?” He laughed, and let his arms drop. “My hands are bloody to the shoulder, cook’s boy, for of all things blood pleases me the most. But, sad to say, not all men that die are killed by me.”

One of the daggers had eased forward in his belt, its horn handle pointing toward Yarvi. He could have snatched it. Had he been his father, or his brother, or brave Keimdal who died trying to protect his king, he might have lunged for that blade, sunk it into Grom-gil-Gorm’s belly, and fulfilled his solemn oath for vengeance.

“Do you want this bauble?” Gorm drew the knife now, and held it out to Yarvi by the bright blade. “Then take it. But you should know that Mother War breathed upon me in my crib. It has been foreseen

that no man can kill me.”

How huge he seemed, against the white sky, hair blowing, and mail shining, and the warm smile on his battle-weathered face. Had Yarvi sworn vengeance against this giant? He, half-man, with his one thin, white hand? He would have laughed at the arrogance of it were he not shivering with cold and fear.

“He should be pegged on the beach and his guts unwound for the crows,” said Gorm’s minister, her blue eyes fixed on Yarvi.

“So you always say, Mother Scaer.” Gorm slid the knife back into his belt. “But the crows never thank me. This is just a little boy. It is hardly as if this outrage was his idea.” Truer than he knew. “Unlike the noble King Odem, I do not need to swell myself with the killing of weak things.”

“What of justice?” The minister frowned over at the shrouded bodies, muscles working on the sides of her shaven head. “The low folk are hungry for vengeance.”

Gorm pushed out his lips and made a farting sound. “It is the lot of low folk to be hungry. Have you learned nothing from the Golden Queen of Gettland, wise and beautiful Laithlin? Why kill what you can sell? Collar him and put him with the others.”

Yarvi squawked as one of the men dragged him up while another snapped a collar of rough iron around his neck.

“If you change your mind about the knife,” Gorm called after him, smiling all the while, “you can seek me out. Fare you well, ex-cook’s boy!”

“Wait!” hissed Yarvi, realizing what was to come, mind racing for some trick to put it off. “Wait!”

“For what?” asked Mother Scaer. “Stop his bleating.”

A kick in the stomach left him breathless. They forced him limp upon an old stump, and while one held him gasping the other brought the pin, yellow-hot from the forge, and worked it through the clasp of his collar with pincers. The first struck it with a hammer to squash it fast but he bungled the task, caught the pin a glancing blow and scattered molten iron across Yarvi’s neck.

He had never known pain like it, and he shrieked like a boiling kettle and sobbed and blubbered and writhed on the block, and one of them took him by his shirt and flung him in a fetid pool so the iron hissed cold.

“One less cook’s boy.” Mother Scaer’s face was pale as milk and smooth as marble and her eyes were blue as the winter sky and had no pity in them. “One more slave.”

II.

THE
SOUTH
WIND

CHEAPEST OFFERINGS

Yarvi squatted in the stinking darkness, fingering the raw burns on his neck and the fresh scabs on his rough-shaved scalp, sweating by day and shivering by night, listening to the groans and whimpers and unanswered prayers in a dozen languages. From the broken throats of the human refuse around him. From his own loudest of all.

Upstairs the best wares were kept clean and well fed, lined up on the street in polished thrall-collars where they might draw in the business. In the back of the shop the less strong or skilled or beautiful were chained to rails and beaten until they smiled for a buyer. Down here in the darkness and the filth were kept the old, sick, simple, and crippled, left to squabble over scraps like pigs.

Here in the sprawling slave-market of Vulsgard, capital of Vansterland, everyone had their price, and money was not wasted on those who would fetch no money. A simple sum of costs and profits, shorn of sentiment. Here you could learn what you were truly worth, and Yarvi learned what he had long suspected.

He was close to worthless.

At first his mind spilled over with plans and stratagems and fantasies for his revenge. He was plagued by a million things he could have done differently. But not by one he could do now. If he screamed out that he was the rightful King of Gettland, who would believe it? He had scarcely believed it himself. And if he found a way to make them believe? Their business was to sell people. They would ransom him, of course. Would King Odem smile to have his missing nephew back under his tender care? No doubt. A smile calm and even as fresh-fallen snow.

So Yarvi squatted in that unbearable squalor, and found it was amazing what a man could get used to.

By the second day he scarcely noticed the stink.

By the third he huddled up gratefully to the warmth of his gods-forsaken companions in the chill of the night.

By the fourth he was rooting through the filth as eagerly as any of them when they were tossed the slops at feeding time.

By the fifth he could hardly remember the faces of those he knew best. His mother and Mother Gundring became confused, his treacherous uncle and his dead father melted together, Hurik no longer could be told from Keimdal, Isriun faded to a ghost.

Strange, how quickly a king could become an animal. Or half a king half an animal. Perhaps even those we raise highest never get that far above the mud.

It was not long after sunrise on his seventh day in that manmade hell, the calls of the merchant in dead men's armor next door just starting to challenge the squawking of the seabirds, that Yarvi heard the voice outside.

"We're looking for men as can pull an oar," it said, deep and steady. The voice of a man used to straight talk and blunt dealing.

"Nine pairs of hands." A softer, subtler voice followed the first. "The trembles has left some gaps on our benches."

“Of course, my friends!” The voice of the shop’s owner—Yarvi’s owner, now—slick and sticky as warm honey. “Behold Namev the Shend, a champion of his people taken in battle! See how tall he stands? Observe those shoulders. He could pull your ship alone. You will find no higher quality—”

A hog snort from the first customer. “If we was after quality we’d be at the other end of the street.”

“You don’t grease an axle with the best oil,” came the second voice.

Footsteps from above, and dust sifting down, and shadows shifting in the chinks of light between the boards over Yarvi’s head. The slaves around him stiffened, quieting their breathing so they could listen. The shop-owner’s voice filtered muffled to their ears, a little less honey on it now.

“Here are six healthy Inglings. They speak little of the Tongue but understand the whip well enough. Fine choices for hard labor and at an excellent price—”

“You don’t grease an axle with good dripping either,” said the second voice.

“Show us to the pitch and pig fat, flesh-dealer,” growled the first.

The damp hinges grated as the door at the top of the steps was opened, the slaves all cringing on instinct into a feeble huddle at the light, Yarvi along with them. He might have been new to slavery, but at cringing he had long experience. With many curses and blows of his stick the flesh-dealer dragged them into a wobbling, wheezing line, chains rattling out a miserable music.

“Keep that hand out of sight,” he hissed, and Yarvi twisted it up into the rags of his sleeve. All his ambition then was to be bought, and owned, and taken from this stinking hell into the sight of Mother Sun.

The two customers picked their way down the steps. The first was balding and burly, with a whip coiled at his studded belt and a way of glaring from under knotted brows that proclaimed him a bad man to fool with. The second was much younger, long, lean, and handsome, with a sparse growth of beard and a bitter twist to his thin lips. Yarvi caught the gleam of a collar at his throat. A slave himself, then, though judging by his clothes a favored one.

The flesh-dealer bowed, and gestured with his stick toward the line. “My cheapest offerings.” He did not bother to add a flourish. Fine words in that place would have been absurd.

“These are some wretched leavings,” said the slave, nose wrinkled against the stench.

His thick-set companion was not deterred. He drew the slave into a huddle with one muscled arm, speaking softly to him in Haleen. “We want rowers, not kings.” It was a language used in Sagenmark and among the islands, but Yarvi had trained as a minister, and knew most tongues spoken around the Shattered Sea.

“The captain’s no fool, Trigg,” the handsome slave was saying, fussing nervously with his collar. “What if she realizes we’ve duped her?”

“We’ll say this was the best on offer.” Trigg’s flat eyes scanned the dismal gathering. “Then you’ll give her a new bottle and she’ll forget all about it. Or don’t you need the silver, Ankran?”

“You know I do.” Ankran shrugged off Trigg’s arm, mouth further twisted with distaste. Scarcely bothering to look them over, he dragged slaves from the line. “This ... this ... this ...” His hand hovered near Yarvi, began to drift on—

“I can row, sir.” It was as big a lie as Yarvi had told in all his life. “I was a fisher’s apprentice.”

In the end Ankran picked out nine. Among them were a blind Throvenlander who had been sold by his father instead of their cow, an old Islander with a crooked back, and a lame Vansterman who could barely restrain his coughing for long enough to be paid for.

Oh, and Yarvi, rightful King of Gettland.

The argument over price was poisonous, but in the end Trigg and Ankran reached an understanding with the flesh-dealer. A trickle of shining hacksilver went into the merchant's hands, and a little back into the purse, and the greater share was split between the pockets of the buyers and, as far as Yarvi could tell, thereby stolen from their captain.

By his calculation he was sold for less than the cost of a good sheep.

He made no complaint at the price.

ONE FAMILY

The *South Wind* listed in its dock, looking like anything but a warm breeze.

Compared to the swift, slender ships of Gettland it was a wallowing monster, low to the water and fat at the waist, green weed and barnacle coating its ill-tended timbers, with two stubby masts and two dozen great oars on a side, slit-windowed castles hunched at blunt prow and stern.

“Welcome home,” said Trigg, shoving Yarvi between a pair of frowning guards and toward the gangplank.

A dark-skinned young woman sat on the roof of the aftcastle, one leg swinging as she watched the new slaves shuffle across. “This the best you could do?” she asked with scarcely the hint of an accent, and sprang easily down. She had a thrall-collar of her own, but made from twisted wire, and her chain was loose and light, part coiled about her arm as though it was an ornament she had chosen to wear. A slave even more favored than Ankran, then.

She checked in the mouth of the coughing Vansterman and clicked her tongue, poked at the Shend’s crooked back, and blew out her cheeks in disgust. “The captain won’t think much of these slops.”

“And where is our illustrious leader?” Ankran had the air of already knowing the answer.

“Asleep.”

“Asleep drunk?”

She considered that, mouth moving faintly as though she was working at a sum. “Not sober.”

“You worry about the course, Sumael,” grunted Trigg, shoving Yarvi’s companions on again. “The rowers are my business.”

Sumael narrowed her dark eyes at Yarvi as he shuffled past. She had a scar and a notch in her top lip where a little triangle of white tooth showed, and he found himself wondering what southern land she was born in and how she had come here, whether she was older or younger than him, hard to tell with her hair chopped short—

She darted out a quick arm and caught his wrist, twisting it up so his hand came free of his torn sleeve.

“This one has a crippled hand.” No mockery, merely a statement of fact, as though she had found a lame cow in a herd. “There’s only one finger on it.” Yarvi tried to pull free but she was stronger than she looked. “And that seems a poor one.”

“That damn flesh-dealer!” Ankran elbowed past to grab Yarvi’s wrist and twist it about to look. “You said you could row!”

Yarvi could only shrug and mutter, “I didn’t say well.”

“It’s almost as if you can’t trust anyone,” said Sumael, one black eyebrow high. “How will he row with one hand?”

“He’ll have to find a way,” said Trigg, stepping up to her. “We’ve got nine spaces and nine slaves.” He loomed over Sumael and spoke with his blunt nose no more than a finger’s width from her pointed one. “Unless you fancy a turn on the benches?”

She licked at that notch in her lip, and eased carefully backward. “I’ll worry about the course, shall I?”

“Good idea. Chain the cripple on Jaud’s oar.”

They dragged Yarvi along a raised gangway down the middle of the deck, past benches on either side, three men to each huge oar, all shaven-headed, all lean, all collared, watching him with their own mixtures of pity, self-pity, boredom and contempt.

A man was hunched on hands and knees, scrubbing at the deck-boards, face hidden by a shag of matted hair and colorless beard, so beggarly he made the most wretched of the oarsmen look like princes. One of the guards aimed the sort of careless kick at him you might at a stray dog and sent him crawling away, dragging a great weight of heavy chain after him. The ship did not seem well supplied in general but of chain there was no shortage.

They flung Yarvi down with unnecessary violence between two other slaves, by no means an encouraging pair. At the end of the oar was a hulking southerner with a thick fold of muscle where his neck should have been, head tipped back so he could watch the seabirds circling. Closest to the rowlock was a dour old man, short and stocky, his sinewy forearms thick with gray hair, his cheeks full of broken veins from a life in the weather, picking at the calluses on his broad palms.

“Gods damn it,” grunted this older one, shaking his head as the guards chained Yarvi to the bench beside him, “we’ve a cripple at our oar.”

“You prayed for help, didn’t you?” said the southerner, without looking around. “Here is help.”

“I prayed for help with two hands.”

“Be thankful for half of what you prayed for,” said Yarvi. “Believe me, I prayed for none of this.”

The big man’s mouth curled up a little as he looked at Yarvi sidelong. “When you have a load to lift, you’re better lifting than weeping. I am Jaud. Your sour oarmate is Rulf.”

“My name’s Yorv,” said Yarvi, having turned his story over in advance. *Keep your lies as carefully as your winter grain*, Mother Gundring would have said. “I was a cook’s boy—”

With a practiced roll of the tongue and twitch of the head the old man spat over the ship’s side. “You’re nothing now, and that’s all. Forget everything but the next stroke. That makes it a little easier.”

Jaud heaved up a sigh. “Don’t let Rulf grind the laughter out of you. He’s sour as lemons, but a good man to have at your back.” He puffed out his cheeks. “Though, one must admit, since he’s chained to your side, that will never happen.”

Yarvi gave a sorry little chuckle, maybe his first since he was made a slave. Maybe his first since he was made a king. But he didn’t laugh long.

The door of the aftcastle banged wide and a woman swaggered into the light, raised both arms with a flourish, and shrieked, “I am awake!”

She was very tall, sharp-featured as a hawk with a pale scar across one dark cheek and her hair pinned up in a tangle. Her clothes were a gaudy patchwork of a dozen cultures’ most impractical attire—a silken shirt with frayed embroidery flapping at the sleeves, a silvery fur coat ruffled by the breeze, a fingerless glove on one hand and the other crusted with rings, a crystal-studded belt the gilt end of which flapped about the grip of a curved sword slung absurdly low.

She kicked aside the nearest oarsman so she could prop one sharp-toed boot on his bench and grinned down the ship, gold glinting among her teeth.

Right away the slaves, the guards, the sailors began to clap. The only ones who did not join them were Sumael, her tongue wedged in her cheek on the roof of the aftcastle, the beggar whose scrubbing block was still scrape-scraping on the gangway, and Yarvi, ex-King of Gettland.

“Damn this bitch,” Rulf forced through a fixed grin while he applauded.

“You’d better clap,” murmured Jaud.

Yarvi held up his hands. “I’m worse equipped for that than rowing.”

“Little ones, little ones!” called the woman, ring-covered fist pressed to her chest with emotion, “you do me too much honor! Don’t let that stop you trying, though. To those who have recently joined us, I am Ebdel Aric Shadikshirram, your captain and caregiver. You may well have heard of me, for my name is famous throughout the Shattered Sea and far beyond, yea unto the very walls of the First of Cities and so on.”

Her fame had not reached Yarvi, but Mother Gundring always used to say *The wise speaker learns first when to stay silent*.

“I could regale you with rousing tales of my colorful past,” she went on, toying with an earring of gold and feathers that dangled down well past her shoulder. “How I commanded the victorious fleet of the empress at the Battle of Fulku, was for some time a favored lover of Duke Mikedas himself but refused to become his wife, scattered the blockade at Inchim, sailed through the greatest tempest since the Breaking of God, landed a whale, and blah blah blah, but why?” She affectionately patted the cheek of the nearest slave, hard enough for the slapping to be clearly heard. “Let us simply say this ship is now the world to you, and on this ship I am great and you are lowly.”

“We’re great,” echoed Trigg, sweeping the benches with his frown, “you’re lowly.”

“Fine profits today, in spite of the sad need to replace a few of your brethren.” The many buckles on the captain’s boots jingled as she swaggered between the benches. “You will all have a mouthful of bread and wine tonight.” Scattered cheers at this spectacular show of generosity. “Though you belong to me—”

Trigg noisily cleared his throat.

“—and the other shareholders in our brave vessel—”

Trigg nodded cautious approval.

“—still I like to think of us all as one family!” The captain gathered the whole ship in her outstretched arms, huge sleeves streaming in the breeze as though she were some rare and enormous seabird taking flight. “I, the indulgent grandparent, Trigg and his guards the kindly uncles, you the troublesome brood. United against merciless Mother Sea, ever the sailor’s most bitter enemy! You are lucky little children, for mercy, charity, and kindness have always been my great weaknesses.” Rulf hawked up phlegm in disgust at that. “Most of you will see the good sense in being obedient offspring, but ... perhaps ...” and Shadikshirram’s smile collapsed to leave her dark face a caricature of hurt, “... there is some malcontent among you thinking of going their own way.”

Trigg gave a disapproving growl.

“Of turning his back upon his loving family. Of abandoning his brothers and sisters. Of *leaving* our loyal fellowship at some harbor or other.” The captain traced the fine scar down her cheek with one fingertip and bared her teeth. “Perhaps even of raising a treacherous hand against his doting carers.”

Trigg gave a horrified hiss.

“Should some devil send such thoughts your way ...” The captain leaned down toward the deck. “Think on the last man to try it.” She came up with the heavy chain and gave it a savage tug, jerking the filthy deck-scrubber from his feet and squawking over in a tangle of limbs, rags, hair. “Never let this ungrateful creature near a blade!” She stepped onto him where he lay. “Not an eating knife, not a nail-trimmer, not a fishhook!” She walked over him, tall heels grinding into his back, losing not the

slightest poise in spite of the challenging terrain. “He is *nothing*, do you hear me?”

“Damn this bitch,” murmured Rulf again as she hopped lightly from the back of the beggar’s head.

Yarvi was watching the wretched scrubber as he clambered up, wiped blood from his mouth, retrieved his block, and without a sound crawled stiffly back to his work. Only his eyes showed through his matted hair for an instant as he looked toward the captain’s back, bright as stars.

“Now!” shouted Shadikshirram, swarming effortlessly up the ladder onto the roof of the aftcastle and pausing to twirl her ring-crusted fingers. “South to Thorlby, my little ones! Profits await! And Ankran?”

“My captain,” said Ankran, bowing so low he nearly grazed the deck.

“Bring me some wine, all this blather has given me a thirst.”

“You heard your grandma!” roared Trigg, uncoiling his whip.

There were clatters and calls, the hissing of rope and the creaking of timbers as the few free sailors cast off and prepared the *South Wind* to leave Vulsgard’s harbor.

“What now?” muttered Yarvi.

Rulf gave a bitter hiss at such ignorance.

“Now?” Jaud spat into his palms and worked his two strong hands about the polished handles of their oar. “We row.”

Soon enough, Yarvi wished he had stayed in the flesh-dealer's cellar.

"Heave."

Trigg's boots ground out a ruthless rhythm as he prowled the gangway, whip coiled in meaty fists, eyes sweeping the benches for slaves in need of its encouragement, blunt voice booming out with pitiless regularity.

"Heave."

It was no surprise that Yarvi's withered hand was even worse at gripping the handle of a great oar than it had been the handle of a shield. But Trigg made Master Hunnan seem a doting nursemaid in Yarvi's memory. The whip was his first answer to any problem, but when that did not cause more fingers to sprout he lashed Yarvi's crooked left wrist to the oar with chafing thongs.

"Heave."

With each impossible haul upon the handles of that terrible oar Yarvi's arms and shoulders and back burned worse. Though the hides on the bench were worn to a silky softness, and the handles to a dull polish by his predecessors, with each stroke his arse was worse skinned, his hands worse blistered. With each stroke the whip cuts and the boot bruises and the slow-healing burns about his rough-forged thrall-collar were more stung by salt sea and salt sweat.

"Heave."

The suffering went far past any point of endurance Yarvi had imagined, but it was astonishing the inhuman efforts a whip in skillful hands could flick from a man. Soon its crack elsewhere, or even the approaching scrape of Trigg's boots on the gangway, would make Yarvi flinch and whimper and pull that fraction harder, spit flecking from his gritted teeth.

"This boy won't last," growled Rulf.

"One stroke at a time," murmured Jaud gently, his own strokes endlessly strong, smooth, regular, as though he was a man of wood and iron. "Breathe slow. Breathe with the oar. One at a time."

Yarvi could not have said why, but that was some help.

"Heave."

And the rowlocks clattered and chains rattled, the ropes squealed and the timbers creaked, the oarslaves groaned or cursed or prayed or kept grim silence, and the *South Wind* inched on.

"One stroke at a time." Jaud's soft voice was a thread through the haze of misery. "One at a time."

Yarvi could hardly tell which was the worse torture—the whip's stinging or his skin's chafing or his muscles' burning or the hunger or the weather or the cold or the squalor. And yet, the endless scraping of the nameless scrubber's stone, up the deck and down the deck and up the deck again, his lank hair swaying and his scar-crossed back showing through his rags and his twitching lips curled from his yellowed teeth, reminded Yarvi that it could be worse.

It could always be worse.

"Heave."

Sometimes the gods would take pity on his wretched state and send a breath of favorable wind. Then Shadikshirram would smile her golden smile and, with the air of a long-suffering mother who

could not help spoiling her thankless offspring, would order the oars unshipped and the clumsy sails of leather-banded wool unfurled, and would airily disclaim on how mercy was her greatest weakness.

With weeping gratitude Yarvi would slump back against the stilled oar of those behind and watch the sailcloth snap and billow overhead and breathe the close stink of more than a hundred sweating, desperate, suffering men.

“When do we wash?” Yarvi muttered, during one of these blissful lulls.

“When Mother Sea takes it upon herself,” growled Rulf.

That was not rarely. The icy waves that slapped the ship’s side would spout, spray, and regularly soak them to the skin, Mother Sea washing the deck and surging beneath the footrests until everything was crusted stiff with salt.

“Heave.”

Each gang of three was chained together with one lock to their bench, and Trigg and the captain had the only keys. The oarslaves ate their meager rations chained to their bench each evening. They squatted over a battered bucket chained to their bench each morning. They slept chained to their bench, covered by stinking blankets and bald furs, the air heavy with moans and snores and grumbles and the smoke of breath. Once a week they sat chained to their bench while their heads and beards were roughly shaved—a defense against lice which deterred the tiny passengers not at all.

The only time Trigg reluctantly produced his key and opened one of those locks was when the coughing Vansterman was found dead one chill morning, and was dragged from between his blank-faced oarmates and heaved over the side.

The only one who remarked on his passing was Ankran, who plucked at his thin beard and said, “We’ll need a replacement.”

For a moment Yarvi worried the survivors might have to work that fraction harder. Then he hoped there might be a little more food to go around. Then he was sick at himself for the way he had started to think.

But not so sick he wouldn’t have taken the Vansterman’s share had it been offered.

“Heave.”

He could not have said how many nights he passed limp and utterly spent, how many mornings he woke whimpering at the stiffness of the last day’s efforts only to be whipped to more, how many days without a thought but the next stroke. But finally an evening came when he did not sink straight into a dreamless sleep. When his muscles had started to harden, the first raw blisters had burst and the whip had fallen on him less.

The *South Wind* was moored in an inlet, gently rocking. The rain was falling hard, so the sails had been lowered and strung over the deck to make a great tent, noisy with the hissing of drops on cloth. Those men with the skill had been handed rods and Rulf was one, hunched near the rowlock in the darkness, murmuring softly to the fish.

“For a man with but one hand,” said Jaud, chain clinking as he propped one big bare foot up on their oar, “you rowed well today.”

“Huh.” Rulf spat through the rowlock, and a clipping of Father Moon’s light showed the grin on his broad face. “We may make half an oarsman of you yet.”

And though one of them was born long miles away and the other long years before him, and though Yarvi knew little about them that he could not read in their faces, and though pulling an oar chained in

a trading galley was no high deed for the son of King Uthrik of Gettland, Yarvi felt a flush of pride, so sharp it almost brought tears to his eyes, for there is a strange and powerful bond that forms between oarmates.

When you are chained beside a man and share his food and his misfortune, share the blows of the overseer and the buffets of Mother Sea, match your rhythm to his as you heave at the same great beam, huddle together in the icy night or face the careless cold alone—that is when you come to know a man. A week wedged between Rulf and Jaud and Yarvi was forced to wonder whether he had ever had two better friends.

Though perhaps that said more about his past life than his present companions.

The next day the *South Wind* put in at Thorlby.

Until Sumael, frowning from the forecandle, snapped and steered and bullied the fat galley through the shipping to the bustling wharves, Yarvi had hardly believed he could be living in the same world as the one in which he had been a king. Yet here he was. Home.

The familiar gray houses rose in tiers, crowded upon the steep slopes, older and grander as Yarvi's eyes scanned upward until, he gazed upon the citadel squatting on its tunnel-riddled rock, black against the white sky, where he had been raised. He could see the six-sided tower where Mother Gundring had her chambers, where he had learned her lessons, answered her riddles, planned his happy future as a minister. He could see the copper dome of the Godshall gleaming, beneath which he had been betrothed to his cousin Isriun, their hands bound together, her lips brushing his. He could see the hillside, in view of the howes of his ancestors, where he had sworn his oath in the hearing of gods and men to take vengeance on the killers of his father.

Was King Odem comfortably enthroned in the Black Chair now, loved and lauded by subjects who finally had a king they could admire? Of course.

Would Mother Gundring be standing minister to him, whispering her pithy wisdom in his ear? More than likely.

Had another apprentice taken Yarvi's place as her successor, sitting on his stool, feeding his doves, and bringing the steaming tea every evening? How could it be otherwise?

Would Isriun be weeping bitter tears because her crippled betrothed would never return? As easily as she forgot Yarvi's brother, she would forget again.

Perhaps his mother would be the only one to miss him, and that because, in spite of all her cunning, her grip on power would surely crumble without her puppet son perched on his toy chair.

Had they burned a ship and raised an empty howe for him as they had for his drowned uncle Uthil? Somehow he doubted it.

He realized he had bunched his shriveled hand into a trembling, knobbled fist.

"What's troubling you?" asked Jaud.

"This was my home."

Rulf gave a sigh. "Take it from one who knows, cook's boy. The past is best buried."

"I swore an oath," said Yarvi. "An oath there can be no rowing away from."

Rulf sighed again. "Take it from one who knows, cook's boy. Never swear an oath."

"But once you have sworn," said Jaud. "What then?"

Yarvi frowned up toward the citadel, his jaw clenched painfully tight. Perhaps the gods had sent him this ordeal as a punishment. For being too trusting, too vain, too weak. But they had left him alive. They had given him a chance to fulfill his oath. To spill the blood of his treacherous uncle. To

reclaim the Black Chair.

But the gods would not wait forever. With every dawn the memory of his father would fade, with every noon his mother's power would wane, with every dusk his uncle's grip on Gettland would grow firmer. With every sunset Yarvi's chances dwindled into darkness.

He would take no vengeance and reclaim no kingdom lashed to an oar and chained to a bench, that much was clear.

He had to get free.

THE MINISTER'S TOOLS

Stroke by backbreaking stroke, Thorlby, and home, and Yarvi's old life slipped into the past. Southward dragged the *South Wind*, though the wind rarely seemed to blow her oarslaves much help. Southward down the ragged coast of Gettland, with its islands and inlets, its walled villages and fishing boats bobbing on the tide, its fenced farmsteads on sheep-dotted hillsides.

And on went Yarvi's pitiless, sinew-shredding, tooth-grinding war against the oar. He could not have said he was winning. No one won. But perhaps his defeats were not quite so one-sided.

Sumael brought them tight to the coast as they passed the mouth of the Helm River, and the ship began to hum with muttered prayers. The oarsmen cast fearful glances out to sea toward a spiral of blackened cloud that tore the sky. They could not see the splintered elf-towers on the broken islands beneath it, but everyone knew they lurked behind the horizon.

"Strokom," muttered Yarvi, straining to see and fearing to see at once. In ages past men had brought relics from that cursed elf-ruin, but in their triumph they had sickened and died, and the Ministry had forbidden any man to go there.

"Father Peace protect us," grunted Rulf, making a shambles of holy symbols over his heart, and the slaves needed no whip to double their efforts and leave that shadow far in their wake.

The irony was not lost on Yarvi that this was the very route he would have taken to his Minister's Test. On that voyage Prince Yarvi, swaddled in a rich blanket with his books, would have spared no thought for the suffering of the oarslaves. Now, chained to the benches, he made the *South Wind* his study. The ship, and the people on it, and how he might use them to get free of it.

For people are the minister's best tools, Mother Gundring always said.

Ebdel Aric Shadikshirram, self-renowned merchant, lover and naval captain, spent most of her time drunk and most of the rest passed out drunk. Sometimes her snoring could be heard through the door of her cabin in the aftcastle, eerily keeping time to the movement of the rowers. Sometimes she would stand upon the forecastle in melancholy mood, one hand on her slouched hip and the other clutching a half-empty bottle, frowning into the wind as though daring it to blow harder. Sometimes she would prowl the gangway slapping backs and telling jokes as though she and her slaves were old friends together. When she passed the nameless deck-scrubber she would never miss a chance to kick, throttle, or upend the night-bucket over him; then she would swig from her wine and roar out, "On to profits!" and the oarsmen would cheer, and a man who cheered especially loudly might get a taste of the captain's wine himself, and a man who stayed silent might get a taste of Trigg's whip instead.

Trigg was the overseer, the chain-master, the grip, second-in-command and with a full share in the enterprise. He ordered the guards, perhaps two dozen of them, and watched over the slaves, and made sure they kept whatever pace the captain asked for. He was a brutal man, but there was a kind of awful justice in him. He had no favorites and made no exceptions. Everyone was whipped alike.

Ankran was the storekeeper and there was no justice in him at all. He slept below decks with the stores, and was the only slave to be regularly let off the ship. It was his task to buy food and clothes and share them out and he worked a thousand tiny swindles every day—buying meat that was halfway spoiled, and trimming every man's rations, and making them mend clothes that were worn to rags—

and splitting the profits with Trigg.

Whenever he passed by, Rulf would spit with particular disgust. “What does that crooked bastard want with the money?”

“Some men simply like money,” said Jaud mildly.

“Even slaves?”

“Slaves have the same appetites as other men. It’s the chance to indulge them they lack.”

“True enough,” said Rulf, looking wistfully up at Sumael.

The navigator spent most of her time on the roof of one of the castles, checking charts and instruments, or frowning up at sun or stars while she worked quick sums on her fingers, or pointing out some rock or ripple, some cloud or current, and snapping out warnings. While the *South Wind* was at sea she went where she pleased, but when they came into dock the captain’s first act was always to lock her by her long, fine chain to an iron ring on the aftcastle. A slave with her skills was probably worth more than their whole cargo.

Sometimes she threaded among the rowers, clambering heedlessly over men, oars and benches to pick at some fixing or other, or to lean over the ship’s side to check depths with a knotted plumbline. The only time Yarvi ever saw her smile was when she was perched on one of the mastheads with the wind tearing at her short hair, as happy there as Yarvi might have been at Mother Gundring’s firepit, scanning the coast through a tube of bright brass.

It was Throvenland that ground by now, gray cliffs besieged by the hungry waves, gray beaches where the sea sucked at the shingle, gray towns where gray-mailed spearmen frowned from the wharves at passing ships.

“My home was near here,” said Rulf, as they shipped the oars on one gray morning, a thin drizzle beading everything with dew. “Two days’ hard ride inland. I had a good farm with a good stone chimney, and a good wife who bore me two good sons.”

“How did you end up here?” asked Yarvi, fiddling pointlessly at the strapping on his raw left wrist.

“I was a fighting man. An archer, sailor, swordsman, and raider in the summer months.” Rulf scratched at his heavy jaw, already gray stubbled, for his beard seemed to spring out an hour after it was shaved. “I served a dozen seasons with a captain called Halstam, an easygoing fellow. I became his helmsman and, along with Hopki Strangletoes and Blue Jenner and some other handy men we enjoyed some successes in the raiding business, enough that I could sit with my feet to the fire and drink good ale all winter.”

“Ale never agreed with me, but it sounds a happy life,” said Jaud, gazing into the far distance. Toward a happy past of his own, perhaps.

“The gods love to laugh at a happy man.” Rulf noisily gathered some spit and sent it spinning over the side of the ship. “One winter, somewhat the worse for drink, Halstam fell from his horse and died, and the ship passed to his oldest son, Young Halstam, who was a different kind of man, all pride and froth and scant wisdom.”

“Sometimes father and son aren’t much alike,” muttered Yarvi.

“Against my better judgment I consented to be his helmsman, and not a week from port, ignoring my advice, he tried to take a too-well-guarded merchant ship. Hopki and Jenner and most of the rest went through the Last Door that day. I was one among a handful taken prisoner and sold on. That was two summers ago, and I’ve been pulling an oar for Trigg ever since.”

“A bitter ending,” said Yarvi.

“Many sweet stories have them,” said Jaud.

Rulf shrugged. “Hard to complain. In my voyages we must’ve stolen ten score Inglings and sold ’em for slaves and taken great delight in the profits.” The old raider rubbed his rough palm against the grain of the oar. “They say the seed you scatter will be the seed you harvest, and so it seems indeed.”

“You wouldn’t leave if you could?” muttered Yarvi, with a glance toward Trigg to make sure they were not heard.

Jaud snorted. “There is a well in the village where I used to live, a well that gives the sweetest water in the world.” He closed his eyes and licked at his lips as if he could taste it. “I would give anything to drink from that well again.” He spread his palms. “But I have nothing to give. And look at the last man who tried to leave.” And he nodded toward the scrubber, his block scraping, scraping, scraping endlessly down the deck, his heavy chain rattling as he shuffled stiffly on scabbed knees to nowhere.

“What’s his story?” asked Yarvi.

“I don’t know his name. Nothing, we all call him. When I was first brought to the *South Wind* he pulled an oar. One night, off the coast of Gettland, he tried to escape. Somehow he got free of his chain and stole a knife. He killed three guards and cut another’s knee so he never walked again, and he gave our captain that scar before she and Trigg put a stop to him.”

Yarvi blinked at the shambling scrubber. “All that with a knife?”

“And not a large one. Trigg wanted to hang him from a mast but Shadikshirram chose to keep him alive as an example to the rest of us.”

“Mercy’s ever been her weakness,” said Rulf, and gave a grunt of joyless laughter.

“She stitched her cut,” said Jaud, “and put that great chain on him, and hired more guards, and told them never to let him get his hands upon a blade, and ever since he has been scrubbing the deck, and never since have I heard him say a word.”

“What about you?” asked Yarvi.

Jaud grinned sideways at him. “I speak when I have something worth saying.”

“No. I mean, what’s your story?”

“I used to be a baker.” Ropes hissed as they brought up the anchor, and Jaud sighed, and worked his hands about the handles his own palms had polished to a gleam. “Now my story is I pull this oar.”

THE FOOL STRIKES

Jaud pulled their oar, and so did Yarvi, with the calluses thickening even on his crippled hand, his face hardening against the weather and his body turning lean and tough as Trigg's whip. They rounded Bail's Point in a soaking squall, hardly able to see the brooding fortress there for the rain, and turned eastward into calmer waters, busy with ships of all shapes and nations, Yarvi twisting around at the oar in his eagerness to see Skekenhouse.

It was the elf-ruins he saw first, of course. The giant walls, sheer and perfectly smooth at their bases, were unmarked by Mother Sea's fury but torn off ragged higher up, twisted metal showing in the cracks like splintered bone in a wound, battlements of new masonry perching at their tops, the flags of the High King proudly fluttering.

The Tower of the Ministry loomed over all. Over every building about the Shattered Sea, unless you counted the ruins of Strokorn or Lanangad where no man dared tread. For three-quarters of its staggering height it was elf-built: pillars of jointless stone, perfectly square, perfectly true, with giant expanses of black elf-glass still twinkling at some of the great windows.

At perhaps five times the height of the tallest tower in Thorlby's citadel the elf-stone was sheared away, rock melted and congealed in giant tears by the Breaking of God. Above, long generations of ministers had constructed a riotous crown of timber and tile—turrets, platforms, slumping roofs, balconies—sprouting with smoking chimneys and festooned with dangling ropes and chains, all streaked with age and droppings, the rotting work of men ridiculous by comparison with the stark perfection below.

Gray specks circled the highest domes. Doves, perhaps, like the ones Yarvi once tended. Like the one that lured his father to his death. Croaking out messages from the many ministers scattered about the Shattered Sea. Could he even see the odd bronze-feathered eagle carrying the High King's wishes back?

In that ancient tower, Yarvi would have taken the test. There he would have kissed the cheek of Grandmother Wexen when he passed. There his life as a prince would have ended, and his life as a minister begun, and his life as a wretched slave never come to pass.

"Unship the oars!" called Sumael.

"Unship the oars!" bellowed Trigg, to make sure everyone saw he gave the orders.

"Oars out, oars in," grunted Rulf. "You'd think they could make up their bloody minds."

"Skekenhouse." Yarvi rubbed at the red raw patches on his wrist as the *South Wind* was heaved into its berth while Sumael leaned from the aftcastle and screamed at the struggling dockers to take care. "The center of the world."

Jaud snorted. "Compared to the great cities of Catalia this is a stable."

"We're not in Catalia."

"No." The big man heaved a heavy sigh. "Sadly."

The docks stank of old rot and salt decay, and with impressive power to be noticed over the stink of Yarvi and his companions. Many of the berths were vacant. The windows of the decaying buildings behind gaped dark and empty. On the dockside a great heap of moldering grain sprouted with weeds.

Guardsmen in the patched livery of the High King sat idle and threw dice. Beggars slouched in the shadows. Perhaps it was the bigger city, but there was none of the vigor and vitality of Thorlby, none of the bustle or new building.

The elf-ruins might have been stupendous, but the parts of Skekenhouse that men had built seemed quite a disappointment. Yarvi curled his tongue and neatly spat over the side of the ship.

“Nice.” Rulf gave him a nod. “Your rowing’s not up to much, but you’re coming on where it really matters.”

“You must struggle by without me, little ones!” Shadikshirram strutted from her cabin in her most garish garments, working an extra ring or two onto her fingers. “I am expected at the Tower of the Ministry!”

“Our money’s expected,” grumbled Trigg. “How much for a license this year?”

“My guess would be a little more than last year.” Shadikshirram licked a knuckle so she could twist a particularly gaudy bauble over it. “There is, in general, an upward trajectory to the High King’s fees.”

“Better to toss our money to Mother Sea than to the Ministry’s jackals.”

“I’d toss you to Mother Sea if I didn’t think she’d toss you straight back.” Shadikshirram held out her jewel-crusted hand at arm’s length to admire. “With a license we can trade anywhere around the Shattered Sea. Without one ... pfah.” And she blew all profits away through her fingertips.

“The High King is jealous of his revenues,” muttered Jaud.

“Course he is,” said Rulf as they watched their captain aim a lazy kick at Nothing, then stroll across the bouncing gangplank, Ankrán scrambling after her on a short length of chain. “It’s his revenues make him High. Without ’em he’ll crash to earth like the rest of us.”

“And great men need great enemies,” said Jaud, “and wars are a damned expensive hobby.”

“Building temples comes close behind.” Rulf nodded up at the skeleton of a huge building showing itself above the nearest roofs, so covered in a ramshackle web of scaffolds, hoists and platforms Yarvi could hardly make out its shape.

“That’s the High King’s temple?”

“To this new god of his.” Rulf spat out of the rowlock, missed, and spattered the timbers instead. “A monument to his own vanity. Four years in the building and still not halfway done.”

“Sometimes I think there can be no such thing as gods at all,” mused Jaud, stroking thoughtfully at his pursed lips with a fingertip. “Then I wonder who can be making my life such hell.”

“An old god,” said Yarvi. “Not a new.”

“How d’you mean?” asked Rulf.

“Before the elves made their war upon Her, there was one God. But in their arrogance they used a magic so strong it ripped open the Last Door, destroyed them all and broke the One God into the many.” Yarvi nodded toward that giant building site. “Some in the south believe the One God cannot ever be truly broken. That the many are merely aspects of the one. It seems the High King has seen the merits of their theology. Or at least Grandmother Wexen has.” He considered that. “Or perhaps she sees a profit in currying favor with the Empress of the South by praying the same way she does.” He remembered the hungry brightness in her eye as he knelt before her. “Or she thinks that folk who kneel to one god will kneel more easily to one High King.”

Rulf spat again. “The last High King was bad enough, but he ranked himself as first among brothers. The older this one gets the more he’s taken with his own power. He and his damn minister

won't be happy 'til they're set above their own One God and all the world kneels before their withered arses."

"A man who worships the One God cannot choose his own path: he is given it from on high," mused Yarvi. "He cannot refuse requests, but must bow to commands." He drew up a length of his chain and frowned down at it. "The One God makes a chain through the world, from the High King, through the little kings, to the rest of us, each link with its right place. All are made slaves."

Jaud was frowning sideways. "You are a deep thinker, Yorv."

Yarvi shrugged and let his chain drop. "Less use than a good hand to an oarsman."

"How can one god make all the world work, anyway?" Rulf held his arms out to encompass the rotting city and all its people. "How can one god be for the cattle and the fish, and the sea and the sky, and for war and peace both? A lot of damn nonsense."

"Perhaps the One God is like me." Sumael sprawled on the aftcastle, propped on one elbow with her head resting on her bony shoulder and one leg dangling.

"Lazy?" grunted Jaud.

She gave a grin. "She chooses the course, but has lots of little gods chained up to do the rowing."

"Pardon me, almighty one," said Yarvi, "but from where I sit you look to have a chain of your own."

"For now," she said, tossing a loop of it over her shoulder like a scarf.

"One God," snorted Rulf again, still shaking his head toward the quarter-built temple.

"Better one than none at all," grunted Trigg as he stalked past.

The oarslaves fell silent at that, all knowing their course would take them past the land of the Shends next, who had no mercy on outsiders, and prayed to no god and knelt to no king, however high he said he was.

Great dangers meant great profits, though, as Shadikshirram informed the crew when she sprang back aboard, holding high her rune-scrawled license, eyes so bright with triumph one might have thought she had it from the hand of the High King himself.

"That paper won't protect us from the Shends," someone grunted from the bench behind. "They skin their captives and eat their own dead."

Yarvi snorted. He had studied the language and customs of most of the peoples around the Shattered Sea. *The food of fear is ignorance*, Mother Gundring used to say. *The death of fear is knowledge*. When you study a race of men you find they are just men like any others.

"The Shends don't like outsiders since we're always stealing them for slaves. They're no more savage than any other people."

"As bad as that?" muttered Jaud, eyeing Trigg as he uncoiled his whip.

They rowed east that afternoon with a new license and new cargo but the same old chains, the Tower of the Ministry dwindling into the haze of distance beyond their wake. At sunset they put in at a sheltered cove, Mother Sun scattering gold on the water as she sank behind the world, painting strange colors among the clouds.

"I don't like the look of that sky!" Sumael had swarmed up one of the masts, legs hooked over the yard, frowning off toward the horizon. "We should stay here tomorrow!"

Shadikshirram waved her warnings away like flies. "The storms in this little pond are nothing, and I have always had outstanding weatherluck. We go on." And she flung an empty bottle into the sea and called to Ankran for another, leaving Sumael to shake her head at the heavens unmarked.

While the *South Wind* rocked gently and the guards and sailors huddled at a brazier on the forecastle to dice for trinkets, one of the slaves began to sing a bawdy song in a voice thin and cracked. At one point he forgot the words and filled them in with nonsense sounds, but at the end there was a scattering of tired laughter, and the hollow thumping of fists on oars in approval.

Another man broke in with a rousing bass, the song of Bail the Builder, who in truth had built nothing but heaps of corpses, and made himself the first High King with fire and sword and a hard word for everyone. Tyrants look far better when looked back on, though, and soon enough other voices joined the first. Eventually Bail passed through the Last Door in battle, as heroes do, and the song came to an end, as songs do, and the singer was rewarded with a round of wood-thumping of his own.

“Who else has a tune?” somebody called.

And to everyone’s surprise, not least his own, it turned out Yarvi did. It was one his mother used to sing at night, when he was young and scared in the dark. He did not know why it came to him then, but his voice soared high and free, to places far from the reeking ship and things these men had long forgotten. Jaud blinked at him, and Rulf stared, and it seemed to Yarvi that, chained and helpless in this rotting tub, he had never sung half so well.

There was a silence when he was done, with only the faint creaking of the ship on the shifting water, and the wind in the rigging, and the far, high calls of distant gulls.

“Give us another,” someone said.

So Yarvi gave them another, and another, and another after that. He gave them songs of love lost and love found, of high deeds and low. The Lay of Froki, so cold-blooded he slept through a battle, and the song of Ashenleer, so sharp-eyed she could count every grain of sand on a beach. He sang of Horalld the Far-Traveled who beat the black-skinned King of Daiba in a race and in the end sailed so far he fell off the edge of the world. He sang of Angulf Clovenfoot, Hammer of the Vanstermen, and did not mention the man was his great-grandfather.

Each time he finished he was asked for another, until Father Moon’s crescent showed over the hills and the stars began to peep through heaven’s cloth, and the last note of the tale of Bereg, who died to found the Ministry and protect the world from magic, smoked out into the dusk.

“Like a little bird with only one wing.” When Yarvi turned Shadikshirram was looking down at him, adjusting the pins in her tangle of hair. “Fine singing, eh, Trigg?”

The overseer sniffed, and wiped his eyes on the back of his hand, and in a voice choked with emotion said, “I never heard the like.”

The wise wait for their moment, Mother Gundring used to say, *but never let it pass*. So Yarvi bowed, and spoke to Shadikshirram in her own language. He did not know it well, but a good minister can make anyone a fine greeting.

“It is my honor,” he said sweetly, while thinking about putting black-tongue root in her wine, “to sing for one so famous.”

She narrowed her eyes at him. “Aren’t you full of surprises?” And she tossed him her mostly empty bottle and walked away, humming so tunelessly he could only just tell it was the Lay of Froki.

If he had been served that wine at his father’s table he would have spat it in the slave’s face, but now it seemed the best he ever tasted, full of sun and fruit and freedom. It was a wrench to share the splash he had, but the sight of Rulf’s huge smile after he took his swallow was well worth the price.

As they made ready to sleep, Yarvi found the other slaves were looking at him differently. Or

perhaps it was that they were looking at him at all. Even Sumael gave him a thoughtful frown from her place outside the captain's cabin, as though he were a sum she could not quite make add up.

“Why are they watching me?” he murmured to Jaud.

“It is rare they get a good thing. You gave them one.”

Yarvi smiled as he pulled the stinking furs to his chin. He would not be cutting the guards down with an eating knife, but perhaps the gods had given him better weapons. Time might be slipping through his fingers. He lacked a full set, after all. But he had to be patient. Patient as the winter.

Once, after his father had hit him in a rage, Yarvi's mother had found him crying. *The fool strikes*, she had said. *The wise man smiles, and watches, and learns.*

Then strikes.

As a boy, Yarvi had been given a little ship of cork. His brother had taken it from him and thrown it in the sea, and Yarvi had lain on the rocky edge above and watched it tossed and whirled and played with by the waves until it was gone.

Now Mother Sea made the *South Wind* a toy ship.

Yarvi's stomach was in his sick-sour mouth as they crested one surging mountain of water, was sucked into his arse as they plunged into the foam-white valley beyond, pitching and yawing, deeper and deeper until they were surrounded by the towering sea on every side and he was sure they would be snatched into the unknowable depths, drowned to a man.

Rulf had stopped saying he'd been in worse. Not that Yarvi could have heard him. It could hardly be told what was the thunder of the sky and what the roaring of the waves and the groaning of the battered hull, the tortured ropes, the tortured men.

Jaud had stopped saying he thought the sky was brightening. It could hardly be told any longer where lashing sea ended and lashing rain began, the whole a stinging fury through which Yarvi could scarcely see the nearest mast, until the storm gloom was lit by a flash which froze the ship and its cowering crew in an instant of stark black and white.

Jaud's face was grim set, all hard planes and bunched muscle as he wrestled with their oar. Rulf's eyes bulged as he lent his own strength to the struggle. Sumael clung to the ring she was chained to when they were in dock, shrieking something no one could hear over the shrieking wind.

Shadikshirram was less inclined to listen than ever. She stood on the aftcastle's roof, one arm hooked around the mast as though it were a drinking companion, shaking her drawn sword at the sky, laughing and, when the gale dropped enough for Yarvi to hear her, daring the storm to blow harder.

Orders would have been useless now anyway. The oars were maddened animals, Yarvi dragged by the strapping about his wrist as his mother had used to drag him when he was a child. His mouth was salty with the sea, salty with his blood where the oar had struck him.

Never in his life had he been so scared and helpless. Not when he hid from his father in the secret places of the citadel. Not when he looked into Hurik's blood-spotted face and Odem said, *Kill him*. Not when he cowered at the feet of Grom-gil-Gorm. Mighty though they were, such terrors paled against the towering rage of Mother Sea.

The next flash showed the rumor of a coast, battering waves chewing at a ragged shore, black trees and black rock from which white spray flew.

"Gods help us," whispered Yarvi, squeezing shut his eyes, and the ship shuddered and flung him back, cracked his head against the oar behind. Men slid and tangled, tumbled from their benches to the farthest extent of their chains, clutching at anything that might spare them from being strangled by their own thrall-collars. Yarvi felt Rulf's strong arm about his shoulder, holding him fast to the bench, and it was some strange comfort to know he would be touching another person as he died.

He prayed as he never had before, to every god that he could think of, tall or small. He prayed not for the Black Chair, or for vengeance on his treacherous uncle, or for the better kiss Isriun had promised him, or even for freedom from his collar.

He prayed only for his life.

There was a grating crash that made the timbers tremble and the ship lurch. Oars shattered like twigs. A great wave washed the deck and dragged at Yarvi's clothes, and he knew that he would surely die the way his uncle Uthil had, swallowed by the pitiless sea....

DAWN CAME MUDDY AND MERCILESS.

The *South Wind* was beached, listed to one side, helpless as a great whale on the cold shingle. Yarvi hunched soaked through and shivering, bruised but alive at his sharply-angled bench.

The storm had snarled away eastward in the darkness, but in the pale blue-gray of morning the wind still blew chill and the rain still fell steadily on the miserable oarslaves, most of them grunting at their grazes, some whimpering at wounds much worse. One bench had been torn from its bolts and vanished out to sea, no doubt bearing its three ill-fated oarsmen through the Last Door.

"We were lucky," said Sumael.

Shadikshirram clapped her on the back and nearly knocked her over. "I told you I have outstanding weatherluck!" She at least seemed in the best of moods after her one-sided battle with the storm.

Yarvi watched them circle the ship, Sumael's tongue tip wedged into the notch in her lip as she peered at gouges, stroked at splintered timbers with sure hands. "The keel and the masts are sound, at least. We lost twelve oars shattered and three benches broken."

"Not to mention three oarslaves gone," grunted Trigg, mightily upset at the expense. "Two dead in their chains and six more who can't row now and may never again."

"The hole in the hull is the real worry," said Ankran. "There's daylight in the hold. It'll have to be patched and caulked before we can even think of floating her."

"Wherever will we find some timber?" Shadikshirram swept a long arm at the ancient forest that hemmed in the beach on every side.

"It belongs to the Shends." Trigg eyed the shadowy woods with a great deal less enthusiasm. "They find us here we'll all end up skinned."

"Then you'd best get started, Trigg. You look bad enough with your skin on. If my luck holds we can handle the repairs and be away before the Shends sharpen their knives. You!" And Shadikshirram stepped over to where Nothing was kneeling on the shingle and rolled him over with a kick in the ribs. "Why aren't you scrubbing, bastard?"

Nothing crawled after his heavy chain onto the sloping deck and, like a man sweeping his hearth after his house has burned down, painfully set about his usual labor.

Ankran and Sumael exchanged a doubtful glance, then set to work themselves, while Shadikshirram went to fetch her tools. Wine, that was, which she started steadily drinking, draped over a nearby rock.

Trigg opened some of the locks—a rarity indeed—and oarsmen who had not left their benches in weeks were put on longer chains and given tools by Ankran. Jaud and Rulf were set to splitting trunks with wedge and mallet, and when the planks were made Yarvi dragged each one to the rent in the ship's side, where Sumael stood, jaw set with concentration as she neatly trimmed them with a hatchet.

"What are you smiling about?" she asked him.

Yarvi's hands were raw with the work and his head hurt from the blow against the oar and he was riddled with splinters from head to toe, but his smile only got wider. On a longer chain everything

looked better, and Sumael was by no means an exception.

“I’m free of the bench,” he said.

“Huh.” She raised her brows. “Don’t get used to it.”

“There!” A screech shrill as a cock dropped on a cook slab. One of the guards was pointing inland, face ghostly pale.

A man stood at the treeline. He was stripped to the waist in spite of the weather, body streaked with white paint, hair a black thicket. He had a bow over his shoulder, a short ax at his hip. He made no sudden move, roared no threat, only looked calmly toward the ship and the slaves busy around it, then turned without hurry and disappeared into the shadows. But the panic he sparked could hardly have been greater had he been a charging army.

“Gods help us,” whispered Ankran, plucking at his thrall-collar as if it sat too tight for him to breathe.

“Work faster,” snarled Shadikshirram, so worried she stopped drinking for a moment.

They doubled their efforts, constantly glancing toward the trees for any more unwelcome visitors. At one point a ship passed out at sea and two of the sailors splashed into the surf, waving their arms and screaming for help. A small figure waved back, but the ship made no sign of stopping.

Rulf wiped the sweat from his forehead on one thick wrist. “I wouldn’t have stopped.”

“Nor I,” said Jaud. “We will have to help ourselves.”

Yarvi could only nod. “I wouldn’t even have waved.”

That was when more Shends slipped noiselessly from the blackness of the forest. Three, then six, then twelve, all armed to the teeth, each arrival greeted with growing horror, by Yarvi as much as anyone. He might have read that the Shends were peaceable enough but these ones did not look as if they had read the same books he had.

“Keep working!” growled Trigg, grabbing one man by the scruff of his neck and forcing him back to the felled trunk he had been stripping. “We should run them off. Give ’em a shock.”

Shadikshirram tossed her latest bottle across the shingle. “For every one you see there’ll be ten hidden. You’d be the one getting the shock, I suspect. But try it, by all means. I’ll watch.”

“What do we do, then?” muttered Ankran.

“I’ll be doing my best not to leave them any wine.” The captain pulled the cork from a new bottle. “If you wanted to save them some trouble I suppose you could skin yourself.” And she chuckled as she took a swig.

Trigg nodded toward Nothing, still on his knees, scrubbing at the deck. “Or we could give him a blade.”

Shadikshirram stopped laughing abruptly. “Never.”

The wise wait for their moment, but never let it pass.

“Captain,” said Yarvi, setting down his plank and stepping humbly forward. “I have a suggestion.”

“You going to sing to them, cripple?” snapped Trigg.

“Talk to them.”

Shadikshirram regarded him through languidly narrowed eyes. “You know their tongue?”

“Enough to keep us safe. Perhaps even to trade with them.”

The overseer jabbed a thick forefinger at the growing crowd of painted warriors. “You think those savages will listen to reason?”

“I know they will.” Yarvi only wished he was as certain as he somehow managed to sound.

“This is madness!” said Ankran.

Shadikshirram’s gaze wandered to the storekeeper. “I keenly await your counterproposal.” He blinked, mouth half open, hands helplessly twitching, and the captain rolled her eyes. “There are so few heroes left these days. Trigg, you conduct our one-handed ambassador to a parley. Ankran, you toddle along with them.”

“Me?”

“How many cowards called Ankran do I own? You trade for the stores, don’t you? Go trade.”

“But nobody trades with the Shends!”

“Then the deals you make should be the stuff of legend.” Shadikshirram stood. “Everyone needs something. That’s the beauty of the merchant’s profession. Sumael can tell you what we need.” She leaned close to Yarvi, blasting him with wine-heavy breath, and patted his cheek. “Sing to ’em, boy. As sweetly as you did the other night. Sing for your life.”

That was how Yarvi found himself walking slowly toward the trees, his empty hands high and his short length of chain held firm in Trigg’s meaty fist, desperately trying to convince himself great dangers meant great profits. Ahead, more Shends had gathered, silently watching. Behind, Ankran muttered in Haleen. “If the cripple manages to make a trade, the usual arrangement?”

“Why not?” answered Trigg, giving a tug on Yarvi’s chain. He could hardly believe they were thinking about money even now, but perhaps when the Last Door stands open for them men fall back on what they know. He had fallen back on his minister’s wisdom, after all. And a flimsy shield it seemed as the Shends got steadily closer in all their painted savagery.

They did not scream or shake their weapons. They were more than threatening enough without. They simply stepped back to make room as Yarvi came near, herded through the trees by Trigg and into a clearing where more Shends were gathered about a fire. Yarvi swallowed as he realized how many more. They might have outnumbered the whole crew of the *South Wind* three to one.

A woman sat among them, whittling at a stick with a bright knife. Strung around her neck on a leather thong was an elf-tablet, the green card studded with black jewels, scrawled with incomprehensible markings, riddled with intricate golden lines.

The first thing a minister learns is to recognize power. To read the glances, and the stances, the movements and tones of voice that mark the followers from the leader. Why waste time on underlings, after all? So Yarvi stepped between the men as if they were invisible, looking only into the woman’s frowning face, and the warriors shuffled after and hedged him and Trigg and Ankran in with a thicket of naked steel.

For the briefest moment Yarvi hesitated. For a moment, he enjoyed Trigg and Ankran’s fear more than he suffered with his own. For a moment he had power over them, and found he liked the feeling.

“Speak!” hissed Trigg.

Yarvi wondered if there was a way to get the overseer killed. To use the Shends to get his freedom, perhaps Rulf’s and Jaud’s as well ... But the stakes were too high and the odds too long. The wise minister picks the greater good, the lesser evil, and smooths the way for Father Peace in every tongue. So Yarvi dropped down, one knee squelching into the boggy ground, his withered hand on his chest and the other to his forehead in the way Mother Gundring had taught him, to show he spoke the truth.

Even if he lied through his teeth.

“My name is Yorv,” he said, in the language of the Shends, “and I come humbly upon bended knee, stranger no longer, to beg the guest-right for me and my companions.”

The woman slowly narrowed her eyes at Yarvi. Then she looked about at her men, carefully sheathed her knife and tossed her stick into the fire. “Damn it.”

“Guest-right?” muttered one of the warriors, pointing toward the stranded ship in disbelief. “These savages?”

“Your pronunciation is dismal.” The woman flung up her hands. “But I am Svidur of the Shends. Stand, Yorv, for you are welcome at our hearth, and safe from harm.”

Another of the warriors angrily flung his ax on the ground and stamped off into the brush.

Svidur watched him go. “We were very much looking forward to killing you and taking your cargo. We must take what we can, for your High King will make war upon us again when the spring comes. The man is made of greed. I swear I have no idea what we have that he wants.”

Yarvi glanced back at Ankran, who was frowning at the conversation with the deepest suspicion. “It is my sad observation that some men always want more.”

“They do.” She sadly propped elbow on knee and chin on hand as she watched her crestfallen warriors sit down in disgust, one of them already bunching moss to scrub off his battle-paint. “This could have been a profitable day.”

“It still can be.” Yarvi clambered to his feet, and clasped his hands the way his mother did when she began a bargain. “There are things for which my captain would like to trade ...”

UGLY LITTLE ... SECRETS

Shadikshirram's cabin was cramped and garish, gloomy from the three slit windows, shadowy from sacks and bags dangling from the low roof-beams. Her bed, heaped with sheets and furs and stained pillows, took up most of the floor. An outsize, iron-bound chest took up most of the rest. Empty bottles had rolled to every corner. The place smelled of tar, salt and incense, stale sweat and stale wine. And yet compared to the life Yarvi had been living—if that even qualified as a life—it seemed the height of indulgent luxury.

"The repair won't last," Sumael was saying. "We should head back to Skekenhouse."

"The wonderful thing about the Shattered Sea is that it forms a circle." Shadikshirram made a circle in the air with her bottle. "We will come to Skekenhouse either way."

Sumael blinked at that. "But one in days, the other months!"

"You'll keep us going, you always do. The sailor's worst enemy is the sea, but wood floats, no? How difficult can it be? We head on." Shadikshirram's eyes drifted to Yarvi as he ducked under the low lintel. "Ah, my ambassador! Since we still have our skins I assume things went well?"

"I need to speak to you, my captain." He spoke with eyes downcast, the way a minister speaks to their king. "You alone."

"Hmmm." She stuck out her bottom lip and plucked at it like a musician might a harp. "A man seeking a private audience always intrigues me, even one so young, crippled, and otherwise unattractive as you. Get to your caulk and timber, Sumael, I want us back on the salt by morning."

The muscles at the sides of Sumael's head bunched as she ground her teeth. "On it or under it." And she shouldered past Yarvi and out.

"So?" Shadikshirram took a long swig of wine and set the bottle rattling down.

"I begged the Shends for guest-right, my captain. They have a solemn tradition not to deny a stranger who asks properly."

"Nimble," said Shadikshirram, gathering her black-and-silver hair in both hands.

"And I negotiated for the things we need, and made what I consider an excellent trade."

"Very nimble," she said, winding her hair into its usual tangle.

But now was when his nimbleness would truly be needed. "You may not think it quite so excellent a deal as I, my captain."

Her eyes narrowed slightly. "How so?"

"Your storekeeper and overseer took their own shares in your profits."

There was a long pause while, one by one, Shadikshirram slid the pins carefully through her hair to hold it fast. Her face did not change by the slightest detail, yet Yarvi felt suddenly that he was standing at the brink of a precipice.

"Did they?" she said.

He had expected anything but this offhand coolness. Did she know already but not care? Would she send him back to the oar regardless? Would Trigg and Ankran learn he had betrayed them? He licked his lips, knowing he stood on desperately thin ice. But he had no choice but to press on, and hope somehow to reach solid ground.

“Not for the first time,” he croaked.

“No?”

“In Vulsgard you gave money for healthy oarslaves and they bought the cheapest dregs they could find, myself among them. I’ve a guess you received little change.”

“Pathetically little.” Shadikshirram picked up her bottle between two fingers and took a long swig. “But I begin to wonder whether I got a bargain with you.”

Yarvi felt a strange desire to blurt the words out, had to make himself speak calmly, earnestly, just as a minister should. “They made both arrangements in Haleen, thinking no one would understand. But I speak that language too.”

“And sing in it, no doubt. For an oarslave you have many talents.”

A minister should endeavor never to be asked a question they do not already know the answer to, and Yarvi had a lie hanging ready for that. “My mother was a minister.”

“A minister’s belt should remain ever fastened.” Shadikshirram sucked air through her pursed lips. “Oh ugly little secret.”

“Life is full of them.”

“So it is, boy, so it is.”

“She taught me tongues, and numbers, and the lore of plants, and many other things. Things that could be of use to you, my captain.”

“A useful child indeed. You may need two hands to fight someone, but only one to stab them in the back, eh? Ankran!” she sang through the open door. “Ankran, your captain would speak with you!”

The storekeeper’s footsteps came fast, but not as fast as Yarvi’s heart. “I’ve been checking the stores, Captain, and there’s a hatchet missing—” He saw Yarvi as he ducked through the doorway, and his face twitched, shock at first, then suspicion, and finally he tried to smile.

“Can I bring you more wine—”

“Never again.” There was an ugly pause, while the captain smiled bright-eyed, and the color steadily drained from Ankran’s face, and the blood in Yarvi’s temples surged louder and louder. “I expect Trigg to rob me: he is a free man and must look to his own interests. But you? To be robbed by one’s own possessions?” Shadikshirram drained her bottle, licked the last drops from the neck and weighed it lazily in her hand. “You must see that is something of an embarrassment.”

The storekeeper’s thin lips twisted. “He’s lying, Captain!”

“But his lies match my suspicions so closely.”

“It’s all—”

So fast that Yarvi hardly saw it, only heard the hollow thud, Shadikshirram clubbed Ankran with the base of her bottle. He dropped with a grunt and lay blinking, blood streaming down his face. She stepped forward, lifting her boot over his head and, calmly, steadily, frowning with concentration, started stamping on it.

“Swindle me?” she hissed through gritted teeth, heel opening a cut down his cheek.

“Steal from me?” as her boot smashed Ankran’s nose sideways.

“Take me for a fool?”

Yarvi looked away into the corner of the room, the breath crawling in his throat as the sick crunching went on.

“After all ... I’ve ... *done* for you!”

Shadikshirram squatted down, forearms resting on her knees and her hands dangling. She thrust her

jaw forward and blew a loose strand of hair out of her face. "I am once again disappointed by the wretchedness of humanity."

"My wife," Ankran whispered, bringing Yarvi's eyes crawling back to his ruined face. A bubble of blood formed and broke on his lips. "My wife ... and my son."

"What of them?" snapped Shadikshirram, frowning at a red spatter that had caught the back of her hand and wiping it clean on Ankran's clothes.

"The flesh-dealer ... you bought me from ... in Thorlby." Ankran's voice was squelchy. "Yoverfell. He has them." He coughed, and pushed a piece of tooth out of his mouth with his tongue. "He said he'd keep them safe ... as long as I brought him their price ... every time we passed through. If I don't pay ..."

Yarvi felt weak at the knees. So weak he thought he might fall. Now he understood why Ankran had needed all that money.

But Shadikshirram only shrugged. "What's that to me?" And she twisted her fingers in Ankran's hair and pulled a knife from her belt.

"Wait!" shouted Yarvi.

The captain looked over at him sharply. "Really? Are you sure?"

It took everything he had to force his mouth into a watery smile. "Why kill what you can sell?"

She squatted there a moment, staring at him, and he wondered if she would kill them both. Then she snorted out a laugh, and lowered the knife. "I do declare. My soft heart will be my undoing. Trigg!"

The overseer paused for just a moment when he stepped into the cabin and saw Ankran on the floor with his face a bloodied pulp.

"It turns out our storekeeper has been robbing me," said the captain.

Trigg frowned at Ankran, then at Shadikshirram, and finally, for a long time, at Yarvi. "Seems some people think only of themselves."

"And I thought we were one family." The captain stood, dusting off her knees. "We have a new storekeeper. Get him a better collar." She rolled Ankran toward the door with her foot. "And put this thing in the space on Jaud's oar."

"Right y'are, Captain." And Trigg dragged Ankran out by one arm and kicked the door closed.

"You see that I am merciful," said Shadikshirram brightly, with merciful gestures of the blood-spotted hand which still loosely held her knife. "Mercy is my weakness."

"Mercy is a feature of greatness," Yarvi managed to croak.

Shadikshirram beamed at that. "Isn't it? But, great though I am ... I rather think Ankran has used up all my mercy for this year." She put her long arm about Yarvi's shoulders, hooking her thumb through his collar, and drew him close, close, close enough to smell the wine on her whisper. "If another storekeeper betrayed my trust ..." And she trailed off into silence more eloquent than any words.

"You have nothing to worry about, my captain." Yarvi looked into her face, so close that her black eyes seemed to merge into one. "I have no wife or children to distract me." Only an uncle to kill, and his daughter to marry, and the Black Chair of Gettland to reclaim. "I'm your man."

"You're scarcely a man, but otherwise, excellent!" And she wiped her knife one way then the other on the front of Yarvi's shirt. "Then wriggle down to your stores, my little one-handed minister, ferret out where Ankran was hiding my money, and bring me up some wine! And smile, boy!" Shadikshirram pulled a golden chain from around her neck and hung it over one of the posts of her bed. A key dangled from it. The key to the oarslaves' locks. "I like my friends smiling and my enemies

dead!” She spread her arms wide, wriggled the fingers, and toppled back onto her furs. “Today dawned with such little promise,” she mused at the ceiling. “But it turns out everyone got what they wanted.”

Yarvi thought it unwise to point out, as he hurried for the door, that Ankran, not to mention his wife and child, would probably not have agreed.

ENEMIES AND ALLIES

To no one's surprise, Yarvi found himself much better suited to the stores than the oars.

At first he could hardly crawl into his shadowy, creaking new domain below decks for the confusion of barrels and boxes, of overspilling chests, of swinging bags hooked to the ceiling. But within a day or two he had everything as organized as Mother Gundring's shelves had been, in spite of the pale new planks of the repair steadily oozing saltwater. It was not a comforting task, bucketing out the brackish puddle that built up every morning.

But a great deal better than being back on the benches.

Yarvi found a length of bent iron to bash at any nail that gave a hint of loosening, and tried not to imagine that just beyond that straining tissue of rough-sawn wood Mother Sea's full crushing weight was bearing in.

The *South Wind* limped eastward and, wounded and undermanned though she was, within a few days reached the great market at Roystock, a hundred hundred shops pressed onto a boggy island near the mouth of the Divine River. Small, swift ships were caught at the tangle of wharves like flies in a spider's web and their lean and sunburned crews were caught too. Men who had rowed hard weeks upstream, and carried their ships for even harder ones at the tall hauls, were swindled from their strange cargoes for a night or two of simple pleasures. While Sumael cursed and struggled to patch the leaking patches, Yarvi was taken ashore on Trigg's chain, looking for stores and oarslaves to replace what the storm had taken.

There in narrow lanes aswarm with humanity of every cut and color, Yarvi bartered. He had watched his mother do it—Laithlin, the Golden Queen, no sharper eye or quicker tongue around the Shattered Sea—and found he had her tricks without thinking. He haggled in six languages, merchants aghast to find their own secret tongues turned against them. He flattered and blustered, snorted derision at prices and contempt at quality, stamped off and was begged back, was first as yielding as oil, then immovable as iron, and left a trail of weeping traders in his wake.

Trigg held the chain with so light a hand that Yarvi almost forgot he was chained at all. Until, when they were done and the saved hacksilver was jingling back into the captain's purse, the overseer's whisper tickled at Yarvi's ear and made his every hair bristle.

"You're quite the cunning little cripple, aren't you?"

Yarvi paused a moment to collect his wits. "I have ... some understanding."

"Doubtless. It's clear you understood me and Ankran, and passed your understandings to the captain. Got quite the vengeful temper, don't she? The tales she tells of herself might all be lies, but I could tell you true ones would amaze you no less. I once saw her kill a man for stepping on her shoe. And this was a big, big man."

"Perhaps that's why his weight bruised her toes so."

Trigg yanked at the chain and the collar bit into Yarvi's neck and made him squawk. "Don't lean too much on my good nature, boy."

Trigg's good nature did indeed seem too weak a thing to bear much weight. "I played the hand I was dealt," croaked Yarvi.

“We all do,” purred Trigg. “Ankran played his poorly, and paid the price. I don’t mean to do the same. So I’ll offer you the same arrangement. Half of what you take from Shadikshirram, you give to me.”

“What if I don’t take anything?”

Trigg snorted. “Everyone takes something, boy. Some of what you give to me, I’ll pass on to the guards, and everyone’s kept friendly. Smiles all round. Give me nothing, you’ll make some enemies. Bad ones to have.” He wound Yarvi’s chain about his big hand and jerked him closer still. “Remember cunning children and stupid ones all drown very much the same.”

Yarvi swallowed once more. Mother Gundring used to say, *A good minister never says no, if they can say perhaps.*

“The captain’s watchful. She doesn’t trust me yet. Only give me a little time.”

With a shove, Trigg sent him stumbling back toward the *South Wind*. “Just make sure it’s a little.”

That was well enough with Yarvi. Old friends in Thorlby—not to mention old enemies—would not wait for him forever. Charming though the overseer was, Yarvi hoped very much to quit Trigg’s company before too long.

FROM ROYSTOCK THEY TURNED NORTHWARD.

They passed lands that had no name, where fens of mirror pools stretched into unknown distances, thousands of fragments of sky sprinkled across this bastard offspring of earth and sea, lonely birds calling out over the desolation, and Yarvi breathed deep the salt chill and longed for home.

He thought often of Isriun, trying to remember her scent as she leaned close, the brush of her lips, the shape of her smile, sun glowing through her hair in the doorway of the Godshall. Scant memories, turned over and over in his mind until they were worn threadbare as a beggar’s clothes.

Was she promised to some better husband now? Smiling at some other man? Kissing another lover? Yarvi clenched his teeth. He had to get home.

His every idle moment was crowded with plans for escape.

At a trading post where the buildings were so rough-hewn a man could get splinters just from walking by, Yarvi pointed out a servant-girl to Trigg, then among the salt and herbs acquired some extra supplies while the overseer was distracted. Enough tanglefoot leaf to make every guard on the ship slow and heavy, or even send them off to sleep if the dose was right.

“What about the money, boy?” Trigg hissed as they headed back to the *South Wind*.

“I have a plan for that,” and Yarvi gave a humble smile while he thought of rolling a slumbering Trigg over the side of the ship.

He was a great deal more valued, respected and, being honest, useful as a storekeeper than he had been as a king. The oarslaves had enough to eat, and warmer clothes to wear, and grunted their approval as he passed. He had the run of the ship while they were on the salt, but like a miser with his profits, that much freedom only sharpened his hunger for more.

When Yarvi thought no one could see, he dropped crusts near Nothing’s hand, and saw him slip them quickly into his rags. Once their eyes met afterward, and Yarvi wondered if the scrubber could be grateful, for it hardly seemed there was anything human left behind those strange, bright, sunken eyes.

But Mother Gundring always said, *It is for one’s own sake that one does good things.* He kept dropping crumbs when he could.

Shadikshirram noted with pleasure the greater weight of her purse, and with even more the improvement in her wine, achieved in part because Yarvi was able to buy in such impressive bulk.

“This is a better vintage than Ankran brought me,” she muttered, squinting at its color in the bottle.

Yarvi bowed low. “One worthy of your achievements.” And behind the mask of his smile he considered how, when he sat in the Black Chair once more, he would see her head above the Screaming Gate and her cursed ship made ashes.

Sometimes as darkness fell she would stick one foot at him so he could pull her boots off while she spouted some tale of past glories, the names and details shifting like oil with every telling. Then she would say he was a good and useful boy, and if he was truly lucky would give him scraps from her table and confess, “My soft heart will be my undoing.”

When he could keep himself from cramming them in his mouth on the spot he would slip them to Jaud, who would pass them to Rulf, while Ankran sat frowning into nowhere between them, his scalp cut from his shaving and his scabbed face a very different shape than it had been before its argument with Shadikshirram’s boot.

“Gods,” grunted Rulf. “Remove this two-handed fool from our oar and give us Yorv again!”

The oarslaves about them laughed, but Ankran sat still as a man of wood, and Yarvi wondered whether he was turning over his own oath for vengeance. He glanced up and saw Sumael frowning down from her place on the yard. She was always watching, judging, as though at a course she could not approve. Even though they were chained at night to the same ring outside the captain’s cabin she said nothing to him beyond the odd grunt.

“Get rowing,” snapped Trigg, shoving past and barging Yarvi into the oar he used to pull.

It seemed he had made enemies as well as friends.

But enemies, as his mother used to say, are the price of success.

“BOOTS, YORV!”

Yarvi flinched as if at a slap. His thoughts had wandered far away, as they often did. Back to the slopes above his father’s burning ship, swearing his oath of vengeance before the gods. Back to the roof of Amwend’s holdfast, the smell of burning in his nose. Back to his uncle’s calmly smiling face.

You would have been a fine jester.

“Yorv!”

He struggled from his blankets, tugging a length of chain after him, stepping over Sumael, hunched in her own bundle, dark face twitching silently in her sleep. It was growing colder as they headed north, and specks of snow whirled from the night on a keen wind, dotting the furs the oarslaves huddled under with white. The guards had given up patrolling and the only two awake hunched over a brazier by the forward hatch into the hold, pinched faces lit in orange.

“These boots are worth more than you, damn it!”

Shadikshirram was sitting on her bed, eyes shining wet, straining forward and trying to grab her foot but so drunk she kept missing. When she saw him she sagged back.

“Give me a hand, eh?”

“As long as you don’t need two,” said Yarvi.

She gurgled with laughter. “You’re a clever little crippled bastard, aren’t you? I swear the gods sent you. Sent you ... to get my boots off.” Her chuckles became like snores, and by the time he wrestled her second boot off and heaved her leg onto the bed she was sound asleep, head back, hair

fluttering over her mouth with each snorting breath.

Yarvi stopped still as stone. Her shirt had come open at the collar and the chain slipped from it. Glinting on the furs beside her neck was the key to every lock on the ship.

He looked toward the door, open a crack, snow flitting outside. He opened the lamp and blew out the flame, and the room sank into darkness. It was an awful risk, but a man with time against him must sometimes throw the dice.

The wise wait for their moment, but never let it pass.

He inched to the bed, skin prickling, and slipped his one-fingered hand under Shadikshirram's head.

Gently, gently he lifted it, shocked at the dead weight, teeth clenched with the effort of moving so slowly. He winced as she twitched and snorted, sure her eyes would flick open, thinking of her heel smashing his face as it had smashed Ankran's.

He took a breath and held it, reached across her for the key, caught by a gleam of Father Moon's light from one of the narrow windows. He strained for it ... but his itching fingertips came up just short.

There was a choking pressure around his neck. His chain had snagged on something. He turned, thinking to yank it free, and there in the doorway, jaw locked tight and Yarvi's chain gripped firmly in both fists, stood Sumael.

For a moment they were frozen there. Then she began to reel him in.

He let Shadikshirram's head fall as gently as he could, gripped the chain with his good hand and tried to drag it back, breath hissing. Sumael only pulled harder, the collar grinding into Yarvi's neck, the links of the chain cutting into his hand, making him bite his lip to keep from crying out.

It was like the rope contest that the boys used to play on the beach in Thorlby, except only one of them had both hands and one end was around Yarvi's neck.

He twisted and struggled but Sumael was too strong for him, and in silence she dragged him closer, and closer, his boots slipping on the floor, catching a bottle and sending it rolling, until in the end she caught him by the collar and hauled him out into the night, dragging him close.

"You damn fool!" she snarled in his face. "Are you trying to get yourself killed?"

"What do you care?" he hissed back, her knuckles white around his collar and his knuckles white around her fist.

"I care if they change all the locks because you stole the key, idiot!"

There was a long pause, then, while they stared at each other in the darkness, and it settled on him just how very close they were. Close enough for him to see the angry creases at the bridge of her nose, to see her teeth gleaming through the notch in her lip, to feel her warmth. Close enough for him to smell her quick breath, a little sour, but none the worse for that. Close enough, almost, to kiss. It must have settled on her at the same moment, because she let go his collar as if it was hot, pulled away and twisted her wrist free of his grip.

He turned her words over, and looked at them this way and that, and the realization settled on him.

"Changing the locks would only bother someone who had a key already. Who found a way to copy a key, perhaps?" He sat down in his usual place, rubbing at the chafe marks and the old burns on his neck with his good hand, tucking his bad one into the warmth of his armpit. "But the only reason a slave would need a key is to escape."

"Shut your mouth!" She slid down beside him, and there was another pause. The snow drifted,

settled upon her hair, across his knees.

It was not until he was giving up hope of her ever speaking again that she finally did, so softly he could scarcely hear it over the wind. “A slave with a key might free some other slaves. All of them, perhaps. In the confusion, who knows who might slip away?”

“A lot of blood could be spilled,” murmured Yarvi. “In the confusion, who knows whose? Far safer to put the guards to sleep.” Sumael looked sharply over at him; he could see the gleam of her eyes, the mist of her breath. “A slave who knew plants, and poured the guards’ ale and brought the captain’s wine might find a way.” A risk, he knew, but with her help things could be so much easier, and a man with time against him must sometimes throw the dice. “Perhaps two slaves together could achieve—”

“What one alone couldn’t,” she finished for him. “Best to slip from the ship while in port.”

Yarvi nodded. “I’d have thought so.” He’d been thinking about little else for days.

“Skekenhouse would be the best chance. The city’s busy but the guards are lazy, the captain and Trigg spend a lot of time off the ship—”

“Unless one had friends somewhere around the Shattered Sea.” He let the bait hang there.

She swallowed it whole. “Friends that might shelter a pair of escaped slaves?”

“Exactly. In, say ... Thorlby?”

“The *South Wind* will be back through Thorlby within a month or two.” Yarvi could hear the excitement, squeaky in her whisper.

He could not keep it from his own. “As soon as that a slave with a key ... and a slave who knew plants ... could be free.”

They sat in silence, in the cold, in the darkness, as they had so many nights before. But, looking across by Father Moon’s pale light, Yarvi thought there was the rare hint of a smile at the corner of Sumael’s mouth.

He thought it suited her.

ONE FRIEND

Far north, now, the oarslaves dragged the *South Wind*, over the black sea with winter on the march. Snow fell often, settling on the roofs of the ship's castles, across the shoulders of the shivering rowers, blowing smoke onto their numbed fingers with each stroke. All night the broken hull groaned. In the morning men leaned over the sides to crack ice from its wounded flanks. At sunset Shadikshirram would wander from her cabin wrapped in furs, eyes and nostrils rimmed with boozy pink, and say she didn't think it overly cold.

"I try to keep love in my heart," said Jaud, grasping with both hands at the soup Yarvi handed him. "But gods, I hate the North."

"There's nowhere more North than this," answered Rulf, rubbing at the tips of his ears as he frowned out toward the white blanket of the coast.

Ankran, as usual, added nothing.

The sea was an ice-flecked emptiness, groups of lumpen seals watching them sadly from the rocky shoreline. They saw few other ships, and when they did Trigg glowered toward them, hand on his sword, until they were dots in the distance. However powerful the High King thought himself, his license would not protect them out here.

"Most merchants lack the courage for these waters." Shadikshirram wedged her boot carelessly on an oarsman's leg. "But I am not most merchants." Yarvi silently thanked the gods for that. "The Banyas who live out in this icy hell worship me as a goddess, for I bring pots and knives and iron tools which they treat like elf-magic, and ask only for pelts and amber which to them are so plentiful as to be next to worthless. They'll do anything for me, poor brutes." She rubbed her palms together with an eager hissing. "Here my best profits are made."

And indeed the Banyas were waiting for the *South Wind* when she finally broke through the shore-ice to a slimy jetty at a gray beach. They made the Shends seem the height of civilization in Yarvi's memory—all swathed in furs so they looked more bears or wolves than men, their shaggy faces pierced with splinters of polished bone and studs of amber, their bows fluttering with feathers and their clubs set with teeth. Yarvi wondered if they were human teeth, and decided people who scratched a living from this miserly land could afford to waste nothing.

"I will be four days away." Shadikshirram vaulted over the ship's side and clomped down the warped timbers of the jetty, the *South Wind's* sailors following with her cargo lashed to clumsy sleds. "Trigg, you're in charge!"

"She'll be better'n when you left her!" the overseer called back with a grin.

"Four days of idleness," Yarvi hissed as the last light stained the sky red, fretting at his thrall-collar with his withered thumb. Every night spent on this rotting tub it seemed to chafe him more.

"Patience." Sumael spoke through closed teeth, scarred lips hardly moving, dark eyes on the guards, and on Trigg in particular. "A few weeks and we might be with your friends in Thorlby." She turned her familiar frown on him. "You'd better have friends in Thorlby."

"You'd be surprised who I know." Yarvi wriggled down into his furs. "Trust me."

She snorted. "Trust?"

Yarvi turned his back to her. Sumael might be spiky as a hedgehog but she was tough, and clever, and there was no one on this ship he would rather have had beside him. He needed an accomplice, not a friend, and she knew what to do and when.

He could see it as though it was already done. Every night he lulled himself to sleep with thoughts of it. The *South Wind* rocking gently at a wharf beneath the citadel of Thorlby. The guards snoring a drugged slumber beside their empty ale cups. The key turning smoothly in the lock. He and Sumael stealing together from the ship, chains muffled with rags, through the steep and darkened streets he knew so well, boot-printed slush on the cobbles, snow on the steep roofs.

He smiled as he pictured his mother's face when she saw him. He smiled even more as he pictured Odem's, just before he rammed the knife into his guts....

YARVI STABBED, AND CUT, and stabbed, his hands slippery hot with traitor's blood, and his uncle squealed like a slaughtered pig.

"The rightful King of Gettland!" came the shout and all applauded, none louder than Grom-gil-Gorm who smashed his great hands together with every squelch of the blade and Mother Scaer who shrieked and capered in her joy and turned into a cloud of clattering doves.

The squelching became a sucking and Yarvi looked over at his brother, white and cold on the slab. Isriun leaned over his face, kissing, kissing.

She smiled up at Yarvi through the shroud of her hanging hair. That smile. "I'll expect a better kiss after your victory."

Odem propped himself up on his elbows. "How long is this going to take?"

"Kill him," said Yarvi's mother. "One of us at least must be a man."

"I am a man!" snarled Yarvi, stabbing and stabbing, his arms burning with the effort. "Or ... half a man?"

Hurik raised an eyebrow. "That much?"

The knife was slippery in Yarvi's grip and all the doves were a terrible distraction, staring at him, staring, and the bronze-feathered eagle in their midst with a message from Grandmother Wexen.

"Have you considered the Ministry?" it croaked at him.

"I am a king!" he snarled, cheeks burning, hiding his useless clown's hand behind his back.

"A king sits between gods and men," said Keimdal, blood leaking from his cut throat.

"A king sits alone," said Yarvi's father, leaning forward in the Black Chair, the wounds that had been dry all dripping fresh and spilling a slick of blood across the floor of the Godshall.

Odem's screams had turned to giggles. "You would have been a fine jester."

"Damn you!" snarled Yarvi, trying to stab harder but the knife was so heavy he could hardly lift it.

"What are you doing?" asked Mother Gundring. She sounded scared.

"Shut up, bitch," said Odem, and he caught Yarvi around the neck, and squeezed....

YARVI WOKE WITH A HORRIBLE jolt to find Trigg's hands around his throat.

A crescent of fierce grins swam above him, teeth shining in torchlight. He retched and twisted but he was held fast as a fly in honey.

"You should've taken the deal, boy."

"What are you doing?" asked Sumael again. He'd never heard her sound scared before. But she

sounded nowhere near as scared as Yarvi was.

“I told you to *shut your mouth!*” one of the guards snarled in her face. “Unless you want to go with him!”

She shrank back into her blankets. She knew what to do, and when. Perhaps a friend would’ve been better than an accomplice after all, but it was a little late now to find one.

“I told you clever children drown just like stupid ones.” Trigg slid his key into the lock and unfastened Yarvi’s chain.

Freedom, but not quite how he had pictured it. “We’re going to put you in the water and see if it’s true.”

And Trigg dragged Yarvi down the deck like a chicken plucked and ready for the pot. Past the oarsmen sleeping on their benches, the odd one peering from his bald furs. None of them stirred to help him. Why would they? How could they?

Yarvi’s heels kicked pointlessly at the deck. Yarvi’s hands fumbled at Trigg’s, good and bad equally useless. Perhaps he should have bargained, bluffed, flattered his way free, but his bursting chest could only gather the air to make a small wet sound, like a fart.

At that moment the soft arts of the minister were shown to have their limitations.

“We’ve got a bet going,” said Trigg, “on how long it takes you to sink.”

Yarvi plucked at Trigg’s arm, scratched at his shoulder with his nails, but the overseer scarcely noticed. Out of the corner of his weeping eye he saw Sumael standing, shaking off her blankets. When Trigg unlocked Yarvi’s chain he unlocked hers too.

But Yarvi knew he could expect no help from her. He could expect no help at all.

“Let this be a lesson to the rest of you!” Trigg stabbed at his chest with his free thumb. “This is my ship. Cross me and you’re done.”

“Let him be!” someone growled. “He’s done no harm.” Jaud, Yarvi saw as he was dragged past. But no one marked the big man. Beside him, from Yarvi’s old place, Ankran watched, rubbing at his crooked nose. It did not look like such a bad place now.

“You should’ve taken the deal.” Trigg bundled Yarvi over the shipped oars like a sack of rags. “I can forgive a lot in a fine singer, boy, but—”

With a sudden yelp the overseer fell sprawling, hand suddenly loose, and Yarvi jabbed his twisted little finger in Trigg’s eye, gave him a wriggling kick in the chest, and went tumbling free.

Trigg had tripped on Nothing’s heavy chain, pulled suddenly taut. The deck-scrubber hunched in the shadows, eyes gleaming behind his hanging hair. “Run,” he whispered.

Perhaps Yarvi had made one friend after all.

The first breath he heaved in made his head reel. He scrambled up, sobbing, snorting, careered into the benches, through oarslaves half asleep, clambering, slithering, under oars and over them.

People were shouting but Yarvi could scarcely hear the words through the throbbing of blood in his ears, like the mindless thunder of a storm.

He saw the forward hatch, wobbling, shuddering. His hand closed around the handle. He hauled it open and pitched face-first into the darkness.

DEATH WAITS

Yarvi fell, knocked his shoulder, cracked his head, tumbled over sacks and sprawled on his face. Wet on his cheek. In the hold.

He rolled with an effort, dragged himself into the shadows.

Dark down here. Pitch-dark, but a minister must know the ways, and he felt them out now with his fingertips.

Roaring in his ears, burning in his chest, terror tickling at every part of him, but he had to master it, and think. *There is always a way*, his mother used to tell him.

He could hear the guards shouting as they looked down into the hatch, too close, too close behind. He jerked his chain after him, squirming between crates and barrels in the hold, a flicker of light from the torches above catching bands and rivets, guiding him toward the ship's stores.

He slithered through the low doorway, sloshing between shelves and boxes in the freezing puddle that was today's leakage. He crouched against the ship's cold side, breath whooping and wheezing, more light now as the guards brought their torches down after him.

"Where is he?"

There had to be a way. Surely they'd be coming from the other direction soon, from the aft hatch. His eyes flickered to its ladder.

Had to be some way. No time for a plan, all his plans were gone like smoke. Trigg would be waiting. Trigg would be angry.

His eyes darted to every sound, to every glint of light, searching desperately for some means of escape, some place to hide, but there was none. He needed an ally. He pressed himself helplessly back against the wood, felt the icy dampness there, heard the drip of saltwater. And Mother Gundring's voice came to him, soft and careful at the firepit.

When a wise minister has nothing but enemies, she beats one with a worse.

Yarvi dived below the nearest shelf, fumbling in the black, and his fingers closed around the iron bar he kept to knock in nails.

The sailor's worst enemy is the sea, Shadikshirram never tired of saying.

"Where are you, boy?"

He could just see the outlines of Sumael's repair and he rammed the iron bar between hull and fresh timbers and dragged on it with all his strength. He gritted his teeth and worked it deeper and snarled out all his fury and his pain and his helplessness and ripped at that bar as though it was Trigg and Odem and Grom-gil-Gorm combined. He tore at it, strained at it, wedged the wrist of his useless hand around it, the tortured wood creaking, pots and boxes clattering down as he barged the shelves with his shoulder.

He could hear the guards now, near, the glow of their lamps in the hold, their humped shapes in the low doorway, the gleam of their blades.

"Come here, cripple!"

He screamed as he made one last muscle-tearing effort. There was a crack as the timbers suddenly gave. Yarvi lurched flailing backward, and hissing with the rage of a devil released from hell, Mother

Sea burst into the stores.

Yarvi brought a shelf crashing down with him, was soaked in an instant in icy water, rolled gasping toward the aft hatch, up and slithering sodden, the din of shouting men and furious sea and splintering wood in his ears.

He floundered to the ladder, the water already to his knees. A guard was at his heels, clutching in the darkness. Yarvi flung the bar at him, sent him stumbling into the jet of water and it tore him across the store like a toy. More leaks had sprung, the sea showering in at a dozen angles, the wails of the guards hardly heard over its deafening roar.

Yarvi dragged himself up the ladder a couple of rungs, heaved the hatch open, slithered through and stood, swaying, wondering if some magic had transported him onto the deck of some other ship in the midst of battle.

The gangway between the benches crawled with men, struggling in the garish light of burning oil which a broken lamp must have sprayed across the forecastle. Flickering flames danced in the black water, in the black eyes of panicked slaves, on the drawn blades of the guards. Yarvi saw Jaud grab one of them and fling him bodily into the sea.

He was up from his bench. The slaves were freed.

Or some of them. Most were still chained, huddling toward the rowlocks to escape the violence. A few lay bleeding on the gangway. Others were even now leaping over the side, preferring to take their chance with Mother Sea than with Trigg's men, who were flailing about them without mercy.

Yarvi saw Rulf butt a guard in the face, heard the man's nose-bone pop and his sword clatter away across the deck.

He had to help his oarmates. The fingers of his good hand twitched open and closed. Had to help them, but how? The last few months had only reinforced Yarvi's long-held opinion that he was no hero. They were outnumbered and unarmed. He flinched as a guard cut down a helpless slave, ax opening a yawning wound. He could feel the slope in the deck, tilting as the sea rushed in below and dragged the *South Wind* down.

A good minister faces the facts, and saves what he can. A good minister accepts the lesser evil. Yarvi clambered across the nearest bench, toward the ship's side and the black water beyond. He set himself to dive.

He was halfway off the ship when he was snatched back by his collar. The world tumbled and he crashed down, gasping like a landed fish.

Trigg stood over him, the end of his chain in one fist. "You're going nowhere, boy."

He leaned down and planted his other hand around Yarvi's throat, just under his collar so the metal bit into his jaw, but this time the overseer squeezed even harder. He dragged Yarvi up until his kicking boots only just scraped the deck, twisting his face around to look at the carnage that choked the ship. Dead men and wounded men, two guards beating a slave with their sticks in the midst.

"See the trouble you've caused me?" he screeched, one eye red and weepy from Yarvi's finger. The guards were all yammering over one another.

"Where's Jaud and that bastard Rulf?"

"Got onto the jetty. But they'll freeze out there for sure."

"Gods, my fingers!"

"How'd they get free?"

"Sumael."

“That little bitch had a key.”

“Where the hell did she get that hatchet?”

“She cut my fingers off! Where are they?”

“What does it matter? They’re no use now!”

“He broke the hull!” gasped a soaked guard as he crawled from the aft-hatch. “There’s water flooding in!” And as though to make the point the *South Wind* shuddered again, the deck tilting further so that Trigg had to grab at a bench to stay upright.

“Gods help us!” screeched one of the chained oarslaves, clawing at his collar.

“Are we sinking?” asked another, wide eyes rolling down.

“How are we going to explain this to Shadikshirram?”

“Gods damn it!” roared Trigg, and he smashed Yarvi’s head against the blunt end of the nearest oar, filling his skull with light and his mouth with scalding sick, then drove him down against the deck and started choking him in earnest.

Yarvi struggled mindlessly but the overseer’s full weight was on him and he couldn’t breathe, couldn’t see anything but Trigg’s snarling mouth, and that growing blurrier, as though it was at the end of a tunnel down which Yarvi was being steadily dragged.

He’d cheated Death half a dozen times in the last few weeks, but no matter how strong or clever, no matter how good your weaponluck or your weatherluck, none can cheat her forever. Heroes and High Kings and Grandmothers of the Ministry all pass through her door in the end: she makes no exceptions for one-handed boys with big mouths and bitter tempers. The Black Chair would be Odem’s, his father unavenged, his oath forever unfulfilled ...

Then, through the surging of trapped blood in his ears, Yarvi heard a voice.

It was a broken, whispering voice, rough as a scrubbing block. Had it been Death’s voice he would not have been surprised. Except by what it said.

“Did you not hear Shadikshirram?”

With an effort Yarvi forced his weeping eyes toward it.

Nothing stood in the middle of the deck. His grease-matted hair was pushed back and for the first time Yarvi could see his face, bent and lopsided, scarred and broken, twisted and hollowed, his eyes wide and gleaming wet.

His heavy chain was wound around and around one arm, and from his fist the hasp dangled free, a chunk of splintered wood and nails still attached. In his other hand he held the sword Rulf had knocked from a guard’s hand.

Nothing smiled. A broken smile full of broken teeth and speaking of a broken mind. “She told you never to give me a blade.”

“Put the sword *down!*” Trigg barked the last word, but his voice creaked with something Yarvi had never heard there before.

Fear.

As if it was Death indeed that stood before him on the deck.

“Oh, no, Trigg, no.” Nothing’s smile grew broader, and madder, and the tears brimmed in his eyes and left shining streaks on his pitted cheeks. “I think it will put you down.”

A guard charged at him.

Scrubbing the deck Nothing had seemed old, and painfully slow. A brittle remnant. A man of twigs and string. With sword in hand he flowed like water, danced like flickering fire. It was as if the blade

had its own mind, quick and merciless as lightning, and Nothing was pulled after.

The sword darted out, its point glinted between the charging guard's shoulder blades and was gone, left him tottering, wheezing, hand clasped to his chest. Another guard swung an ax and Nothing slipped out of its way and let it chop splinters from the corner of a bench. It went up again and with a click of metal the arm that held it spun off into the darkness. The guard sank to his knees, eyes goggling, and Nothing's bare foot knocked him flat.

A third came at him from behind, sword raised. Without looking, Nothing thrust his blade out, took the guard through the throat and left him spluttering blood, then knocked a club away with his chain-wrapped arm and smashed the pommel of his sword into the mouth of its owner, teeth flying, dropped soundlessly to scythe the legs from under another and send him spinning onto the deck face-down.

All this in the space of time that Yarvi might have taken one breath. If he could have taken a breath.

The first guard still stood, fumbling at his pierced chest, trying to speak but saying only red froth. Nothing pushed him gently out of his way with the back of his arm as he passed, the balls of his bare feet making no sound. He looked down at the blood-soaked boards and clicked his tongue.

"The deck is very dirty." He looked up, wasted face all black-dashed and red-speckled. "Shall I scrub it, Trigg?"

The overseer backed away while Yarvi fumbled helplessly with his hand. "Come closer and I kill him!"

"Kill him." Nothing shrugged. "Death waits for us all." The guard with the ruined legs was whimpering as he tried to drag himself up the tilted deck. Nothing stabbed him through the back in passing. "Today she waits for you. She reaches for her key, Trigg. She unlocks the Last Door."

"Let's talk about it!" Trigg backed off with one palm up. The deck was tipping farther now, black water welling from the aft-hatch. "Let's just talk!"

"Talk only makes problems." Nothing lifted the sword. "Steel is always the answer." And he spun it in his hand so the blade caught the light and danced red and white and yellow and all the colors of fire. "Steel does not flatter or compromise. Steel tells no lies."

"Just give me a chance!" whined Trigg, water pouring over the sides of the ship now, flooding among the benches.

"Why?"

"I've got dreams! I've got plans! I've got—"

With a hollow click the sword split Trigg's skull down to his nose. His mouth kept making words for a moment, but no breath came to give them sound. He flopped back, kicking a little, and Yarvi tore free of his limp hand, gasping in air, and coughing, and trying to drag his collar free so he could breathe.

"Perhaps I shouldn't," said Nothing, twisting the sword from Trigg's head, "but I feel much better."

All around them men were screaming. If any guards survived they'd preferred the sea to Nothing's sword. Some slaves were trying to clamber over their sinking benches to drier ones behind, others straining at their chains as the water surged higher and higher, others with faces only just showing, mouths sucking at the air and their eyes bulging with horror. Still others, Yarvi knew, must already be below the black surface, holding their breath for a few more moments while they struggled hopelessly at their locks.

He dropped to his hands and knees, retching, head spinning, digging at Trigg's bloody clothes for his key, struggling not to look at his split face but catching a glimpse anyway of features distorted and

fleshy pulp gleaming inside the great wound and he swallowed vomit, rooting again for the key, the wails of the trapped slaves loud in his ears.

“Leave it.” Nothing stood over him, standing far taller than Yarvi had ever imagined he might, blood-spotted sword hanging from one hand.

Yarvi blinked up at him, and then down the tipping deck toward the drowning slaves. “But they’ll die.” His voice was a tiny croak.

“Death waits for us all.”

Nothing caught Yarvi by his thrall-collar, hefted him into the air and over the rail, and once again Mother Sea took him in her icy embrace.

III.

THE
LONG
ROAD

BENDING WITH CIRCUMSTANCE

Someone slapped Yarvi's face. He saw the hand, heard the noise, but hardly felt it.

"Run," hissed Jaud's voice.

The closest Yarvi could manage was a shivering shamble, his flapping chain and his soaked clothes dragging him down with every step, the shingle clutching at his waterlogged boots. He tripped often, but whenever he fell strong arms would be there to haul him up, to haul him on into the darkness.

"Go," grunted Rulf.

Near the snow-covered top of the beach Yarvi snatched one look back, and forced out, "Gods," through his rattling teeth.

Mother Sea was hungrily swallowing the *South Wind*. The forecastle was wreathed in fire, rigging made lines of flame, the top of the mast, where Sumael used to perch, ablaze. The benches where Yarvi had struggled were flooded, tangled oars sticking up helplessly like the legs of a turned-over woodlouse. Only one corner of the aftcastle still showed above waters alive with the reflections of fire. The hold, the stores, and the captain's cabin were drowned in the silence beneath.

There were black figures on the shore, on the jetty, staring. Guards who had escaped Nothing's sword? Slaves who had somehow got free of their chains? Yarvi wondered if he could hear faint cries above the keening of the wind. Faint screams above the crackling of the flames. There was no way to know who luck had saved from that ordeal of fire and water, who was living and who dead, and Yarvi was too cold to be glad he had survived one more disaster, let alone to be sad that anyone else had not. No doubt the regrets would come soon enough.

If he lived out the night.

"Move," said Sumael.

They bundled him over the crest and he tumbled down the far side, came to rest on his back in a drift, skin on fire with the cold, each icy gasp like a knife in his throat. He saw Rulf's broad face with a glimmer of orange down one cheek, Sumael's gaunt and twitching in the light of Father Moon.

"Leave me," he tried to say, but his mouth was too numb to make the words, his teeth chilled to the roots, and all that came was a weak puff of smoke.

"We go together," said Sumael. "Wasn't that the deal?"

"I thought it was finished when Trigg started throttling me."

"Oh, you won't wriggle out of it that easily." She caught him by his crooked wrist. "Get up."

He had been betrayed by his own family, his own people, and found loyalty among a set of slaves who owed him nothing. He was so pathetically glad of it he wanted to weep. But he had a feeling he would need his tears later.

With Sumael's help he managed to get up. With Rulf's and Jaud's to flounder on, hardly thinking about the course except to keep the sinking *South Wind* somewhere at his back. The icy wetness squelched in his boots, the wind cut through his soaked and chafing clothes as though he wore nothing.

"Did you have to pick the coldest place the gods have made for your escape?" growled Rulf. "And the coldest time of year?"

“I had a better plan.” Sumael sounded less than delighted with the total ruin of it too. “But it sunk with the *South Wind*.”

“Plans must sometimes bend with circumstance,” said Jaud.

“Bend?” growled Rulf. “This one’s snapped in pieces.”

“Over there.” Yarvi pointed with the frozen stub of his finger. Up ahead a stunted tree clawed at the night, each branch picked out on top in white, underneath in the faintest flickering of orange. He hardly dared believe his own eyes but he started toward it as fast as he could even so, half walking, half crawling, all desperate. At that moment, even a dream of fire seemed better than nothing.

“Wait!” hissed Sumael. “We don’t know who—”

“We don’t care,” said Rulf, floundering past.

The fire had been built in a hollow beneath that twisted tree where there was some shelter from the wind, the fragments of a broken crate carefully arranged, the smallest flame flickering in their midst. Hunched over it, coaxing it into life with his smoking breath, was Ankran.

Had Yarvi made the choice of who to save, Ankran’s name would have been far from the first on his lips. But freeing Rulf and Jaud meant freeing their oarmate, and Yarvi would have thrown himself at Odem’s feet right then had he offered warmth. He flopped onto his knees, holding his shaking hands toward the flames.

Jaud planted his fists on his hips. “You made it, then.”

“Some turds float,” said Rulf.

Ankran only rubbed at his crooked nose. “If my stench bothers you, you could find your own fire.”

A hatchet slid silently from Sumael’s sleeve, the dangling blade gleaming. “I like this one.”

The ex-storekeeper shrugged. “Then far be it from me to turn the desperate away. Welcome one and all to my mansion!” Sumael had already shinned up the frozen rocks to the tree and neatly lopped off a branch. Now she wedged it in the ground so its twigs were toward the fire. She snapped her fingers at Yarvi. “Get your clothes off.”

“Romance yet survives!” said Rulf, fluttering his lashes at the sky.

Sumael ignored him. “Wet clothes will kill you in the night sure as any enemy.”

Now the cold was loosening its grip Yarvi was feeling his bruises—every muscle aching and his head sore and his neck throbbing from Trigg’s hands. Even had he wanted to, he lacked the strength to object. He peeled off his soaked clothes, some of the hems already stiff with ice, and huddled as close to the fire as he dared, near naked but for collar and chain.

Rulf dumped an old fleece around his shuddering shoulders. “I’m lending that,” he said, “not giving it.”

“Much appreciated ... either way,” Yarvi forced through his chattering teeth as he watched Sumael hang his clothes facing the flames, where they began to gently steam.

“What if someone sees the light?” Jaud was asking, frowning back the way they had come.

“If you’d rather freeze, sit in the darkness. You’ll find plenty of it.” Ankran tried to prod more warmth from the fire with a twig. “For my part I suspect the fight, then the ship aflame, then the ship sinking, will have dampened their appetite for a search.”

“As long as we’re well gone before dawn,” said Rulf.

“Gone where?” asked Sumael, squatting beside Yarvi.

East was the obvious choice. East along the coast the way the *South Wind* had brought them. But west was where Yarvi needed to go. West to Vansterland. West to Gettland. West to Odem, and

vengeance, and the sooner the better. He glanced around this motley fellowship, all huddled over the life-giving flames, faces pinched and strange in its light, wondering how he could possibly convince them to go the wrong way.

“East of course,” said Rulf. “How long ago did we pass that trading post?”

Sumael spent a moment reckoning on her fingers. “On foot we might make it in three days.”

“It’ll be hard going.” Rulf scrubbed with his nails at his stubbly chin. “Damn hard going, and—”

“I’ll be going west,” said Ankran, bent jaw clenched and his eyes fixed on the flames.

There was silence as they all looked at him. “West to where?” asked Jaud.

“Thorlby.”

Yarvi could only raise his brows at help from such an unexpected quarter. Rulf burst out laughing. “Thank you for giving me one good chuckle before I die, Master Ankran! Our ex-storekeeper’s walking to Gettland.”

“To Vansterland. I’ll try to find a ship to take me from there.”

Rulf chuckled again. “So you’re only going to walk to Vulsgard? And how long a stroll do you reckon that to be, oh navigator?”

“At least a month on foot.” Sumael said it so quickly she already must have worked it out.

“A month of this!” Rulf waved his broad hand toward the snow-covered emptiness they had struggled through already, and Yarvi had to admit the thought was by no means a heartening one. “With what gear?”

“I have a shield.” Jaud swung it off his back and knocked at it with one fist. A large, round shield of rough wood with an iron boss. “I thought to use it as a float.”

“And a generous guard lent me his bow.” Rulf plucked at the string as if it was a harp. “But with no arrows it plays no music. Does anyone have a tent? Extra clothes? Blankets? Sleds?” Silence, aside from the moaning of the chill wind just outside their firelit hollow. “Then the very best of luck, Master Ankran! It’s been my pleasure to row beside you but I fear our ways must part. The rest of us will be going east.”

“What fool put you in charge?”

They all spun about as the voice croaked from the darkness, and Nothing was there. He was streaked with soot as well as his usual dirt, rags and hair and beard all blackened. He had Trigg’s boots on, and Trigg’s jacket, blood crusting one shoulder. Over the other he carried a great roll of singed sailcloth, and cradled in one arm, like a babe against the freezing night, the sword with which Yarvi had seen him kill six men.

He dropped cross-legged beside the fire as though it was a meeting long arranged and gave a satisfied sigh as he held his palms to the flames. “West to Gettland sounds well. We will be followed.”

“Trigg?” asked Sumael.

“You need give no more thought to our overseer. My debt to him is paid. But between me and Shadikshirram the account is still open.” Nothing licked a finger and polished a blemish from the blade of his sword. “We must put her far behind us.”

“Us?” snapped Sumael, and Yarvi noticed that, just behind her back, the hatchet was ready. “You’re inviting yourself along?”

The firelight shifted in Nothing’s mad eyes. “Unless someone else wants to invite me?”

Yarvi held his hands up between them and smoothed the way for Father Peace. “We need all the

help we can get. What's your name, even?"

Nothing stared off into the night sky as though the answer might be written in the stars. "I have had three names ... perhaps four ... but all of them brought me bad luck. I would hate them to bring you bad luck too. If you must talk to me, Nothing will do, but I am no great talker. Shadikshirram will be coming, and she will expect us to go east."

"Because going west is madness!" Rulf rounded on Sumael. "Tell them!"

She pressed her scarred lips together and narrowed her eyes at the fire. "East is quicker. East is easier."

"There!" barked Rulf, slapping his thigh.

"I'm going west," said Sumael.

"Eh?"

"East there will be people. Anyone who got off the ship. Then that trading post was crawling with slavers."

"And Vansterland isn't?" asked Rulf. "Because we always did good business in Inglings there."

"East is dangerous," said Sumael.

"West is nothing but weeks of wilderness!"

"There is forest. Forest might mean fuel. Might mean food. East has the trading post, but then? Only the fens and the wild, hundreds of miles of it. West is Vansterland. West is civilization. West is ... maybe ... ships that go farther west. That go home."

"Home." Jaud stared into the flames as though he glimpsed his village there, and that well with the sweetest water in the world.

"We head inland," said Sumael, "out of sight of any ships. Then west."

Rulf flung up his hands. "How will you find your way out in the snows? You'll end up walking in circles!"

Sumael slid a leather package from inside her coat, unrolled it to show her eyeglass and instruments. "I'll find my way, old man, don't worry on that score. I can't say I much look forward to either route. Especially in this company. But west might be the better chance."

"Might be?"

Sumael shrugged. "Sometimes, might be is the best you can hope for."

"Three for west." Ankran had the first smile Yarvi had seen him give since Shadikshirram knocked his two front teeth out. "What about you, big man?"

"Hmm." Jaud propped his chin thoughtfully on one fist and looked about the circle. "Huh." He carefully eyed each one of them, and ended on Sumael's instruments. "Heh." He shrugged his heavy shoulders, and took a long breath. "There is no man I would rather have beside me in a fight, Rulf. But when it comes to getting from a place to a place ... I trust Sumael. I go west. If you will have me."

"You can hold your shield over me when it snows," said Sumael.

"You're all bloody mad!" Rulf slapped down a heavy hand on Yarvi's shoulder. "Looks like it's just you and me, Yorv."

"I'm very flattered by the offer ..." Yarvi slipped from under Rulf's hand and his fleece together and back into his shirt, not altogether dry but close enough. "But the first thing we have to do is stick together. Stick together or die apart." That and his chair, and his oath, and his vengeance all waited for him in Gettland, and the longer they waited, the less his chance of ever claiming them. "We'll all

be going west.” And Yarvi gave Rulf a grin, and slapped him on the shoulder with his good hand. “I prayed for younger help but I’ll take what I can get.”

“Gods!” Rulf pressed at his temples with the heels of his hands. “We’ll all regret this.”

“It can keep the rest of my regrets company.” Nothing stared off into the darkness as though he saw a ghostly host beyond the firelight. “There are enough of them.”

Sumael led the way at a furious pace and they all walked her course with as little question as they had rowed it. Through a broken land of black rock and white snow they floundered, where stunted trees had all been swept into tortured shapes by the wind, bowing mournfully toward the sea.

“How many steps to Vansterland?” called Rulf.

Sumael checked her instruments, lips moving with silent sums, peered up at the smudge of Mother Sun in the iron sky, and headed on without answering.

Few in the citadel of Thorlby would have reckoned it a treasure, but Nothing’s roll of mildewed sailcloth became their most valued possession. With the care of pirates dividing a stolen hoard they tore it up between them and wound it under their clothes, around their frozen heads and hands, stuffed their boots with it. Half, Jaud carried with him so they could huddle beneath it when night came. No doubt it would scarcely be warmer than the utter darkness outside, but they knew they would be grateful for that little.

That little would be the difference between life and death.

They took turns breaking new ground, Jaud forging ahead without complaint, Rulf venting curses on the snow as though it was an old enemy, Ankran struggling on with arms hugged around himself, Nothing with head up and sword clutched tight, as though he fancied he was made from steel himself and no weather could chill or warm him, even when in spite of Yarvi’s prayers snow began to settle across the shoulders of his stolen jacket.

“Bloody wonderful,” muttered Rulf at the sky.

“It works for us,” said Ankran. “Covers our tracks, keeps us hidden. With luck our old mistress will think we froze out here.”

“Without luck we will,” muttered Yarvi.

“No one cares either way,” said Rulf. “No one’s mad enough to follow us here.”

“Ha!” barked Nothing. “Shadikshirram is too mad to do anything else.” And he tossed the end of his heavy chain over his shoulder like a scarf and cut that conversation down as dead as he had the *South Wind*’s guards.

Yarvi frowned back the way they had come, their tracks snaking off into the gray distance. He wondered when Shadikshirram would find the wreck of her ship. Then he wondered what she would do when she did. Then he swallowed, and floundered after the others just as fast as he could.

At midday, Mother Sun no higher than Jaud’s shoulder at her feeble zenith, their long shadows struggling after them across the white, they paused to huddle in a hollow.

“Food,” said Sumael, giving voice to every thought among them.

No one was keen to volunteer. They all knew food was worth more than gold out here. It was Ankran who surprised them all by first reaching into his furs and bringing out a packet of salted fish.

He shrugged. “I hate fish.”

“The man who used to starve us now feeds us,” said Rulf. “Who says there’s no justice?” He came up with a few biscuits well past their best, if they had ever had one. Sumael followed that with two dried loaves.

Yarvi could only spread his empty palms and try to smile. “I’m humbled ... by your generosity ...?”

Ankran rubbed gently at his crooked nose. “It warms me just a little to see you humbled. How about you two?”

Jaud shrugged. “I had little time to prepare.”

Nothing held up his sword. “I brought the knife.”

They all considered their meager larder, scarcely enough for one decent meal for the six of them.

“I suppose I’d better be mother,” said Sumael.

Yarvi sat, slaving like his father’s dogs waiting for scraps, while she rationed out six fearsomely equal and awfully tiny shares of bread. Rulf swallowed his in two bites, then watched as Ankran chewed every crumb a hundred times with eyes closed in ecstasy.

“Is that all we eat?”

Sumael wrapped up the precious bundle again, jaw tight, and pushed it into her shirt without speaking.

“I miss Trigg,” said Rulf, mournfully.

Sumael would have made a fine minister. She had been thinking clearly enough on her way off the ship to grab two of Shadikshirram’s abandoned wine bottles, and now they packed them with snow and took turns to carry them inside their clothes. Yarvi soon learned only to sip the results, since unwrapping to piss in that cold was an act of heroism that earned grunted congratulations from the others, all the more heartfelt since everyone knew sooner or later they would have to present their own nethers to the searing wind.

For all it felt like a month of torture the day was short, and as evening came the heavens blazed with stars, glittering swirls and burning trails, bright as the eyes of the gods. Sumael pointed out strange constellations, for every one of which she had a name—the Bald Weaver, the Crooked Way, Stranger-Come-Knocking, the Eater of Dreams—and as she spoke them steaming into the dark she smiled, a happiness in her voice that he had never heard from her before, and made him smile too.

“How many steps to Vansterland, now?” he asked.

“Some.” She looked back to the horizon, happiness swiftly snuffed out, and upped the pace.

He toiled on after her. “I haven’t thanked you.”

“You can do it when we don’t end up a pair of frozen corpses.”

“Since I might not get that chance ... thank you. You could’ve let Trigg kill me.”

“If I’d taken a moment to think about it, I would have.”

He could hardly complain at that. He wondered what he would have done if she had been the one Trigg throttled, and did not like the answer. “I’m glad you didn’t think, then.”

There was a long pause, with just the crunching of their boots in the snow. Then he saw her frown over her shoulder at him, and away. “So am I.”

THE SECOND DAY THEY JOKED to keep their spirits up.

“You’re being stingy with the stores again, Ankran! Pass back the roast pig!” And they laughed.

“I’ll race you to Vulsgard! Last one through the gate gets sold to pay for ale!” And they chuckled.

“I hope Shadikshirram brings some wine when she comes for us.” Not so much as a smile.

When they slithered from their wretched tent at dawn on the third day, if you could call that watery gloom a dawn, they were all grumbling.

"I do not care for this old blunderer in front," croaked Nothing, after tripping over Rulf's heels for a third time.

"I'm not sure I like this madman's sword at my back," snapped Rulf over his shoulder.

"You could have it through your back instead."

"How many years between you and still you act like children?" Yarvi pushed his way in to step between them. "We need to help one another or the winter will kill us all."

Faintly, just ahead, he heard Sumael say, "More than likely it will kill us all anyway."

He did not disagree.

By the fourth day, the freezing fog lying over the white land like a shroud, they were silent. Just a grunt now as one or another stumbled, just a grunt as one or another helped them up and on to nowhere. Six silent figures in the great emptiness, in the great, cold void, each struggling under their own burden of chill misery, under their own chafing thrall-collar and ever heavier chain, each with their own pain, and hunger, and fear.

At first Yarvi thought about the men drowned on the ship. How many dead? The planks cracking and the sea pouring in. So that he could save himself? The slaves straining at their chains for one more gasp before Mother Sea dragged them down, down, down.

But his mother had always said, *Never worry about what has been done. Only about what will be.*

There was no changing it, and guilt over the past and worry about the future began both to fade, leaving only taunting memories of food. The four dozen pigs roasted for the visit of the High King, so much for such a little, gray-haired man and his hard-eyed minister. The feast when Yarvi's brother passed his warrior's test that Yarvi had done no more than pick at, knowing he could never pass himself. The beach before his ill-fated raid, men cooking the meal that might be their last, meat turning above a hundred fires, heat like a hand on your face, a ring of hungry grins lit by flame, fat sizzling and the crackling blackened—

"Freedom!" roared Rulf, opening his arms wide to hold the vast expanse of empty white. "Freedom to freeze where you please! Freedom to starve where you like! Freedom to walk 'til you drop!"

His voice died quickly in that thin sharp air.

"Finished?" asked Nothing.

Rulf let his arms flop down. "Yes." And they slogged on.

It was not the thought of his mother that kept Yarvi going, step after floundering step, stride after aching stride, fall after chilling fall, dogged in the tracks of the others. It was not the thought of his betrothed, or his dead father, or even his stool beside Mother Gundring's fire. It was the thought of Odem, smiling with his hand on Yarvi's shoulder. Of Odem, promising to be his shoulder-man. Of Odem, asking gently as the spring rain if a cripple should be King of Gettland.

"I think *not*," Yarvi snarled in smoke through his cracked lips. "I think *not* ... I think *not*."

And step after torturous step, Gettland edged ever closer.

The fifth day was clear and icy crisp, the sky blinding blue, so that it seemed Yarvi could see almost all the way to the sea, a strip of black and white on the far horizon of a land of black and white.

"We've done well," he said. "You have to admit."

Sumael, shading her eyes from the brightness as she frowned westward, had to do no such thing. "We've had good weatherluck."

"I don't feel lucky," muttered Rulf, hugging himself. "Do you feel lucky, Jaud?"

“I feel cold,” said Jaud, rubbing at the pinked tips of his ears.

Sumael shook her head at the sky, which aside from a distant bruise far off to the north looked unusually clear. “Maybe tonight, maybe tomorrow, you’ll learn what bad weatherluck looks like. There’s a storm coming.”

Rulf squinted up. “You’re sure?”

“I don’t tell you how to snore, do I? Don’t tell me how to navigate.”

Rulf looked at Yarvi, and shrugged. But before dark, as usual, she was proved right. That bruise on the sky grew, and swelled, and darkened, and turned odd colors.

“The gods are angry,” muttered Nothing, frowning.

“When aren’t they?” said Yarvi.

The snow began to fall in giant flakes, in curtains and eddies. The wind blew up in shrieking gusts, bludgeoning from every way at once, barging them left and right. Yarvi took a fall and, when he clambered up, couldn’t see any of the others. He blundered on in a panic and ran straight into Jaud’s back.

“We have to get out of this!” he screeched, hardly able even to hear his own voice over the wind.

“I will not argue!” Jaud bellowed back.

“We need deep snow!”

“Snow we have!” roared Ankran.

They floundered to the bottom of a narrow gully, the most promising slope Yarvi could hope to find with the snow coming in such flurries that the others were little more than ghosts. He dug like a rabbit, scooping snow between his legs, burrowing desperately inward then, when he’d tunneled a body’s length, up. His hands burned with the cold inside their wrappings of wet sailcloth, his muscles burned with the effort but he forced himself on. He dug as if his life depended on it.

It did.

Sumael wormed her way after him, growling through her gritted teeth and using her hatchet like a trowel. They dug out first a shelf, then a hollow, then a tiny chamber. Ankran wriggled in behind, tongue wedged into the gap in his front teeth as he scooped the snow back. Rulf came next into the cold dimness, then Jaud worked his great shoulders up into the growing cave, and finally Nothing poked his head in.

“Neat,” he said.

“Keep the entrance clear,” Yarvi muttered, “or we’ll be buried in the night,” and he hunched against the packed snow, unwound the soaked wrappings and blew into his cupped hands. He had few enough fingers already: he could afford to lose no more.

“Where did you learn this?” asked Sumael, sitting back beside him.

“My father taught me.”

“I think he has saved our lives.”

“You must thank him, when you see him.” Ankran wriggled his shoulders into place. They were tightly squeezed, but they had been for days. There was no room for pride, or distaste, or enmity out here in the wastes.

Yarvi closed his eyes then and thought of his father, laid out pale and cold on the slab. “My father’s dead.”

“I am sorry,” came Jaud’s deep voice.

“It’s good that one of us is.”

Yarvi let his hand drop, and realized a moment later it had fallen against Sumael's, her upturned fingers pressed into his palm. It felt good there, warm where her skin touched his. He did not move it. Nor did she.

Slowly he closed his fingers around hers.

There was a long silence then, the wind whining soft outside their shelter and the breath coming heavy inside, and Yarvi began to feel about as close to comfortable, packed under strides of frozen snow, as he had since they left Ankran's fire.

"Here." He felt the breath of the word on his face, felt Sumael gently take him by the wrist. His eyes flicked open but he could not guess at her expression in the darkness.

She turned his hand over and pressed something into his palm. Stale, and sour, and halfway between soggy and frozen, but it was bread, and by the gods he was glad to get it.

They sat pressed together, all eking out their shares, all chewing with something like contentment, or at least relief, and one by one swallowing, and falling silent, and leaving Yarvi wondering whether he dared take Sumael's hand again.

Then she said, "That's the last food."

Another silence, but this one far less comfortable.

Rulf's voice came muffled in the darkness. "How far to Vansterland?"

No one answered.

THE BETTER MEN

“Gettlanders are the better men,” came Nothing’s breathy croak. “They fight as one. Each guarded by the shield of his shoulder-man.”

“Gettlanders? Hah!” Rulf snorted smoke as he struggled on up the snowy slope after Sumael. “A herd of bloody sheep driven bleating to the butcher! When the shoulder-man falls, what then? Throvenmen have fire in them!”

They’d been arguing all day. Whether sword or bow was superior. Whether Hemenholm was south of Grenmer Island. Whether painted wood or oiled were more loved by Mother Sea and hence made for a more favored vessel. Yarvi could not imagine where they found the breath. He hardly had enough for breathing with.

“Throvenmen?” croaked Nothing. “Hah! When the fires burn out, what then?” First they would argue their case, then settle to stating their position with ever more certainty, and finally to a contest of scornful grunting. In Yarvi’s hearing neither had conceded a hair’s breadth since they left the *South Wind* sinking.

It was three days since the food ran out, and Yarvi’s hunger was an aching void inside him that swallowed every hope. When he had unwrapped the sailcloth from his hands that morning he had hardly recognized them: they were shriveled and bloated at once. The skin on his fingertips had a waxy look, prickly-numb to the touch. Even Jaud was hollow about the cheeks. Ankran had a limp he was trying and failing to hide. Rulf’s breath came with a wheeze that made Yarvi wince. Nothing had frost in his straggling eyebrows. Sumael’s scarred lips were thinner and grayer and tighter pressed with every mile they trudged.

All Yarvi could think about, as this debate of the damned droned on, was which of them would die first.

“Gettlanders know discipline,” droned Nothing. “Gettlanders are—”

“What kind of fool even gives a damn?” snarled Yarvi, rounding on the two old men and stabbing his stub of a finger in their faces, suddenly furious. “Men are just men, good or bad depending on their luck! Now save your breath for walking!” And he wedged his hands back under his armpits and forced himself on up the slope.

“He’s a cook’s boy and a philosopher,” he heard Rulf wheeze.

“I can hardly decide which is the more useless out here,” muttered Nothing. “I should have let Trigg kill him. Gettlanders are clearly ...”

He fell silent as he crested the ridge. They all did. A forest lay before them, stretching away in every direction until it was lost in the gray veil of the falling snow.

“Trees?” whispered Sumael, as though she hardly dared believe her own senses.

“Trees could mean food,” said Yarvi.

“Trees could mean fire,” said Ankran.

Suddenly they were all plunging down the hillside, whooping like children freed from their chores. Yarvi fell, tumbled in a shower of snow, and was up again. They floundered eagerly between the stunted outliers, then in among towering firs with trunks so thick Yarvi could scarcely have linked his

hands around them. Mighty pillars as in some sacred place and they unwelcome trespassers.

They slowed from run to jog, from jog to cautious shuffle. No fruit fell from the sparse branches. No deer flung themselves onto Nothing's sword. Such fallen wood as they found was soaked and rotted. Beneath the snow the ground was treacherous with tangled roots and countless years of rotted needles.

Their laughter guttered out and the wood was perfectly quiet, not so much as a bird's chirrup to scratch the heavy silence.

"Gods," whispered Ankran. "We're no better here than out there."

Yarvi scrambled to a tree trunk, breaking off a piece of half-frozen fungus with a trembling hand.

"Have you found something?" asked Jaud, squeaky with hope.

"No." Yarvi tossed it aside. "This kind can't be eaten." And despair began to float down with the snow and settle on Yarvi even more heavily than before.

"Fire is what we need," he said, trying to keep the flickering of hope alive. Fire would warm them, and raise their spirits, and bring them together, and keep them going a little longer. Where that might take them he could not afford to think about. One stroke at a time, as Jaud had always told him.

"For a fire we need dry wood," said Ankran. "Might the cook's boy know where to find some?"

"I'd know where to buy it in Thorlby," Yarvi snapped back. In truth, he probably wouldn't have. There had been slaves for that.

"Higher ground should be drier ground." Sumael set off at a jog and Yarvi struggled after, sliding down a slope and into a treeless dip, covered in clean white snow. "Maybe up here ..."

She hurried out into that scar in the forest and Yarvi followed the trail of her quick footprints. Gods, he was tired. He could scarcely feel his feet. There was something strange about the ground here, flat and hard under a thin blanket of snow, black patches scattered. At Sumael's next step there came a strange creaking.

She froze, frowning down.

"Wait!" Nothing stood on the slope behind them, clutching a tree with one hand and his sword with the other. "It's a river!"

Yarvi stared at his feet, every hair on him prickling with horror. The ice pinged, clicked, shifted under his boots. It gave a long groan as Sumael turned toward him, her wide eyes flicking up to his. There was no more than a stride or two between them.

Yarvi swallowed, hardly daring even to breathe, and held out his hand to her.

"Tread softly," he whispered.

She took a step and, without so much as a gasp, vanished through the ice.

First he stood frozen.

Then his whole body twitched as if to dash forward.

He stopped himself with a moan, floundered down onto all fours and wriggled to where she had disappeared. Black water, and splinters of ice floating, and not the slightest sign of her. He stared over his shoulder to see Jaud bounding down the bank in a shower of snow.

"Stay!" shrieked Yarvi. "You're too heavy!"

He thought he saw movement under the ice, dragged himself to it sprawled out on his face, scrubbed away snow, could see nothing down there but blackness, lonely bubbles shifting.

Ankran teetered out onto the river, arms spread wide, skittered to a halt as the frozen surface groaned. Nothing was floundering through the snow downstream, toward a patch of bare ice where

jagged rocks poked through.

Awful silence stretched out.

“Where is she?” screamed Yarvi. Rulf only stared from the bank, mouth hanging helplessly.

How long could someone hold their breath? Not this long, surely.

He saw Nothing hop a few steps from the bank and raise his sword high, point downward.

“Are you mad?” Yarvi screeched, before he realized.

Of course he was.

The sword darted down, spray fountained up, and Nothing dropped on the ice and thrust his other arm into the water.

“I have her!” He hauled Sumael from the river, limp as rags and streaming freezing water, dragged her toward the bank where Jaud and Rulf were waiting.

“Is she breathing?” screamed Yarvi, crawling on hands and knees for fear of going through himself.

“How do I tell?” asked Jaud, kneeling beside her.

“Put your cheek to her mouth!”

“I don’t think so!”

“Lift her feet!” Yarvi scrambled from the frozen river and forced his leaden legs along the snow-covered bank.

“What?”

“Get her upside-down!”

Jaud dumbly lifted her by her ankles, her loose head dragging in the snow, and Yarvi struggled up and forced two fingers into her mouth, hooked them round and down her throat.

“Come on!” he growled, spitting, and straining. “Come on!” He had seen Mother Gundring do it once, to a boy who fell in a mill-pond.

The boy had died.

Sumael didn’t move. She was clammy-cold, like a dead thing already, and Yarvi snarled a mess of prayers through his clenched teeth, he hardly even knew who to.

He felt Nothing’s hand on his shoulder. “Death waits for us all.”

Yarvi shrugged him off and pushed harder. “Come on!”

And as suddenly as a child pinched awake Sumael jerked and coughed out water, rasped in half a breath and coughed out more.

“Gods!” said Rulf, taking a dumbstruck step back.

Yarvi was almost as surprised as he was, and certainly had never been so glad to have a handful of cold puke.

“You going to put me down?” croaked Sumael, eyes swiveling to the corners. Jaud let her drop and she hunched on the snow, plucking at her thrall-collar, and coughing and spitting, and starting to shiver hard.

Rulf was staring as if he had witnessed a miracle. “You’re a sorcerer!”

“Or a minister,” murmured Ankran.

Yarvi had no wish to let anyone pick at that scab. “We need to get her warm.”

They struggled to coax a fire with Ankran’s little flint, tearing sheets of moss from the trees for kindling, but everything was wet and the few sparks would not take. One after another they tried while Sumael stared, eyes fever-bright, shivering harder and harder until they could hear her clothes flapping against her.

Jaud who had once lit the ovens in a bakery every morning could do nothing, and Rulf who had set fires on beaches windswept and rain-lashed all about the Shattered Sea could do nothing, and even Yarvi made a futile effort, fumbling the flint in his useless stub of a hand until his fingers were cut while all the while Ankran muttered a prayer to He Who Makes the Flame.

But the gods were working no more miracles that day.

“Can we dig a shelter?” Jaud rocked back on his heels. “Like we did in the blizzard?”

“Not enough snow,” said Yarvi.

“With branches, then?”

“Too much snow.”

“Got to keep going.” Sumael suddenly wobbled to her feet, Rulf’s outsize coat dropping in the snow behind her. “Too hot,” she said, unwinding the sailcloth from her hands so it flapped free, tugging her shirt open and pulling at the chain inside. “Scarf’s too tight.” She took a couple more shambling steps and pitched straight on her face. “Got to keep going,” she mumbled into the snow.

Jaud gently rolled her, sat her up, hugging her with one arm.

“Father won’t wait forever,” she whispered, faintest breath of smoke spilling from her blued lips.

“The cold’s in her head.” Yarvi put his palm against her clammy skin and found his hand shook. He might have saved her from drowning but without fire or food the winter would take her through the Last Door still, and he could not stand the thought of it. What would they do without her?

What would he do without her?

“Do something!” hissed Rulf, gripping hard at Yarvi’s arm.

But what? Yarvi chewed at his cracked lip, staring off into the forest as though some answer might present itself among those barren trunks.

There is always a way.

He frowned for a moment, then shook Rulf off and hurried to the nearest tree, tearing the wrappings from his good hand. He plucked a red-brown tuft of something from the bark, and the embers of hope sparked to life once again.

“Wool,” muttered Ankran, holding up another tuft. “Sheep passed this way.”

Rulf tore it from his fingers. “Were driven?”

“Southward,” said Yarvi.

“How can you tell?”

“The moss grows out of the wind on the west side of the trunks.”

“Sheep mean warmth,” said Rulf.

“Sheep mean food,” said Jaud.

Yarvi did not say what he was thinking. That sheep meant people, and people might not be friendly. But to weigh your choices you need more than one.

“I’ll stay with her,” said Ankran. “You bring help, if you can.”

“No,” said Jaud. “We go together. We are all oarmates now.”

“Who’ll carry her?”

Jaud shrugged. “When you have a load to lift, you’re better lifting than weeping.” And he slipped his arms underneath Sumael and grimaced as he lifted her, stumbled just a little, then settled her twitching face against his shoulder and without another word started southward, head held high. She must not have weighed much now but, cold and hungry and tired as Yarvi was, it seemed a feat almost impossible.

“I’ve lived a while,” muttered Rulf, blinking at Jaud’s back. “But I can’t say I ever saw a finer thing.”

“Nor I,” said Yarvi, clambering up and hurrying after. How could he complain, or doubt, or falter, with that lesson in strength before him?

How could any of them?

They huddled in the damp brush, and looked down toward the steading.

One building was stone-built, so old it had settled into the land, a thin plume of smoke drifting from the snow-humped roof which made Yarvi's mouth water and his skin prickle at misty memories of food and warmth. Another building, which from the occasional muffled bleating was the barn where the sheep were kept, looked to be made from the hull of an upended ship, though how it might have come this far inland he had no notion. Others were rough-hewn sheds almost lost under the drifted snow, the gaps between them blocked by a fence of sharpened logs.

Just outside the entrance, by a hole in the ice and with his fishing rod propped on a pair of sticks, a small boy sat swaddled in furs, and from time to time noisily blew his nose.

"This worries me," whispered Jaud. "How many will be in there? We know nothing about them."

"Except that they are people and people are never to be trusted," said Nothing.

"We know they have food, and clothes, and shelter." Yarvi looked at Sumael, hunched in every thread they could spare, which was few enough. She was shivering so hard her teeth rattled, lips gray-blue like slate, eyelids drooping, closing, opening and drooping again. "Things we need to survive."

"Then it is simple." Nothing unwrapped the cloth from the hilt of his sword. "Steel is the answer."

Yarvi stared at him. "You're going to kill that boy?"

Rulf wriggled his shoulders uncomfortably, but Nothing only shrugged his. "If it is a choice between his death or ours then, yes, I will kill him, and anyone else down there. They can join my regrets." He started to rise but Yarvi grabbed his ragged shirt and dragged him back down, found himself staring into his hard, flat, gray eyes. Close up, they looked no more sane. Quite the reverse.

"The same goes for you, cook's boy," whispered Nothing.

Yarvi swallowed, but he did not look away, and he did not let go. Sumael had risked her life for his on the *South Wind*. It was time to repay the debt. And besides, he was tired of being a coward.

"First we'll try talking." He stood, tried to think up some gesture that might make him look less like a ragged beggar at the utter extremes of desperation, and failed.

"Once they have killed you," said Nothing, "will steel be the answer?"

Yarvi breathed a smoky sigh. "I expect so." And he shuffled down the slope toward the buildings.

All was still. No sign of life but for the boy. Yarvi stopped perhaps a dozen steps from him.

"Hey."

The lad jerked up, upsetting his fishing rod, stumbled back and nearly fell, then ran toward the house. Yarvi could only wait, and shiver. Shiver with the cold, and with the fear of what was coming. You could not expect too much kindness from folk who lived in land as harsh as this.

They spilled from the stone building like bees from a broken hive. He counted six, each well-wrapped in furs, each with a spear. Three of them had stone points rather than metal, but all were gripped with grim purpose. Silently they rushed to make half a circle around him, spears pointing in.

All Yarvi could do was lift his hands, empty apart from their swaddlings of filthy sailcloth, send up a silent prayer to Father Peace, and croak out, "I need your help."

The figure in the center planted her spear butt-down in the snow, and walked slowly up to Yarvi. She pushed her hood back to show a shag of yellow-gray hair and a face deep-lined, worn by work and weather. For a moment, she studied him.

Then she stepped forward and, before Yarvi could cringe away, threw her arms about him and hugged him tight.

“I am Shidwala,” she said in the Tongue. “Are you alone?”

“No,” he whispered, fighting to hold back his tears of relief. “My oarmates are with me.”

THE INSIDE OF THE HOUSE was low, and narrow, and stank of sweat and woodsmoke, and it seemed a palace. An oily stew of roots and mutton was doled out from a blackened pot into a wooden bowl polished with years of use. Yarvi dug into it with his fingers and had never tasted anything finer. Benches followed the curving walls, and Yarvi and his friends sat on one side of the sizzling firepit and their hosts on the other—Shidwala, and four men he took to be her sons, and the boy from the ice pool, who stared at Sumael and Jaud as if they were elves stepped out of legend.

Back in Thorlby, these people would have seemed beyond poor. Now the room was crammed with riches. Tools of wood and bone were bracketed on the walls, cunning instruments for hunting, and fishing, and digging shelter, and teasing a living from the ice, skins of wolf and goat and bear and seal on every surface. One of the hosts, a man with a thick brown beard, scraped out the pot to hand Jaud a second bowl, and the big man nodded his thanks and started to stuff it in, eyes closed in ecstasy.

Ankran leaned close to him. “I think we have eaten all their dinner.”

Jaud froze with his fingers in his mouth and the bearded man laughed and leaned across the fire to clap him on the shoulder.

“I’m sorry,” said Yarvi, putting his own bowl aside.

“You are hungrier than us, I think,” said Shidwala. They spoke the Tongue with a strange accent. “And also remarkably far from your way.”

“We are heading to Vulsgard from the land of the Banyas,” said Ankran.

The woman considered that a moment. “Then you are remarkably close to your way, but I find your way a very strange one.”

Yarvi could only agree with that. “If we had known the hardship of it, we might have chosen another.”

“So it is with many choices.”

“All we can do now is see it through.”

“So it is with many choices.”

Nothing leaned close to Yarvi and whispered in his ground-down stub of a voice. “I do not trust them.”

“He wants to thank you for your hospitality,” said Yarvi, quickly.

“We all do,” said Ankran. “You, and the gods of your house.”

Yarvi brushed ashes from the prayer stone that was set into the hearth and read the runes there. “And She Who Breathes Out the Snows.”

“Well said and well reckoned.” Shidwala narrowed her eyes. “Where you come from she is a small god, eh?”

Yarvi nodded. “But here a tall one, I think.”

“Like many things, gods seem bigger when you are closer to them. Here, She Who Breathes Out the Snows is ever at our elbows.”

“She shall have our first prayers waking,” said Ankran.

“Wise,” said Shidwala.

“And you’ll have our second,” said Yarvi. “You’ve saved our lives.”

“Here all the living must be friends.” She smiled, and the deep creases in her face reminded Yarvi of Mother Gundring, and for a moment he was sick for home. “The winter is enemy enough for all of us.”

“We know it.” Yarvi looked over at Sumael, hunched close to the fire with her eyes shut, rocking gently with a blanket about her shoulders. Most of the color had come back to her face.

“You could wait with us, until winter passes.”

“I cannot,” said Ankran, voice cracking as he set his jaw hard. “I must get to my family.”

“And I to mine,” said Yarvi, though his pressing need was to kill one of his rather than save them.

“We must go on, but there are many things we need ...”

Shidwala took in their wretched state and raised her brows. “Indeed there are. We would happily trade.”

At the word “trade” Shidwala’s sons smiled, and nodded their approval.

Yarvi glanced at Ankran, and Ankran spread his empty palms. “We have nothing to trade.”

“There is the sword.”

Nothing frowned even harder, cradled the blade a little closer, and Yarvi was painfully aware he had been happy to kill these people a few moments before.

“He will not part with it,” said Yarvi.

“There is one thing I could make good use of.” The man with the brown beard was staring across the fire at Sumael.

Jaud stiffened, and Rulf gave an unhappy grunt, and Ankran’s voice had a harsh edge when he spoke. “We will not sell one of our own. Not at any price.”

Shidwala laughed. “You misunderstand. Metal here is scarce.” She came around the fire on her haunches, reached into Sumael’s collar where steel glinted, and drew out a length of her fine chain. “This is what we want.”

Yarvi felt the smile spread across his face. It had been a while, and it felt fine there. “In that case ...” He unwound his scarf of frayed sailcloth and drew out his own heavier chain. “You might want this one too.”

The bearded man’s eyes lit up as he weighed it in his hand, then his jaw dropped as Nothing jerked open his own collar. “And there is this,” he said, dragging out the heavy links.

Now everyone was smiling. Yarvi leaned in close to the fire, and clasped his hands the way his mother used to. “Let us trade.”

Nothing leaned to whisper in his ear. “I told you steel would be the answer.”

WITH A FINAL CRASH the rusted bolt sheared away and Nothing’s collar sprang open.

“That was a stubborn one,” said the bearded man, frowning at his ruined chisel.

Somewhat unsteadily Nothing stood from the block, reached with one trembling hand to touch his neck, the skin leathery with the chafing of years.

“For twenty years I wore that collar,” he whispered, tears glimmering in his eyes.

Rulf slapped him on the shoulder. “I wore mine only three, and still I feel light as air without it. You must feel like you could float away.”

“I have,” whispered Nothing. “I will.”

Yarvi stroked absently at the old burns where his own collar used to sit, watching Ankran carefully pack the things their chains had bought them. A fishing rod and bait. A shovel made from the shoulderblade of a moose. A bronze knife that looked like a relic from a time soon after the Breaking of God. Nine arrows for Rulf’s bow. A wooden bowl for drinking. Dried moss to start a fire. Rope woven from wool. Ewe’s cheese and mutton and dried fish. Furs too, and rough over-clothes stitched from fleeces, and raw wool to stuff inside them. Leather sacks to carry it all. Even a sled to pull it on.

What silly things these would have seemed once, what beggar’s junk. Now it was a treasure hoard.

Sumael was wrapped up to her chin in a thick white fur, eyes closed and a rare grin on her face, white tooth showing through the notch in her lip.

“Feels good?” Jaud asked her.

“I am warm,” she whispered, without opening her eyes. “If I’m dreaming, don’t wake me.”

Shidwala tossed Nothing’s open collar clattering into a barrel alongside their chains. “If you want advice—”

“Always,” said Ankran.

“Head north and west. In two days you will come upon a country that fires under the earth make hot. At its edges the streams run with warm water and the fish teem.”

“I’ve heard tales of such a country,” said Yarvi, remembering Mother Gundring’s voice droning over the firepit.

“We will go north and west,” said Ankran.

Shidwala nodded. “And may the gods walk with you.” She turned to go but Nothing dropped suddenly to his knees, took her hand, and pressed his cracked lips to it.

“I will never forget this kindness,” he said, wiping tears on the back of his hand.

“None of us will,” said Yarvi.

With a smile she pulled Nothing to his feet, and patted his grizzled cheek. “That is its own reward.”

THE TRUTH

Rulf slipped from the trees with a huge grin on his face, bow over one shoulder and a stringy deer over the other. To leave no one in any doubt as to the quality of his archery he had left the arrow sticking from its heart.

Sumael raised one brow at him. "So you're not just a beauty."

He winked back. "To an archer, arrows make all the difference."

"Do you want to skin, cook's boy, or shall I?" Ankran held out the knife with the hint of a twisted grin. As though he knew Yarvi would refuse. He was no fool. The few times Yarvi had been dragged out to hunt his hand had stopped him drawing bow or holding spear and he had felt sick when it came to the butchery. His father had scolded him and his brother had mocked him and their men had barely bothered to conceal their contempt.

Much like the rest of his childhood, then.

"You can skin this time," said Yarvi. "I'll give you some pointers if you go wrong."

After they ate Jaud sat with his bare feet to the fire, rubbing fat into the cracks between his thick toes. Rulf tossed the last bone aside and wiped his greasy hands on his fleece jacket.

"Some salt would've made all the difference."

Sumael shook her head. "Have you ever had a thing you didn't complain about?"

"If you can't find anything to complain about you aren't looking hard enough." Rulf settled back on one elbow, smiling into the darkness and scratching at his thick growth of beard. "Though I never was disappointed in my wife. I thought I'd die at that bloody oar. But since I still seem to be casting a shadow I've a mind to see her again. Just to say a hello. Just to know that she's well."

"If she has any sense she'll have moved on," said Sumael.

"She had more'n her share. Too much to waste life waiting." Rulf sniffed, and spat into the fire. "And better men than me aren't hard to find."

"There we can agree." Nothing sat a little way from the fire with his stiff back to the rest of them and his naked sword on his knees, polishing the blade with a rag.

Rulf only grinned over at him. "And what about you, Nothing? You spent years scrubbing a deck, will you spend the rest of them scrubbing that sword? What will you do once we get to Vulsgard?"

Yarvi realized it was the first time since the *South Wind* went beneath the waves that any one of them had talked about what might come next. It was the first time it had looked as if they might make it.

"I have scores to settle. But they have kept fresh twenty years." Nothing bent back to his frantic polishing. "It can rain blood later."

"Anything but snow would be an improvement in the weather," said Jaud. "I will be finding passage south, back to Catalia. Najit is the name of my village, and from its well comes the sweetest water in the world." He clasped his hands over his stomach, and smiled the way he always did when he mentioned the place. "I mean to drink from that well again."

"Perhaps I'll join you," said Sumael. "It won't be far out of my way."

"Your way where?" Yarvi asked. Though they had slept within reach of each other for months he

hardly knew a thing about her, and found he wanted to. She frowned at him, as if wondering whether to open a door so long kept bolted, then shrugged.

“The First of Cities, I expect. I grew up there. My father was a famous man, in his way. A shipwright to the empress. His brother still is ... perhaps. I hope. If he’s alive. A lot can change in the time I’ve been away.”

And she fell silent, and frowned into the flames, and so did Yarvi, worrying over what might have changed in Thorlby while he was gone.

“Well, I will not be turning down your company,” said Jaud. “Someone who actually knows where they are going can be a considerable help on a long journey. What about you, Ankran?”

“In Angulf’s Square in Thorlby there is a flesh-dealer’s shop.” Ankran growled the words at the fire, his bony face full of shadows. “The one where Shadikshirram bought me. From a man called Yoverfell.” He flinched when he said the name. The way Yarvi might have when he thought of Odem’s. “He has my wife. He has my son. I have to get them back.”

“How do you plan to do that?” asked Rulf.

“I will find a way.” Ankran made a fist, and thumped it harder and harder against his knee until it had to be painful. “*I must.*”

Yarvi blinked across the fire. When he first laid eyes on Ankran he had hated him. He had tricked him, watched him beaten, and stolen his place. Then he had accepted him, walked beside him, taken his charity. Come to trust him. Now he found what he had never thought to. That he admired him.

All Yarvi had done was for himself. His freedom, his vengeance, his chair. What Ankran had done was for his family.

“I could help,” he said.

Ankran looked up sharply. “You?”

“I have ... friends in Thorlby. Powerful friends.”

“This cook you were apprenticed to?” snorted Rulf.

“No.”

Yarvi was not sure why he chose that moment. Perhaps the closer he was bound to this band of misfits the heavier the lie sat on him. Perhaps some spot of pride had somehow survived and chose that moment to chafe. Perhaps he thought Ankran was putting the truth together anyway. Or perhaps he was just a fool.

“Laithlin,” he said. “Wife of the dead king, Uthrik.”

Jaud gave a smoking sigh, and settled down into his fur. Rulf did not bother even to chuckle. “And what are you to the Golden Queen of Gettland?”

Yarvi kept his voice level even though his heart was suddenly thumping. “Her younger son.”

And that gave them all some pause.

Yarvi the most, for it came to him then he could have stayed a cook’s boy, and gone anywhere. Traipsed after Rulf to say hello to his wife or followed Nothing to whatever madness his cracked mind settled on. Gone with Jaud to drink from that well in far Catalia, or on with Sumael to the wonders of the First of Cities. The two of them, together ...

But now there was nowhere to go but into the Black Chair. Except through the Last Door.

“My name isn’t Yorv, it’s Yarvi. And I am the rightful King of Gettland.”

There was a long silence. Even Nothing had forgotten his polishing and twisted about on his stone to stare with eyes fever-bright.

Ankran softly cleared his throat. "That would explain your shitty cooking."

"You're not joking, are you?" asked Sumael.

Yarvi returned her gaze, long and level. "Do you hear me laughing?"

"Then if I may ask, what was the King of Gettland doing lashed to an oar on a rotting trading galley?"

Yarvi pulled his fleece tight about his shoulders and looked into the fire, the flames taking on the shapes of things done and faces past. "Because of my hand ... or the lack of it, I was to give up my birthright and join the Ministry. But my father, Uthrik, was killed. Betrayed by Grom-gil-Gorm and his minister, Mother Scaer ... or so I was told. I led twenty-seven ships on a raid against them. My uncle Odem laid the plans." He found his voice was quivering. "Which included killing me and stealing my chair."

"Prince Yarvi," murmured Ankran. "Uthrik's younger son. He had a crippled hand." Yarvi held it up to the light and Ankran considered it, thoughtfully stroking the side of his crooked nose. "When we last passed through Thorlby there was talk of his death."

"The announcement was made a little early. I fell from a tower, and Mother Sea washed me into the arms of Grom-gil-Gorm. I pretended to be a cook's boy, and he put a collar on me and sold me to slavers in Vulsgard."

"And there Trigg and I bought you," mused Ankran, turning the story over for truth as a merchant might turn over a ring, trying to fathom how much gold was in the alloy. "Because you told me you could row."

Yarvi could only shrug as he pushed his crippled hand back inside the warmth of his fleece. "As you can see, not the biggest lie I've ever told."

Jaud puffed out his cheeks. "No doubt every man has his secrets, but that is larger than the average."

"And a good deal more dangerous," said Sumael, eyes narrowed. "Why break the silence?"

Yarvi thought about that for a moment. "You deserve to know the truth. And I deserve to tell it. And it deserves to be told."

More silence. Jaud rubbed more fat into his feet. Ankran and Sumael exchanged a lingering frown. Then Rulf pushed his tongue between his lips and made a loud farting sound. "Does anyone believe this rubbish?"

"I believe." Nothing stood, eyes black and huge, lifting his sword high. "And I now swear an oath!" He rammed the blade into the fire, sparks whirling and everyone shuffling back in surprise. "A sun-oath and a moon-oath. Let it be a chain about me and a goad within me. I will not rest until the rightful King of Gettland sits in the Black Chair once again!"

This silence was even longer, and no one was more stunned than Yarvi.

"Did you ever feel you were living in a dream?" muttered Rulf.

Jaud gave another of his sighs. "Often."

"A nightmare," said Sumael.

EARLY THE NEXT DAY they crested a ridge and were greeted by a sight straight out of a dream. Or perhaps a nightmare. Instead of white hills ahead they saw black, distant mountains ghostly in a haze of steam.

"The hot country," said Ankran.

“A place where the gods of fire and ice make war upon each other,” whispered Nothing.

“Looks pleasant enough,” said Yarvi, “for a battlefield.”

There was a stretch of verdant green between the white land and the black, vegetation shifting with the breeze, clouds of colored birds wheeling above, water glimmering in the thin sun.

“A strip of spring cut out from the winter,” said Sumael.

“I do not trust it,” said Nothing.

“What do you trust?” asked Yarvi.

Nothing held up his sword, and did not so much smile as show his broken teeth. “Only this.”

No one mentioned yesterday’s revelation as they trudged on. As though they did not know whether to believe him, or what to do if they decided they did, and so had settled on pretending it had never happened and treating him just as they had before.

That was well enough with Yarvi, in the end. He always had felt more like a cook’s boy than a king.

The snow grew thin under his ragged boots, then melted and worked its way into them, then left him slipping in mud, then was gone altogether. The ground was patched with moss, then covered with tall green grass, then speckled with wildflowers that even Yarvi did not know the names of. Finally they stepped onto a shingle bank beside a wide pool, steam rising from the milky water, a twisted tree spreading rustling orange leaves over their heads.

“I have spent the last few years, and the last few days in particular, wondering what I did to earn such a punishment,” said Jaud. “Now I wonder how I deserved such a reward.”

“Life ain’t about deservings,” said Rulf, “so much as snatching what can be got. Where’s that fishing rod?”

And the old raider began to pluck pale fish from that cloudy water as quickly as he could bait his hook. It had started to snow again but it would not settle on the warm ground, and dry wood was everywhere, so they set a fire and Ankran cooked a banquet of fish on a flat stone above it.

Afterward Yarvi lay back with his hands on his full belly and his battered feet soaking in warm water and wondered when he was last this happy. Not taking yet another shameful beating in the training square, that was sure. Not hiding from his father’s slaps or wilting under his mother’s glare, for certain. Not even beside Mother Gundring’s fire. He lifted his head to look at the faces of his mismatched oarmates. Who would be worse off if he never went back? Surely an oath unfulfilled was not the same as an oath broken...

“Perhaps we should just stay here,” he murmured.

Sumael had a mocking twist at the corner of her mouth. “Who’d lead the people of Gettland to a brighter tomorrow then?”

“I’ve a feeling they’d get by. I could be king of this pond, and you my minister.”

“Mother Sumael?”

“You always know the right path. You could find me the lesser evil and the greater good.”

She snorted. “Those aren’t on any map. I need to piss.” And Yarvi watched her stride off into the long grass.

“I’ve a feeling you like her,” murmured Ankran.

Yarvi’s head jerked toward him. “Well ... we all like her.”

“Of course,” said Jaud, grinning broadly. “We’d be lost without her. Literally.”

“But you,” Rulf grunted, eyes closed and hands clasped behind his head, “*like* her.”

Yarvi worked his mouth sourly, but found he could not deny it. "I have a crippled hand," he muttered. "The rest of me still works."

Ankran gave something close to a chuckle. "I've a feeling she likes you."

"Me? She's harder on me than anyone!"

"Exactly." Rulf was smiling too as he wriggled his shoulders contentedly into the ground. "Ah, I remember what it was, to be young ..."

"Yarvi?" Nothing was standing tall and stiff on a rock beside that spreading tree, showing no interest in who liked who and staring off the way they had come. "My eyes are old and yours are young. Is that smoke?"

Yarvi was almost glad of the distraction as he clambered up beside Nothing, squinting southward. But the gladness did not last long. It rarely did. "I can't tell," he said. "Maybe." Almost certainly. He could see faint smudges against the pale sky.

Sumael joined them, shading her eyes with one hand and giving no sign of liking anyone. Her jaw muscles tightened. "It's coming from Shidwala's steading."

"Maybe they've made a bonfire," said Rulf, but his smile was gone.

"Or Shadikshirram has," said Nothing.

A good minister hopes always for the best, but prepares always for the worst. "We need to get up high," said Yarvi. "See if anyone's following."

Nothing pursed his lips to gently blow a speck of dust from the bright blade of his sword. "You know she is."

And she was.

Squinting through the strange round window of Sumael's eyeglass from the rocky slope above the pool, Yarvi could see specks on the snow. Black specks moving, and the hope drained out of him like wine from a punctured skin. Where hope was concerned, he had long been a leaky vessel.

"I count two dozen," said Sumael. "Banyas, I think, and some of the sailors from the *South Wind*. They have dogs and they have sleds and more than likely are well armed."

"And intent on our destruction," muttered Yarvi.

"That or they're very, very keen to wish us well on our journey," said Rulf.

Yarvi lowered the eyeglass. It was hard to imagine they had been laughing just an hour before. His friends' faces were back in the drawn and worried shapes which had become so wearily familiar.

Apart from Nothing, of course, who looked precisely as mad as he always did.

"How far back are they?"

"My guess is sixteen miles," said Sumael.

Yarvi was used to counting her guesses as facts. "How long will it take them to cover that?"

Her lips moved silently as she worked through the sums. "Pushing hard with sleds, they might be here at first light tomorrow."

"Then we'd better not be," said Ankran.

"No." Yarvi looked away from his placid little kingdom, up the hill of bare scree and shattered rock above. "In the hot land their sleds will be no help."

Nothing frowned into the white sky, scratching at his neck with the backs of his filthy fingernails. "Sooner or later, steel must be the answer. It always is."

"Later, then," said Yarvi, hefting his pack. "Now, we run."

They ran.

Or they jogged. Or they waddled, and stumbled, and shuffled over a hellish landscape of blasted stone where not a plant grew or a bird flew, Father Earth tortured into a hot waste as empty of life as the cold had been.

“The winds of fate have blown me to some glamorous places of late,” mused Ankran as they crested a ridge and stared out at another vista of smoking rock.

“Are they still following?” asked Jaud.

“Hard to see men in this broken country.” Sumael peered through her eyeglass to scan the desolation behind them, which was misted with stinking steam. “Especially ones who’d rather not be seen.”

“Perhaps they’ve turned back.” Yarvi sent up a prayer to He Who Turns the Dice for a little rare luck. “Perhaps Shadikshirram couldn’t convince the Banyas to follow us.”

Sumael wiped grimy sweat across her face. “Who wouldn’t want to come here?”

“You do not know Shadikshirram,” said Nothing. “She can be most persuasive. A great leader.”

“I saw scant sign of it,” said Rulf.

“You were not at Fulku, when she led the fleet of the empress to victory.”

“But you were, I suppose?”

“I fought on the other side,” said Nothing. “I was champion to the King of the Alyuks.”

Jaud’s forehead wrinkled with disbelief. “You were a king’s champion?” Looking at him it was hard to imagine, but Yarvi had watched great warriors in the training square, and never seen the like of Nothing’s blade-work.

“Our flagship was aflame.” The old man’s knuckles were white about his sword’s grip as he remembered. “Roped by a dozen galleys, slick with the blood of the fallen, crawling with the soldiers of the empress when Shadikshirram and I first fought. I was tired from battle and sore with wounds and unused to the shifting deck. She played the helpless woman, and in my pride I believed her and she made me bleed. So I came to be her slave. The second time we fought I was weak from hunger, and she had steel in her hand and strong men at her back and I stood alone with only an eating knife. She made me bleed a second time, but in her pride she let me live.” His mouth twisted into that mad smile and made flecks of spit as he barked the words. “Now we shall meet a third time, and I have no pride to weigh me down, and the ground shall be of my choosing, and she shall bleed for me. Yes, Shadikshirram!”

He raised his sword high, cracked voice echoing from the bare rocks, bouncing about the valley. “The day is here! The time is now! The reckoning comes!”

“Could it come after I’m safely back in Thorlby?” asked Yarvi.

Sumael grimly tightened her belt a notch. “We have to move.”

“What have we been doing?”

“Dawdling.”

“What’s your plan?” asked Rulf.

“Kill you and leave your corpse as a peace offering?”

“Don’t think she’s come all this way for peace, do you?”

Sumael’s jaw muscles worked. “Sadly, no. My plan is to reach Vansterland ahead of them.” And she started down the slope, gravel trickling from every footstep.

The ordeal by steam was almost worse than the ordeal by ice had been. Though the snow was falling it grew hotter and hotter, and layer by layer they stripped off their jealously hoarded clothes until they were slogging along half-naked, sweat-soaked, dust-smearing as laborers emerging from a mine. Thirst took the place of hunger, Ankran rationing out the cloudy, foul-tasting water in their two bottles more stingily than ever he had the stores on the *South Wind*.

There had been fear before. Yarvi could not remember the last time he had been without it. But it had been the slow fear of cold and hunger and exhaustion. Now it was a crueler spur. The fear of sharpened steel, the sharp teeth of the Banyas’ dogs, the even sharper vengeance of their owner.

They struggled on until it was so dark Yarvi could scarcely see his withered hand before his face, Father Moon and all his stars lost in the gloom, and they crawled in silence into a hollow in the rocks. He fell into an ugly mockery of sleep and was shaken awake what felt like moments later, bruised and aching at the first gray glimmer of dawn, to struggle on again with the splinters of his nightmares still niggling at him.

To keep ahead was all they thought of. The world became no bigger than the stretch of bare rock between their heels and their pursuers, a space ever shrinking. For a while Rulf dragged a pair of sheepskins after them on ropes: an old poacher’s trick to put off the dogs. The dogs were not fooled. Soon enough they were all bruised, grazed, bloodied from a hundred slips and falls, but with only one good hand Yarvi did worse than the others. Yet each time he went down Ankran was there with a steadying hand, to help him up, to help him on.

“Thanks,” said Yarvi, once he had lost count of his falls.

“You’ll get your chance to repay me,” said Ankran. “In Thorlby, if not before.”

For a moment they scrambled on in awkward silence, then Yarvi said, “I’m sorry.”

“For falling?”

“For what I did on the *South Wind*. For telling Shadikshirram ...” He winced at the memory of the wine bottle cracking into Ankran’s head. The heel of the captain’s boot crunching into his face.

Ankran grimaced, tongue wedged into the hole in his front teeth. “What I hated most about that ship wasn’t what was done to me, but what I was made to do. No. What I chose to do.” He stopped for a moment, bringing Yarvi to a halt and looking him in the eye. “I used to think I was a good man.”

Yarvi put a hand on his shoulder. “I used to think you were a bastard. Now I’m starting to have some doubts.”

“You can weep over each other’s hidden nobility when we’re safe!” called Sumael, a black outline on a boulder above them, pointing off into the misty gray. “For now, we have to turn south. If we reach the river ahead of them we’ll need some way to cross. We won’t make a raft from stones and steam.”

“Will we make it to the river before we die of thirst?” asked Rulf, licking the last drops from one of the bottles and peering hopefully into it as though some might be stuck in there.

“Thirst.” Nothing barked out a chuckle. “It’s a Banya spear in your back you need to worry about.”

They slid down endless slopes of scree, hopped between boulders as big as houses, clambered down spills of black rock like waterfalls frozen. They crossed valleys where the ground was painful

to touch it was so hot, choking steam hissing from cracks like devils' mouths, skirting pools of bubbling water slick with many-colored oil. They toiled upward, sending stones clattering down dizzy drops, clinging with cut fingertips, Yarvi pawing at cracks with his useless hand, finally looking back from the heights ...

To see those black dots through Sumael's eyeglass still following, and always slightly closer than before.

"Do they never tire?" asked Jaud, wiping the sweat from his face. "Will they never stop?"

Nothing smiled. "They will stop when they are dead."

"Or we are," said Yarvi.

DOWNRIVER

They heard the river before they saw it, a whisper through the woods that put a little lost spring in Yarvi's ruined legs and a little lost hope in his aching heart. The whisper became a growl, then a surging roar as they finally burst from the trees, all filthy with sweat, dust, and ash. Rulf flung himself down the shingle onto his face and started lapping up water like a dog. The rest of them were not far behind him.

When the burning thirst of a day's hard scrambling was quenched, Yarvi sat back and stared across the river to the trees on the far side, so like the ones about them, yet so different.

"Vansterland," muttered Yarvi. "Thank the gods!"

"Thank 'em once we're across," said Rulf, clean mouth and patch of beard pale in his ash-streaked face. "That doesn't look like friendly water to this sailor."

Nor did it to Yarvi. His relief was already turning to dread as he took in the width of the Rangheld, the steep far bank perhaps twice a bowshot away, the river high with meltwater from the burning land at their backs. On the black surface patterns of frothing white showed swift currents and rippling eddies and hinted at hidden rocks, deadly as traitor's knives.

"Can you build a raft to cross this?" he muttered.

"My father was the foremost shipwright in the First of Cities," said Sumael, peering into the woods. "He could pick the best keel from a forest with one look."

"Doubt we'll have time for a carved figurehead," said Yarvi.

"Maybe we could mount you on the front," said Ankran.

"Six small trunks for the raft, then a larger one cut in half for crossbeams." Sumael hurried to a nearby fir, running her hand up the bark. "This will do for one. Jaud, you hold it, I'll chop."

"I'll keep watch for our old mistress and her friends." Rulf shrugged the bow from his shoulder and turned back the way they came. "How far back do we reckon 'em now?"

"Two hours if we're lucky, and we generally aren't." Sumael slid out her hatchet. "Yarvi, find the rope, then look for some wood that might make a paddle. Nothing, when we've felled the trunks, you trim the branches."

Nothing hugged his sword tight. "This is no saw. I will need the blade keen when Shadikshirram comes."

"We hope to be long gone by then," said Yarvi, too much water sloshing in his aching belly as he rooted through the packs.

Ankran held out his hand. "If you won't use it give me the sword—"

Faster than seemed possible the immaculate point was grazing Ankran's stubbled throat. "Try to take it and I will give it to you point first, storekeeper," murmured Nothing.

"Time presses," hissed Sumael through her gritted teeth, sending splinters flying from the base of her chosen tree with short, quick blows. "Use your sword or snap them off in your arse, but trim the bloody branches. And leave some long so we have something to hold on to."

Soon Yarvi's right hand was cut and dirty from dragging lengths of timber, his left wrist, which he hooked underneath them, riddled with splinters. Nothing's sword was slathered in sap, Jaud's fuzzy

growth of hair was full of wood dust, Sumael's right palm was bloody from wielding the hatchet and still she chopped, chopped, chopped.

They sweated and strained, snapping at one another through bared teeth, not knowing when the Banyas' dogs would be snapping at them instead, but knowing it could not be long.

Jaud heaved up the trunks with a grunting effort, veins bulging from his thick neck, and nimble as a dressmaker sewing a hem Sumael weaved the rope in and out while Nothing hauled out the slack. Yarvi stood and watched, startling at every sound and, not for the first or the last time, wishing he had two good hands.

Considering the tools they had and the time they didn't, their raft was a noble effort. Considering the surging torrent they would have to navigate, it was a terrifying one—hacked and splintered timbers bound with a hairy tangle of wool rope, their moose-shoulder shovel as one paddle, Jaud's shield as another, and a vaguely spoon-shaped branch Yarvi had found as a third.

With arms folded about his sword, Nothing gave voice to Yarvi's thoughts. "I do not care for the look of this raft and this river together."

The fibers in Sumael's neck stood out starkly as she dragged at the knots one more time. "All it has to do is float."

"No doubt it will, but will we still be on it?"

"That depends on how well you hold on."

"And what will you say when it breaks up and floats out to sea in pieces?"

"I imagine I'll be forever silent by then, but with the satisfaction of knowing as I drown that you were killed first by Shadikshirram, here, on this forsaken bank." Sumael raised one brow at him. "Or are you coming with us?"

Nothing frowned at them, then off into the trees, weighing his sword in one hand, then he cursed and threw his weight in between Jaud and Yarvi. The raft began to grind slowly toward the water, their boots sliding in the shingle. Yarvi slipped into the mud in panic as someone came springing from the bushes.

Ankran, his eyes wild. "They're coming!"

"Where's Rulf?" asked Yarvi.

"Just behind me! This is it?"

"No, this is a joke," hissed Sumael. "I have a war galley of ninety oars hidden behind that tree."

"Only asking."

"Stop asking and help us launch the bastard!"

Ankran flung his weight to the raft and with all of them pushing it slithered down the bank into the river. Sumael dragged herself on, her kicking foot catching Yarvi in the jaw and making him bite his tongue. He was up to his waist in water, thought he heard shouting behind him in the trees. Nothing was on now: he seized the wrist of Yarvi's useless hand and hauled him up, one of the torn branches gouging his chest. Ankran snatched their packs from the beach and started to fling them onto the raft.

"Gods!" Rulf burst from the trees, cheeks puffing with every huge breath. Yarvi could see shadows in the woods beyond him, could hear wild calls in a language he did not know. Then the barking of dogs.

"Run, you old fool!" he screeched. Rulf charged down the shingle and sloshed out into the water and between them Yarvi and Ankran hauled him aboard while Jaud and Nothing began to paddle like madmen.

The only effect was that they began to slowly spin.

“Keep us straight!” snapped Sumael as the raft picked up speed.

“I’m trying!” growled Jaud, digging away with his shield and showering them all with water.

“Try harder! Do you know any decent oarsmen?”

“Do you have any decent oars?”

“Shut your mouth and paddle!” snarled Yarvi, water washing across the raft and soaking his knees.

Dogs spilled from the forest—huge dogs, the size of sheep they seemed, all snarling teeth and drool, bounding up and down the shingle, barking.

Then men came. Yarvi could not have said how many in that snatched glance over his shoulder.

Ragged shapes among the trees, kneeling on the bank, the curve of a bow.

“Get down!” roared Jaud, clambering to the back of the raft and huddling behind his shield.

Yarvi heard the bowstrings, saw the black splinters drifting up. He crouched, fascinated, his eyes fixed on them. They seemed to take an age to fall, each with a gentle whisper. One plopped in the water a couple of strides away. Then there were two quiet clicks as arrows stuck into Jaud’s shield. A fourth lodged shuddering in the raft beside Yarvi’s knee. A hand’s width to one side and it would have been through his thigh. He blinked at it, mouth open.

There the difference between one side of the Last Door and the other.

He felt Nothing’s hand at the scruff of his neck, forcing him to the edge of the raft. “Paddle!”

More men were spilling from the trees. There might have been a score of them. There might have been more.

“Thanks for the arrows!” Rulf bellowed at the bank.

One of the archers let fly another but they were moving out into swifter water now and his arrow fell well short. A figure stood with hands on hips, looking after them. A tall figure, with a curved sword, and Yarvi caught a glimpse of gleaming crystal on a dangling belt.

“Shadikshirram,” murmured Nothing. He had been right. She had been tracking them all along. And though Yarvi did not hear her make a sound, could not even see her face over that distance, he knew then she would not stop.

Not ever.

ONLY A DEVIL

They might have escaped a fight with Shadikshirram, but soon enough the river was giving them more fight than even Nothing could have hoped for.

It showered them with cold water, soaked them and all their gear right through, made the raft buck and twist like an unbroken horse. Rocks battered at them, overhanging trees clutched at them, caught Ankran's hood and might have plucked him from the raft had Yarvi not been clinging to his shoulder.

The banks grew steeper, higher, narrowed, until they were hurtling down a rocky gorge between broken cliffs, water spurting up through the gaps between the logs, their raft spinning like a leaf in spite of Jaud's effort to use his arrow-stuck shield as a rudder. The river soaked the ropes and tore at the knots and began to work them loose, the raft flexing with the current, threatening to rip apart altogether.

Yarvi could not hear Sumael's screamed orders over the thunder of the river, and he gave up all pretense of influencing the outcome, closed his eyes and clung on for his life, good hand and bad hand burning with the clenched effort, one moment cursing the gods for putting him on this raft, the next begging them to get him off it with his life. There was a wrench, a drop, the raft tipped under Yarvi's knees, and he squeezed his eyes shut, waiting for the end.

But suddenly the waters were calm.

He pried one eye open. They all were huddled in the middle of the flopping, foundering raft, clinging to the branches, clinging to one another, shivering and bedraggled, water lapping at their knees as they ever so gently spun.

Sumael stared at Yarvi, hair plastered to her face, gulping for air.

"Shit."

Yarvi could only nod. Unclenching the fingers of his good hand from their branch was an aching effort.

"We're alive," croaked Rulf. "Are we alive?"

"If I'd known," muttered Ankran, "what this river would be like ... I would've taken my chances ... with the dogs."

Daring to look past the ring of haggard faces, Yarvi saw the river had widened and slowed. It grew much broader still ahead, smooth water with barely a ripple, trees on wooded slopes reflected in the mirror surface.

And off on their right, flat and inviting, lay a wide beach scattered with rotting driftwood.

"Get paddling," said Sumael.

One by one they slid from their disintegrating raft, hauled it between them as far onto the beach as they could, dragged off their sodden gear, tottered a few steps and without a word flopped on the shingle among the rest of the flotsam, no strength left even to celebrate their escape, unless lying still and breathing counted.

"Death waits for us all," said Nothing. "But she takes the lazy first." By some magic he was standing, frowning upriver for any sign of pursuit. "They will be following."

Rulf worked himself up onto his elbows. "Why the hell would they?"

“Because this is just a river. That some men call this side Vansterland will mean nothing to the Banyas. It will certainly mean nothing to Shadikshirram. They are as bound together now in their pursuit as we are in our escape. They will build their own rafts and follow, and the river will be too swift for them to land just as it was for us. Until they come here.” Nothing smiled. Yarvi was starting to get nervous when Nothing smiled. “And they will come ashore, tired and wet and foolish, just as we have, and we will fall upon them.”

“Fall upon them?” said Yarvi.

“We six?” asked Ankran.

“Against their twenty?” muttered Jaud.

“With a one-handed boy, a woman and a storekeeper among us?” said Rulf.

“Exactly!” Nothing smiled wider. “You think just as I do!”

Rulf propped himself on his elbows. “There is no one, ever, who’s thought as you do.”

“You are afraid.”

The old raider’s ribs shook with chuckles. “With you on my side? You’re damn right I am.”

“You told me Throvenlanders had fire.”

“You told me Gettlanders had discipline.”

“For pity’s sake, anything but that!” snarled Yarvi as he stood. It was not a hot and mindless anger that came upon him, as his father’s rages had been, or his brother’s. It was his mother’s anger, calculating and patient, cold as winter, and for the time being it left no room for fear.

“If we have to fight,” he said, “we’ll need better ground than this.”

“And where will we find this field of glory, my king?” asked Sumael, with her notched lip curled.

Yarvi blinked into the trees. Where indeed?

“There?” Ankran was pointing up toward a rocky bluff above the river. It was hard to say with the sky bright behind but, squinting toward it, Yarvi thought there might be ruins at the summit.

“WHAT WAS THIS PLACE?” asked Jaud, easing through the archway, and at the sound of his voice birds clattered from perches high in the broken walls and away.

“It’s an elf-ruin,” said Yarvi.

“Gods,” muttered Rulf, making a sign against evil, and badly.

“Don’t worry.” Sumael kicked heedlessly through a heap of rotten leaves. “I doubt there’ll be any elves here now.”

“Not for thousands upon thousands of years.” Yarvi ran his hand over one of the walls. Not made from mortared stone but smooth, and hard, without joint or edge as though it had been molded more than built. From its crumbling top rods of rusted metal sprouted, unruly as an idiot’s hair. “Not since the Breaking of God.”

There had been a great hall here, with pillars proudly marching down both sides and archways to rooms on the right and left. But the pillars had toppled long ago, and the walls were thickly webbed with dead creeper. Part of the far wall had vanished entirely, claimed by the hungry river far below. The roof had fallen centuries since and above them was only the white sky and a shattered tower wreathed in ivy.

“I like it,” said Nothing, striding across the rubble-strewn ground, thick with dead leaves, rot and bird-droppings.

“You were all for staying on the beach,” said Rulf.

“I was, but this is a stronger place.”

“I’d like it better with a good gate.”

“A gate only postpones the inevitable.” Nothing made a ring with filthy thumb and forefinger and peered with one bright eye through it toward the empty archway. “That invitation will be their undoing. They will be funneled through, without room to make their numbers count. Here we have a chance of winning!”

“So your last plan was certain death?” said Yarvi.

Nothing grinned. “Death is life’s only certainty.”

“You surely know how to build morale,” muttered Sumael.

“We are outnumbered four to one and most of us are no fighters!” Ankran’s bulging eyes had a desperate look. “I can’t afford to die here! My family are—”

“Have more faith, storekeeper!” Nothing hooked one arm about Ankran’s neck and one about Yarvi’s and dragged them close with shocking strength. “If not in yourself, then in the rest of us. We are your family now!”

It was even less reassuring, if anything, than it had been when Shadikshirram told them as much aboard the *South Wind*. Ankran stared at Yarvi and all Yarvi could do was stare back.

“And anyway, there is no way out now, and that is good. People fight hardest when they have no way out.” Nothing gave them a parting squeeze then hopped up onto the base of a broken pillar, pointing toward the entrance with his naked sword. “Here I shall stand, and take the brunt of their attack. Their dogs at least cannot have made the river journey. Rulf, you will climb that tower with your bow.”

Rulf peered up at the crumbling tower, then around the others, and finally blew his gray-bearded cheeks out with a heavy sigh. “I daresay it’s sad to think of a poet’s death, but I’m a fighting man, and in that trade you’re bound to go sooner or later.”

Nothing laughed, a strange and jagged sound. “I daresay we’ve both lasted longer than we deserve! Together we braved the snow and the hunger, the steam and the thirst, together we will stand. Here! Now!”

It was hard to believe this man, standing straight and tall with steel in hand, wild hair pushed back and eyes burning bright, could be the pitiful beggar Yarvi had stepped over on his way onto the *South Wind*. He seemed a king’s champion indeed now, with an air of command none questioned, an air of mad confidence that gave even Yarvi some courage.

“Jaud, take your shield,” said Nothing. “Sumael your hatchet, and guard our left. That is our weaker side. Let none get around me. Keep them where I and my sword may look them in the eyes. Ankran, you and Yarvi will guard our right. That shovel will do as a club: anything can kill if you swing it hard enough. Give Yarvi the knife since he has just one hand to hold it. One hand, perhaps, but the blood of kings in his veins!”

“It’s keeping it there that worries me,” said Yarvi under his breath.

“You and I, then.” Ankran offered out the knife. A makeshift thing without so much as a crosspiece, wooden handle wrapped with leather cord and the blade greened down the back but the edge keen enough.

“You and I,” said Yarvi, taking it from him and gripping it tight. He would never have believed when he first looked on the storekeeper in the stinking slave-pits of Vulsgard that he might one day stand as his shoulder-man, but he found in spite of his fear he was proud to do it.

“With a good bloody ending this journey will make a fine song, I think.” Nothing held his free arm out, fingers spread, toward the archway through which Shadikshirram and her Banyas would no doubt soon be spilling, fixed on murder. “A band of brave companions escorting the rightful king of Gettland to his stolen chair! A last stand amid the elf-ruins of yore! You cannot expect all the heroes to survive a good song, you know.”

“He’s a damn devil,” murmured Sumael, jaw muscles clenching and unclenching as she weighed her hatchet in her hand.

“When you’re in hell,” murmured Yarvi, “only a devil can point the way out.”

THE LAST STAND

Rulf's voice split the quiet. "They're coming!" And it felt as if Yarvi's guts would drop out of his arse.

"How many?" called Nothing eagerly.

A pause. "Might be twenty!"

"Gods," whispered Ankran, chewing at his lip.

Until that moment there had been the hope that some might have turned back or drowned in the river but, as with so many of Yarvi's hopes, it had withered before bearing fruit.

"The greater their numbers, the greater our glory!" shouted Nothing. The blacker their plight the happier he grew. At that moment there seemed a lot to be said for inglorious survival, but the choice was made now, if there had ever been a choice.

No more running, no more tricks.

Yarvi might have mouthed a dozen prayers over the last few moments, to every god, tall or small, that might be the slightest help. But now he closed his eyes and sent up one more. Perhaps he had been touched by Father Peace, but this one he sent to Mother War alone. To guard his friends, his oarmates, his family. For each in their own way had proved themselves worth saving.

That, and to bring his enemies a red day. For Mother War likes a prayer with blood in it, that's no secret.

"Fight or die," murmured Ankran, and he offered out his hand and Yarvi gave his own, useless though it was. They looked into each other's faces, he and this man that he had hated, plotted against, seen beaten, then struggled through the wastes beside and come to understand.

"If I don't get glory but ... the other thing," said Ankran, "would you find a way to help my family?"

Yarvi nodded. "I swear it." What difference if he failed to keep a second oath, after all? He could only be damned once. "If I get the other thing ..." Asking Ankran to kill his uncle seemed too high an expectation. He shrugged. "Weep me a river?"

Ankran grinned. A shaky grin with the front teeth missing, but he managed it still, and it seemed at that moment high heroism to marvel at. "Mother Sea will rise with my tears."

The long silence stretched out, split into aching moments by the pounding of Yarvi's heart.

"What if we both die?" he whispered.

Nothing's grating voice came before the answer. "Ebdel Aric Shadikshirram! Welcome to my parlor!"

"Like you, it's a little past its best." Her voice.

Yarvi pressed himself to a crack in the wall, eyes straining toward the archway.

"We all are less than we used to be," called Nothing. "You were an admiral once. Then a captain. And now—"

"Now I am nothing, just like you." Yarvi saw her, in the shadows of the archway, eyes gleaming as she peered in. Trying to make out what was inside, and who. "An empty jug. A broken vessel with all the hopes leaked out." He knew she couldn't see him, but even so he shrank away behind the

crumbling elf-stone.

"I sympathize," called Nothing. "It hurts to lose everything. Who knows better than I?"

"And what do you think the sympathy of nothing for nothing is worth?"

Nothing laughed. "Nothing."

"Who's with you in there? That lying little bitch who used to cap my mastheads? That sneaking maggot with the turnip for a hand?"

"I have a higher opinion of them than you, but no. They went on ahead. I am alone."

Shadikshirram barked a laugh at that, and as she leaned forward into the archway Yarvi saw the glimmer of drawn steel. "No, you're not. But you soon will be." He peered up toward the tower, saw the curve of Rulf's bow, the string full drawn. But Shadikshirram was too canny to offer him a shot. "I am too merciful! That has always been my fault. I should have killed you years ago."

"You can try today. Twice we have met before in battle, but this time I—"

"Tell it to my dogs." And Shadikshirram gave a shrill whistle.

Men spilled through the archway. Or things that looked like men. The Banyas. Wild and ragged shadows, glimpses of white faces gaping, studs of amber and bone and bared teeth shining, weapons of polished rock and walrus tooth and whale jaw. They screeched and gibbered, whooped and wailed, mad sounds, like beasts, like devils, as if that archway was a gate to hell and what lay beyond was vomiting into the world.

The foremost dropped gurgling with one of Rulf's arrows in his chest but the others plunged into the ruin and Yarvi stumbled from the crack as though slapped. The urge to run was almost more than he could stand, but he felt Ankran's hand on his shoulder then, and stood, shaking like a leaf, every breath a wheezing whimper.

But he stood.

The screaming started. Crashes, the sounds of steel, of rage, of pain, almost worse for not being able to see who made them, or why. He heard the shrieking of the Banyas, but more horrible still was Nothing's voice. A bubbling moan, a whispering sigh, a jagged growl. The rattle of final breath.

Or could it be laughter?

"Do we help?" whispered Yarvi, though he doubted he could move his rooted feet.

"He said wait." Ankran's crooked face was chalk-white. "Should we wait?"

Yarvi turned to look at him, and over his shoulder saw a figure drop from the wall.

He was more boy than man, hardly older than Yarvi. One of the sailors from the *South Wind*. Yarvi had seen him laughing on the rigging, but had never known his name. It seemed a little late for introductions now.

"There," he croaked, and Ankran turned just as another man dropped down. Another of the sailors, bigger, bearded, and he held a mace in his hand, its heavy head spiked with steel. Yarvi felt his eyes drawn to the awful weight of that weapon, wondering what it might do to his skull, swung in anger. The man smiled as though guessing his thoughts, then leaped at Ankran, the two of them going down and rolling in a snarling tangle.

Yarvi knew he had a debt to pay, knew he should plunge to help his friend, his shoulder-man, but instead he turned to face the lad, as if they were couples pairing off at a harvest dance, somehow sensing who was their proper partner.

Like dancers they circled, knives held out before them, prodding at the air as if testing for the right bit of it. They circled, circled, the snarling and snapping of Ankran and the bearded man ignored,

their struggle for life and death dismissed in the pressing need to survive the next few moments. Beyond the dirt and the bared teeth, he looked scared, this lad. Almost as scared as Yarvi felt. They circled, circled, eyes flickering between the glinting knife and—

The lad darted forward, stabbing, and Yarvi stumbled back, caught his heel on a root and only just kept his balance. The boy came at him again but Yarvi slipped away, cut at nothing and made the lad totter against the wall.

Could it really be one of them had to kill the other? To end everything he was, everything he might ever be?

So it seemed. But it was hard to see the glory in it.

The boy lunged again and Yarvi saw the knife flash through a shaft of daylight. By some dim instinct of the training square he caught it on his own, gasping, blades scraping. The lad crashed into him with a shoulder and Yarvi fell against the wall.

They spat and snarled in each other's faces, close enough that Yarvi could see the black pores on the lad's nose, the red veins in the whites of his bulging eyes, close enough that Yarvi could have stuck his tongue out and licked him.

They strained, grunting, trembling, and Yarvi knew he was the weaker. He tried to push his finger into the lad's face but his crooked wrist was caught, twisted away. The blades scraped again and Yarvi felt a burning cut on the back of his hand, felt the point of the knife brush his stomach, cold through his clothes.

"No," he whispered. "Please."

Then something scratched Yarvi's cheek and the pressure was gone. The lad tottered back, lifting a trembling hand to his throat, and Yarvi saw an arrow there, its dripping head toward him, a line of blood running down the lad's neck into his collar. His face was going pink, cheeks quivering as he dropped to his knees.

Through a notch in the crumbling elf-wall behind him Yarvi saw Rulf squatting on top of the tower, knocking another arrow to his bow. The lad's face was turning purple and he gulped and clucked—cursing Yarvi, or begging him for help, or asking the gods for mercy, but all he could say was blood.

"I'm sorry," whispered Yarvi.

"You will be."

Shadikshirram stood a few strides away in a fallen archway.

"I thought you were a clever boy," she said. "But you turn out something of a disappointment."

Her finery was crusted with mud, and her hair fell across her face in a filthy tangle, the pins lost, one fever-bright eye showing in its sunken socket. But the long, curved blade of her sword was deadly clean.

"Only the latest in a lengthy string of them." She kicked the dying lad onto his back and stepped over his jerking legs. Strutted, strolled, without fuss or hurry. Just as she had used to walk on the deck of the *South Wind*. "But I suppose I have brought it on myself."

Yarvi edged back, crouching, breathing hard, eyes darting between the ruined walls for some way out, but there was none.

He would have to fight her.

"I have too soft a heart for this hard world of ours." She glanced sideways, toward the notch Rulf's arrow had come through, then ducked smoothly under it. "That has always been my one weakness."

Yarvi scrambled back through the rubble, the grip of the knife sweaty in his palm. He could hear

screams, the sounds of fighting. The others, more than busy with their own final bloody steps through the Last Door. He snatched a glance over his shoulder, saw the place where the broken elf-walls ended at the brink, sapling trees spreading their branches into empty air above the river.

“I cannot tell you how it pleases me to have the chance to say goodbye.” Shadikshirram smiled. “Goodbye.”

No doubt she was far better armed than him. And taller, stronger, more skillful, more experienced. Not to mention her considerable advantage in number of hands. And in spite of her protestations he did not think she would be too weighed down by softness of heart.

There is always a way, his mother used to say, but where would he find a way to beat Shadikshirram? He, who in a hundred shameful showings in the training square had never won a match?

She raised her brows, as though she had been working at the same sum and happened upon the same answer. “Perhaps you should just jump.”

She took another step, slowly herding him backward, the point of her sword glinting as it passed through a chink of sunlight. He was running out of ground, could sense the space opening behind him, could feel the high breeze on the back of his neck, could hear the angry river chewing at the rocks far below.

“Jump, cripple.”

He edged back again and heard stones clattering into the void, the verge dissolving at his heels.

“Jump!” screamed Shadikshirram, spit flecking from her teeth.

And Yarvi caught movement at the corner of his eye. Ankran’s pale face sliding around the crumbling wall, creeping up with his tongue pressed into the gap in his bared teeth and his club raised. Yarvi couldn’t stop his eyes flickering across.

Shadikshirram’s forehead creased.

She spun quick as a cat, twisted away from the moose-bone shovel so that it whistled past her shoulder and without much effort, without much sound, slid her sword straight through Ankran’s chest.

He gave a shuddering breath, eyes bulging.

Shadikshirram cursed, pulling back her sword arm.

Mercy is weakness, Yarvi’s father used to say. Mercy is failure.

In an instant he was on her. He drove his claw of a hand under her armpit, pinned her sword, his knobbly palm pushing up into her throat, and with his right fist he hit her, punched her, dug at her.

They drooled and spat and snorted, whimpering, squealing, lurching, her hair in his mouth. She twisted and growled and he clung to her, punching, punching. She tore free and her elbow caught him in the nose with a sick crunch, snapped his head up and the ground hit him in the back.

Calls far away. The echo of steel.

A distant battle. Something important.

Had to stand. Could not let his mother down.

Had to be a man. His uncle would be waiting.

He tried to shake the dizziness away, the sky flashed as he rolled over.

His arm flopped out into space, black river far below, white water on rocks.

Like the sea beneath the tower of Amwend. The sea he had plunged into.

Breath whooped in as he came back to himself. He scrabbled from the crumbling brink, head spinning, face throbbing, heels clumsy, mouth salty with blood.

He saw Ankran, twisted on his back, arms wide. Yarvi gave a whimper, scrambling toward him, reaching out. But his trembling fingertips stopped short of Ankran's blood-soaked shirt. The Last Door had opened for him. He was past help.

Shadikshirram lay on the rubble beside his body, trying to sit up and looking greatly surprised that she could not. The fingers of her left hand were tangled with the grip of her sword. Her right was clasped against her side. She peeled it away and her palm was full of blood. Yarvi blinked down at his own right hand. The knife was still in it, the blade slick, his fingers, his wrist, his arm red to the elbow.

"No," she snarled. She tried to lift the sword but the weight of it was too much.

"Not like this. Not here." Her bloody lips twisted as she looked up at him. "Not you."

"Here," said Yarvi. "Me. What was it you said? You may need two hands to fight someone. But only one to stab them in the back."

And he realized then that he had not lost all those times in the training square because he lacked the skill, or the strength, or even a hand. He had lacked the will. And somewhere on the *South Wind*, somewhere in the trackless ice, somewhere in this ancient ruin, he had found it.

"But I commanded the ships of the empress," Shadikshirram croaked, her whole right side dark with blood. "I was a favored lover ... of Duke Mikedas. The world was at my feet."

"That was long ago."

"You're right. You're a clever boy. I am too soft." Her head dropped back and she stared at the sky. "That's ... my one ..."

The hall of the elf-ruin was scattered with bodies.

The Banyas had been devils from a distance. Close up they were wretched. Small and scrawny as children, bundles of rags, decked with whalebone holy signs that had been no shield against Nothing's pitiless steel.

One that still breathed reached toward Yarvi, his other hand clutching at an arrow lodged in his ribs. His eyes held no hate, only doubt, and fear, and pain. Just as Ankran's had done when Shadikshirram killed him.

Only people, then, who Death ushered through the Last Door like any others.

He tried to make a word as Nothing walked up to him. The same word, over and over, shaking his head.

Nothing put a finger to his lips. "Shhhh." And he stabbed the Banya through the heart.

"Victory!" roared Rulf as he leapt the last distance to the ground. "I never saw sword work like it!"

"Nor I such archery!" said Nothing, folding Rulf in a crushing embrace. The closest of friends now, united in slaughter.

Sumael stood in an archway, gripping one shoulder, blood streaking her arm to the fingertips. "Where's Ankran?" she asked.

Yarvi shook his head. He didn't dare speak in case he was sick. Or started crying. Or maybe both at once. With the pain and the fading fury. With relief that he was alive. With sorrow that his friend was not. Sorrow that weighed heavier with every moment.

Jaud sank down onto a fallen lump of elf-stone, and let the scarred shield drop from his arm, and Sumael put one bloody hand on his shaking shoulder.

"I freely acknowledge now that Gettlanders are the best!" frothed Rulf.

"Just as I begin to doubt it!" Nothing frowned. "I was expecting Shadikshirram."

Yarvi looked down at her curved sword in his hand, as if for evidence. "I killed her."

Perhaps he should have fallen to his knees and given thanks to the gods for their unlikely victory, but the red harvest sword-hacked and arrow-stuck about that ruin did not look like a thing to give thanks for.

So he sat down beside the others, and picked the crusted blood from under his broken nose.

He was the King of Gettland, after all, was he not?

He had knelt enough.

BURNING THE DEAD

The dead burned.

The flames that wreathed them made strange shadows flow across the walls of the elf-ruin. They sent a roiling of smoke into the pinking sky, the proper thing to thank Mother War for their victory. So Nothing said, and few were on such friendly terms with her as he. If Yarvi squinted hard enough he fancied he could still see the bones in the fire, of the nine dead Banyas and the three dead sailors, of Ankran and Shadikshirram.

“I will miss him,” said Yarvi, struggling to hold back his tears.

“We all will,” said Jaud, wiping his on the heel of his hand.

Nothing let his spill freely down his scarred cheeks as he nodded at the flames. “I will miss her.”

Rulf snorted. “I bloody won’t.”

“Then you are more a fool than I first took you for. The gods give no finer gift than a good enemy. Like a good whetstone on the blade,” and Nothing frowned down at his sword, clean of blood though his fingernails were still crusted with it, and gave the steel another shrieking lick with his stone. “A good enemy keeps you ever sharp.”

“I’m happier blunt,” grunted Jaud.

“Pick your enemies more carefully than your friends,” Nothing was muttering at the flames. “They will be with you longer.”

“Don’t worry.” Rulf clapped Nothing on the shoulder. “If life has taught me one thing it’s that your next enemy is never far away.”

“You can always make enemies of your friends,” said Sumael, pulling Shadikshirram’s coat tight about her shoulders. “Making friends of your enemies is harder labor.”

Yarvi knew that to be true enough. “Do you think this is what Ankran would have wanted?” he muttered.

“To be dead?” said Jaud. “I doubt it.”

“To be burned,” said Yarvi.

Jaud glanced over at Nothing, and shrugged. “Once the men of violence get a notion it is hard to put them off. Especially when they still have the smell of blood in their noses.”

“And why make the attempt?” Sumael scratched again at the dirty bandages Yarvi had bound around her cut arm. “These are the dead. Their complaints are easily brushed aside.”

“You fought well, Yarvi,” called Nothing. “Like a king indeed.”

“Does a king let his friends die for him?” Yarvi glanced guiltily across at Shadikshirram’s sword, and remembered the feeling, punching, punching, the red knife in his red hand, and shivered under his stolen cloak. “Does a king stab women in the back?”

The tears were still wet on Nothing’s wasted face. “A good one sacrifices everything to win, and stabs whom he must however he can. The great warrior is the one who still breathes when the crows feast. The great king is the one who watches the carcasses of his enemies burn. Let Father Peace spill tears over the methods. Mother War smiles upon results.”

“That’s what my uncle would have said.”

“A wise man, then, and a worthy enemy. Perhaps you will stab him in the back and we can watch him burn together.”

Yarvi rubbed gently at the swollen bridge of his nose. The thought of more corpses on fire gave him scant comfort, no matter who they belonged to. Over and over the moment went through his mind, his eyes flicking to Ankran, giving him away, Shadikshirram spinning, the blade darting out. Over and over he sorted through the things he might have done differently, the things that might have left his friend alive, but he knew it was all wasted effort.

There was no going back.

Sumael turned, frowning into the night. “Did anyone hear—”

“Hold!” echoed a voice from the darkness, harsh as a whip crack. Yarvi twisted about, heart leaping, and saw a tall warrior step through the archway. Huge, he seemed, in the light of the corpse-fire, bright helm and mail, strong sword and shield all gleaming.

“Give up your weapons!” came another call and a second man slipped from the shadows, a drawn bow leveled, long braids hanging about his face. A Vansterman, then. Others came after, and more, and within a breath or two a dozen warriors had formed a crescent about them.

Yarvi had not thought his spirits could drop further. Now he discovered the scale of his error.

Rulf’s eyes drifted to his bow, well out of reach, and he slumped back on one elbow. “Where do Vanstermen come on your list of the most worthy?”

Nothing nodded at them appraisingly. “In these numbers, high enough.”

What strength the gods had given Yarvi he had more than used up that day. He poked Shadikshirram’s sword away with his toe. Jaud raised his empty hands. Sumael held up her hatchet between finger and thumb and tossed it into the shadows.

“What about you, old man?” asked the first of the Vanstermen.

“I am considering my position.” Nothing gave his sword another grating stroke with the stone. It might as well have been applied directly to Yarvi’s nerves.

“If steel is the answer they have a great deal of it,” he muttered.

“Put it down.” The second Vansterman full drew his bow. “Or we’ll burn your corpse with the rest.”

Nothing stabbed his sword point down into the earth, and sighed. “He makes a persuasive case.”

Three of the Vanstermen started forward to gather the weapons and search them for more while their captain watched. “What brings you five to Vansterland?”

“We are travelers ...” said Yarvi, as he watched one of the warriors shake out the sorry contents of his pack. “On our way to Vulsgard.”

The archer raised his brows at the pyre. “Travelers burning corpses?”

“What is the world coming to when an honest man cannot burn corpses without suspicion?” asked Nothing.

“We were waylaid by bandits,” ventured Yarvi, thinking as fast as he was able.

“You should keep your country safe to travel,” said Rulf.

“Oh, we thank you for making us safer.” The captain peered at Yarvi’s neck, then twitched Jaud’s collar back to show the scars. “Slaves.”

“Freed men,” said Sumael. “I was their mistress. I am a merchant.” And she reached into her coat to carefully produce a crumpled piece of parchment. “My name is Ebdel Aric Shadikshirram.”

The man frowned at the High King’s license, but recently removed from its rightful owner’s corpse.

“You are ragged for a merchant.”

“I didn’t say I was a good one.”

“And young,” said the captain.

“I didn’t say I was an old one.”

“Where is your ship?”

“At sea.”

“Why are you not aboard?”

“I thought it wise to leave before it touched the bottom.”

“A poor merchant indeed,” muttered one of the men.

“With a cargo of lies,” said another.

The captain shrugged. “The king can decide what to believe. Bind them.”

“King?” asked Yarvi, as he offered his wrists.

The man gave the thinnest of smiles. “Grom-gil-Gorm has come north to hunt.”

So it seemed that Rulf was right. The next enemy was closer than any of them had thought.

FLOATING TWIGS

Yarvi was no stranger to hard men. His father had been one. His brother another. Dozens more had taken their turn in the training square each day in Thorlby. There had been hundreds gathered on the sand to see King Uthrik howed. To sail with young King Yarvi on his ill-fated raid to Amwend. Faces that smiled only in battle and hands worn to the shape of their weapons.

But he had never seen such a gathering as Grom-gil-Gorm had brought with him to hunt.

“I never saw so many Vanstermen in one place,” muttered Rulf. “And I spent a year in Vulsgard.”

“An army,” grunted Nothing.

“And an ugly one,” said Jaud.

They bristled with weapons and puffed with menace, glared daggers and spoke swords. They wore their scars as proudly as a princess might her jewels while, by way of music, a woman’s voice shrill as a whetstone keened out a love song to Mother War, of spilled blood and notched steel and lives lost too soon.

Into the midst of this bear pit, roped and hobbled helpless, between fires over which fresh carcasses dripped red gravy, Yarvi and his friends were herded stumbling at spearpoint.

“If you have a plan,” hissed Sumael from the corner of her mouth, “now would be the time.”

“I have a plan,” said Nothing.

“Does it involve a sword?” asked Jaud.

A pause. “All my plans do.”

“Do you have a sword?”

Another. “No.”

“How will your plan work without one?” muttered Sumael.

A third. “Death waits for us all.”

Where this company of killers was tightest knotted Yarvi saw the outline of a great chair, and upon it a great figure with a great cup in his great fist, but instead of the fear that might once have gripped him Yarvi felt the ticklings of opportunity. Not a plan, scarcely even an idea but, as Mother Gundring used to tell him, *Drowning men must clutch at whatever twigs they find floating.*

“There are better things one can do with enemies than kill them,” he whispered.

Nothing snorted. “And what would that be?”

“Make allies of them.” And Yarvi took a deep breath and roared out, “Grom-gil-Gorm!” His voice smoked shrill and cracked and as far from kingly as could be imagined, but loud enough to be heard all about the camp, and that was what mattered. A hundred firelit faces turned toward him. “King of Vansterland! Bloodiest son of Mother War! Breaker of Swords and Maker of Orphans, we meet again! I—”

A well-judged blow in the stomach drove his breath out in a mournful sigh. “Stop your tongue before I rip it out, boy!” snarled the captain, shoving Yarvi coughing onto his knees.

But his words had their effect.

First a heavy silence settled, then an even heavier tread approached, and finally the singsong voice of Grom-gil-Gorm himself. “You bring guests!”

“Though they look like beggars.” And though he had not heard it since they put the collar on him, Yarvi knew the icy tone of Mother Scaer from his dreams.

“We found them in the elf-ruin above the river, my king,” said the captain.

“They do not have the look of elves,” said Gorm’s minister.

“They were burning corpses.”

“A noble enterprise if they are the right ones,” said Gorm. “You speak as though I know you, boy. Would you have me play a guessing game?”

Struggling for breath to speak, Yarvi raised his head, once again taking in the boots, the belt, the thrice-looped chain, and finally, far above, the craggy head of the King of Vansterland, most bitter enemy to his father, his country, his people.

“Last time we met ... you offered me your knife.” And Yarvi fixed Gorm with his eye. On his knees, ragged and bloodied, beaten and bound, but fixed him still. “You told me to seek you out if I changed my mind. Would you give it to me now?”

The King of Vansterland frowned, fingering that chain of dead men’s pommels about his trunk of a neck, and with the other hand pushed his many blades carefully into his belt. “That might not be prudent.”

“I thought Mother War breathed on you in your crib, and it had been foreseen no man could kill you?”

“The gods help those who help themselves.” Mother Scaer grabbed Yarvi’s jaw with bruising fingers and twisted his face into the light. “It is the cook’s boy caught at Amwend.”

“That it is,” murmured Gorm. “But he is changed. He has a stern eye upon him now.”

Mother Scaer narrowed her own eyes. “And you have lost the collar I gave you.”

“It chafed. I wasn’t born to be a slave.”

“And yet you kneel again before me,” said Gorm. “What were you born to be?”

His men spilled lickspittle laughs, but Yarvi had been laughed at all his life and it had lost its sting.

“The King of Gettland,” he said, and this time his voice was cold and hard as the Black Chair itself.

“Oh, gods,” he heard Sumael breathe. “We’re dead.”

Gorm gave a huge smile. “Odem! You are younger than I remember.”

“I am Odem’s nephew. Uthrik’s son.”

The captain cuffed Yarvi across the back of the head and knocked him on his broken nose. Which was particularly galling, since with hands bound he could do nothing to break his fall. “Uthrik’s son died with him!”

“He had another son, fool!” Yarvi wriggled back onto his knees, mouth salty with blood. A taste he was tiring of.

Fingers were twisted in Yarvi’s hair and he was dragged up. “Shall I hire him for a jester or hang him for a spy?”

“That is not your place to decide.” Mother Scaer merely raised one finger, elf-bangles on her long arm rattling, but the captain let go as if he had been slapped. “Uthrik did have a second son. Prince Yarvi. He was training for the Ministry.”

“But never took the test,” said Yarvi. “I took the Black Chair instead.”

“So that the Golden Queen might keep her grip on power.”

“Laithlin. My mother.”

Mother Scaer considered him for a long moment, and Yarvi raised his chin and stared back in as close to a kingly manner as his bleeding nose, bound hands and stinking rags would allow. Perhaps it was enough, at least to plant the seed of doubt.

“Free his hands.”

Yarvi felt his ropes cut and, with a suitable sense of theater, slowly held his left hand to the light. The muttering about the campfires at the sight of the twisted thing seemed for once most gratifying.

“Was this what you were looking for?” he asked.

Mother Scaer took it in hers, and turned it over, and kneaded at it with strong fingers. “If you were student to Mother Gundring, whose student was she?”

Yarvi did not hesitate. “She was taught by Mother Wexen, then minister to King Fynn of Throvenland, now Grandmother of the Ministry and first servant of the High King himself.”

“How many doves does she keep?”

“Three dozen, and one more with a black patch upon its brow that will carry news to Skekenhouse when Death opens the Last Door for her.”

“Of what wood is the door to the King of Gettland’s bedchamber?”

Yarvi smiled. “There is no door, for the king is one with the land and its people, and can have no secrets from them.”

The look of disbelief on Mother Scaer’s gaunt face was the source of much rare satisfaction for Yarvi.

Grom-gil-Gorm raised one crag of brow. “He spoke pure answers?”

“He did,” murmured his minister.

“Then ... this crippled pup is truly Yarvi, son of Uthrik and Laithlin, the rightful king of Gettland?”

“So it would appear.”

“It’s true?” croaked Rulf.

“It’s true,” breathed Sumael.

Gorm was busy laughing. “Then this has been my best hunting trip in many long years! Send a bird, Mother Scaer, and find out what King Odem will pay us for the return of his wayward nephew.” The King of Vansterland began to turn away.

Yarvi stopped him with a snort. “The great and terrible Grom-gil-Gorm! In Gettland they call you a madman, drunk on blood. In Throvenland they call you a savage king of a savage land. In Skekenhouse, in the elf-built halls of the High King ... why, there you hardly warrant mention.”

Yarvi heard Rulf give a worried grunt, the captain growling with suppressed fury, but Gorm only stroked thoughtfully at his beard. “If you aim to flatter me you miss the mark. Your point?”

“Would you prove them right, and make so small a profit from the golden chance the gods have sent you?”

The King of Vansterland raised a brow at his minister. “My ears are open to greater gains.”

Sell them what they want, Yarvi’s mother always said, *not what you have*. “Every spring you gather your warriors and raid across the border into Gettland.”

“It has been known.”

“And this spring?”

Gorm pursed his lips. “A small jaunt perhaps. Mother War demands vengeance for your uncle’s outrages at Amwend.”

Yarvi thought it best not to point out that he had been king at the start of those outrages if not their

end. "All I ask is that you push a little farther this year. All the way to the walls of Thorlby itself."

Mother Scaer hissed her disgust. "Only that?"

But Gorm's curiosity was tickled. "What would I gain for granting such a favor?"

Proud men like Yarvi's dead father, and his murdered brother, and his drowned uncle Uthil, would no doubt have spat their last breath in Grom-gil-Gorm's face rather than sought his help. But Yarvi had no pride. It had been shamed out of him by his father. Tricked out of him by Odem. Beaten out of him on the *South Wind*. Frozen out of him in the wasteland.

He had been kneeling all his life, to kneel a little longer was no hardship.

"Help me take back my throne, Grom-gil-Gorm, and I shall kneel in Odem's blood before you as King of Gettland, your vassal and subject."

Nothing leaned close, hissing angrily through clenched teeth, "Too high a price!"

Yarvi ignored him. "Uthil, Uthrik, and Odem. The brothers that have been your great enemies shall all three be gone through the Last Door and around the Shattered Sea you shall stand second in power only to the High King himself. Perhaps ... in time ... higher yet."

The more powerful a man is, Mother Gundring always used to say, the more he craves power.

Gorm's voice was slightly hoarse. "That would be a fine thing."

"A fine thing indeed," agreed Mother Scaer, her eyes narrower than ever as she glared at Yarvi. "If it could be managed."

"Only give me and my companions passage to Thorlby and I will make the attempt."

"They are strange retainers you have gathered," said Mother Scaer, eyeing them without enthusiasm.

"Strange circumstances demand them."

"Who is this crooked creature?" asked Gorm. The others were wisely looking to the ground, but Nothing stared back unbowed, bright eyes burning.

"I am a proud Gettlander."

"Ah, one of those." Gorm smiled. "Up here we prefer our Gettlanders shamed and bloody."

"Pay him no mind, my king. He is Nothing." And Yarvi brought Gorm's eyes back to his with the honeyed tone his mother used to use, for men of violence thrive on rage but know not what to do with reason and good sense. "If I fail, you'll still have the plunder taken on your march south."

Nothing growled his disgust, and small wonder. The towns of Gettland burning, the land ravaged, the people driven off or made slaves. Yarvi's land and Yarvi's people, but he was too deep in the mire now to return. The only way out was through, and to drown in the attempt or rise filthy but breathing on the other side. To take back the Black Chair he needed an army, and Mother War now placed their swords in his withered hand. Or their boots on his scarred neck, at least.

"You have all to gain," he coaxed, softly, softly, "nothing to lose."

"There is the High King's favor," said Mother Scaer. "He has commanded that there be no war until his temple is finished—"

"There was a time Grandmother Wexen's eagles brought requests." Gorm's singsong voice held a note of anger now. "Then they brought demands. Now she sends commands. Where does it end, Mother Scaer?"

His minister spoke softly. "The High King has the Lowlanders and most of the Ingling's praying to his One God now, ready to fight and die at his order—"

"And does the High King rule Vansterland too?" scoffed Yarvi. "Or does Grom-gil-Gorm?"

Mother Scaer's lip wrinkled. "Don't play too close to the fire, boy. We all answer to someone."

But Gorm was far away, already spreading flame and murder across the steadings of Gettland, no doubt. "Thorlby has strong walls," he murmured, "and many strong warriors to man them. Too many. If I could take that city my skalds would already be singing of my victory."

"Never," whispered Nothing, but no one listened. The deal was done.

"That is the best thing of all," crooned Yarvi. "You need only wait outside. I will give you Thorlby."

IV.

THE
RIGHTFUL
KING

CROWS

Yarvi pulled the fur collar of his borrowed cloak up against the wind and wrinkled his nose at the salt tang of the sea. That and the stink of the slaves pulling the oars. He had grown used to it when he was one of them, slept with his face in Rulf's armpit and scarcely noticed. He had stunk just as bad as the rest, he knew. But that made their smell no better now.

All the worse, in fact.

"Poor dogs." Jaud frowned over the rail of the aftcastle at them struggling below. For such a strong man he had a weak heart.

Rulf scrubbed at the gray-brown hair that had sprouted above his ears, though his pate was bald as ever. "Be nice to set 'em free."

"Then how would we get to Thorlby?" said Yarvi. "Someone has to row. Will you pull an oar?"

His old oarmates both looked sharply across at him. "You have changed," said Jaud.

"I've had to." And he turned away from them and the benches where he had once struggled. Sumael stood at the rail, a huge smile on her face as the salt wind tore at her hair, grown longer now than it had been, black as raven's feathers.

"You look pleased," said Yarvi, happy to see her happy. He had not seen it often enough.

"Glad to be on the sea again." She spread her arms wide, wriggling her fingers. "And with no chains!"

He felt his smile fade, for he still had a chain he could not break. The one he had forged himself with his own oath. The one that drew him back to Thorlby, and bound him to the Black Chair. And he knew then that sooner or later Sumael would stand at the rail of another ship. One that would carry her back to the First of Cities, and away from him forever.

Her smile faltered too, as though she had the same thought at the same moment, and they looked away from each other to watch Father Earth grinding by in awkward silence.

For two lands so bitterly opposed, Vansterland and Gettland looked very much the same. Barren beaches, forest, and fen. He had seen few people, and those hurrying inland, fearful at the sight of a ship. Narrowing his eyes to the south, he saw a little tooth upon a headland, the smoke of houses smudging the white sky.

"What's that town?" he asked Sumael.

"Amwend," she said. "Near the border."

Amwend, where he had led the raid. Or flopped from a ship without a shield and straight into a trap, at least. That was the tower, then, where Keimdal had died. Where Hurik had betrayed him. From which Odem had thrown him down, down into the bitter sea, and even more bitter slavery.

Yarvi realized he had ground his shriveled hand into the rail until it hurt. He turned his eyes away from land, toward the white-churned water in their wake, the marks of the oars quickly fading to leave no sign of their passing. Would it be so with him? Faded and forgotten?

Sister Owd, the apprentice Mother Scaer had sent with them, was looking straight at him. A furtive sort of look, then quickly down at something she was writing on a tiny slip of paper, tugged and twitched under her charcoal by the wind.

Yarvi walked slowly to her. "Keeping an eye on me?"

"You know I am," she said, without looking up. "That's what I'm here for."

"Do you doubt me?"

"I just tell Mother Scaer what I see. She chooses what to doubt."

She was small and round-faced, one of those people whose age is hard to guess, but even so Yarvi did not think she could be older than him. "When did you take the Minister's Test?"

"Two years ago," she said, shielding the little slip of paper with her shoulder.

He gave up trying to see it. Ministers have their own signs anyway: he doubted he could read them. "What was it like?"

"Not hard, if you're prepared."

"I was prepared," said Yarvi, thinking back to that night Odem came in out of the rain. The flames reflected in the jars, the creases in Mother Gundring's smile, the purity of question and answer. He felt a surge of longing, then, for that simple life with no uncles to kill or oaths to keep or hard choices to be made. For the books and the plants and the soft word spoken. He had to force it away to the back of his mind with an effort. He could not afford it now. "But I never got the chance to take it."

"You didn't miss much. A lot of fussing outside the door. A lot of being stared at by old women." She finished the message and began to roll it up into a tiny pellet. "Then the honor of being kissed by Grandmother Wexen."

"How was that?"

Sister Owd puffed out her cheeks and gave a long sigh. "Wiseest of all women she may be, but I was hoping my last kiss would be from someone younger. I saw the High King, from a distance."

"So did I, once. He seemed small, and old, and greedy, and complained about everything, and was scared of his food. But he had many strong warriors with him."

"Time hasn't changed him much, then. Except he worships the One God now, he's more gripped with his own power than ever, and by all accounts can't stay awake longer than an hour at a time. And those warriors have multiplied." She rolled up the canvas cover on the cage. The birds inside did not move, did not startle at the light, only stared levelly at Yarvi with half a dozen pairs of unblinking eyes. Black birds.

Yarvi frowned at them. "Crows?"

"Yes." Sister Owd pulled up her sleeve, unhooked the tiny door and skillfully wormed a white arm inside the cage, took a crow about the body and drew it out, still and calm as a bird made from coal.

"Mother Scaer hasn't used doves for years."

"Not at all?"

"Not since I've been her apprentice." She made the message fast about the bird's ankle and spoke softly. "The rumor is a dove sent from Mother Gundring tried to claw her face. She doesn't trust them." She leaned close to the black bird and cooed, "We are a day from Thorlby."

"Thorlby," spoke the crow in its croaking voice, then Sister Owd flicked it into the skies where it clattered away to the north.

"Crows," murmured Yarvi, watching it skim the white-flecked waves.

"Promises of obedience to your master, Grom-gil-Gorm?" Nothing stood beside Yarvi, still hugging his sword like a lover even though he had a perfectly good sheath for it now.

"He's my ally, not my master," answered Yarvi.

"Of course. You are a slave no longer." Nothing rubbed gently at the scars all about his stubbled

neck. "I remember our collars coming off, in that friendly farmstead. Before Shadikshirram burned it. No slave, you. And yet you made the deal with the Vanstermen kneeling."

"We were all on our knees at the time," growled Yarvi.

"My question is, are we still? You will win few friends when you take back the Black Chair with the help of Gettland's worst enemy."

"I can win friends once I'm in the chair. It's getting enemies out of it that concerns me now. What should I have done? Let the Vanstermen burn us?"

"Perhaps there was middle ground between letting Gorm kill us and selling him the land of our birth."

"Middle ground has been hard to find of late," Yarvi forced through gritted teeth.

"It always is, but a king's place is upon it. There will be a price for this, I think."

"You are quick with the questions but tardy on the answers, Nothing. Did you not swear an oath to help me?"

Nothing narrowed his eyes at Yarvi, the wind blowing up and lashing the gray hair about his battle-beaten face. "I swore an oath, and mean to see it through or die."

"Good," said Yarvi, turning away. "I will hold you to it."

Below them the oarslaves were working up a sweat, teeth clenched at their benches, grunting in time as the overseer stalked between them, whip coiled behind his back. Just as Trigg had done on the deck of the *South Wind*. Yarvi remembered well enough the burning in his muscles, the burning of the lash across his back.

But the closer he came to the Black Chair the heavier weighed his oath, and the shorter grew his patience.

Someone has to row.

"More speed!" he growled at the overseer.

YOUR ENEMY'S HOUSE

Sumael sprang from ship to jetty and shoved through the press to the table where Thorlby's dockmistress sat flanked by guards. Yarvi followed with a little less agility and a lot less authority across the gangplank, onto the ground that should have been his kingdom, eyes down and hood up, the others at his back.

"My name is Shadikshirram," Sumael said, flicking the paper carelessly open and dropping it onto the table, "and I carry a license to trade from the High King, stamped with the rune of Grandmother Wexen herself."

They had waited until the most junior dockmistress took her turn at the table in the hope she would wave them through. Instead she frowned at the license long enough for everyone to get twitchy, fingering the two keys about her neck, one of her household and one of her office. Yarvi noticed with a wave of sick nerves that one corner of the license was brown with old blood. The blood of its rightful owner, indeed, and spilled by Yarvi's own hand. The dockmistress peered up at Sumael, and spoke the words he had been dreading.

"You're not Shadikshirram." One of the guards shifted his gloved hand slightly on the haft of his spear, and Nothing shifted his thumb in his belt toward his sword, and Yarvi's sickness swelled to dread. Would it all end here, in an ugly little brawl on the docks? "I saw her come ashore here often, usually drunk—"

Sumael dealt the tabletop a fearsome blow, snarling into the dockmistress's face and making her shrink back, astonished. "You speak of my mother, Ebdel Aric Shadikshirram, and you'll speak with more respect! She is gone through the Last Door. Drowned in the icy waters of the North." Her voice cracked, and she dabbed at her dry eyes with the back of her hand. "Her business she entrusted to me, her loving daughter Sumael Shadikshirram." She snatched the license back from the table and shouted again, flecking dockmistress, guards, and Yarvi too with spit. "And I have business with Queen Laithlin!"

"She is queen no—"

"You know who I speak of! Where is Laithlin?"

"Usually at her counting house—"

"I will have words with her!" And Sumael turned on her heel and stalked off up the jetty.

"She may not take visitors ..." the dockmistress muttered weakly after her.

Sister Owd gave the table a friendly pat as Yarvi and the rest filed past. "If it's any consolation, she's like this with everyone."

"A winning performance," said Yarvi as he caught up to Sumael, hurrying past the fish hanging and the nets heaped and the fishers shouting prices for the morning's catch. "What would we do without you?"

"I nearly wet myself," she hissed back. "Is anyone following?"

"Not even looking." The dockmistress was busy venting her frustrations on the next arrival and they soon left her behind.

Home at last, but Yarvi felt like a stranger. It all seemed smaller than he remembered, less busy,

berths and stalls standing empty, buildings abandoned. His heart leapt whenever he saw a familiar face and, like a thief passing the place of his crime, he shrank farther into his hood, back prickling with sweat despite the cold.

If he was recognized King Odem would soon hear of it, and lose no time in finishing what began on the roof of Amwend's tower.

"Those are the howes of your ancestors, then?"

Nothing was staring through his tangle of hair toward the north, down the long and lonely sweep of beach and the file of grassy humps above it, the nearest with just a few months of patchy green on its fallow flanks.

"Of my murdered father Uthrik." Yarvi worked his jaw. "And my drowned uncle Uthil, and kings of Gettland back into the darkness of history."

Nothing scratched at his grizzled cheek. "Before them you swore your oath."

"As before me you swore yours."

"Never fear." Nothing grinned as they threaded through a crowded gate in the outermost wall of the city. That mad, bright-eyed grin that gave Yarvi more fears rather than fewer. "Flesh may forget, but steel never does."

Sister Owd seemed to know the ways of Thorlby better even than Yarvi, its native son. Its king. She led them up narrow streets zigzagging the steep hillside, houses crammed tall and narrow between outcroppings of rock, the gray bones of Gettland showing through the city's skin. She led them across bridges over surging streams where slaves leaned out to fill the jugs of the wealthy. She led them finally to a long, slim yard in the shadow of the lowering citadel where Yarvi had been born, and raised, and daily humiliated, and studied to be a minister, and found out he was a king.

"The house is here," said Sister Owd. It was in plain sight. One Yarvi had often walked past.

"Why does Gorm's minister keep a house in Thorlby?"

"Mother Scaer says the wise minister knows her enemy's house better than her own."

"Mother Scaer is as prone to pithy phrases as Mother Gundring," grunted Yarvi.

Owd turned the key. "It's what the Ministry is all about."

"Take Jaud with you." Yarvi drew Sumael to one side and spoke softly to her. "Go to the counting house and speak to my mother." If his luck held, Hurik would be at the training square now.

"And say what?" asked Sumael. "That her dead son has come calling?"

"And that he's finally learned to fasten his cloak-buckle. Bring her here."

"What if she doesn't believe me?"

Yarvi pictured his mother's face, then, as she used to frown down at him, and thought it very likely she would doubt. "Then we must think of something else."

"And if she doesn't believe me, and orders me dead for the insult?"

Yarvi paused. "Then *I* must think of something else."

"Who among you has been sent bad weatherluck or bad weaponluck?" came a ringing voice from across the square. A crowd had gathered before a grand building, new-raised, pillars of white marble at its front, and before them a priest in robes of humble sackcloth stood with arms spread and wailed his message. "Who among you finds their prayers to the many gods ignored?"

"My prayers were ignored so much I stopped making 'em," muttered Rulf.

"It would be small wonder!" called out the priest. "For there are not many gods but one! All the arts of the elves could not break her! The arms of the One God, and the gates of her temple, are flung

wide for all!”

“Temple?” Yarvi frowned. “My mother built that place to be a mint. They were going to stamp coins there, every one the same weight.” Now the seven-rayed sun of the One God—the High King’s god—was raised above the doorway.

“Her comfort, her mercy, her shelter, is freely given!” roared the priest. “Her only demand is that you love her as she loves you!”

Nothing spat on the stones. “What have gods to do with love?”

“Things have changed here,” said Yarvi, glancing about the square and pulling his hood a little lower.

“New king,” said Sumael, licking at her scarred lip, “new ways.”

GREAT STAKES

They heard the door open, and Yarvi stiffened. They heard footsteps in the hallway, and Yarvi swallowed with an effort. The door swung open and Yarvi took a halting step toward it, hardly able to breathe—

Two slaves ducked through, hands on their swords. Two huge-shouldered Inglings with silver collars. Nothing bristled, steel glinting as he drew.

“No!” said Yarvi. He knew these two. Slaves of his mother’s.

And now their owner swept into the room with Sumael just behind.

She was not changed.

Tall and stern, golden hair oiled and piled in shining coils. She wore few jewels but those of humbling size. The great Queen’s Key, key to the treasury of Gettland, was gone from her chain, and in its place was a smaller, set with dark rubies like drops of spilled blood.

Yarvi might have had trouble convincing his companions he was a king, but his mother filled that small room to its corners with an effortless majesty.

“Gods,” croaked Rulf, and with a wince lowered himself to his knees, and Sister Owd, and Jaud and Sumael, and the two slaves hurried to follow him. Nothing knelt last, eyes and sword’s point on the floor, so that only Yarvi and his mother were left standing.

She did not so much as acknowledge them. She stared at Yarvi, and he at her, as though they were alone. She walked to him, neither smiling nor frowning, until she stood but a stride away, and she seemed to him so beautiful it hurt his eyes to look at her, and he felt in them the burning of tears.

“My son,” she whispered, and folded him in her arms. “My son.” And she held him so tight that it was almost painful, and her tears wetted his head while his wetted her shoulder.

Yarvi had come home.

It was some time before his mother let him go, and held him at arm’s length, and carefully wiped her cheeks. He realized he looked up into her face no longer. He had grown, then. Grown in many ways.

“It seems your friend spoke the truth,” she said.

Yarvi slowly nodded. “I am alive.”

“And have learned to fasten your cloak-buckle,” she said, giving it a searching tug and finding it secure.

IN SILENCE SHE LISTENED to his story.

In silence she heard of the raid and the burning of Amwend. Of Odem’s betrayal and Yarvi’s long fall into the bitter sea.

Shall Gettland have half a king?

In silence she heard him made a slave, and sold a slave, only her eyes moving to the faint scars on his neck.

These are some wretched leavings.

In silence he made his escape, endured the long ordeal in the ice, fought for his life in the elf-ruin, and all the while Yarvi thought what a song it would make if he lived to have it set to music.

You cannot expect all the heroes to survive a good song.

And when it came to Ankran's death and then to Shadikshirram's, Yarvi thought of the red knife in his hand, and his grunting and hers, and his throat closed, and he shut his eyes and could not speak.

You may need two hands to fight someone, but only one to stab them in the back.

Then he felt his mother's hand on his. "I am proud. Your father would have been proud. All that matters is that you have come back to me."

"Thanks to these four," said Yarvi, swallowing sour spit.

Yarvi's mother swept his companions with her searching gaze. "You all have my thanks."

"It was nothing," grunted Nothing, eyes locked to the floor, face hidden behind his tangle of hair.

"My honor," said Jaud, bowing his head.

"We couldn't have made it without him," muttered Rulf.

"He was a sore pain in my arse every mile," said Sumael. "If I had it to do again I'd leave him in the sea."

"And then where would you find a ship to take you home?" asked Yarvi, grinning at her.

"Oh, I would think of something else," she said, grinning back.

Yarvi's mother did not join them. She took in every detail of the look they gave each other, and her eyes narrowed. "What is my son to you, girl?"

Sumael blinked, and her dark cheek colored. "I ..." Yarvi had never seen her at a loss for words before.

"She is my friend," he said. "She risked her life for mine. She is my oarmate." He paused for a moment. "She is my family."

"Is that so?" Yarvi's mother still glared at Sumael, who was now studying the floor with minute interest. "Then she must be mine also."

In truth Yarvi was far from sure what they were to each other, and less than keen to put it to the test before his mother. "Things have changed here." He nodded toward the window, the entreaties of the One God's priest coming faint from outside.

"Things lie in ruins here." His mother's eyes came back to his, and angrier than ever. "I had only just taken off my black for your death when an eagle came to Mother Gundring. An invitation to the High King's wedding in Skekenhouse."

"Did you go?"

She snorted. "I was, and am, reluctant to attend."

"Why?"

"Because Grandmother Wexen has me in mind for the bride, Yarvi."

Yarvi's eyes went wide. "Oh."

"Yes. Oh. They think to chain me to the key of that withered old remnant and have me spin them gold out of straw. Meanwhile your snake of an uncle and his worm of a daughter frustrate me at every turn, and do their damndest to destroy all I have built here."

"Isriun?" muttered Yarvi, with the slightest croak in his throat. He almost added, "my betrothed," but with a glance at Sumael thought it best to stop short.

"I know her name," growled his mother. "I choose not to use it. They break agreements years in the making, turn hard-won friends to enemies in a moment, seize the goods of foreign merchants and drive

them from the market. If their aim was to ruin Gettland they could not have done a finer job. They have given my mint over as a temple to the High King's false god, you saw that?"

"Something of the kind—"

"One God standing above all others, just as one High King sits above all others." She barked a joyless laugh that made Yarvi jump. "I fight them, but I am losing ground. They do not understand the battlefield, but they have the Black Chair. They have the key to the treasury. I have fought them every day, with every weapon and strategy—"

"Except the sword," grunted Nothing, without looking up.

Yarvi's mother turned her dagger gaze on him. "That will be next. But Odem takes no chances with his safety, and has all the warriors of Gettland behind him. I have no more than two score men in my household. There is Hurik—"

"No," said Yarvi. "Hurik is Odem's man. He tried to kill me."

His mother's eyes widened. "Hurik is my Chosen Shield. He would never betray me—"

"He betrayed me easily enough." Yarvi remembered Keimdal's blood speckling his face. "Believe me. It is a moment I am not likely to forget."

She bared her teeth and placed one trembling fist upon the table. "I will see him drowned in the mire. But to beat Odem we will need an army."

Yarvi licked his lips. "I have one on the way."

"Did I lose a son and gain a magician? From where?"

"Vansterland," said Nothing.

There was a stony pause then. "I see." Yarvi's mother turned her glare on Sister Owd, who ventured an apologetic smile, then cleared her throat and looked down at the floor. Few looked elsewhere when his mother was in the room. "You forged an alliance with Grom-gil-Gorm? The man who killed your father and sold you as a slave?"

"He did not kill my father. I am sure of that." Three-quarters sure, at least. "Odem killed your husband and your son, his own brother and nephew. And we must seize the allies the wind blows us."

"What was Gorm's price?"

Yarvi worked his tongue around his dry mouth. He should have known the Golden Queen would miss no detail of a deal. "That I would kneel before him and be his vassal." And from the corner of the room Nothing gave an angry grunt.

His mother's eye twitched. "Their king kneeling before their most hated enemy? What will our people think of such a devil's bargain?"

"Once Odem is sunk in the midden they can think what they will. Better a king on my knees than a beggar on my feet. I can stand later."

A smile touched the corner of her mouth. "You are far more my son than your father's."

"And proud to be so."

"Still. Would you unleash that butcher in Thorlby? Make our city a slaughter-yard?"

"He'll only act as bait for the city's warriors," said Yarvi. "Lure them out so the citadel is lightly manned. We'll enter by the tunnels beneath the rock, seal the Screaming Gate, and take Odem while he's unguarded. Can you find enough good men for that?"

"Perhaps. I think so. But your uncle is no fool. What if he will not spring your trap? What if he keeps his men in the citadel and bides his time in safety?"

"And seem a coward while the Breaker of Swords mocks him from his very doorstep?" Yarvi sat

forward, staring into his mother's eyes. "No. I have sat where he sits and I know his mind. Odem is new to the Black Chair. He has no great victories to sing of. And he has the memory of my father, and the legend of my uncle Uthil to contend with." And Yarvi smiled, for he knew how it felt to lurk always in the shadow of a better brother. "Odem will not give up a golden chance to do what his brothers never could. Defeat Grom-gil-Gorm and prove himself a mighty war leader."

His mother's smile spread, and Yarvi wondered whether he had ever seen her look at him with admiration before. "Your brother may have got more than his share of the fingers, but the gods kept all the wits for you. You have become a deep-cunning man, Yarvi."

It seemed that empathy, properly used, could be a deadly weapon. "My years training for the Ministry were not wasted. Still, help from someone close to Odem would only sweeten our chances. We could go to Mother Gundring—"

"No. She is Odem's minister."

"She is my minister."

Yarvi's mother shook her head. "At best her loyalties would be split. Who knows what she would judge the greater good? There is already so much that could go wrong."

"But so much to win. Great stakes mean great risks."

"So they do." She stood, shaking out her skirts, and looked down at him in wonder. "When did my favorite son become a gambler?"

"When his uncle threw him into the sea and stole his birthright."

"He underestimated you, Yarvi. And so did I. But I am glad to learn my error." Her smile faded and her voice took on a deadly edge. "His will bring him a bloody reckoning. Send your bird to Grom-gil-Gorm, little sister. Tell him we most keenly await his arrival."

Sister Owd bowed very low. "I will, my queen, but ... once I do, there can be no going back."

Yarvi's mother barked a joyless laugh. "Ask your mistress, Sister. I am not one for going back." She reached across the table and placed her strong hand on Yarvi's weak. "Nor is my son."

IN DARKNESS

“This is a bastard of a risk,” whispered Rulf, his words deadened in the darkness.

“Life is a risk,” answered Nothing. “All things, from birth on.”

“A man can still rush at the Last Door naked and screaming or tread softly the other way.”

“Death will usher us all through regardless,” said Nothing. “I choose to face her.”

“Can I choose to be elsewhere the next time?”

“Enough of your squabbling!” hissed Yarvi. “You’re like old hounds over the last bone!”

“We can’t all act like kings,” muttered Rulf, with more than a little irony. Perhaps when you’ve watched a man make soil every day in a bucket beside you, it is hard to accept he sits between gods and men.

Bolts squealed with the rust of years and in a shower of dust the gate swung open. One of his mother’s Ingling was crammed into the narrow archway beyond, frowning down at them.

“Were you seen?” asked Yarvi.

The slave shook his head, turned, and plodded up the narrow stair, stooped under the low ceiling. Yarvi wondered if he could be trusted. His mother thought so. But then she had trusted Hurik. Yarvi had grown out of the childish notion that his parents knew everything.

He had grown out of all sorts of notions over the past few months.

The stair opened out into a great cave, the ragged rock of the ceiling crusted with teeth of lime, each hung with its own dewdrop, sparkling in the light of their torches.

“We’re under the citadel?” asked Rulf, peering nervously up at the unimaginable weight of stone above their heads.

“The rock is riddled with passages,” said Yarvi. “With ancient elf-tunnels and newer cellars. With hidden doors and spy-holes. Some kings, and all ministers, sometimes want to go unobserved. But no one knows these ways like me. I spent half my childhood in the shadows. Hiding from my father or my brother. Creeping from one place of solitude to another. Seeing while unseen, and pretending I was part of what I saw. Making up a life where I wasn’t an outcast.”

“A sad story,” murmured Nothing.

“Wretched.” Yarvi thought of his younger self, weeping in the darkness, wishing someone would find him but knowing they did not care enough to look, and shook his head in disgust at his own past weakness. “But it might still have a happy ending.”

“It might.” Nothing let one hand brush the wall beside them. A face of jointless elf-stone, thousands of years old and smooth as if it had been laid yesterday. “This way your mother’s men can enter the citadel unseen.”

“As Odem’s file out above to face Grom-gil-Gorm.”

The Ingling held out his arm to stop them.

The passageway ended at a round shaft. Far above a little circle of light, far below the faint glimmer of water. A stair wound about it, a stair so narrow Yarvi had to edge up sideways, shoulder blades scraping the smooth elf-stone, toes of his boots grazing the brink, sweat springing from his forehead. Halfway up there came a whirring from above and he flinched as something flashed past his

face, might have toppled forward had Rulf not caught his arm.

“Wouldn’t want your reign cut short by a bucket.”

It splashed down far below and Yarvi breathed a long sigh. The last thing he needed was another plunge into cold water.

Women’s voices echoed around them, strangely loud.

“... she still says no.”

“Would you want to marry that old husk after you’d been wife to a man like Uthrik?”

“Her wants don’t come into it. If a king sits between gods and men, the High King sits between kings and gods. No one says no to him forever....”

They shuffled on. More shadows, more steps, more shameful memories, walls of rough stone laid by the hands of men that seemed older but were thousands of years newer than the tunnels below, daylight winking through grated openings near the ceiling.

“How many men has the queen bought?” asked Rulf.

“Thirty-three,” said the Ingling over his shoulder. “So far.”

“Good men?”

“Men.” The Ingling shrugged. “They will kill or die according to their luck.”

“Of how many could Odem say the same?” asked Nothing.

“Many,” said the Ingling.

“This might be a quarter of them.” Yarvi went up on tiptoes to squint through a grate into the light.

Today’s training square had been set out in the yard of the citadel, the ancient cedar at one corner. The warriors were at shield-practice, forming walls and wedges and breaking them apart, steel flashing in the thin sun, clattering against wood, the scrape of shuffling feet. The instructions of Master Hunnan came brittle on the cold air, to lock shields, to keep by the shoulder-man, to thrust low, the way they used to be barked at Yarvi, to precious little good.

“That is a great number of men,” said Nothing, prone to understate the case.

“Well-trained and battle-hardened men, on their own ground,” added Rulf.

“My ground,” Yarvi forced through his gritted teeth. He led them on, every step, stone, turning familiar. “See there?” He drew Rulf next to him, pressing him against another narrow grate with a view of the citadel’s one gateway. The doors of studded wood stood open, flanked by guards, but in the shadows at the top of the archway burnished copper gleamed.

“The Screaming Gate,” he whispered.

“Why that name?” asked Rulf. “Because of the screams we’ll make when this goes wrong?”

“Never mind the name. It drops from above to seal the citadel. Six ministers made the mechanism. A single silver pin holds it up. It’s always guarded, but a hidden stair leads to the room. When the day comes, Nothing and I will take a dozen men and hold it. Rulf, you’ll take archers to the roof, ready to make pincushions of my uncle’s guards.”

“No doubt they’ll make fine ones.”

“When the moment is ripe we pull the pin, the gate drops, and Odem is trapped inside.” Yarvi pictured the horror on his uncle’s face as the Screaming Gate fell and he wished, not for the first time, that doing a thing was as simple as saying it.

“Odem is trapped ...” Nothing’s eyes glinted in the darkness. “And so are we.”

There was cheering in the yard as the latest exercise came to its end. One side the winner, the other laid low.

Yarvi nodded toward the silent Ingling. “My mother’s slave will show you the ways. Learn them.”
“Where are you going?” asked Rulf, and then added uncertainly, “my king.”
“There’s something I have to do.”

HOLDING HIS BREATH LEST the slightest sound betray him, Yarvi eased through the fusty darkness toward the hidden door between the legs of Father Peace, pressed himself to the spy-slot, and peered through into the Godshall.

It was before noon and the King of Gettland was in his proper place—the Black Chair. Its back was toward Yarvi, so he could not see Odem’s face, only the outline of his shoulders, the gleam of the King’s Circle in his hair. Mother Gundring sat on her stool at his right hand, arm trembling with the effort of holding up her minister’s staff.

Below the dais, making a sea of dim-lit faces, were the great and good of Gettland, or at least the mean and meager, best buckles and keys polished, faces pressed into servile smiles. The same men and women who had wept as Yarvi’s father was howed up, and wondered wherever they would find his like again. Not in his crippled joke of a younger son, that was sure.

And standing unbowed upon the steps below the chair with Hurik looming at her back, was Yarvi’s mother.

He could not see Odem’s face, but he heard the false king’s voice echo in the hallowed space. As calm and reasoned as it had always been. As patient as winter, and Yarvi felt a wintry shiver at the sound of it. “Might I inquire of our honored sister when she intends to travel to Skekenhouse?”

“As soon as I am able, my king,” answered Yarvi’s mother. “I have pressing matters of business that—”

“I wear the key to the treasury now.”

Yarvi peered from the corner of the slot, and saw Isriun sitting on the other side of the Black Chair. His betrothed. Not to mention his brother’s. She wore the key to the treasury around her neck, and by all appearances it weighed less heavily than she had once feared. “I can resolve your business, Laithlin.”

She sounded little like the nervous girl who had sung her quavering promises to him in this very chamber. He remembered her eyes shining as she touched the Black Chair, and saw them shine now as she glanced at her father sitting in it.

It seemed Yarvi was not the only one changed since he sailed for Amwend.

“See to it soon,” came Odem’s voice.

“That you may stand as High Queen over us all,” added Mother Gundring, lifting high her staff for just a moment, elf-metal darkly gleaming.

“Or kneel as Grandmother Wexen’s bookkeeper,” snapped Yarvi’s mother.

There was a pause, then Odem said softly, “There are worse fates, sister. We must do our duty. We must do what is best for Gettland. See to it.”

“My king,” she forced through gritted teeth as she bowed, and though Yarvi had often dreamed of it, he felt a burning anger at seeing her humbled.

“Now leave me with the gods,” said Odem, waving away his retainers. The doors were opened, the great men and women bowed their bottomless respect and filed out into the light. Yarvi’s mother went among them, Hurik beside her, and Mother Gundring after them, and Isriun last of all, smiling back at her father in the doorway as she had once smiled back at Yarvi.

The doors were closed with an echoing boom, and a heavy silence settled, and with a groan Odem wrenched himself up from the Black Chair as though it burned him to sit in it. He turned, and Yarvi found the breath stopped in his chest.

His uncle's face was just as he remembered it. Strong, with hard lines in the cheeks and silver in the beard. So like Yarvi's father, but with a softness and a care not even his own son could ever find in King Uthrik's face.

The hate should have flooded in, and swept away all Yarvi's fears, and drowned his nagging doubts that ripping the Black Chair back from his uncle's clutches might not be worth the blood it would surely cost.

But instead, when he saw the face of his enemy, the killer of his family and thief of his kingdom, Yarvi's heart betrayed him, and he felt of all things a choking surge of love. For the only one in his family who had ever given him kindness. Had ever made him feel that he was liked. Had ever made him feel he was worth liking. Next came a choking sorrow at the loss of that man, and Yarvi felt tears in his eyes, and he ground his twisted knuckles into the cold stone beside him, hating himself for his weakness.

"Stop looking at me!"

Yarvi jerked back from the slot but Odem's gaze was fixed high above. He walked slowly, the taps of his footfalls echoing in the velvet dimness of that great space.

"Have you deserted me?" he called out. "As I have deserted you?"

He was speaking to the amber statues set about the dome. He was speaking to the gods, and his cracking voice was anything but calm. Now he lifted off the King's Circle Yarvi had once worn and with a wince rubbed at the marks left on his forehead.

"What could I do?" he whispered, so quietly Yarvi could scarcely hear it. "We all serve someone. For everything there is a price."

And Yarvi thought of Odem's last words to him, sharp as knives in his memory.

You would have been a fine jester. But is my daughter really to have a one-handed weakling for a husband? A crippled puppet dangling on his mother's string?

And now the hate boiled up, hot and reassuring. Had he not sworn an oath? For his father. For his mother.

For himself.

With the faintest ringing, the point of Shadikshirram's sword left the sheath, and Yarvi pressed the knobbled fist of his left hand against the hidden door. One good shove would send it swinging, he knew. One shove, and three steps, and a thrust of the blade could end this. He licked his lips, and worked his hand about the grip, setting his shoulders for the effort, the blood surging at his temples—

"Enough!" roared Odem, the echoes ringing, and Yarvi froze again. His uncle had snatched up the King's Circle and twisted it back on. "What's done is done!" He shook his fist toward the ceiling. "If you wanted it otherwise, why did you not stop me?" And he spun on his heel and strode from the chamber.

"They have sent me to do it," whispered Yarvi, sliding Shadikshirram's sword back into its sheath. Not now. Not yet. Not as easily as that. But his doubts were burned away.

Even if he had to sink Thorlby in blood.

Odem had to die.

A FRIEND'S FIGHT

Yarvi strained at the oar, knowing the whip was over him. He tugged and snarled, plucked even with the stub of finger on his useless hand, but how could he move it alone?

Mother Sea burst roaring into the hold of the *South Wind* and Yarvi fumbled desperately with the ladder, watched the men straining against their chains for a last breath as the water surged over their faces.

“Clever children drown just like stupid ones,” said Trigg, blood running from the neat split in his skull.

Yarvi took one more floundering step in the merciless snow, slipped and teetered on hot rock smooth as glass. However he ran the dogs were always snapping at his heels.

Grom-gil-Gorm's bared teeth were red and his face blood-dashed and Yarvi's fingers threaded on his necklace. “I am coming,” he sang like the clanging of a bell. “And Mother War comes with me!”

“Are you ready to kneel?” asked Mother Scaer, arms covered in flashing elf-bangles and the crows on her shoulders laughing, laughing.

“He is on his knees already,” said Odem, elbows upon the black arms of the Black Chair.

“He always has been,” said Isriun, smiling, smiling.

“We all serve someone,” said Grandmother Wexen, a hungry brightness in her eye.

“Enough!” hissed Yarvi. “Enough!”

And he flung open the hidden door and lashed out with the curved sword. Ankran's eyes bulged as the blade slid through him. “Steel is the answer,” he croaked.

Shadikshirram grunted and elbowed and Yarvi punched at her, and metal squelched in flesh, and she smiled at him over her shoulder.

“He is coming,” she whispered. “He is coming.”

YARVI WOKE WET WITH SWEAT, tangled with his blankets, stabbing at his mattress.

A devil's face loomed over him, made of flame and shadow and stinking of smoke. He shrank away, then gasped in relief as he realized it was Rulf, a torch in his hand against the darkness.

“Grom-gil-Gorm is coming,” he said.

Yarvi tore free of his blankets. Sounds echoed distorted through the shutters at the window. Crashing. Shouting. The clangor of bells.

“He's crossed the border with more than a thousand men. Might be a hundred thousand depending on what rumor you listen to.”

Yarvi tried to blink away his dream. “Already?”

“He moves quick as fire and spreads as much chaos. The messengers barely outrode him. He's only three days from the city. Thorlby's in uproar.”

Downstairs the faintest gray of dawn was leaking through the shutters and across pale faces. The faintest smell of smoke tickled Yarvi's nose. Smoke and fear. Faintly he could hear the priest outside calling in a broken voice for folk to kneel before the One God and be saved.

To kneel before the High King and be made slaves.

“Your crows fly swiftly, Sister Owd,” said Yarvi.

“I told you they would, my king.” Yarvi flinched at the word. It still sounded like a joke to him. It was a joke, and would be until Odem was dead.

He looked at the faces of his oarmates. Sumael and Jaud each nursing their own kind of fear. Nothing with hungry smile and polished sword both unsheathed.

“This is my fight,” said Yarvi. “If any of you want to leave, I won’t blame you.”

“I and my steel are sworn to the purpose.” Nothing rubbed a speck from his sword with a thumb-tip. “The only door that will stop me is the Last.”

Yarvi nodded, and with his good hand clasped Nothing’s arm. “I don’t pretend to understand your loyalty, but I’m grateful for it.”

The others were slower to the cause. “I’d be lying if I said the odds didn’t bother me,” said Rulf.

“They bothered you on the border,” said Nothing, “and that ended with the burning bodies of our enemies.”

“And of our friend. And our capture by a crowd of angry Vanstermen. Angry Vanstermen are again involved, and if this plan miscarries I doubt we’ll be talking our way clear, however nimble-tongued the young king may be.”

Yarvi put his twisted palm on the pommel of Shadikshirram’s sword. “Then our steel must talk for us.”

“Easy to say before it’s drawn.” Sumael frowned across to Jaud. “I think we had better head south before the swords begin to speak.”

Jaud looked from Yarvi to Sumael and back, and his big shoulders slumped. *The wise wait for the moment. But never let it pass.*

“You can go with my blessing, but I’d rather have you at my side,” said Yarvi. “Together we braved the *South Wind*. Together we escaped her. Together we faced the ice and came through. We’ll come through this as well. Together. Only take one more stroke with me.”

Sumael blinked at Jaud, then leaned close to him. “You’re not a warrior, not a king. You’re a baker.”

Jaud looked sidelong at Yarvi, and sighed. “And an oarsman.”

“Not by choice.”

“Not much in life that matters is by choice. What kind of oarsman abandons his mate?”

“This isn’t our fight!” hissed Sumael, low and urgent.

Jaud shrugged. “My friend’s fight is my fight.”

“What about the sweetest water in the world?”

“It will be just as sweet later. Sweeter still, maybe.” And Jaud gave Yarvi a weak smile. “When you have a load to lift, you’re better lifting than weeping.”

“We all might end up weeping.” Sumael took a slow step toward Yarvi, dark eyes fixed on his. She raised a hand to reach toward him, and the breath caught in his throat. “Please, Yorv—”

“My name is Yarvi.” And though it hurt to do it he met her gaze with flinty hardness, the way his mother might have. He would have liked to take her hand. To hold it the way he had in the snow. To be pulled far away by it to the First of Cities, and be Yorv again, and the Black Chair be damned.

He would have loved to take her hand, but he could not afford to weaken. Not for anything. He had sworn an oath, and he needed his oarmates beside him. He needed Jaud. He needed her.

“What about you, Rulf?” he asked.

Rulf worked his mouth, carefully rolled his tongue, and neatly spat out of the window. “When the baker fights, what can the warrior do?” His broad face broke into a grin. “My bow’s yours.”

Sumael let her hand fall and stared at the floor, her scarred mouth twisted. “Mother War rules, then. What can I do?”

“Nothing,” said Nothing, simply.

MOTHER WAR'S BARGAIN

The dovecote was still perched in the top of one of the citadel's highest towers, still streaked inside and out with centuries of droppings, and still through its many windows a chill wind blew. More chill than ever.

"Gods damn this cold," muttered Yarvi.

Sumael kept looking through her eyeglass, mouth fixed in a hard line. "You saying you haven't been colder?"

"You know I have." They both had, out there in the crushing ice. But it seemed there had been a spark between the two of them to warm him. He had well and truly snuffed it out now.

"I'm sorry," he said, though it came out a grudging grunt. She kept her silence, and he found himself meandering on. "For what my mother said to you ... for asking Jaud to stay ... for not—"

Her jaw-muscles worked. "Surely a king need never apologize."

He winced at that. "I'm the same man you slept beside on the *South Wind*. The same man you walked beside in the snow. The same man—"

"Are you?" She looked at him then, finally, but there was no softness in it. "Over the hill there." She passed the eyeglass across. "Smoke."

"Smoke," croaked one of the doves. "Smoke."

Sumael eyed it suspiciously, and from their cages ranged about the walls the doves eyed her back, unblinking. All apart from the bronze eagle, huge and regal, which must have come from Grandmother Wexen with another offer—or demand—of marriage for Yarvi's mother. It poked proudly at its plumage and did not deign to look down.

"Smoke, smoke, smoke ..."

"Can you stop them doing that?" asked Sumael.

"They echo bits of the messages they've been trained to say," said Yarvi. "Don't worry. They don't understand them." Though as those dozens of eyes turned on him as one, heads attentively cocked, he was forced again to wonder whether they might understand more than he did. He turned back to the window and pressed the glass to his eye, saw the crooked thread of smoke against the sky.

"There is a steading that way." The owner had been one among the procession of hand-wringing mourners at his father's howing up. Yarvi tried not to wonder whether that man had been on his farm when Grom-gil-Gorm came visiting. And if he had not, who had been there to greet the Vanstermen, and what had happened to them since....

A wise minister weighs the greater good, Mother Gundring always said, and finds the lesser evil. Surely a wise king could only do the same?

He jerked the eyeglass away from the burning steading, scanning the jagged horizon, and caught the glint of sun on steel.

"Warriors." Coming down the northern road, spilling from a cleft in the hills. Slow as treacle in winter they seemed to crawl from this distance, and Yarvi found he was chewing at his lip, wishing them on.

"The King of Gettland," he muttered to himself. "Urging an army of Vanstermen to Thorlby."

“The gods cook strange recipes,” said Sumael.

Yarvi looked up at the domed ceiling, gods painted there as birds in flaking colors. He Who Carries the Message. She Who Stirs the Branches. She Who Spoke the First Word and Will Speak the Last. And painted with red wings at the center, smiling blood, Mother War.

“I’ve rarely prayed to you, I know,” Yarvi whispered at her image. “Father Peace always suited me better. But give me victory this day. Give me back the Black Chair. You’ve tested me and I stand ready. I’m not the fool I was, not the coward, not the child. I am the rightful king of Gettland.”

One of the doves chose that moment to loose a spatter of droppings onto the floor beside him. Mother War’s answer, perhaps?

Yarvi ground his teeth. “If you choose not to make me king ... if you choose to send me through the Last Door today ... at least let me keep my oath.” He clenched his fists, such as they were, knuckles white. “Give me Odem’s life. Give me revenge. Grant me that much, and I’ll be satisfied.”

Not a nurturing prayer of the kind that ministers are taught. Not a giving or a making prayer. But giving and making are nothing to Mother War. She is the taker, the breaker, the widow-maker. She cares only for blood.

“The king must die,” he hissed.

“The king must die!” screeched the eagle, standing tall and spreading its wings so it filled its cage and seemed to darken the whole chamber. “The king must die!”

“IT’S TIM,” SAID YARVI.

“Good,” said Nothing. His voice, through the tall slot in a helmet that hid most of his face, rang with metal.

“Good,” said the two Inglings together, one of them spinning a great ax about in his fists as though it were a toy.

“Good,” murmured Jaud, but he looked far from happy. Uncomfortable in his borrowed war-gear, and more uncomfortable still at the sight of his brothers-in-arms, squatting in the deep shadows of the elf-tunnel.

Honestly, they inspired scant confidence in Yarvi. It was a company of horrors his mother’s gold had brought to his cause. Every land about the Shattered Sea—and some much further flung—had contributed a couple of its worst sons. There were rogues and cutthroats, sea-raiders and convicts, some with their crimes tattooed on their foreheads. One with an always-weeping eye had a face scrawled blue with them. Men without king or honor. Men without conscience or cause. Not to mention three fearsome Shend women, bristling with blades and muscled like masons, who took great delight in baring teeth filed to wicked points at anyone who glanced their way.

“Not the first folk I’d pick to trust my life to,” murmured Rulf, carefully averting his eyes.

“What can you think about a cause,” muttered Jaud, “when all the decent folk stand on the other side?”

“Many tasks call for decent folk.” Nothing twisted his helmet carefully back and forth. “The murder of a king is not one such.”

“This is no murder,” growled Yarvi. “And Odem no true king.”

“Shhh,” said Sumael, eyes rolling to the ceiling.

Faint sounds were leaking through the rock. Shouting, perhaps, the rattle of arms. The very faintest whiff of alarm.

“They know our friends have arrived.”

Yarvi swallowed a surge of nerves. “To your places.”

Their plans were well rehearsed. Rulf took a dozen men skilled with bows. Each of the Ingling took a dozen more to hiding places from which they could quickly reach the yard. The dozen that remained crept up the winding stair after Yarvi and Nothing. Toward the chain room above the citadel’s one entrance. Toward the Screaming Gate.

“Have care,” whispered Yarvi, pausing at the hidden door, though his throat was almost too tight to force words through. “The men in there aren’t our enemies—”

“They will do for today,” said Nothing. “And Mother War hates care.” He kicked the door wide and ducked through.

“Damn it!” hissed Yarvi, scrambling after.

The chain room was dim, light leaking in from narrow windows, the rumble of thumping boots echoing loud from the passageway below. Two men sat at a table. One turned, smile vanishing as he saw Nothing’s drawn sword.

“Who are—”

Steel flashed through a strip of light and his head came off with a wet click, spinning into a corner. Ridiculous, it seemed, a mummer’s joke at a spring fair, but no children laughed now. Nothing stepped past the slumping body, caught the other man under his arm as he rose and slid the sword through his chest. He gave a ragged gasp, pawed toward the table where an ax lay.

Nothing pushed the table carefully out of reach with one boot, then pulled his sword free and lowered the man gently to sit against the wall, shuddering silently as Death eased open the Last Door for him.

“The chain room is ours.” Nothing peered through an archway at the far end, then dragged the door shut and slid the bolt.

Yarvi knelt beside the dying man. He knew him. Or had done. Ulvdem was his name. No friend of his, but not one of the worst. He had smiled once at a joke Yarvi made, and Yarvi had been glad of it.

“Did you have to kill them?”

“No.” Nothing carefully wiped clean his sword. “We could have let Odem be king.”

The hirelings were spreading out, frowning toward the centerpiece of the room, and their plan, the Screaming Gate. Its bottom was sunken in the floor and its top in the ceiling, a wall of polished copper softly gleaming, engraved with a hundred faces which snarled, screeched, howled in pain or fear or rage, flowing into one another like reflections in a pool.

Sumael stood looking at it with hands on hips. “I think I can guess now why it’s called the Screaming Gate.”

“A hideous thing to hang our hopes on,” said Jaud.

Yarvi brushed the metal with his fingertips, cold and awfully solid. “A hideous thing to have drop on your head, no doubt.” Beside the great slab, about a post carved with the names of fifteen gods, was a confusion of interlocking gears, inscribed wheels, coiled chains, that even with his minister’s eye he could not begin to fathom the workings of. In its center was a single silver pin. “This is the mechanism.”

Jaud reached toward it. “All you do is pull the pin?”

Yarvi slapped his hand away. “At the right moment! The last moment. The more of Odem’s men have gone to face Gorm the better our chances.”

“Your uncle speaks,” called Nothing from one of the narrow windows.

Yarvi eased open the shutters of another and peered down into the yard. That familiar patch of green among the towering gray walls, the cedar spreading its branches at one side. Men were gathered there, many hurriedly arming, many already arrayed for battle. Yarvi’s eyes widened as he took in the number. Three hundred at a guess, and he knew there would be far more making ready outside the citadel. Above them, upon the marble steps of the Godshall, in fur and silvered mail and with the King’s Circle on his brow, stood Yarvi’s uncle Odem.

“Who stands outside the walls of Thorlby now?” he was roaring at the gathered warriors. “Grom-gil-Gorm, the Breaker of Swords!”

The men stamped their feet and let go a storm of curses and contempt. “He who murdered Uthrik, your king, my brother!” Howls of anger at that, and Yarvi had to stop himself making one of his own at the lie.

“But in his arrogance he has brought few men with him!” called Odem. “We have the right, we have the ground, we have the numbers and the quality! Will we let this army of scum stand a moment longer within sight of the howes of my brothers Uthrik and Uthil, the howe of my grandfather Angulf Clovenfoot, Hammer of the Vanstermen?”

The warriors clattered weapons on shields and shields on armor and roared that they would not.

Odem reached out, his kneeling blade-bearer offered up his sword, and he drew it and held it high, the steel breaking from the shadows and flashing so brightly for an instant Yarvi had to look away. “Then let us do honor to Mother War, and bring her a red day! Let us leave our walls at our backs and stride out, and before sunset see the heads of Grom-gil-Gorm and his Vanster dogs above our gates.”

“We’ll see whose head sits on the walls tonight,” said Yarvi, words lost in the answering cheer of the warriors of Gettland. The warriors who should have been cheering for him.

“They go to fight,” said Nothing, as men began to file from the yard, called off in stretches of the shield wall, each knowing his place, each ready to die for his shoulder-man. “You guessed your uncle’s mind correctly.”

“It was no guess,” said Yarvi.

“Your mother was right.” He saw Nothing’s eyes glint in the darkness of his helmet’s slot. “You have become a deep-cunning man.”

The youngest warriors came first, some younger even than Yarvi, the older and more battle-worn were next. They tramped under the Screaming Gate, the clatter of harness echoing about the chain room, shadows shifting across the pitted faces of Yarvi’s rogues as they peered through the slots in the floor to watch better men pass below. And with each one gone down that passageway Yarvi’s happiness grew, for he knew their odds were so much the better, and his fear grew too, for he knew the moment was almost upon them.

The moment of his vengeance. Or the moment of his death.

“The king’s moving,” said Sumael, pressed into the shadows beside another window. Odem was striding through his veterans toward the gate, shield-bearer, and blade-bearer, and standard-bearers at his back, clapping men on their shoulders as he went.

“The moment is not ripe,” murmured Nothing.

“I see that!” hissed Yarvi. The boots tramped on, men draining from the citadel, but there were far too many yet in the yard.

Had he endured all this, suffered all this, sacrificed all this so Odem could wriggle carefree from

the hook at the last moment? He fussed with his stub of finger, the very tips of his thumbs sweating.

“Do I pull the pin?” called Jaud.

“Not yet!” squeaked Yarvi, terrified they would be heard through the slots in the floor. “Not yet!”

Odem strode on, soon to be lost from view below the archway. Yarvi raised his hand to Jaud, ready to bring it down and all the weight of the Screaming Gate with it.

Even if it doomed them all.

“My king!” Yarvi’s mother stood on the steps of the Godshall, Hurik huge at one shoulder, Mother Gundring bent over her staff at the other. “My brother!”

Yarvi’s uncle stopped, frowning, and turned.

“Odem, please, a word!”

Yarvi hardly dared breathe in case it somehow upset the delicate balance of the moment. Time crawled as Odem looked to the gate, then to Yarvi’s mother, then, cursing, strode back toward her, his closest retainers rattling after.

“Wait!” hissed Yarvi, and with wide eyes Jaud eased his fingers from the pin.

Yarvi strained toward the window, cool breeze kissing his sweat-sheened face, but could not hear what was said on the steps of the Godshall. His mother knelt at Odem’s feet, pressed hands to her chest, humbly bowed her head. Perhaps she made abject apologies for her stubbornness, her ingratitude to her brother and the High King. Perhaps she swore obedience and begged forgiveness. Then she took Odem’s hand in both of hers, and pressed her lips to it, and Yarvi’s skin crawled.

His uncle looked at Mother Gundring, and gave the slightest nod. His minister looked back, and gave the slightest shrug. Then Odem touched Yarvi’s mother on the cheek and strode away, back toward the gate, his servants and closest guards about him in an eager gaggle.

The last trickle of warriors were following their brothers out of the citadel, no more than three dozen left in the yard. Yarvi’s mother clasped her hands, and looked up toward the gatehouse, and Yarvi fancied she might even have met his eye.

“Thank you, Mother,” he whispered. Once again he lifted his withered hand to Jaud. Once again he watched Odem approach the gate. But this time, instead of seeing the gods pull all his plans apart, he saw them offer him his chance.

“Wait,” he whispered, the hot breath of the word tickling at his lips.

“Wait.” Here was the day. Here the hour.

“Wait.” Here the moment.

“Now.”

He chopped down his crippled hand and, weak though it was, thanks to the ingenuity of six ministers of old, it fell with the weight of mountains. Jaud snatched free the pin, gears whirred, a chain snapped taut, and the reason for the name was suddenly made clear. With a shrieking like all the dead in hell and a blast of wind that tore Yarvi’s helmet off and slammed him against the wall, the Screaming Gate plunged through the floor.

It struck the ground below with a crash that shook the citadel to its elf-tunneled roots, sealing the entrance with a weight of metal Father Earth himself would have strained to lift.

The floor reeled, tipped, and Yarvi wondered for a moment if the very gatehouse was collapsing at that shattering impact.

He stumbled to a slot in the floor, trying to shake the dizziness from his head, the ringing from his ears. The passageway below was full of Odem’s closest. Some were tottering with hands clasped to

their heads. Some were fumbling out their weapons. Some clustered at the gate, silently shouting, silently, stupidly, uselessly beating against the screaming faces. The false king himself stood in their midst, staring up. His eyes met Yarvi's, and his face paled as though he saw a demon that had clawed its way back through the Last Door.

And Yarvi smiled.

Then he felt himself seized by the shoulder.

Nothing was dragging at him, shouting in his face, he could see his mouth moving in the slot in his helmet, but could hear only a vague burble.

He scrambled after, the floor settling to level, down a winding stair, bouncing from the walls, jostled by men behind. Nothing flung a door wide, a bright archway in the dark, and they burst into the open air.

THE LAST DOOR

In the yard of the citadel, chaos ruled.

Weapons swung and splinters flew, steel clashed and faces snarled, arrows flitted and bodies dropped, all in dream-like silence.

Just as Yarvi had planned, his mother's hirelings had spilled from hidden doorways and taken Odem's veterans in their backs, hacked them down where they stood, driven them witless about the yard, left their scattered bodies bleeding.

But those that survived the first shock were fighting back fiercely, the battle broken up into ugly little struggles to the death. In blinking silence Yarvi watched one of the Shend women stabbing at a man while he opened gashes down her face with the rim of his shield.

Just as he had planned, Yarvi saw Rulf and his archers send a flight of arrows from the roofs. Silently they went up, silently rattled down, prickling the shields of Odem's closest guards, formed into a knot about their king. One man caught a shaft in the face and seemed hardly to notice, still pointing toward the Godshall with his sword, still bellowing silent words. Another went down, clutching at an arrow in his side, clutching at the leg of the man beside him who kicked his hand away and shuffled on. Yarvi knew them both, honored men who once stood guard at the entrance to the king's chamber.

Battle makes all men animals, Yarvi's father used to tell him. He saw a snarling thug with *sheep thief* written on his cheek cut down an unarmed slave, water jug flying from his hands and shattering against a wall.

Could this be what he had planned? What he had prayed for?

He had flung wide the door, and begged Mother War to be his guest. He could not stop this. No one could. Surviving it would be challenge enough.

He saw Nothing hack the legs from under one man, slash another across the back as he turned to run, shove another by the shield so he tottered into the low wall of the well and over, vanishing from sight into the depths.

In a deafened stupor he dragged Shadikshirram's sword from its sheath. That was what a man did in battle, wasn't it? Gods, it felt heavy all of a sudden. Men jostled him as they ran past to join the madness, but he was rooted to the earth.

He saw the doors of the Godshall standing open, Odem's guards crouching behind arrow-bristled shields around the archway, shepherding the false king into the shadows.

Yarvi pointed his sword toward them, shouted, "There!" The deafness was fading. Enough that he heard thudding footsteps in time to spin around.

But not to do much more.

Steel clashed on steel and the sword was wrenched in his fist, almost out of his hand. He caught a glimpse of Hurik's scarred face, heard a snatch of his low growl before his shield crashed into Yarvi's chest, lifted him from his feet and dumped him groaning on his back two strides away.

Hurik's eyes slid sideways and he twisted to catch an ax on his shield, splinters spinning from the force of the blow. Jaud, charging in with a roar, hacking away like a mad woodsman at a stump. Hurik

gave ground, blocked the second blow, but the third was clumsy and he caught it in a ready crouch, steering it wide, the heavy blade missing his shoulder by a hand's breadth and thudding into the turf. He clubbed Jaud in the head with the rim of his shield as he stumbled past, knocking him off balance, then with a short chop of his sword ripped the ax from Jaud's hand.

It seemed a baker was no match for a queen's Chosen Shield, however good a man he was.

Hurik's bared teeth showed white in his black beard, his sword flashed as he stabbed, blade sinking into Jaud's ribs to the hilt.

"No," croaked Yarvi, struggling to get up, but wanting a thing is not always enough.

Jaud dropped to his knees, face crushed up with pain, and Hurik planted one great boot on his shoulder, ripped his sword free, then kicked Jaud onto his back. He turned to Yarvi.

"Let us finish what we started in Amwend."

He stepped forward, red sword raised. Yarvi would have liked to face Death smiling, but few have courage when the Last Door yawns before them, even kings. Kings least of all, perhaps. He slithered back, holding up his withered hand as though that might ward off the blade.

Hurik's lip twisted. "What a king you would have made—"

"We shall see."

Hurik's chin was jerked back and there was steel under his white-streaked beard. A dagger, polished to an icy gleam. The face of Yarvi's mother, eyes narrowed and jaw clenched, appeared beside his.

"Drop your sword, Hurik."

He hesitated for a moment and she leaned closer and murmured in his ear. "You know me. Few better. Can it really be ..." and she twisted the blade until a line of blood ran down his thick neck, "that you doubt my will?"

Hurik swallowed, wincing as the knobble on his stubbled throat squirmed against the steel, then let his blade clatter to the dirt. Yarvi scrambled up, clutching Shadikshirram's sword, leveling the point at Hurik's chest.

"Wait," said his mother. "First answer me this. For nineteen years you have been my Chosen Shield. Why break your oath?"

Hurik's eyes shifted to Yarvi. Sad they looked now, and broken. "Odem told me the boy must die, or you must."

"And why not kill Odem where he stood?"

"Because the High King had decreed it!" Hurik hissed out. "And the High King would not be denied. My oath was to protect you, Laithlin." He pushed his shoulders back, and slowly closed his eyes. "Not your crippled son."

"Then consider your oath discharged."

The smallest movement of the knife and Yarvi stumbled back as blood spotted his cheek. Hurik fell, and keeled on his face, and Yarvi stood with his sword slack in his hand, blinking down at the dark pool creeping through the grass.

His skin was flushed and prickling. The breath tore at his throat. Lights danced in his eyes, his limbs heavy, bruised chest throbbing. He wanted only to sit down. To sit in the darkness and cry.

The dead and wounded were scattered blade-slashed and arrow-prickled across the grass where Yarvi had played as a child. Cherished swords and shields, heirlooms of noble houses, had fallen from lifeless fingers and lay shattered, filthy with blood. The doors of the Godshall were sealed,

those of Yarvi's men still standing gathered about them, Rulf's face red-streaked from a cut in his hair. The two big Inglings were pounding away with their axes but the heavy wood stayed firm.

And against the trunk of the spreading cedar, that Yarvi's brother used to mock him for being too scared to climb, Jaud sat still with head tipped back and hands limp in his bloody lap. Sumael knelt beside him, her head hanging and her lips curled from her teeth, clutching at one bloody fistful of his shirt, as though she might lift him up. As though she might carry him to safety, as he once carried her. But there was nowhere to take him, even had she had the strength.

Nowhere but through the Last Door.

And Yarvi realized then that Death does not bow to each person who passes her, does not sweep out her arm respectfully to show the way, speaks no profound words, unlocks no bolts. The key upon her chest is never needed, for the Last Door stands always open. She herds the dead through impatiently, heedless of rank or fame or quality. She has an ever-lengthening queue to get through. A blind procession, inexhaustible.

"What have I done?" whispered Yarvi, taking a halting step toward Jaud and Sumael.

"What you had to." His mother's grip on his arm was iron. "There is no time to mourn, now, my son. My king." One side of her face was pale, the other dotted red, and she looked at that moment like Mother War indeed. "Follow Odem." She squeezed harder. "Kill him, and take back the Black Chair."

Yarvi clenched his jaw then, and nodded. There could be no going back.

"Stop that!" he called at the Inglings. "There are better ways." They lowered their axes to stare darkly at him. "Mother, stay with them and watch the door. Make sure no one leaves."

"Not until Odem is dead," she said.

"Nothing, Rulf, gather a dozen men and follow me."

Rulf stared at the carnage in the yard of the citadel, breathing hard. The wounded and the dying, the hobbling and the bleeding. And Jaud, brave Jaud, who had stood by his oarmate, sitting with his back to the trunk of the cedar, no oar to pull, no load to lift, no encouragement to give any longer.

"Will I find a dozen still able?" he whispered.

Yarvi turned away. "Get what there is."

A LONELY SEAT

“Ready?” whispered Yarvi.

“Always,” said Nothing.

Rulf worked his head one way then the other, the blood that streaked his face black in the shadows.

“Don’t see that I’ll get any readier.”

Yarvi heaved in a great breath, and as he pushed it out drove the heel of his twisted hand into the catch, barged the hidden door open with his shoulder, and burst into the sacred vastness of the Godshall.

Empty at the top of its dais the Black Chair stood, in the sight of the Tall Gods, their jeweled eyes agleam. Above them, about the dome, the amber statues of the Small Gods observed the petty doings of humanity without comment, emotion, or even much interest.

Odem had only ten men left and those in a sorry state, clustered about the doors as they shook faintly from blows outside. Two were trying to shore them up with spears. Two others had swept the holy offerings from a table shiny with age and were dragging it toward the entrance as a barricade. The rest sat bewildered or stood stunned, not knowing how their king could have been taken unawares by a company of rogues in the heart of his own citadel. Mother Gundring hunched beside Odem, tending to his standard-bearer’s bleeding arm.

“To the king!” he shrieked as he saw Yarvi burst in, and Odem’s men clustered about their master, raising their shields before him, weapons ready. The man with the arrow in his face had snapped it off, the bloody shaft poking from his cheek. He had been leaning groggily on his sword but now he pointed it, wobbling, toward Yarvi.

Nothing rushed up at his left shoulder, Rulf at his right, and those slaves and mercenaries who could still fight spread out about them, bristling with sharpened metal.

They edged around the Black Chair, down the steps of the dais, spitting and rasping curses in half a dozen languages. Odem urged his men forward, the space between them ten strides of stone, then eight, then six, the coming violence hanging heavy as a stormcloud in the still air of the Godshall.

Then Mother Gundring squinted toward Yarvi, and her eyes went wide. “Wait!” she screamed, beating her elf-staff upon the ground and sending crashing echoes bouncing about the dome above. “Wait!”

For a moment the men held, staring, snarling, hands tickling their weapons, and Yarvi leapt into the narrow gap of opportunity the old minister had opened for him.

“Men of Gettland!” he shouted. “You know me! I am Yarvi, son of Uthrik!” And he pointed at Odem with the one stubby finger of his left hand. “This treacherous *thing* tried to steal the Black Chair, but the gods will not suffer a usurper to sit upon it for long!” He dug his thumb into his chest. “The rightful king of Gettland has returned!”

“The woman’s puppet?” spat Odem at him. “The half-king? The king of cripples?”

Before Yarvi could shriek his reply he felt a strong hand on his shoulder, steering him aside. Nothing stepped past, unbuckling the strap on his helmet. “No,” he said. “The rightful king.” And he pulled it off and tossed it spinning across the floor of the Godshall with a steely clatter.

He had chopped his wild shag of hair to a short gray fuzz, shaved clean his thicket of a beard. The face revealed was all sharp angles and ruthless lines, bones broken and set harder, work- and weather-worn, beating- and battle-scarred. The beggar of twigs and string was gone, and in his place a warrior of oak and iron stood, but his eyes, deep set in hollow sockets, were the same.

Still burning with a fire at the brink of madness. Hotter than ever.

And suddenly Yarvi was no longer sure who this man was that he had traveled beside, fought beside, slept beside. No longer sure what he had brought with him into the citadel of Gettland, right to the Black Chair itself.

He blinked around him, suddenly full of doubt. The young warriors of Gettland still growled their defiance. But on the older men the sight of Nothing's face worked a strange transformation.

Jaws dropped, blades wavered, eyes widened, even brimmed with tears, breathed oaths drifted from quivering lips. Odem had turned paler even than when he saw Yarvi. The face of a man who looks upon the end of creation.

"What sorcery is this?" whispered Rulf, but Yarvi could not say.

The elf-metal staff slipped from Mother Gundring's limp fingers and clattered to the floor, the echoes fading into heavy silence.

"Uthil," she whispered.

"Yes." And Nothing turned his mad smile on Odem. "Well met, brother."

And now the name was spoken Yarvi saw how like the two men were, and felt a chill to the tips of his fingers.

His uncle Uthil, whose matchless skill the warriors toasted before every training, whose drowned body had never been washed from the bitter sea, whose howe above the wind-blasted beach stood empty.

His uncle Uthil had been standing at his side for months.

His uncle Uthil stood before him now.

"Here is the reckoning," said Nothing. Said Uthil. And he stepped forward, sword in hand.

"Blood cannot be shed in the Godshall!" shouted Mother Gundring.

Uthil only smiled. "The gods love nothing better than blood, my minister. What better place to shed it?"

"Kill him!" shrieked Odem, no calm in his voice now, but no one rushed to obey. No one so much as spoke a word. "I am your king!"

But power can be a brittle thing. Slowly, carefully, as though they thought with one mind, the warriors backed away from him to form a crescent.

"The Black Chair is a lonely seat indeed," said Uthil, glancing up at it, empty on its dais.

The muscles in Odem's jaw worked as he gazed at the circle of grim faces ranged about him, at those of his guards and those of the hirelings, at Mother Gundring's and at Yarvi's, and finally at Uthil's, so like his own, but passed through twenty years of horrors. He snorted, and spat on the holy stones at his brother's feet.

"So be it, then." And Odem snatched his shield from its bearer, gilded and with winking jewels set in its rim, and barged the man away.

Rulf offered out his shield but Nothing shook his head. "Wood has its place, but here steel is the answer." And he raised his blade, the same simple one he had carried through the wastes, plain steel polished to a frosty shine.

“You have been so long away, *brother*.” Odem lifted his sword, one forged for Yarvi’s father, pommel of ivory and hilt of gold, runes of blessing worked into the mirror-bright blade. “Let us embrace.”

He darted forward, so scorpion-quick that Yarvi gave a gasp and stumbled back a pace himself, twitching this way and that as he followed his uncles’ movements. Odem thrust, and thrust again, hissed as he slashed high and low with blows to cleave a man in two. But fast and deadly as he was, his brother was faster. Like smoke on a mad wind Uthil drifted, twisted, reeled, while the bright steel carved the air but gave him not a kiss.

“Do you remember when we last saw each other?” Uthil asked as he danced away. “In that storm, at the prow of our father’s ship? Laughing into the gale with my brothers at my back?”

“You never cared for anything but your laughter!” Odem rushed in again, chopping left and right and making the watchful guards lurch back. But Uthil wheeled to safety, not even raising his sword.

“Is that why you and Uthrik together threw me into the bitter sea? Or was it so that he could steal my birthright? And you in turn could steal it from him?”

“The Black Chair is mine!” Odem’s sword was a shining arc over his head. But Uthil caught it on his own with a ringing crash. He caught Odem’s shield as well and for a moment Yarvi’s two uncles were locked together, blades grating. Then Uthil dipped his shoulder and jerked the shield upward, the rim cracking into Odem’s jaw. He twisted his other shoulder and flung Odem away, heels kicking at the stones, falling in a tangle against the men behind him.

They pushed him off and Odem shrank behind his shield, but Uthil only stood his ground in the center of the circle. “Even though my empty howe stands above the beach, I did not drown. I was plucked from the sea by slavers, and made to fight in a pit. And in those years in the darkness, for the amusement of blood-drunk animals, I killed ninety-nine men.” Uthil pressed a finger to his ear, and for a moment looked like Nothing once again. “I hear them whisper, sometimes. Can you hear them whisper, Odem?”

“You’re mad!” spat Odem, blood on his lips.

But Uthil only smiled the wider. “How could it be otherwise? They promise a hundredth victory will set you free, but I was tricked and sold again.” Odem circled him, stalking in a hunter’s crouch, shield up, sweat across his forehead from the weight of his silvered mail. Uthil stood tall, sword swinging loose and easy in his hand, scarcely even breathing hard. “I was a war-slave, then an oarslave, then ... nothing. A dozen bitter years I spent upon my knees. It is a good place to think.”

“Think on this!” Odem spat blood as he came again, feinted a thrust and made it into a hissing, angling cut. But Uthil steered it wide to crash into the stone of the floor, striking sparks and filling the Godshall with ear-splitting echoes.

Odem gasped, stumbled, shuddering with the impact, and Uthil stepped away and with a terrible precision slashed him across the arm, just above his shield’s garnet-studded rim.

Odem gave a howl, the gaudy thing sliding from his limp left hand and the blood already tapping on it from his dangling fingertips. He looked up at Uthil, eyes wide. “I was the best among the three of us! I should have been king! Uthrik was nothing but violence, you nothing but vanity!”

“So true.” Uthil frowned as he wiped both sides of his sword carefully on his sleeve. “How the gods have punished me for it. The lessons they have taught me, Odem. And now they have sent me to teach one to you. They do not make the best man king, but the first-born.” He nodded toward Yarvi. “And our nephew was right about one thing. They will not suffer a usurper to sit in the Black Chair

for long.” He bared his teeth and hissed out the words. “It is *mine*.”

He sprang forward and Odem met him snarling. Blades clashed, once, twice, faster than Yarvi could follow. The third blow Uthil slid beneath, slashing his brother’s leg as he danced away and making him roar again. Odem winced, knee buckling, only staying upright by using his sword as a crutch.

“The Last Door opens for you,” said Uthil.

Odem found his balance, chest heaving, and Yarvi saw the silvered mail on his leg turned red, fast-flowing blood working its way out from his boot down the cracks between the stones.

“I know it.” Odem lifted his chin, and Yarvi saw a tear leak from the corner of his eye and streak his face. “It has stood open at my shoulder all these years.” And with a sound between a snort and a sob, he tossed his sword down to clatter into the shadows. “Ever since that day in the storm.”

The blood surged in Yarvi’s ears as Uthil lifted his sword high, blade catching the light and its edge glittering cold.

“Just answer me one question ...” breathed Odem, eyes fixed above him on his death.

For a moment Uthil hesitated. The sword wavered, drifted down. One brow twitched up, questioning. “Speak, brother.”

And Yarvi saw Odem’s hand shifting, subtly shifting around his back, fingers curling toward the hilt of a dagger at his belt. A long dagger with a pommel of black jet. The same one he had showed to Yarvi on the roof of Amwend’s tower.

We must do what is best for Gettland.

Yarvi sprang down the steps in one bound.

He might not have been the sharpest pupil in the training square, but he knew how to stab a man. He caught Odem under the arm and the curved blade of Shadikshirram’s sword slid through his mail and out of his chest with hardly a sound.

“Whatever your question,” Yarvi hissed into his ear, “steel is my answer!” And he stepped back, ripping the blade free.

Odem gave a bubbling gasp. He took one drunken step and dropped onto his knees. He slowly turned his head, and for a moment, over his shoulder, his disbelieving eye met Yarvi’s. Then he toppled sideways. He lay still on the sacred stones, at the foot of the dais, in the sight of the gods, in the center of that circle of men, and Yarvi and Uthil were left staring at each other over his body.

“It seems there is a question between us, nephew,” said his one surviving uncle, that one brow still raised. “Shall steel be our answer?”

Yarvi’s eyes flickered up to the Black Chair, standing silent above them.

Hard it might be, but harder than the benches of the *South Wind*? Cold it might be, but colder than the snows of the utmost north? He did not fear it anymore. But did he truly want it? He remembered his father sitting in it, tall and grim, his scarred hand never far from his sword. A doting son to Mother War, just as a king of Gettland should be. Just as Uthil was.

The statues of the Tall Gods gazed down, as though awaiting a decision, and Yarvi looked from one stony face to another, and took a long breath. Mother Gundring always said he had been touched by Father Peace, and he knew she was right.

He had never really wanted the Black Chair. Why fight for it? Why die for it? So Gettland could have half a king?

He made of his fist an open hand, and let Shadikshirram’s sword drop rattling to the bloody stones.

“I have my vengeance,” he said. “The Black Chair is yours.” And he slowly sank to his knees before Uthil, and bowed his head. “My king.”

THE BLAME

Grom-gil-Gorm, King of Vansterland, bloodiest son of Mother War, Breaker of Swords and Maker of Orphans, strode into the Godshall with his minister and ten of his most battle-tested warriors at his back, huge left hand slack upon the hilt of his huge sword.

He had a new white fur about his heavy shoulders, Yarvi noticed, and a new jewel on one great forefinger, and the triple-looped chain about his neck had lengthened by a few pommels. Mementos of his bloody jaunt through Gettland, at Yarvi's invitation, stolen from the innocent along with their lives, no doubt.

But the hugest thing of all, as he stepped between the scarred doors and into the house of his enemy, was his smile. The smile of a conqueror, who sees all his plans ripen, all his adversaries brought low, all the dice come up his number. The smile of a man greatly favored by the gods.

Then he saw Yarvi standing on the steps of the dais between his mother and Mother Gundring, and his smile buckled. And then he saw who sat in the Black Chair, and it crumpled entire. He came to an uncertain halt in the center of that wide floor, on about the spot where Odem's blood still stained the cracks in the stones, surrounded on all sides by the glowering great of Gettland.

Then he scratched at one side of his head, and said, "This is not the king we expected."

"Many here might say so," said Yarvi. "But it is the rightful one, even so. King Uthil, my eldest uncle, has returned."

"Uthil." Mother Scaer gave a hiss through her teeth. "The proud Gettlander. I thought I knew that face."

"You might have mentioned it." Gorm frowned around at the gathered warriors and wives, keys and cloak-buckles all aglitter in the shadows, and heaved up a weighty sigh. "I've an unhappy sense you will not be kneeling before me as my vassal."

"I have spent long enough on my knees." Uthil stood, his sword still cradled in his arms. That same plain sword he had taken up from the listing deck of the *South Wind* and polished until the blade glittered like moonlight on the chill sea. "If anyone kneels it should be you. You stand on my land, in my hall, before my chair."

Gorm lifted the toes of his boots and peered down at them. "So it would seem. But I have always been stiff in the joints. I must decline."

"A shame. Perhaps I can unstiffen you with my sword when I visit you in Vulsgard in the summer."

Gorm's face hardened. "Oh, I can guarantee any Gettlander who crosses the border a warm welcome."

"Why wait for summer, then?" Uthil took the steps one by one, until he stood on the lowest, so that he looked straight into Gorm's face on about a level footing. "Fight me now."

A twitch began at the corner of Gorm's eye and set his cheek to flutter. Yarvi saw his scarred knuckles white on the grip of his sword, the eyes of his warriors darting about the room, the gathered men of Gettland hardening their frowns. "You should know that Mother War breathed upon me in my crib," growled the King of Vansterland. "It has been foreseen no man can kill me—"

"Then fight me, dog!" roared Uthil, the echoes crashing about the hall and every person holding

their breath as if it would be their last. Yarvi wondered if they might see a second king die in the Godshall within a day, and he would not have cared to bet on which of these two it would be.

Then Mother Scaer rested her thin hand gently on Gorm's fist. "The gods guard those who guard themselves," she whispered.

The King of Vansterland took a long breath. His shoulders relaxed, and he peeled his fingers from his sword and gently combed them through his beard. "This new king is very rude," he said.

"He is," said Mother Scaer. "Did you not teach him diplomacy, Mother Gundring?"

The old minister gazed sternly at them from her place beside the Black Chair. "I did. And who deserves it."

"I believe she means we don't," said Gorm.

"I take that to be the case," answered Mother Scaer. "And find her rude also."

"Is this how you keep a bargain, Prince Yarvi?"

This hall full of worthies had once lined up to kiss Yarvi's hand. Now they looked as if they would happily queue to cut his throat. He shrugged. "I am prince no longer, and I have kept what I could. No one foresaw this turn of events."

"There's events for you," said Mother Scaer. "They never flow quite down the channel you dig for them."

"You will not fight me, then?" asked Uthil.

"Why so very bloodthirsty?" Gorm pushed out his bottom lip. "You are new in the job, but you will learn a king is more than just a killer. Let us give Father Peace his season, abide by the wishes of the High King in Skekenhouse and make of the fist an open hand. In summer, perhaps, on ground that suits me better, you can put Mother War's breath to the test." He turned away, and followed by his minister and his warriors, strode for the door. "I thank you for your winning hospitality, Gettlanders! You will hear from me!" He paused for a moment on the threshold, a great black outline against the daylight. "And on that day, I shall speak in thunder."

The doors of the Godshall were swung shut upon them.

"The time may come when we wish we had killed him here today," murmured Yarvi's mother.

"Death waits for us all," said Uthil, lowering himself back into the Black Chair, sword still cradled in his arms. He had a way of sitting in it, slouched and easy, that Yarvi never could have managed. "And we have other matters to attend to." The king's eyes drifted across to Yarvi's, bright as the day they met upon the *South Wind*. "My nephew. Once prince, once king, now—"

"Nothing," said Yarvi, lifting his chin.

Uthil gave the faintest sad smile at that. A glimpse of the man Yarvi had slogged through the ice with, shared his last crust with, faced death beside. A glimpse, then the king's face was sword-sharp and ax-hard once again.

"You made a pact with Grom-gil-Gorm," he said, and angry mutterings broke out about the hall. *A wise king always has someone to blame*, Mother Gundring used to say. "You invited our most bitter enemy to spread fire and murder across Gettland." Yarvi could hardly deny it, even if denials could have been heard above the mounting anger in the Godshall. "Good people died. What price does the law demand for that, Mother Gundring?"

The minister looked from her new king to her old apprentice, and Yarvi felt his mother's hand grip tight at his arm, for they both knew the answer. "Death, my king," croaked Mother Gundring, seeming to slump against her staff. "Or exile, at the least."

“Death!” screeched a woman’s voice from somewhere in the darkness, and the harsh echoes faded into a quiet stony as a tomb’s.

Yarvi had faced Death before. Many times, now, she had eased open the Last Door for him, and he was still casting a shadow. Though he was far from comfortable in her chill presence, as with many things he had improved with practice. This time at least, though his heart pounded and his mouth was sour, he faced her standing, and let his voice ring out clear.

“I made a mistake!” called Yarvi. “I made many. I know it. But I swore an oath! Before the gods I swore it. A sun-oath and a moon-oath. And I saw no other way to keep it. To avenge the killing of my father and brother. To turn the traitor Odem out of the Black Chair. And, though I am sorry for the blood that was spilled, thanks to the favor of the gods ...” Yarvi gazed up toward them, then humbly down at the floor, spreading his arms in submission. “The rightful king has returned.”

Uthil frowned toward his hand, fingers resting upon the metal of the Black Chair. A small reminder that he owed it to Yarvi’s plans could do no harm. The angry muttering began again, mounted, swelled, until Uthil raised his hand to bring silence.

“It is true that Odem set you on the path,” he said. “His crimes were greater by far than yours, and you have already delivered his just punishment. You had reasons for what you did, and there has been enough death here, I think. Yours would be no justice.”

Yarvi kept his head bowed, and swallowed his relief. In spite of the hardships of the last few months, he liked being alive. He liked it more than ever.

“But there must be a reckoning.” And it seemed there was a sadness in Uthil’s eyes. “I am sorry, truly I am. But your sentence must be exile, for a man who has sat once in the Black Chair will always seek to reclaim it.”

“I didn’t think it so very comfortable.” Yarvi took one step up the dais. He knew what he had to do. He had known ever since Odem lay dead at his feet and he saw the face of Father Peace above him. Exile was not without some appeal. To owe nothing. To be anything. But he had wandered long enough. This was his home, and he was going nowhere.

“I never wanted the Black Chair. I never expected it.” Yarvi lifted his left hand and shook it so the one finger flopped back and forth. “I am no one’s notion of a king, least of all my own.” In silence he knelt. “I offer another solution.”

Uthil’s eyes narrowed, and Yarvi prayed to Father Peace that his uncle was looking for a way to pardon him. “Speak, then.”

“Let me do what is best for Gettland. Let me give up all claim to your chair forever. Let me take the Minister’s Test, as I was to do before my father’s death. Let me surrender all title and inheritance, and let my family be the Ministry. I belong here, in the Godshall. Not in the Black Chair, but beside it. Show your greatness through your mercy, my king, and let me atone for my mistakes through loyal service to you and to the land.”

Uthil slowly sat back, frowning, while the silence stretched out. Finally the king leaned toward his minister.

“What think you to this, Mother Gundring?”

“A solution Father Peace will smile upon,” she murmured. “I always believed Yarvi would make a fine minister. I still believe it. He has proved himself a deep-cunning man.”

“That much I believe.” But Uthil still hesitated, rubbing at his sharp jaw in consideration.

Then his mother let go Yarvi’s arm and swept up toward the Black Chair, the train of her red dress

spilling down the steps as she knelt at Uthil's feet. "A great king is merciful," she murmured. "Please, my king. Let me have my only son."

Uthil stirred, and his mouth opened but no words came. He might have been fearless before Grom-gil-Gorm, but faced with Yarvi's mother he trembled.

"We were once promised to each other," she said. One hard breath would have sounded like thunder in the Godshall, then, but every breath was held. "You were thought dead ... but the gods have brought you back to your rightful place...." She put her hand gently upon the scarred back of his, where it rested on the arm of the Black Chair, and Uthil's eyes were fixed on her face. "My dearest wish is to see that promise fulfilled."

Mother Gundring shuffled closer, speaking low. "The High King has proposed marriage to Laithlin more than once, he will take it very ill—"

Uthil did not look at her. His voice was rough. "Our promise is older than the High King's suit by twenty years."

"But only today Grandmother Wexen sent another eagle to—"

"Does Grandmother Wexen sit in the Black Chair, or do I?" Uthil finally turned his bright eyes on his minister.

"You do." Mother Gundring turned hers to the floor. The wise minister coaxes, wheedles, argues, advises, and the wise minister obeys.

"Then send Grandmother Wexen's bird back to her with an invitation to our wedding." Uthil turned over his hand so that he held Yarvi's mother's in his calloused palm, worn to the shape of a scrubbing block. "You will wear the key to my treasury, Laithlin, and manage those affairs at which you have proved yourself so very able."

"Gladly," said Yarvi's mother. "And my son?"

King Uthil looked at Yarvi for a long moment. Then he nodded. "He shall take back his place as Mother Gundring's apprentice." And at a stroke he made himself look stern and merciful both at once.

Yarvi breathed out. "At last Gettland has a king to be proud of," he said. "I will thank Mother Sea every day for sending you back from the depths."

And he stood and followed Grom-gil-Gorm toward the doors. He smiled through the taunts, and the jeering, and the mutters, and rather than hide his withered hand up his sleeve as his old habit had been, he let it proudly dangle. Compared to the slave pens of Vulsgard, and the torments of Trigg's whip, and the cold and hunger of the trackless ice, the scorn of fools was not so very difficult to endure.

With a little help from his two mothers, each no doubt with her own reasons, Yarvi walked from the Godshall alive. A crippled outcast once again, and bound for the Ministry. Where he belonged.

He had come full circle. But he had left a boy, and returned a man.

THE DEAD WERE LAID OUT on chill slabs in a chill cellar beneath the rock. Yarvi did not want to count them. Enough. That was their number. The harvest of his carefully-sown plans. The consequences of his rash oath sworn. No faces, only shrouds peaked at the nose, the chin, the feet. There was no way to tell his mother's hired killers from the honored warriors of Gettland. Perhaps, once they had passed through the Last Door, there was no difference.

Yarvi knew which body was Jaud's, though. His friend's. His oarmate's. The man who had forged a path through the snow for him to follow. Whose soft voice had murmured "one stroke at a time" as

he whimpered over the oar. Who had taken Yarvi's fight as his own, even though he had been no fighter. It was the one Sumael stood beside, her clenched fists on the slab, dark face lit down one side by the flame of a single flickering taper.

"Your mother's found a place for me on a ship," she said, without looking up, her voice with a softness he was not used to hearing there.

"Good navigators are always in demand," said Yarvi. The gods knew, he could have done with someone to point out the path for him.

"We leave at first light for Skekenhouse, then on."

"Home?" he asked.

Sumael closed her eyes, and nodded, the faintest smile at the corner of her scarred mouth. "Home." When he first saw her he had not thought of her as fine-looking, but she seemed beautiful now. So much he could not look away.

"Have you thought that, maybe ... you could stay?" Yarvi hated himself even for asking. For making her turn him down. He was bound for the Ministry anyway. He had nothing to offer her. And Jaud's body lay between them, a barrier there was no crossing.

"I have to go," she said. "I can barely remember who I used to be."

He could have said the same. "Surely all that matters is who you are now."

"I barely know that either. Besides, Jaud carried me, in the snow." Her hand twitched toward the shroud, but much to Yarvi's relief she let it lie. "The least I can do is carry his ashes. I'll leave them at his village. Maybe I'll even drink from that well of his. Drink for both of us." She swallowed, and all the while for some reason Yarvi felt a cold anger growing in him. "Why miss the sweetest water in the—"

"He chose to stay," snapped Yarvi.

Sumael slowly nodded, not looking up. "We all did."

"I didn't force him."

"No."

"You could have left, and taken him, if you'd fought harder."

Now she looked up, but with none of the anger he knew he deserved, only her own share of the guilt. "You're right. That will be my weight to carry."

Yarvi looked away, and suddenly his eyes swam with tears. A set of things done, and choices made, and each had seemed the lesser evil but had somehow led him here. Could this really be anyone's greater good?

"You don't hate me?" he whispered.

"I've lost one friend, I don't mean to throw away another." And she put one hand gently on his shoulder. "I'm not much good at making new ones."

He pressed his own on top of it, wishing he could hold it there. Strange, how you never see how much you want a thing until you know you cannot have it.

"You don't blame me?" he whispered.

"Why would I?" She gave him a last parting squeeze, then let him go. "It's better if you do it."

SOME ARE SAVED

"I'm glad you came," said Yarvi. "I'm fast running out of friends."

"Happy to do it," said Rulf. "For you and for Ankran. Can't say I loved the skinny bastard when he was storekeeper, but I warmed to him in the end." He grinned at Yarvi, the big scab above his eye shifting. "Some men you stick to right off, but it's those that take time to stick as stick longest. Shall we get some slaves?"

There was a muttering, and a grunting, and a clattering of chains as the wares got to their feet for inspection, each pair of eyes with its own mixture of shame, and fear, and hope, and hopelessness, and Yarvi found himself rubbing gently at the faint scars on his throat where his own collar used to sit. The stink of the place smothered him with memories he would much rather have forgotten. Strange, how quickly he had grown used to free air again.

"Prince Yarvi!" The proprietor hurried from the shadows at the back, a big man with a soft, pale face, faintly familiar. One of the procession who had groveled before Yarvi at his father's howing up. Now he would have a chance to grovel again.

"I'm a prince no longer," said Yarvi, "but, otherwise, yes. You're Yoverfell?"

The flesh-dealer puffed up with pride at being known. "Indeed I am, and deeply honored by your visit! Might I ask what sort of slave you are—"

"Does the name Ankran mean much to you?"

The merchant's eyes flickered to Rulf, standing grim and solid with his thumbs in his silver-buckled sword-belt. "Ankran?"

"Let me sharpen your memory as the reek of your shop has sharpened mine. You sold a man called Ankran, then extorted money from him to keep his wife and child safe."

Yoverfell cleared his throat. "I have broken no law—"

"And nor will I when I call in your debts."

The merchant's face had drained of color. "I owe you nothing..."

Yarvi chuckled. "Me? No. But my mother, Laithlin, soon to be once again the Golden Queen of Gettland and holder of the key to the treasury ... I understand you do owe her a trifling debt?"

The knobble on the merchant's scrawny throat bobbed as he swallowed. "I am my queen's most humble servant—"

"Her slave, I'd call you. If you sold all you own it wouldn't come close to covering what you owe her."

"Her slave, then, why not?" Yoverfell gave a bitter snort. "Since you concern yourself with my business, it was because of the interest on her loans that I had to squeeze what I could from Ankran. I did not want to do it—"

"But you put your wishes aside," said Yarvi. "How noble."

"What do you want?"

"Let us begin with the woman and her child."

"Very well." Eyes on the ground, the merchant scraped away into the shadows. Yarvi looked across at Rulf, and the old warrior raised his brows, and about them the slaves looked on in silence. Yarvi

thought one might be smiling.

He was not sure what he had been expecting. Outstanding beauty, or stunning grace, or something that struck him instantly to the heart. But Ankran's family were an ordinary-looking pair. Most people are, of course, to those that don't know them. The mother was small and slight with a defiant set to her jaw. The son was sandy-headed, as his father had been, and kept his eyes down.

Yoverfell ushered them forward, then plucked nervously at one of his hands with the other. "Healthy and well cared for, as promised. They are yours, of course, gifts, with my compliments."

"Your compliments you can keep," said Yarvi. "Now you will pack up here, and move your business to Vulsgard."

"Vulsgard?"

"Yes. They have many flesh-dealers there, you will feel very much at home."

"But why?"

"So you can keep an eye on the business of Grom-gil-Gorm. Know your enemy's house better than your own, I've heard it said."

Rulf gave an approving grunt, puffed out his chest a little and shifted his thumbs in his sword-belt.

"It's that," said Yarvi, "or find yourself being sold in your own shop. What price would you fetch, do you think?"

Yoverfell cleared his throat. "I will make the arrangements."

"Quickly," said Yarvi, and strode from the stink of that place to stand in the air and breathe, eyes closed.

"You ... are our new owner, then?"

Ankran's wife stood beside him, one finger wedged inside her collar.

"No. My name is Yarvi, this is Rulf."

"We were friends of your husband," said Rulf, ruffling the boy's hair and causing him some discomfort.

"Were?" she asked. "Where is Ankran?"

Yarvi swallowed, wondering how to break that news, searching for the proper words—

"Dead," said Rulf, simply.

"I'm sorry," added Yarvi. "He died saving my life, which strikes even me as a poor trade. But you are free."

"Free?" she muttered.

"Yes."

"I don't want to be free, I want to be safe."

Yarvi blinked at that, then felt his mouth twitch into a sad smile. He had never wanted much more himself. "I daresay I could use a servant, if you're willing to work."

"I always have been that," she said.

Yarvi stopped beside a smith's shop, and flicked a coin over a trestle covered with boat-maker's tools. One of the first coins of the new kind—round and perfect, and stamped on one side with his own mother's frowning face.

"Strike their collars," he said.

Ankran's family gave no thanks for their freedom, but the ringing of hammer on chisel was thanks enough for Yarvi. Rulf watched with one foot up on a low wall and his forearms crossed upon his knee.

“I’m no high judge of righteousness.”

“Who is?”

“But I find this to be a good thing.”

“Don’t let anyone know, it might ruin my reputation.” Yarvi saw an old woman glaring at him from across the square, and he smiled back, and waved, and watched her scuttle muttering away. “It seems I’ve become the villain of this piece.”

“If life has taught me one thing, it’s that there are no villains. Only people, doing their best.”

“My best has proved disastrous.”

“Could’ve been far worse.” Rulf curled his tongue and spat. “And you’re young. Try again. Might be you’ll improve.”

Yarvi narrowed his eyes at the old warrior. “When did you become wise?”

“I’ve always been uncommonly insightful, but you were blinded by your own cleverness.”

“A common fault with kings. Hopefully I’m young enough to learn humility too.”

“It’s well one of us is.”

“And what will you do with your twilight years?” asked Yarvi.

“As it happens, the great King Uthil has offered me a place with his guard.”

“The stench of honor! You’ll accept?”

“I said no.”

“You did?”

“Honor’s a fool’s prize, and I’ve a feeling Uthil is the sort of master who’ll always have dead servants about him.”

“Wiser and wiser,” said Yarvi.

“Until recently I thought my life done, but now that it begins again I find I’ve no pressing desire to cut it short.” Yarvi looked sideways, and saw Rulf looking sideways back. “Thought maybe you could use an oarmate.”

“Me?”

“What could a one-handed minister and a rogue fifteen years past his best not achieve together?”

At a final blow the collar sprang open and Ankran’s son stood, blinking, and rubbing at his neck, and his mother took him in her arms and kissed his hair.

“I’m not alone,” murmured Yarvi.

Rulf put an arm around him and hugged him crushing tight. “Not while I’m alive, oarmate.”

IT WAS A GREAT AFFAIR.

Many powerful families in the far reaches of Gettland would be angered that news of King Uthil’s return had barely reached them before he was married, denying them the chance to have their importance noted at an event that would live so long in the memory.

No doubt the all-powerful High King on his high chair in Skekenhouse, not to mention the all-knowing Grandmother Wexen at his elbow, would be far from delighted at the news, as Mother Gundring was keen to point out.

But Yarvi’s mother brushed all objections away with an airy wave and said, “Their anger is dust to me.” She was the Golden Queen again. Once she had spoken, it was as a thing already done.

And so in the Godshall the statues were garlanded with the first flowers of spring, and the wedding gifts were heaped about the Black Chair in gaudy abundance, and the people were packed beneath the

dome tight as sheep in winter quarters until the very air was misty with their breath.

The blessed couple sang promises to each other in the sight of gods and men, shafts of light from the dome above striking fire from the king's burnished armor and the queen's daunting jewels, and all applauded though Uthil's singing voice was, in Yarvi's opinion, not up to much and his mother's little better. Then Brinyolf droned out the most elaborate blessing even that hallowed place had ever witnessed, while beside him Mother Gundring slumped ever more impatiently around her staff and every bell in the city sent up a merry clangor from below.

Oh, happy day!

How could Uthil not be pleased? He had the Black Chair and the best wife any man could ask for, coveted by the High King himself. How could Laithlin not be delighted? She had the jeweled key to the treasury of Gettland once again upon her chain and the priests of the One God dragged from her mint and whipped through Thorlby into the sea. How could the people of Gettland not rejoice? They had a king of iron and a queen of gold, rulers to trust in and be proud of. Rulers with poor singing voices, possibly, but two hands each.

In spite of all that happiness, though—or more likely because of it—Yarvi scarcely enjoyed the marriage of his mother more than he had the burning of his father. That event Yarvi had been unable to avoid. If anyone noticed him steal away from this one, no doubt they were not sad to see it.

The weather outside better suited his mood than the petal-scented warmth within. There was a seeking wind off the gray sea that day, and it moaned among the battlements of the citadel and cut at him with a salt rain as he wandered up the worn steps and along the empty walkways.

He saw her from far off, on the roof of the Godshall, clothes far too thin plastered to her with the rain, hair furiously whipping in the wind. He saw her in good time. He could have walked on and found another place to frown at the sky. But his feet led him toward her.

"Prince Yarvi," she said as he came close, tearing a scrap from her bitten-down thumbnail with her teeth and spitting it into the wind. "What an honor."

Yarvi sighed. There was a wearying pattern to the last few days. "I'm not a prince any more, Isriun."

"No? Your mother is queen again, isn't she? She has the key to the treasury of Gettland on her chain?" Her white hand strayed to her chest, where there was no key, no chain, nothing anymore. "What's a queen's son, if not a prince?"

"A crippled fool?" he muttered.

"You were that when we met, and no doubt always will be. Not to mention the child of a traitor."

"Then we have more in common than ever," snapped Yarvi, and saw her pale face twitch, and instantly regretted it. Had things been only a little different, it might have been the two of them raised up in glory down below. He in the Black Chair, she upon the stool beside him, eyes shining as she gently held his withered hand, as they shared that better kiss she had asked for on his return....

But things were as they were. There would be no kisses today. Not today, not ever. He turned to look at the heaving sea, his fists bunched on the parapet. "I didn't come to argue."

"Why did you come?"

"I thought I should tell you, since ..." He gritted his teeth, and looked down at his twisted hand, white on the wet stone. Since what? *Since we were promised? Since we once meant something to each other?* He could not bring himself to say the words. "I'm leaving for Skekenhouse. I'm taking the Minister's Test. I'll have no family, no birthright, and ... no wife."

She laughed into the wind. “And more in common yet. I’ve no friends, no dowry, and no father.” She turned to look at him then, and the hatred in her eyes made him feel sick. “They sank his body in the midden.”

Perhaps that should have made Yarvi glad. He had dreamed of it often enough, bent all his prayers and all his will toward it. Broken everything, and sacrificed his friend and his friendships for it. But looking into Isriun’s face, red eyes sunken in shadowed sockets, he felt no triumph.

“I’m sorry. Not for him, but for you.”

Her mouth twisted with contempt. “What do you think that’s worth to me?”

“Nothing. But I’m sorry still.” And he took his hands from the parapet, and turned his back on his betrothed, and walked toward the steps.

“I’ve sworn an oath!”

Yarvi paused. He wanted very much to leave that blasted roof and never return, but now the skin on his neck prickled, and he turned back despite himself. “Oh?”

“A sun-oath and a moon-oath.” Isriun’s eyes burned in her white face and her wet hair lashed at her. “I swore it before She Who Judges, and He Who Remembers, and She Who Makes Fast the Knot. My ancestors buried above the beach bore witness. He Who Watches and She Who Writes bore witness. Now you bear witness, Yarvi. It will be a chain upon me and a goad within me. I will be revenged upon the killers of my father. I have sworn it!”

She smiled a twisted smile, then. A mockery of the one she gave him when she left the Godshall on the day they were promised. “So you see, a woman can swear the same oath as a man.”

“If she’s fool enough,” said Yarvi, as he turned away.

THE LESSER EVIL

Mother Sun smiled even as she sank beneath the world on the evening Brother Yarvi came home.

The first day of summer, the Gettlanders had declared it, with cats basking on the hot roofs of Thorlby, the seabirds calling lazy to one another, the slightest breeze carrying a salt tang up the steep lanes and through the open windows of the city.

Through the door to Mother Gundring's chambers too, when Yarvi finally managed to wrestle the heavy latch open with his crippled hand.

"The wanderer returns," said the old minister, putting aside her book in a puff of dust.

"Mother Gundring." Yarvi bowed low, and presented her with the cup.

"And you have brought me tea." She closed her eyes, and sniffed the steam, then sipped, and swallowed. Her lined face broke into the smile which Yarvi had always felt so proud to see. "Things have not been the same without you."

"You need never want for tea again, at least."

"Then you passed the test?"

"Did you ever doubt?"

"Not I, Brother Yarvi, not I. And yet you wear a sword." She frowned toward Shadikshirram's blade, sheathed at his waist. "A kind word parries most blows."

"I carry this for the others. It reminds me where I've come from. A minister stands for Father Peace, but a good one is no stranger to Mother War."

"Hah! True enough." Mother Gundring held out her hand to the stool on the other side of the firepit. The one where Yarvi had so often sat, following the old minister's stories with rapt attention, learning tongues, and history, and the lore of plants, and the proper way to speak to a king. Could it really be only a few months since he last sat there? It seemed he had done so in a different world. In a dream.

And now he had woken.

"I am glad you are back," said Mother Gundring, "and not just because of your tea. We have much to do in Thorlby."

"I don't think people love me here."

Mother Gundring shrugged it off. "Already they forget. Folk have short memories."

"The minister's task is to remember."

"And to advise, to heal, to speak truth and know the secret ways, to find the lesser evil and weigh the greater good, to smooth the path for Father Peace in every tongue, to spin tales—"

"Shall I spin a tale for you?"

"What manner of tale, Brother Yarvi?"

"A tale of blood and deceit, of money and murder, of treachery and power."

Mother Gundring laughed, and took another sip from her cup. "The only sort I enjoy. Has it elves in it? Dragons? Trolls?"

Yarvi shook his head. "People can do all the evil we'll need."

"True again. Is it something you heard in Skekenhouse?"

"Partly. I've been working at this tale for a long time. Ever since that night my father died. But I

think I have it now from start to end.”

“Knowing your talents it must be a fine tale indeed.”

“You will thrill to it, Mother Gundring.”

“Then begin!”

Yarvi sat forward, looking into the flames, rubbing at his twisted palm with his thumb. He had been rehearsing it ever since he passed the test, gave up his birthright, and was accepted into the Ministry. Ever since he kissed the cheek of Grandmother Wexen, looked into her eyes, found them brighter and hungrier than ever, and knew the truth. “I find I hardly know where to begin.”

“Set it up. Let’s have the background.”

“Good advice,” said Yarvi. “But yours always has been. So ... a High King well past his youth, and a grandmother of the Ministry no closer to hers, most jealous of their power, as the powerful often are, looked to the north from Skekenhouse, and saw a threat to their majesty. Not a great man wielding iron and steel, but a great woman wielding gold and silver. A golden queen, with a plan to stamp coins all of one weight, so that every trade about the Shattered Sea would be made with her face.”

Mother Gundring sat back, the many lines on her forehead deepening as she considered. “This story has the smack of truth.”

“The best ones do. You taught me that.” Now that he was begun the words spilled out easily. “The High King and his minister saw the merchants leave their wharves for those of this northern queen, and their revenues shriveling month upon month, and their power shriveling with them. They had to act. But kill a woman who could spin gold from the air? No. Her husband was too proud and wrathful to be dealt with. Kill him, then, and topple the queen from her lofty perch and take her for their own, so she could spin gold for them. That was their plan.”

“Kill a king?” muttered Mother Gundring, staring hard at Yarvi over the rim of her cup.

He shrugged. “It’s how these stories often start.”

“But kings are cautious and well-guarded.”

“This one especially. They needed the help of someone he trusted.” Yarvi sat forward, the fire warm on his face. “And so they taught a bronze-feathered eagle a message. The king must die. And they sent it to his minister.”

Mother Gundring blinked, and very slowly swallowed another mouthful of tea. “A heavy task to give a minister, killing the man she was sworn to serve.”

“But was she not sworn to serve the High King and her grandmother too?”

“We all are,” whispered Mother Gundring. “You among us, Brother Yarvi.”

“Oh, I’m forever swearing oaths: I hardly know which ones to honor. This minister had the same trouble, but if a king sits between gods and men, the High King sits between gods and kings, and has been thinking himself higher yet, of late. She knew he would not be denied. So she fashioned a plan. Replace her king with a more reasonable brother. Trim away any troublesome heir. Blame some old enemy from the utmost north where even the thoughts of civilized men rarely stray. Say that a dove came from another minister with an offer of peace, and drew this rash king into an ambush...”

“Perhaps that was the lesser evil,” said Mother Gundring. “Perhaps it was that or see Mother War spread her bloody wings across the whole Shattered Sea.”

“The lesser evil and the greater good.” Yarvi took a long breath, and it seemed to hurt deep in his chest, and he thought of the black birds blinking in Sister Owd’s cage. “Only the minister given the

blame never used doves. Only crows.”

Mother Gundring paused with the cup halfway to her mouth. “Crows?”

“It is so often the small things overlooked that leave our schemes in ruins.”

“Oh, troublesome detail.” Mother Gundring’s eye twitched as she looked down at her tea and took a longer swallow, and for a while they sat in silence, only the happy crackle of the fire and the odd floating spark between them. “I thought you might untangle it in time,” she said. “But not so soon.”

Yarvi snorted. “Not before I died at Amwend.”

“That was never my choice,” said the old minister. She who had always been like a mother to him. “You were to take the test, and give up your birthright, and in time take my place as we had always planned. But Odem did not trust me. He moved too soon. I could not stop your mother putting you in the Black Chair.” She gave a bitter sigh. “And Grandmother Wexen would by no means have been satisfied with that result.”

“So you let me flounder into Odem’s trap.”

“With the deepest regret. I judged it the lesser evil.” She set her empty cup down beside her. “How does this story end, Brother Yarvi?”

“It already has. With the deepest regret.” He looked up from the flames and into her eyes. “And it is Father Yarvi now.”

The old minister frowned, first at him, then down at the cup he had brought her. “Black-tongue root?”

“I swore an oath, Mother Gundring, to be avenged on the killers of my father. I may be half a man, but I swore a whole oath.”

The flames in the firepit flickered then, their reflections dancing orange in the glass jars on the shelves.

“Your father and your brother,” croaked Mother Gundring. “Odem and his men. So many others. And now the Last Door opens for me. All ... because of coins.”

She blinked then, and swayed toward the fire, and Yarvi started up and caught her gently with his left arm, and slipped the cushion behind her with his right, and eased her with great care back into her chair. “It seems coins can be most deadly.”

“I am sorry,” whispered Mother Gundring, her breath coming short.

“So am I. You will not find a sorrier man in all of Gettland.”

“I do not think so.” She gave the faintest smile. “You will make a fine minister, Father Yarvi.”

“I will try,” he said.

She did not answer.

Yarvi took a ragged breath, and brushed her eyelids closed, and crossed her withered hands in her lap, and slumped back sick and weary on his stool. He was still sitting there when the door banged wide and a figure blundered up the steps, setting the bunches of drying plants swinging like hanged men behind him.

One of the youngest warriors, newly past his tests. Younger even than Yarvi, firelight shifting on his beardless face as he loitered in the archway.

“King Uthil seeks an audience with his minister,” he said.

“Does he indeed?” Yarvi tossed the half-drunk tea into the firepit, then wrapped the fingers of his good hand about Mother Gundring’s staff. His staff, the elf-metal cold against his skin.

He stood. “Tell the king I am on my way.”

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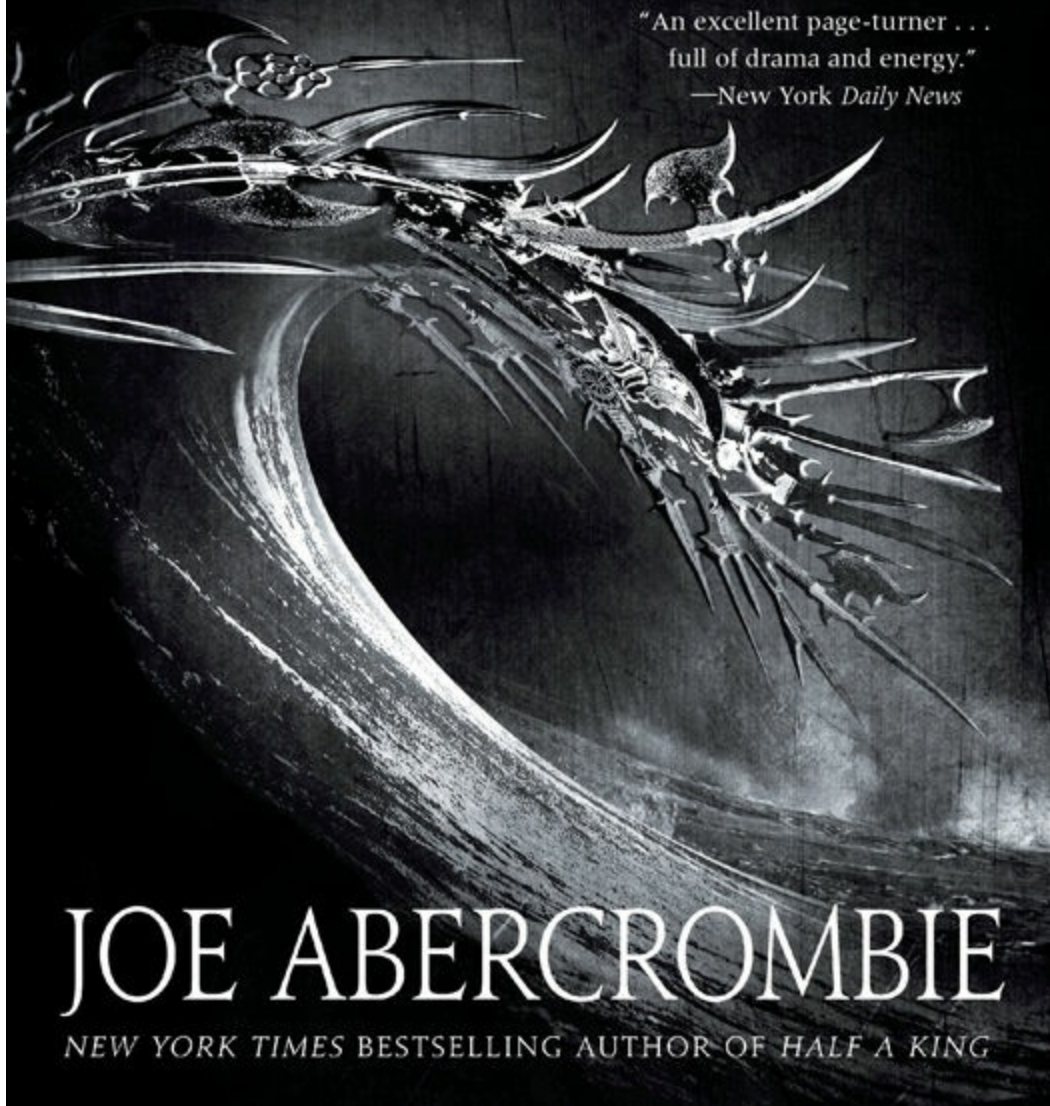
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You know who you are....

HALF THE WORLD

"An excellent page-turner . . .
full of drama and energy."
—New York *Daily News*



JOE ABERCROMBIE

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *HALF A KING*

JOE
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Acknowledgments

CATTLE DIE,
KINDRED DIE,
EVERY MAN IS MORTAL:
BUT I KNOW ONE THING
THAT NEVER DIES,
THE GLORY OF THE GREAT DEED.

FROM *HÁVAMÁL*,
THE SPEECH OF THE HIGH ONE

I.

OUTCASTS

THE WORTHY

He hesitated just an instant, but long enough for Thorn to club him in the balls with the rim of her shield.

Even over the racket of the other lads all baying for her to lose, she heard Brand groan.

Thorn's father always said *the moment you pause will be the moment you die*, and she'd lived her life, for better and mostly worse, by that advice. So she bared her teeth in a fighting snarl—her favorite expression, after all—pushed up from her knees and went at Brand harder than ever.

She barged at him with her shoulder, their shields clashing and grating, sand scattering from his heels as he staggered back down the beach, face still twisted with pain. He chopped at her but she ducked his wooden sword, swept hers low and caught him full in the calf, just below his mailshirt's flapping hem.

To give Brand his due he didn't go down, didn't even cry out, just hopped back, grimacing. Thorn shook her shoulders out, waiting to see if Master Hunnan would call that a win, but he stood silent as the statues in the Godshall.

Some masters-at-arms acted as if the practice swords were real, called a halt at what would have been a finishing blow from a steel blade. But Hunnan liked to see his students put down, and hurt, and taught a hard lesson. The gods knew, Thorn had learned hard lessons enough in Hunnan's square. She was happy to teach a few.

So she gave Brand a mocking smile—her second favorite expression, after all—and screamed, “Come on, you coward!”

Brand was strong as a bull, and had plenty of fight in him, but he was limping, and tired, and Thorn had made sure the slope of the beach was on her side. She kept her eyes fixed on him, dodged one blow, and another, then slipped around a clumsy overhead to leave his side open. *The best place to sheathe a blade is in your enemy's back*, her father always said, but the side was almost as good. Her wooden sword thudded into Brand's ribs with a thwack like a log splitting, left him tottering helpless, and Thorn grinning wider than ever. There's no feeling in the world so sweet as hitting someone just right.

She planted the sole of her boot on his arse, shoved him splashing down on his hands and knees in the latest wave, and on its hissing way out it caught his sword and washed it down the beach, left it mired among the weeds.

She stepped close and Brand winced up at her, wet hair plastered to one side of his face and his teeth bloodied from the butt she gave him before. Maybe she should've felt sorry for him. But it had been a long time since Thorn could afford to feel sorry.

Instead she pressed her notched wooden blade into his neck and said, “Well?”

“All right.” He waved her weakly away, hardly able to get the breath to speak. “I'm done.”

“Ha!” she shouted in his face.

“Ha!” she shouted at the crestfallen lads about the square.

“Ha!” she shouted at Master Hunnan, and she thrust up her sword and shield in triumph and shook them at the spitting sky.

A few limp claps and mutters and that was it. There’d been far more generous applause for far meaner victories, but Thorn wasn’t there for applause.

She was there to win.

Sometimes a girl is touched by Mother War, and put among the boys in the training square, and taught to fight. Among the smaller children there are always a few, but with each year that passes they turn to more suitable things, then are turned to them, then shouted and bullied and beaten to them, until the shameful weeds are rooted out and only the glorious flower of manhood remains.

If Vanstermen crossed the border, if Islanders landed on a raid, if thieves came in the night, the women of Gettland found blades soon enough, and fought to the death, and many of them damn well too. They always had. But the last time a woman passed the tests and swore the oaths and won a place on a raid?

There were stories. There were songs. But even Old Fen, who was the oldest person in Thorlby and, some said, the world, had never seen such a thing in all her countless days.

Not until now.

All that work. All that scorn. All that pain. But Thorn had beaten them. She closed her eyes, felt Mother Sea’s salt wind kiss her sweaty face and thought how proud her father would be.

“I’ve passed,” she whispered.

“Not yet.” Thorn had never seen Master Hunnan smile. But she had never seen his frown quite so grim. “I decide the tests you’ll take. I decide when you’ve passed.” He looked over to the lads her age. The lads of sixteen, some already puffed with pride from passing their own tests. “Rauk. You’ll fight Thorn next.”

Rauk’s brows went up, then he looked at Thorn and shrugged. “Why not?” he said, and stepped between his fellows into the square, strapping his shield tight and plucking up a practice sword.

He was a cruel one, and skillful. Not near as strong as Brand but a lot less likely to hesitate. Still, Thorn had beaten him before and she’d—

“Rauk,” said Hunnan, his knobble-knuckled finger wandering on, “and Sordaf, and Edwal.”

The glow of triumph drained from Thorn like the slops from a broken bath. There was a muttering among the lads as Sordaf—big, slow and with scant imagination, but a hell of a choice for stomping on someone who was down—lumbered out onto the sand, doing up the buckles on his mail with fat fingers.

Edwal—quick and narrow-shouldered with a tangle of brown curls—didn’t move right off. Thorn had always thought he was one of the better ones. “Master Hunnan, three of us—”

“If you want a place on the king’s raid,” said Hunnan, “you’ll do as you’re bid.”

They all wanted a place. They wanted one almost as much as Thorn did. Edwal frowned left and right, but no one spoke up. Reluctantly he slipped between the others and picked out a wooden sword.

“This isn’t fair.” Thorn was used to always wearing a brave face, no matter how long the odds, but her voice then was a desperate bleat. Like a lamb herded helpless to the slaughterman’s knife.

Hunnan dismissed it with a snort. “This square is the battlefield, girl, and the battlefield isn’t fair. Consider that your last lesson here.”

There were some stray chuckles at that. Probably from some of those she’d shamed with beatings

one time or another. Brand watched from behind a few loose strands of hair, one hand nursing his bloody mouth. Others kept their eyes to the ground. They all knew it wasn't fair. They didn't care.

Thorn set her jaw, put her shield hand to the pouch around her neck and squeezed it tight. It had been her against the world for longer than she could remember. If Thorn was one thing, she was a fighter. She'd give them a fight they wouldn't soon forget.

Rauk jerked his head to the others and they began to spread out, aiming to surround her. Might not be the worst thing. If she struck fast enough she could pick one off from the herd, give herself some splinter of a chance against the other two.

She looked in their eyes, trying to judge what they'd do. Edwal reluctant, hanging back. Sordaf watchful, shield up. Rauk letting his sword dangle, showing off to the crowd.

Just get rid of his smile. Turn that bloody and she'd be satisfied.

His smile buckled when she gave the fighting scream. Rauk caught her first blow on his shield, giving ground, and a second too, splinters flying, then she tricked him with her eyes so he lifted his shield high, went low at the last moment and caught him a scything blow in his hip. He cried out, twisting sideways so the back of his head was to her. She was already lifting her sword again.

There was a flicker at the corner of her eye and a sick crunch. She hardly felt as if she fell. But suddenly the sand was roughing her up pretty good, then she was staring stupidly at the sky.

There's your problem with going for one and ignoring the other two.

Gulls called above, circling.

The towers of Thorlby cut out black against the bright sky.

Best get up, her father said. Won't win anything on your back.

Thorn rolled, lazy, clumsy, pouch slipping from her collar and swinging on its cord, her face one great throb.

Water surged cold up the beach and around her knees and she saw Sordaf stamp down, heard a crack like a stick breaking.

She tried to scramble up and Rauk's boot thudded into her ribs and rolled her over, coughing.

The wave sucked back and sank away, blood tickling at her top lip, dripping pit-patter on the wet sand.

"Should we stop?" she heard Edwal say.

"Did I say stop?" came Hunnan's voice, and Thorn closed her fist tight around the grip of her sword, gathering one more effort.

She saw Rauk step toward her and she caught his leg as he kicked, hugged it to her chest. She jerked up hard, growling in his face, and he tumbled over backward, arms flailing.

She tottered at Edwal, more falling than charging, Mother Sea and Father Earth and Hunnan's frown and the faces of the watching lads all tipping and reeling. He caught her, more holding her up than trying to put her down. She grabbed at his shoulder, wrist twisted, sword torn from her hand as she stumbled past, floundering onto her knees and up again, her shield flapping at her side on its torn strap as she turned, spitting and cursing, and froze.

Sordaf stood, sword dangling limp, staring.

Rauk lay propped on his elbows on the wet sand, staring.

Brand stood among the other boys, mouth hanging open, all of them staring.

Edwal opened his mouth but all that came out was a strange squelch like a fart. He dropped his practice blade and lifted a clumsy hand to paw at his neck.

The hilt of Thorn's sword was there. The wooden blade had broken to leave a long shard when Sordaf stamped on it. The shard was through Edwal's throat, the point glistening red.

"Gods," someone whispered.

Edwal slumped down on his knees and drooled bloody froth onto the sand.

Master Hunnan caught him as he pitched onto his side. Brand and some of the others gathered around them, all shouting over each other. Thorn could hardly pick out the words over the thunder of her own heart.

She stood swaying, face throbbing, hair torn loose and whipping in her eyes with the wind, wondering if this was all a nightmare. Sure it must be. Praying it might be. She squeezed her eyes shut, squeezed them, squeezed them.

As she had when they led her to her father's body, white and cold beneath the dome of the Godshall.

But that had been real, and so was this.

When she snapped her eyes open the lads were still kneeling around Edwal so all she could see was his limp boots fallen outward. Black streaks came curling down the sand, then Mother Sea sent a wave and turned them red, then pink, then they were washed away and gone.

And for the first time in a long time Thorn felt truly scared.

Hunnan slowly stood, slowly turned. He always frowned, hardest of all at her. But there was a brightness in his eyes now she had never seen before.

"Thorn Bathu." He pointed at her with one red finger. "I name you a murderer."

IN THE SHADOWS

“Do good,” Brand’s mother said to him the day she died. “Stand in the light.”

He’d hardly understood what doing good meant at six years old. He wasn’t sure he was much closer at sixteen. Here he was, after all, wasting what should have been his proudest moment, still trying to puzzle out the good thing to do.

It was a high honor to stand guard on the Black Chair. To be accepted as a warrior of Gettland in the sight of gods and men. He’d struggled for it, hadn’t he? Bled for it? Earned his place? As long as Brand could remember, it had been his dream to stand armed among his brothers on the hallowed stones of the Godshall.

But he didn’t feel like he was standing in the light.

“I worry about this raid on the Islanders,” Father Yarvi was saying, bringing the argument in a circle, as ministers always seemed to. “The High King has forbidden swords to be drawn. He will take it very ill.”

“The High King forbids everything,” said Queen Laithlin, one hand on her child-swollen belly, “and takes everything ill.”

Beside her, King Uthil shifted forward in the Black Chair. “Meanwhile he orders the Islanders and the Vanstermen and any other curs he can bend to his bidding to draw their swords against us.”

A surge of anger passed through the great men and women of Gettland gathered before the dais. A week before Brand’s voice would’ve been loudest among them.

But all he could think of now was Edwal with the wooden sword through his neck, drooling red as he made that honking pig sound. The last he’d ever make. And Thorn, swaying on the sand with her hair stuck across her blood-smeared face, jaw hanging open as Hunnan named her a murderer.

“Two of my ships taken!” A merchant’s jewelled key bounced on her chest as she shook her fist toward the dais. “And not just cargo lost but men dead!”

“And the Vanstermen have crossed the border again!” came a deep shout from the men’s side of the hall, “and burned steadings and taken good folk of Gettland as slaves!”

“Grom-gil-Gorm was seen there!” someone shouted, and the mere mention of the name filled the dome of the Godshall with muttered curses. “The Breaker of Swords himself!”

“The Islanders must pay in blood,” growled an old one-eyed warrior, “then the Vanstermen, and the Breaker of Swords too.”

“Of course they must!” called Yarvi to the grumbling crowd, his shrivelled crab-claw of a left hand held up for calm, “but when and how is the question. The wise wait for their moment, and we are by no means ready for war with the High King.”

“One is always ready for war.” Uthil gently twisted the pommel of his sword so the naked blade

flashed in the gloom. “Or never.”

Edwal had always been ready. A man who stood for the man beside him, just as a warrior of Gettland was supposed to. Surely he hadn’t deserved to die for that?

Thorn cared for nothing past the end of her own nose, and her shield rim in Brand’s still-aching balls had raised her no higher in his affections. But she’d fought to the last, against the odds, just as a warrior of Gettland was supposed to. Surely she didn’t deserve to be named murderer for that?

He glanced guiltily up at the great statues of the six tall gods, towering in judgment over the Black Chair. Towering in judgment over him. He squirmed as though he was the one who’d killed Edwal and named Thorn a murderer. All he’d done was watch.

Watch and do nothing.

“The High King could call half the world to war with us,” Father Yarvi was saying, patiently as a master-at-arms explains the basics to children. “The Vanstermen and the Throvenmen are sworn to him, the Ingling and the Lowlanders are praying to his One God, Grandmother Wexen is forging alliances in the south as well. We are hedged in by enemies and we must have friends to—”

“Steel is the answer.” King Uthil cut his minister off with a voice sharp as a blade. “Steel must always be the answer. Gather the men of Gettland. We will teach these carrion-pecking Islanders a lesson they will not soon forget.” On the right side of the hall the frowning men beat their approval on mailed chests, and on the left the women with their oiled hair shining murmured their angry support.

Father Yarvi bowed his head. It was his task to speak for Father Peace but even he was out of words. Mother War ruled today. “Steel it is.”

Brand should’ve thrilled at that. A great raid, like in the songs, and him with a warrior’s place in it! But he was still trapped beside the training square, picking at the scab of what he could’ve done differently.

If he hadn’t hesitated. If he’d struck without pity, like a warrior was supposed to, he could’ve beaten Thorn, and there it would’ve ended. Or if he’d spoken up with Edwal when Hunnan set three on one, perhaps together they could’ve stopped it. But he hadn’t spoken up. Facing an enemy on the battlefield took courage, but you had your friends beside you. Standing alone against your friends, that was a different kind of courage. One Brand didn’t pretend to have.

“And then we have the matter of Hild Bathu,” said Father Yarvi, the name bringing Brand’s head jerking up like a thief’s caught with his hand round a purse.

“Who?” asked the king.

“Storn Headland’s daughter,” said Queen Laithlin. “She calls herself Thorn.”

“She’s done more than prick a finger,” said Father Yarvi. “She killed a boy in the training square and is named a murderer.”

“Who names her so?” called Uthil.

“I do.” Master Hunnan’s golden cloak-buckle gleamed as he stepped into the shaft of light at the foot of the dais.

“Master Hunnan.” A rare smile touched the corner of the king’s mouth. “I remember well our bouts together in the training square.”

“Treasured memories, my king, though painful ones for me.”

“Ha! You saw this killing?”

“I was testing my eldest students to judge those worthy to join your raid. Thorn Bathu was among them.”

“She embarrasses herself, trying to take a warrior’s place!” one woman called.

“She embarrasses us all,” said another.

“A woman has no place on the battlefield!” came a gruff voice from among the men, and heads nodded on both sides of the room.

“Is Mother War herself not a woman?” The king pointed up at the Tall Gods looming over them. “We only offer her the choice. The Mother of Crows picks the worthy.”

“And she did not pick Thorn Bathu,” said Hunnan. “The girl has a poisonous temper.” Very true. “She failed the test I set her.” Partly true. “She lashed out against my judgment and killed the boy Edwal.” Brand blinked. Not quite a lie, but far from all the truth. Hunnan’s gray beard wagged as he shook his head. “And so I lost two pupils.”

“Careless of you,” said Father Yarvi.

The master-at-arms bunched his fists but Queen Laithlin spoke first. “What would be the punishment for such a murder?”

“To be crushed with stones, my queen.” The minister spoke calmly, as if they considered crushing a beetle, not a person, and that a person Brand had known most of his life. One he’d disliked almost as long, but even so.

“Will anyone here speak for Thorn Bathu?” thundered the king.

The echoes of his voice faded to leave the silence of a tomb. Now was the time to tell the truth. To do good. To stand in the light. Brand looked across the Godshall, the words tickling at his lips. He saw Rauk in his place, smiling. Sordaf too, his doughy face a mask. They didn’t make the faintest sound.

And nor did Brand.

“It is a heavy thing to order the death of one so young.” Uthil stood from the Black Chair, mail rattling and skirts rustling as everyone but the queen knelt. “But we cannot turn from the right thing simply because it is a painful thing.”

Father Yarvi bowed still lower. “I will dispense your justice according to the law.”

Uthil held his hand out to Laithlin, and together they came down the steps of the dais. On the subject of Thorn Bathu, crushing with rocks was the last word.

Brand stared in sick disbelief. He’d been sure among all those lads someone would speak, for they were honest enough. Or Hunnan would tell his part in it, for he was a respected master-at-arms. The king or the queen would draw out the truth, for they were wise and righteous. The gods wouldn’t allow such an injustice to pass. Someone would do something.

Maybe, like him, they were all waiting for someone else to put things right.

The king walked stiffly, drawn sword cradled in his arms, his iron-gray stare wavering neither right nor left. The queen’s slightest nods were received like gifts, and with the odd word she let it be known that this person or that should enjoy the favor of visiting her counting house upon some deep business. They came closer, and closer yet.

Brand’s heart beat loud in his ears. His mouth opened. The queen turned her freezing gaze on him for an instant, and in shamed and shameful silence he let the pair of them sweep past.

His sister was always telling him it wasn’t up to him to put the world right. But if not him, who?

“Father Yarvi!” he blurted, far too loud, and then, as the minister turned toward him, croaked far too soft, “I need to speak to you.”

“What about, Brand?” That gave him pause. He hadn’t thought Yarvi would have the vaguest notion

who he was.

“About Thorn Bathu.”

A long silence. The minister might only have been a few years older than Brand, pale-skinned and pale-haired as if the color was washed out of him, so gaunt a stiff breeze might blow him away and with a crippled hand besides, but close up there was something chilling in the minister’s eye. Something that caused Brand to wilt under his gaze.

But there was no going back, now. “She’s no murderer,” he muttered.

“The king thinks she is.”

Gods, his throat felt dry, but Brand pressed on, the way a warrior was supposed to. “The king wasn’t on the sands. The king didn’t see what I saw.”

“What did you see?”

“We were fighting to win places on the raid—”

“Never again tell me what I already know.”

This wasn’t running near as smoothly as Brand had hoped. But so it goes, with hopes. “Thorn fought me, and I hesitated ... she should’ve won her place. But Master Hunnan set three others on her.”

Yarvi glanced toward the people flowing steadily out of the Godshall, and eased a little closer. “Three at once?”

“Edwal was one of them. She never meant to kill him—”

“How did she do against those three?”

Brand blinked, wrong-footed. “Well ... she killed more of them than they did of her.”

“That’s in no doubt. I was but lately consoling Edwal’s parents, and promising them justice. She is sixteen winters, then?”

“Thorn?” Brand wasn’t sure what that had to do with her sentence. “I ... think she is.”

“And has held her own in the square all this time against the boys?” He gave Brand a look up and down. “Against the men?”

“Usually she does better than hold her own.”

“She must be very fierce. Very determined. Very hard-headed.”

“From what I can tell her head’s bone all the way through.” Brand realized he wasn’t helping and mumbled weakly, “but ... she’s not a bad person.”

“None are, to their mothers.” Father Yarvi pushed out a heavy sigh. “What would you have me do?”

“What ... would I what?”

“Do I free this troublesome girl and make enemies of Hunnan and the boy’s family, or crush her with stones and appease them? Your solution?”

Brand hadn’t expected to give a solution. “I suppose ... you should follow the law?”

“The law?” Father Yarvi snorted. “The law is more Mother Sea than Father Earth, always shifting. The law is a mummer’s puppet, Brand, it says what I say it says.”

“Just thought I should tell someone ... well ... the truth?”

“As if the truth is precious. I can find a thousand truths under every autumn leaf, Brand: everyone has their own. But you thought no further than passing the burden of your truth to me, did you? My epic thanks, preventing Gettland sliding into war with the whole Shattered Sea gives me not enough to do.”

“I thought ... this was doing good.” Doing good seemed of a sudden less a burning light before him,

clear as Mother Sun, and more a tricking glimmer in the murk of the Godshall.

“Whose good? Mine? Edwal’s? Yours? As we each have our own truth so we each have our own good.” Yarvi edged a little closer, spoke a little softer. “Master Hunnan may guess you shared your truth with me, what then? Have you thought on the consequences?”

They settled on Brand now, cold as a fall of fresh snow. He looked up, saw the gleam of Rauk’s eye in the shadows of the emptying hall.

“A man who gives all his thought to doing good, but no thought to the consequences ...” Father Yarvi lifted his withered hand and pressed its one crooked finger into Brand’s chest. “That is a dangerous man.”

And the minister turned away, the butt of his elf staff tapping against stones polished to glass by the passage of years, leaving Brand to stare wide-eyed into the gloom, more worried than ever.

He didn’t feel like he was standing in the light at all.

JUSTICE

Thorn sat and stared down at her filthy toes, pale as maggots in the darkness.

She had no notion why they took her boots. She was hardly going to run, chained by her left ankle to one damp-oozing wall and her right wrist to the other. She could scarcely reach the gate of her cell, let alone rip it from its hinges. Apart from picking the scabs under her broken nose till they bled, all she could do was sit and think.

Her two least favorite activities.

She heaved in a ragged breath. Gods, the place stank. The rotten straw and the rat droppings stank and the bucket they never bothered to empty stank and the mold and rusting iron stank and after two nights in there she stank worst of all.

Any other day she would've been swimming in the bay, fighting Mother Sea, or climbing the cliffs, fighting Father Earth, or running or rowing or practicing with her father's old sword in the yard of their house, fighting the blade-scarred posts and pretending they were Gettland's enemies as the splinters flew—Grom-gil-Gorm, or Styr of the Islands, or even the High King himself.

But she would swing no sword today. She was starting to think she had swung her last. It seemed a long, hard way from fair. But then, as Hunnan said, fair wasn't a thing a warrior could rely on.

"You've a visitor," said the key-keeper, a weighty lump of a woman with a dozen rattling chains about her neck and a face like a bag of axes. "But you'll have to make it quick." And she hauled the heavy door squealing open.

"Hild!"

This once Thorn didn't tell her mother she'd given that name up at six years old, when she pricked her father with his own dagger and he called her "thorn." It took all the strength she had to unfold her legs and stand, sore and tired and suddenly, pointlessly ashamed of the state she was in. Even if she hardly cared for how things looked, she knew her mother did.

When Thorn shuffled into the light her mother pressed one pale hand to her mouth. "Gods, what did they do to you?"

Thorn waved at her face, chains rattling. "This happened in the square."

Her mother came close to the bars, eyes rimmed with weepy pink. "They say you murdered a boy."

"It wasn't murder."

"You killed a boy, though?"

Thorn swallowed, dry throat clicking. "Edwal."

"Gods," whispered her mother again, lip trembling. "Oh, gods, Hild, why couldn't you ..."

"Be someone else?" Thorn finished for her. Someone easy, someone normal. A daughter who wanted to wield nothing weightier than a needle, dress in southern silk instead of mail, and harbor no dreams beyond wearing some rich man's key.

"I saw this coming," said her mother, bitterly. "Ever since you went to the square. Ever since we

saw your father dead, I saw this coming.”

Thorn felt her cheek twitch. “You can take comfort in how right you were.”

“You think there’s any comfort for me in this? They say they’re going to crush my only child with stones!”

Thorn felt cold then, very cold. It was an effort to take a breath. As though they were piling the rocks on her already. “Who said?”

“Everyone says.”

“Father Yarvi?” The minister spoke the law. The minister would speak the judgment.

“I don’t know. I don’t think so. Not yet.”

Not yet, that was the limit of her hopes. Thorn felt so weak she could hardly grip the bars. She was used to wearing a brave face, however scared she was. But Death is a hard mistress to face bravely. The hardest.

“You’d best go.” The key-keeper started to pull Thorn’s mother away.

“I’ll pray,” she called, tears streaking her face. “I’ll pray to Father Peace for you!”

Thorn wanted to say, “Damn Father Peace,” but she could not find the breath. She had given up on the gods when they let her father die in spite of all her prayers, but a miracle was looking like her best chance.

“Sorry,” said the key-keeper, shouldering shut the door.

“Not near as sorry as me.” Thorn closed her eyes and let her forehead fall against the bars, squeezed hard at the pouch under her dirty shirt. The pouch that held her father’s fingerbones.

We don’t get much time, and time feeling sorry for yourself is time wasted. She kept every word he’d said close to her heart, but if there’d ever been a moment for feeling sorry for herself, this had to be the one. Hardly seemed like justice. Hardly seemed fair. But try telling Edwal about fair. However you shared out the blame, she’d killed him. Wasn’t his blood crusted up her sleeve?

She’d killed Edwal. Now they’d kill her.

She heard talking, faint beyond the door. Her mother’s voice—pleading, wheedling, weeping. Then a man’s, cold and level. She couldn’t quite catch the words, but they sounded like hard ones. She flinched as the door opened, jerking back into the darkness of her cell, and Father Yarvi stepped over the threshold.

He was a strange one. A man in a minister’s place was almost as rare as a woman in the training square. He was only a few years Thorn’s elder but he had an old eye. An eye that had seen things. They told strange stories of him. That he had sat in the Black Chair, but given it up. That he had sworn a deep-rooted oath of vengeance. That he had killed his Uncle Odem with the curved sword he always wore. They said he was cunning as Father Moon, a man rarely to be trusted and never to be crossed. And in his hands—or in his one good one, for the other was a crooked lump—her life now rested.

“Thorn Bathu,” he said. “You are named a murderer.”

All she could do was nod, her breath coming fast.

“Have you anything to say?”

Perhaps she should’ve spat her defiance. Laughed at Death. They said that was what her father did, when he lay bleeding his last at the feet of Grom-gil-Gorm. But all she wanted was to live.

“I didn’t mean to kill him,” she gurgled up. “Master Hunnan set three of them on me. It wasn’t murder!”

“A fine distinction to Edwal.”

True enough, she knew. She was blinking back tears, shamed at her own cowardice, but couldn't help it. How she wished she'd never gone to the square now, and learned to smile well and count coins like her mother always wanted. But you'll buy nothing with wishes.

“Please, Father Yarvi, give me a chance.” She looked into his calm, cold, gray-blue eyes. “I'll take any punishment. I'll do any penance. I swear it!”

He raised one pale brow. “You should be careful what oaths you make, Thorn. Each one is a chain about you. I swore to be revenged on the killers of my father and the oath still weighs heavy on me. That one might come to weigh heavy on you.”

“Heavier than the stones they'll crush me with?” She held her open palms out, as close to him as the chains would allow. “I swear a sun-oath and a moon-oath. I'll do whatever service you think fit.”

The minister frowned at her dirty hands, reaching, reaching. He frowned at the desperate tears leaking down her face. He cocked his head slowly on one side, as though he was a merchant judging her value. Finally he gave a long, unhappy sigh. “Oh, very well.”

There was a silence then, while Thorn turned over what he'd said. “You're not going to crush me with stones?”

He waved his crippled hand so the one finger flopped back and forth. “I have trouble lifting the big ones.”

More silence, long enough for relief to give way to suspicion. “So ... what's the sentence?”

“I'll think of something. Release her.”

The jailer sucked her teeth as if opening any lock left a wound, but did as she was bid. Thorn rubbed at the chafe-marks the iron cuff left on her wrist, feeling strangely light without its weight. So light she wondered if she was dreaming. She squeezed her eyes shut, then grunted as the key-keeper tossed her boots over and they hit her in the belly. Not a dream, then.

She couldn't stop herself smiling as she pulled them on.

“Your nose looks broken,” said Father Yarvi.

“Not the first time.” If she got away from this with no worse than a broken nose she would count herself blessed indeed.

“Let me see.”

A minister was a healer first, so Thorn didn't flinch when he came close, prodded gently at the bones under her eyes, brow wrinkled with concentration.

“Ah,” she muttered.

“Sorry, did that hurt?”

“Just a litt—”

He jabbed one finger up her nostril, pressing his thumb mercilessly into the bridge of her nose. Thorn gasped, forced down onto her knees, there was a crack and a white-hot pain in her face, tears flooding more freely than ever.

“That got it,” he said, wiping his hand on her shirt.

“Gods!” she whimpered, clutching her throbbing face.

“Sometimes a little pain now can save a great deal later.” Father Yarvi was already walking for the door, so Thorn tottered up and, still wondering if this was some trick, crept after him.

“Thanks for your kindness,” she muttered as she passed the key-keeper

The woman glared back. “I hope you never need it again.”

“No offense, but so do I.” And Thorn followed Father Yarvi along the dim corridor and up the steps, blinking into the light.

He might have had one hand but his legs worked well enough, setting quite a pace as he stalked across the yard of the citadel, the breeze making the branches of the old cedar whisper above them.

“I should speak to my mother—” she said, hurrying to catch up.

“I already have. I told her I had found you innocent of murder but you had sworn an oath to serve me.”

“But ... how did you know I’d—”

“It is a minister’s place to know what people will do.” Father Yarvi snorted. “As yet you are not too deep a well to fathom, Thorn Bathu.”

They passed beneath the Screaming Gate, out of the citadel and into the city, down from the great rock and toward Mother Sea. They went by switching steps and narrow ways, sloping steeply between tight-crammed houses and the people tight-crammed between them.

“I’m not going on King Uthil’s raid, am I?” A fool’s question, doubtless, but now Thorn had stepped from Death’s shadow there was light enough to mourn her ruined dreams.

Father Yarvi was not in a mourning mood. “Be thankful you’re not going in the ground.”

They passed down the Street of Anvils, where Thorn had spent long hours gazing greedily at weapons like a beggar child at pastries. Where she had ridden on her father’s shoulders, giddy-proud as the smiths begged him to notice their work. But the bright metal set out before the forges only seemed to mock her now.

“I’ll never be a warrior of Gettland.” She said it soft and sorry, but Yarvi’s ears were sharp.

“As long as you live, what you might come to be is in your own hands, first of all.” The minister rubbed gently at some faded marks on his neck. “There is always a way, Queen Laithlin used to tell me.”

Thorn found herself walking a little taller at the name alone. Laithlin might not be a fighter, but Thorn could think of no one she admired more. “The Golden Queen is a woman no man dares take lightly,” she said.

“So she is.” Yarvi looked at Thorn sidelong. “Learn to temper stubbornness with sense and maybe one day you will be the same.”

It seemed that day was still some way off. Wherever they passed people bowed, and muttered softly, “Father Yarvi,” and stepped aside to give the minister of Gettland room, but shook their heads darkly at Thorn as she skulked after him, filthy and disgraced, through the gates of the city and out onto the swarming dockside. They wove between sailors and merchants from every nation around the Shattered Sea and some much farther off, Thorn ducking under fishermen’s dripping nets and around their glittering, squirming catches.

“Where are we going?” she asked.

“Skekenhouse.”

She stopped short, gaping, and was nearly knocked flat by a passing barrow. She had never in her life been further than a half-day’s walk from Thorlby.

“Or you could stay here,” Yarvi tossed over his shoulder. “They have the stones ready.”

She swallowed, then hurried again to catch him up. “I’ll come.”

“You are as wise as you are beautiful, Thorn Bathu.”

That was either a double compliment or a double insult, and she suspected the latter. The old

planks of the wharf clonked under their boots, salt water slapping at the green-furred supports below. A ship rocked beside it, small but sleek and with white-painted doves mounted at high prow and stern. Judging by the bright shields ranged down each side, it was manned and ready to sail.

“We’re going now?” she asked.

“I am summoned by the High King.”

“The High ... King?” She looked down at her clothes, stiff with dungeon filth, crusted with her blood and Edwal’s. “Can I change, at least?”

“I have no time for your vanity.”

“I stink.”

“We will haul you behind the ship to wash away the reek.”

“You will?”

The minister raised one brow at her. “You have no sense of humor, do you?”

“Facing Death can sap your taste for jokes,” she muttered.

“That’s the time you need it most.” A thickset old man was busy casting off the prow rope, and tossed it aboard as they walked up. “But don’t worry. Mother Sea will have given you more washing than you can stomach by the time we reach Skekenhouse.” He was a fighter: Thorn could tell that from the way he stood, his broad face battered by weather and war.

“The gods saw fit to take my strong left hand.” Yarvi held up his twisted claw and wiggled the one finger. “But they gave me Rulf instead.” He clapped it down on the old man’s meaty shoulder. “Though it hasn’t always been easy, I find myself content with the bargain.”

Rulf raised one tangled brow. “D’you want to know how I feel about it?”

“No,” said Yarvi, hopping aboard the ship. Thorn could only shrug at the gray-bearded warrior and hop after. “Welcome to the *South Wind*.”

She worked her mouth and spat over the side. “I don’t feel too welcome.”

Perhaps forty grizzled-looking oarsmen sat upon their sea chests, glaring at her, and she had no doubts what they were thinking. *What is this girl doing here?*

“Some ugly patterns keep repeating,” she murmured.

Father Yarvi nodded. “Such is life. It is a rare mistake you make only once.”

“Can I ask a question?”

“I have the sense that if I said no, you would ask anyway.”

“I’m not too deep a well to fathom, I reckon.”

“Then speak.”

“What am I doing here?”

“Why, holy men and deep-cunning women have been asking that question for a thousand years and never come near an answer.”

“Try talking to Brinyolf the Prayer-Weaver on the subject,” grunted Rulf, pushing them clear of the wharf with the butt of a spear. “He’ll bore your ears off with his talk of whys and wherefores.”

“Who is it indeed,” muttered Yarvi, frowning off toward the far horizon as though he could see the answers written in the clouds, “that can plumb the gods’ grand design? Might as well ask where the elves went!” And the old man and the young grinned at each other. Plainly this act was not new to them.

“Very good,” said Thorn. “I mean, why have you brought me onto this ship?”

“Ah.” Yarvi turned to Rulf. “Why do you think, rather than taking the easy road and crushing her, I

have endangered all our lives by bringing the notorious killer Thorn Bathu onto my ship?"

Rulf leaned on his spear a moment, scratching at his beard. "I've really no idea."

Yarvi looked at Thorn with his eyes very wide. "If I don't share my thinking with my own left hand, why ever would I share it with the likes of you? I mean to say, you stink."

Thorn rubbed at her temples. "I need to sit down."

Rulf put a fatherly hand on her shoulder. "I understand." He shoved her onto the nearest chest so hard she went squawking over the back of it and into the lap of the man behind. "This is your oar."

FAMILY

“You’re late.”

Rin was right. Father Moon was smiling bright, and his children the stars twinkling on heaven’s cloth, and the narrow hovel was lit only by the embers of the fire when Brand ducked through the low doorway.

“Sorry, sister.” He went in a stoop to his bench and sank down with a long groan, worked his aching feet from his boots and spread his toes at the warmth. “But Harper had more peat to cut, then Old Fen needed help carrying some logs in. Wasn’t like she was chopping them herself, and her ax was blunt so I had to sharpen it, and on the way back Lem’s cart had broke an axle so a few of us helped out—”

“Your trouble is you make everyone’s trouble your trouble.”

“You help folk, maybe when you need it they’ll help you.”

“Maybe.” Rin nodded toward the pot sitting over the embers of the fire. “There’s dinner. The gods know, leaving some hasn’t been easy.”

He slapped her on the knee as he leaned to get it. “But bless you for it, sister.” Brand was fearsome hungry, but he remembered to mutter a thanks to Father Earth for the food. He remembered how it felt to have none.

“It’s good,” he said, forcing it down.

“It was better right after I cooked it.”

“It’s still good.”

“No, it’s not.”

He shrugged as he scraped the pot out, wishing there was more. “Things’ll be different now I’ve passed the tests. Folk come back rich from a raid like this one.”

“Folk come to the forge before every raid telling us how rich they’re going to be. Sometimes they don’t come back.”

Brand grinned at her. “You won’t get rid of me that easily.”

“I’m not aiming to. Fool though y’are, you’re all the family I’ve got.” She dug something from behind her and held it out. A bundle of animal skin, stained and tattered.

“For me?” he said, reaching through the warmth above the dying fire for it.

“To keep you company on your high adventures. To remind you of home. To remind you of your family. Such as it is.”

“You’re all the family I need.” There was a knife inside the bundle, polished steel gleaming. A fighting dagger with a long, straight blade, crosspiece worked like a pair of twined snakes and the pommel a snarling dragon’s head.

Rin sat up, keen to see how her gift would sit with him. “I’ll make you a sword one day. For now this was the best I could manage.”

“You made this?”

“Gaden gave me some help with the hilt. But the steel’s all mine.”

“It’s fine work, Rin.” The closer he looked the better it got, every scale on the snakes picked out, the dragon baring little teeth at him, the steel bright as silver and holding a deadly edge too. He hardly dared touch it. It seemed too good a thing for his dirty hands. “Gods, it’s master’s work.”

She sat back, careless, as though she’d known that all along. “I think I’ve found a better way to do the smelting. A hotter way. In a clay jar, sort of. Bone and charcoal to bind the iron into steel, sand and glass to coax the dirt out and leave it pure. But it’s all about the heat ... You’re not listening.”

Brand gave a sorry shrug. “I can swing a hammer all right but I don’t understand the magic of it. You’re ten times the smith I ever was.”

“Gaden says I’m touched by She who Strikes the Anvil.”

“She must be happy as the breeze I quit the forge and she got you as an apprentice.”

“I’ve a gift.”

“The gift of modesty.”

“Modesty is for folk with nothing to boast of.”

He weighed the dagger in his hand, feeling out the fine heft and balance to it. “My little sister, mistress of the forge. I never had a better gift.” Not that he’d had many. “Wish I had something to give you in return.”

She lay back on her bench and shook her threadbare blanket over her legs. “You’ve given me everything I’ve got.”

He winced. “Not much, is it?”

“I’ve no complaints.” She reached across the fire with her strong hand, scabbed and calloused from forge-work, and he took it, and they gave each other a squeeze.

He cleared his throat, looking at the hard-packed earth of the floor. “Will you be all right while I’m gone on this raid?”

“I’ll be like a swimmer who just shrugged her armor off.” She gave him the scornful face but he saw straight through it. She was fifteen years old, and he was all the family she had, and she was scared, and that made him scared too. Scared of fighting. Scared of leaving home. Scared of leaving her alone.

“I’ll be back, Rin. Before you know it.”

“Loaded with treasures, no doubt.”

He winked. “Songs sung of my high deeds and a dozen fine Islander slaves to my name.”

“Where will they sleep?”

“In the great stone house I’ll buy you up near the citadel.”

“I’ll have a room for my clothes,” she said, stroking at the wattle wall with her fingertips. Wasn’t much of a home they had, but the gods knew they were grateful for it. There’d been times they had nothing over their heads but weather.

Brand lay down too, knees bent since his legs hung way off the end of his bench these days, started unrolling his own smelly scrap of blanket.

“Rin,” he found he’d said, “I might’ve done a stupid thing.” He wasn’t much at keeping secrets. Especially from her.

“What this time?”

He set to picking at one of the holes in his blanket. “Told the truth.”

“What about?”

“Thorn Bathu.”

Rin clapped her hands over her face. “What is it with you and her?”

“What d’you mean? I don’t even like her.”

“No one likes her. She’s a splinter in the world’s arse. But you can’t seem to stop picking at her.”

“The gods have a habit of pushing us together, I reckon.”

“Have you tried walking the other way? She killed Edwal. She killed him. He’s dead, Brand.”

“I know. I was there. But it wasn’t murder. What should I have done, tell me that, since you’re the clever one. Kept my mouth shut with everyone else? Kept my mouth shut and let her be crushed with rocks? I couldn’t carry the weight of that!” He realized he was near-shouting, anger bubbling up, and he pressed his voice back down. “I couldn’t.”

A silence, then, while they frowned at each other, and the fire sagged, sending up a puff of sparks. “Why does it always fall to you to put things right?” she asked.

“I guess no one else is doing it.”

“You always were a good boy.” Rin stared up toward the smoke-hole and the chink of starry sky showing through it. “Now you’re a good man. That’s your trouble. I never saw a better man for doing good things and getting bad results. Who’d you tell your tale to?”

He swallowed, finding the smoke-hole mightily interesting himself. “Father Yarvi.”

“Oh, gods, Brand! You don’t like half measures, do you?”

“Never saw the point of them,” he muttered. “Dare say it’ll all work out, though?” wheedling, desperate for her to tell him yes.

She just lay staring at the ceiling, so he picked her dagger up again, watched the bright steel shine with the colors of fire.

“Really is fine work, Rin.”

“Go to sleep, Brand.”

KNEELING

"If in doubt, kneel." Rulf's place as helmsman was the platform at the *South Wind*'s stern, steering oar wedged under one arm. "Kneel low and kneel often."

"Kneel," muttered Thorn. "Got it." She had one of the back oars, the place of most work and least honor, right beneath his ever-watchful eye. She kept twisting about, straining over her shoulder in her eagerness to see Skekenhouse, but there was a rainy mist in the air and she could make out nothing but ghosts in the murk. The looming phantoms of the famous elf-walls. The faintest wraith of the vast Tower of the Ministry.

"You might be best just shuffling around on your knees the whole time you're here," said Rulf. "And by the gods, keep your tongue still. Cause Grandmother Wexen some offense and crushing with stones will seem light duty."

Thorn saw figures gathered on the dock as they glided closer. The figures became men. The men became warriors. An honor guard, though they had more the flavor of a prison escort as the *South Wind* was tied off and Father Yarvi and his bedraggled crew clambered onto the rain-slick quay.

At sixteen winters Thorn was taller than most men but the one who stepped forward now might easily have been reckoned a giant, a full head taller than she was at least. His long hair and beard were darkened by rain and streaked with gray, the white fur about his shoulders beaded with dew.

"Why, Father Yarvi." His sing-song voice was strangely at odds with that mighty frame. "The seasons have turned too often since we traded words."

"Three years," said Yarvi, bowing. "That day in the Godshall, my king."

Thorn blinked. She had heard the High King was a withered old man, half-blind and scared of his own food. That assessment seemed decidedly unfair. She had learned to judge the strength of a man in the training square and she doubted she had ever seen one stronger. A warrior too, from his scars, and the many blades sheathed at his goldbuckled belt. Here was a man who looked a king indeed.

"I remember well," he said. "Everyone was so very, very rude to me. The hospitality of Gettlanders, eh, Mother Scaer?" A shaven-headed woman at his shoulder glowered at Yarvi and his crew as if they were heaps of dung. "And who is this?" he asked, eyes falling on Thorn.

At starting fights she was an expert, but all other etiquette was a mystery. When her mother had tried to explain how a girl should behave, when to bow and when to kneel and when to hold your key, she'd nodded along and thought about swords. But Rulf had said kneel, so she dropped clumsily down on the wet stones of the dock, scraping her sodden hair out of her face and nearly tripping over her own feet.

"My king. My high ... king, that is—"

Yarvi snorted. "This is Thorn Bathu. My new jester."

"How is she working out?"

"Few laughs as yet."

The giant grinned. “I am but a low king, child. I am the little king of Vansterland, and my name is Grom-gil-Gorm.”

Thorn felt her guts turn over. For years she had dreamed of meeting the man who killed her father. None of the dreams had worked out quite like this. She had knelt at the feet of the Breaker of Swords, the Maker of Orphans, Gettland’s bitterest enemy, who even now was ordering raids across the border. About his thick neck she saw the chain, four times looped, of pommels twisted from the swords of his fallen enemies. One of them, she knew, from the sword she kept at home. Her most prized possession.

She slowly stood, trying to gather every shred of her ruined dignity. She had no sword-hilt to prop her hand on, but she thrust her chin up at him just as if it was a blade.

The King of Vansterland peered down like a great hound at a bristling kitten. “I am well accustomed to the scorn of Gettlanders, but this one has a cold eye upon her.”

“As if she has a score to settle,” said Mother Scaer.

Thorn gripped the pouch about her neck. “You killed my father.”

“Ah.” Gorm shrugged. “There are many children who might say so. What was his name?”

“Storn Headland.”

She had expected taunts, threats, fury, but instead his craggy face lit up. “Ah, but that was a duel to sing of! I remember every step and cut of it. Headland was a great warrior, a worthy enemy! On chill mornings like that one I still feel the wound he gave me in my leg. But Mother War was by my side. She breathed upon me in my crib. It has been foreseen that no man can kill me, and so it has proved.” He beamed down at Thorn, spinning one of the pommels idly around and around on his chain between great finger and thumb. “Storn Headland’s daughter, grown so tall! The years turn, eh, Mother Scaer?”

“Always,” said the minister, staring at Thorn through blue, blue narrowed eyes.

“But we cannot pick over old glories all day.” Gorm swept his hand out with a flourish to offer them the way. “The High King awaits, Father Yarvi.”

Grom-gil-Gorm led them across the wet docks and Thorn slunk after, cold, wet, bitter, and powerless, the excitement of seeing the Shattered Sea’s greatest city all stolen away. If you could kill a man by frowning at his back, the Breaker of Swords would have fallen bloody through the Last Door that day, but a frown is no blade, and Thorn’s hatred cut no one but her.

Through a pair of towering doors trudged the *South Wind*’s crew, into a hallway whose walls were covered from polished floor to lofty ceiling with weapons. Ancient swords, eaten with rust. Spears with hafts shattered. Shields hacked and splintered. The weapons that once belonged to the mountain of corpses Bail the Builder climbed to his place as the first High King. The weapons of armies his successors butchered spreading their power from Yutmark into the Lowlands, out to Inglefold and halfway around the Shattered Sea. Hundreds of years of victories, and though swords and axes and cloven helms had no voice, together they spoke a message more eloquent than any minister’s whisper, more deafening than any master-at-arms’ bellow.

Resisting the High King is a very poor idea.

“I must say it surprises me,” Father Yarvi was saying, “to find the Breaker of Swords serving as the High King’s doorman.”

Gorm frowned sideways. “We all must kneel to someone.”

“Some of us kneel more easily than others, though.”

Gorm frowned harder but his minister spoke first. “Grandmother Wexen can be most persuasive.”

“Has she persuaded you to pray to the One God, yet?” asked Yarvi.

Scaer gave a snort so explosive it was a wonder she didn't blow snot down her chest.

“Nothing will pry me from the bloody embrace of Mother War,” growled Gorm. “That much I promise you.”

Yarvi smiled as if he chatted with friends. “My uncle uses just those words. There is so much that unites Gettland and Vansterland. We pray the same way, speak the same way, fight the same way. Only a narrow river separates us.”

“And hundreds of years of dead fathers and dead sons,” muttered Thorn, under her breath.

“Shush,” hissed Rulf, beside her.

“We have a bloody past,” said Yarvi. “But good leaders must put the past at their backs and look to the future. The more I think on it, the more it seems our struggles only weaken us both and profit others.”

“So after all our battles shall we link arms?” Thorn saw the corner of Gorm's mouth twisted in a smile. “And dance over our dead together into your brave future?”

Smiles, and dancing, and Thorn glanced to the weapons on the walls, wondering whether she could tear a sword from its brackets and stove Gorm's skull in before Rulf stopped her. There would be a deed worthy of a warrior of Gettland.

But then Thorn wasn't a warrior of Gettland, and never would be.

“You weave a pretty dream, Father Yarvi.” Gorm puffed out a sigh. “But you wove pretty dreams for me once before. We all must wake, and whether it pleases us to kneel or no, the dawn belongs to the High King.”

“And to his minister,” said Mother Scaer.

“To her most of all.” And the Breaker of Swords pushed wide the great doors at the hallway's end.

Thorn remembered the one time she had stood in Gettland's Godshall, staring at her father's pale, cold corpse, trying to squeeze her mother's hand hard enough that she would stop sobbing. It had seemed the biggest room in the world, too big for man's hands to have built. But elf hands had built the Chamber of Whispers. Five Gods-halls could have fit inside with floor left over to plant a decent crop of barley. Its walls of smooth elf-stone and black elf-glass rose up, and up, and were lost in the dizzying gloom above.

Six towering statues of the tall gods frowned down, but the High King had turned from their worship and his masons had been busy. Now a seventh stood above them all. The southerners' god, the One God, neither man nor woman, neither smiling nor weeping, arms spread wide in a smothering embrace, gazing down with bland indifference upon the petty doings of mankind.

People were crowded about the far-off edges of the floor, and around a balcony of gray elf-metal at ten times the height of a man, and a ring of tiny faces at another as far above again. Thorn saw Vanstermen with braids in their long hair, Throvenmen with silver ring-money stacked high on their arms. She saw Islanders with weathered faces, stout Lowlanders and wild-bearded Ingling. She saw lean women she reckoned Shends and plump merchants of Sagenmark. She saw dark-faced emissaries from Catalia, or the Empire of the South, or even further off, maybe.

All the people in the world, it seemed, gathered with the one purpose of licking the High King's arse.

“Greatest of men!” called Father Yarvi, “between gods and kings! I prostrate myself before you!” And he near threw himself on his face, the echoes of his voice bouncing from the galleries above and

shattering into the thousand thousand whispers which gave the hall its name.

The rumors had in fact been overly generous to the greatest of men. The High King was a shrivelled remnant in his outsize throne, withered face sagging off the bone, beard a few gray straggles. Only his eyes showed some sign of life, bright and flinty hard as he glared down at Gettland's minister.

"Now you kneel, fool!" hissed Rulf, dragging Thorn down beside him by her belt. And only just in time. An old woman was already walking out across the expanse of floor toward them.

She was round-faced and motherly, with deep laughter lines about her twinkling eyes, white hair cut short, her coarse gray gown dragging upon the floor so heavily its hem was frayed to dirty tatters. About her neck upon the finest chain, crackling papers scrawled with runes were threaded.

"We understand Queen Laithlin is with child." She might have looked no hero, but by the gods she spoke with a hero's voice. Deep, soft, effortlessly powerful. A voice that demanded attention. A voice that commanded obedience.

Even on his knees, Yarvi found a way to bow lower. "The gods have blessed her, most honored Grandmother Wexen."

"An heir to the Black Chair, perhaps?"

"We can but hope."

"Convey our warm congratulations to King Uthil," scratched out the High King, no trace of either warmth or congratulation on his withered face.

"I will be delighted to convey them, and they to receive them. May I rise?"

The first of ministers gave the warmest smile, and raised one palm, and tattooed upon it Thorn saw circles within circles of tiny writing.

"I like you there," she said.

"We hear troubling tales from the north," croaked out the High King, and curling back his lip licked at a yawning gap in his front teeth. "We hear King Uthil plans a great raid against the Islanders."

"A raid, my king?" Yarvi seemed baffled by what was common knowledge in Thorlby. "Against our much-loved fellows on the Islands of the Shattered Sea?" He waved his arm so his crippled hand flopped dismissively. "King Uthil is of a warlike temper, and speaks often in the Godshall of raiding this or that. It always comes to nothing for, believe me, I am ever at his side, smoothing the path for Father Peace, as Mother Gundring taught me."

Grandmother Wexen threw her head back and gave a peal of laughter, rich and sweet as treacle, echoes ringing out as if she were a chuckling army. "Oh, you're a funny one, Yarvi."

She struck him with a snake's speed. With an open hand, but hard enough to knock him on his side. The sound of it bounced from the balconies above sharp as a whip cracks.

Thorn's eyes went wide and without thinking she sprang to her feet. Or halfway there, at least. Rulf's hand shot out and caught a fistful of her damp shirt, dragging her back to her knees, her curse cut off in an ugly squawk.

"Down," he growled under his breath.

It felt suddenly a very lonely place, the center of that huge, empty floor, and Thorn realized how many armed men were gathered about it, and came over very dry in the mouth and very wet in the bladder.

Grandmother Wexen looked at her, neither scared nor angry. Mildly curious, as though at a kind of ant she did not recognize. "Who is this ... person?"

“A humble halfwit, sworn to my service.” Yarvi pushed himself back up as far as his knees, good hand to his bloody mouth. “Forgive her impudence, she suffers from too little sense and too much loyalty.”

Grandmother Wexen beamed down as warmly as Mother Sun, but the ice in her voice froze Thorn to her bones. “Loyalty can be a great blessing or a terrible curse, child. It all depends on to whom one is loyal. There is a right order to things. There *must be* a right order, and you Gettlanders forget your place in it. The High King has forbidden swords to be drawn.”

“I have forbidden it,” echoed the High King, his own voice dwindled to a reedy rustling, hardly heard in the vastness.

“If you make war upon the Islanders you make war upon the High King and his ministry,” said Grandmother Wexen. “You make war upon the Inglings and the Lowlanders, upon the Throvenmen and the Vanstermen, upon Grom-gil-Gorm, the Breaker of Swords, whom it has been foreseen no man can kill.” She pointed out the murderer of Thorn’s father beside the door, seeming far from comfortable on one great knee. “You even make war upon the Empress of the South, who has but lately pledged an alliance with us.” Grandmother Wexen spread her arms wide to encompass the whole vast chamber, and its legion of occupants, and Father Yarvi and his shabby crew looked a feeble flock before them indeed. “Would you make war on half the world, Gettlanders?”

Father Yarvi grinned like a simpleton. “Since we are faithful servants of the High King, his many powerful friends can only be a reassurance.”

“Then tell your uncle to stop rattling his sword. If he should draw it without the High King’s blessing—”

“Steel shall be my answer,” croaked the High King, watery eyes bulging.

Grandmother Wexen’s voice took on an edge that made the hairs on Thorn’s neck prickle. “And there shall be such a reckoning as has not been seen since the Breaking of the World.”

Yarvi bowed so low he nearly nosed the floor. “Oh, highest and most gracious, who would wish to see such wrath released? Might I now stand?”

“First one more thing,” came a soft voice from behind. A young woman walked toward them with quick steps, thin and yellow-haired and with a brittle smile.

“You know Sister Isriun, I think?” said Grandmother Wexen.

It was the first time Thorn had seen Yarvi lost for words. “I ... you ... joined the Ministry?”

“It is a fine place for the broken and dispossessed. You should know that.” And Isriun pulled out a cloth and dabbed the blood from the corner of Yarvi’s mouth. Gentle, her touch, but the look in her eye was anything but. “Now we are all one family, once again.”

“She passed the test three months ago without one question wrong,” said Grandmother Wexen. “She is already greatly knowledgeable on the subject of elf-relics.”

Yarvi swallowed. “Fancy that.”

“It is the Ministry’s most solemn duty to protect them,” said Isriun. “And to protect the world from a second breaking.” Her thin hands fussed one with the other. “Do you know the thief and killer, Skifr?”

Yarvi blinked as though he scarcely understood the question. “I may have heard the name ...”

“She is wanted by the Ministry.” Isriun’s expression had grown even deadlier. “She entered the elf-ruins of Strokorn, and brought out relics from within.”

A gasp hissed around the chamber, a fearful whispering echoed among the balconies. Folk made

holy signs upon their chests, murmured prayers, shook their heads in horror.

“What times are we living in?” whispered Father Yarvi. “You have my solemn word, if I hear but the breath of this Skifr’s passing, my doves will be with you upon the instant.”

“Such a relief,” said Isriun, “Because if anyone were to strike a deal with her, I would have to see them burned alive.” She twisted her fingers together, gripping eagerly until the knuckles were white. “And you know how much I would hate to see you burn.”

“So we have that in common too,” said Yarvi. “May I now depart, oh, greatest of men?”

The High King appeared to have nodded sideways, quite possibly off to sleep.

“I will take that as a yes.” Yarvi stood, and Rulf and his crew stood with him, and Thorn struggled up last. She seemed always to be kneeling when she had better stand and standing when she had better kneel.

“It is not too late to make of the fist an open hand, Father Yarvi.” Grandmother Wexen sadly shook her head. “I once had high hopes for you.”

“Alas, as Sister Isriun can tell you, I have often been a sore disappointment.” There was just the slightest iron in Yarvi’s voice as he turned. “I struggle daily to improve.”

Outside the rain was falling hard, still making gray ghosts of Skekenhouse.

“Who was that woman, Isriun?” Thorn asked as she hurried to catch up.

“She was once my cousin.” The muscles worked on the gaunt side of Yarvi’s face. “Then we were betrothed. Then she swore to see me dead.”

Thorn raised her brows at that. “You must be quite a lover.”

“We cannot all have your gentle touch.” He frowned sideways at her. “Next time you might think before leaping to my defense.”

“The moment you pause will be the moment you die,” she muttered.

“The moment you didn’t pause you nearly killed the lot of us.”

She knew he was right, but it still nettled her. “It might not have come to that if you’d told them the Islanders have attacked us, and the Vanstermen too, that they’ve given us no choice but to—”

“They know that well enough. It was Grandmother Wexen set them on.”

“How do you—”

“She spoke thunderously in the words she did not say. She means to crush us, and I can put her off no longer.”

Thorn rubbed at her temples. Ministers seemed never to mean quite what they said. “If she’s our enemy, why didn’t she just kill us where we knelt?”

“Because Grandmother Wexen does not want her children dead. She wants them to obey. First she sends the Islanders against us, then the Vanstermen. She hopes to lure us into rash action and King Uthil is about to oblige her. It will take time for her to gather her forces, but only because she has so many to call on. In time, she will send half the world against us. If we are to resist her, we need allies.”

“Where do we find allies?”

Father Yarvi smiled. “Among our enemies, where else?”

DEAD MAN'S MAIL

The boys were gathered.

The *men* were gathered, Brand realized. There might not be much beard among them, but if they weren't men now they'd passed their tests and were about to swear their oaths, when would they be?

They were gathered one last time with Master Hunnan, who'd taught them, and tested them, and hammered them into shape like Brand used to hammer iron at Gaden's forge. They were gathered on the beach where they'd trained so often, but the blades weren't wooden now.

They were gathered in their new war-gear, bright-eyed and breathless at the thought of sailing on their first raid. Of leaving Father Peace at their backs and giving themselves guts and sinew to his red-mouthed wife, Mother War. Of winning fame and glory, a place at the king's table and in the warriors' songs.

Oh, and coming back rich.

Some were buckled up prettily as heroes already, blessed with family who'd bought them fine mail, and good swords, and new gear all aglitter. Though he counted her more blessing than he deserved, Brand had only Rin, so he'd borrowed his mail from Gaden in return for a tenth share of aught he took—dead man's mail, tarnished with use, hastily resized and still loose under the arms. But his ax was good and true and polished sharp as a razor, and his shield that he'd saved a year for was fresh painted by Rin with a dragon's head and looked well as anyone's.

"Why a dragon?" Rauk asked him, one mocking eyebrow high.

Brand laughed it off. "Why not a dragon?" It'd take more than that fool's scorn to spoil the day of his first raid.

And it wasn't just any raid. It was the biggest in living memory. Bigger even than the one King Uthrik led to Sagenmark. Brand went up on tiptoe again to see the gathered men stretched far off down the shore, metal twinkling in the sun and the smoke from their fires smudging the sky. Five thousand, Hunnan had said, and Brand stared at his fingers, trying to reckon each a thousand men. It made him as dizzy as looking down a long drop.

Five thousand. Gods, how big the world must be.

There were men well-funded by tradesmen or merchants and ragged brotherhoods spilled down from the mountains. There were proud-faced men with silvered sword-hilts and dirty-faced men with spears of flint. There were men with a lifetime of scars and men who'd never shed blood in their lives.

It was a sight you didn't see often, and half of Thorlby was gathered on the slopes outside the city walls to watch. Mothers and fathers, wives and children, there to see off their boys and husbands and pray for their safe and enriched return. Brand's family would be there too, no doubt. Which meant

Rin, on her own. He bunched his fists, staring up into the wind.

He'd make her proud. He swore he would.

The feeling was more of wedding-feast than war, the air thick with smoke and excitement, the clamor of songs, and jests, and arguments. Prayer-Weavers wove their own paths through the throng speaking blessings for a payment, and merchants too, spinning lies about how all great warriors carried an extra belt to war. It wasn't just warriors hoping to turn a coin from King Uthil's raid.

"For a copper I'll bring you weaponluck," said a beggar-woman, selling lucky kisses, "for another I'll bring you weatherluck too. For a third—"

"Shut up," snapped Master Hunnan, shooing her off. "The king speaks."

There was a clattering of gear as every man turned westward. Toward the barrows of long-dead rulers above the beach, dwindling away to the north into wind-flattened humps.

King Uthil stood tall before them on the dunes, the long grass twitching at his boots, cradling gently as a sick child his sword of plain gray steel. He needed no ornaments but the scars of countless battles on his face. Needed no jewels but the wild brightness in his eye. Here was a man who knew neither fear nor mercy. Here was a king that any warrior would be proud to follow to the very threshold of the Last Door and beyond.

Queen Laithlin stood beside him, hands on her swollen belly, golden key upon her chest, golden hair taken by the breeze and torn like a banner, showing no more fear or mercy than her husband. They said it was her gold that bought half these men and most of these ships, and she wasn't a woman to take her eye off an investment.

The king took two slow, swaggering steps forward, letting the breathless silence stretch out, excitement building until Brand could hear his own blood surging in his ears.

"Do I see some men of Gettland?" he roared.

Brand and his little knot of newly-minted warriors were lucky to be close enough to hear him. Further off the captains of each ship passed on the king's words to their crews, wind-blown echoes rippling down the long sweep of the shore.

A great clamor burst from the gathered warriors, weapons thrust up toward Mother Sun in a glittering forest. All united, all belonging. All ready to die for the man at their shoulder. Perhaps Brand had only one sister, but he felt then he had five thousand brothers with him on the sand, a sweet mixture of rage and love that wetted his eyes and warmed his heart and seemed in that moment a feeling worth dying for.

King Uthil raised his hand for silence. "How it gladdens me to see so many brothers! Wise old warriors often tested on the battlefield, and bold young warriors lately tested in the square. All gathered with good cause in the sight of the gods, in the sight of my forefathers." He spread his arms toward the ancient barrows. "And can they ever have looked on so mighty a host?"

"No!" someone screamed, and there was laughter, and others joined him, shouting wildly, "No!" Until the king raised his hand for silence again.

"The Islanders have sent ships against us. They have stolen from us, and made our children slaves, and spilled our blood on our good soil." A muttering of anger began. "It is they who turned their backs on Father Peace, they who opened the door to Mother War, they who made her our guest." The muttering grew, and swelled, an animal growling that found its way to Brand's own throat. "But the High King says we of Gettland must not be good hosts to the Mother of Crows! The High King says *our* swords must stay sheathed. The High King says we must suffer these insults in silence! Tell me,

men of Gettland, what should be our answer?"

The word came from five thousand mouths as one deafening roar, Brand's voice cracking with it. "Steel!"

"Yes." Uthil cradled his sword close, pressing the plain hilt to his deep-lined cheek as if it was a lover's face. "Steel must be the answer! Let us bring the Islanders a red day, brothers. A day they will weep at the memory of!"

With that he stalked toward Mother Sea, his closest captains and the warriors of his household behind him, storied men with famous names, men Brand dreamed of one day joining. Folk whose names had yet to trouble the bards crowded about the king's path for a glimpse of him, for a touch of his cloak, a glance of his gray eye. Shouts came of, "The Iron King!" and "Uthil!" until it became a chant, "Uthil! Uthil!" each beat marked with the steely clash of weapons.

"Time to choose your futures, boys."

Master Hunnan shook a canvas bag so the markers clattered within. The lads crowded him, shoving and honking like hogs at feeding time, and Hunnan reached inside with his gnarled fingers and one by one pressed a marker into every eager palm. Discs of wood, each with a sign carved into it that matched the prow-beasts on the many ships, telling each boy—or each man—which captain he'd swear his oath to, which crew he'd sail with, row with, fight with.

Those given their signs held them high and whooped in triumph, and some argued over who'd got the better ship or the better captain, and some laughed and hugged each other, finding the favor of Mother War had made them oarmates.

Brand waited, hand out and heart thumping. Drunk with excitement at the king's words, and the thought of the raid coming, and of being a boy no more, being poor no more, being alone no more. Drunk on the thought of doing good, and standing in the light, and having a family of warriors always about him.

Brand waited as his fellows were given their places—lads he liked and lads he didn't, good fighters and not. He waited as the markers grew fewer in the bag, and let himself wonder if he was left till last because he'd won an oar on the king's own ship, no place more coveted. The more often Hunnan passed him over, the more he allowed himself to hope. He'd earned it, hadn't he? Worked for it, deserved it? Done what a warrior of Gettland was supposed to?

Rauk was the last of them, forcing a smile onto his crestfallen face when Hunnan brought wood from the bag for him, not silver. Then it was just Brand left. His the only hand still out, the fingers trembling. The lads fell silent.

And Hunnan smiled. Brand had never seen him smile before, and he felt himself smile too.

"This for you," said the master-at-arms as he slowly, slowly drew out his battle-scarred hand. Drew out his hand to show ...

Nothing.

No glint of the king's silver. No wood neither. Only the empty bag, turned inside out to show the ragged stitching.

"Did you think I wouldn't know?" said Hunnan.

Brand let his hand drop. Every eye was upon him now and he felt his cheeks burning like he'd been slapped.

"Know what?" he muttered, though he knew well enough.

"That you spoke to that cripple about what happened in my training square."

A silence, while Brand felt as if his guts dropped into his arse. “Thorn’s no murderer,” he managed to say.

“Edwal’s dead and she killed him.”

“You set her a test she couldn’t pass.”

“I set the tests,” said Hunnan. “Passing them is up to you. And you failed this one.”

“I did the right thing.”

Hunnan’s brows went up. Not angry. Surprised. “Tell yourself that if it helps. But I’ve my own right thing to look to. The right thing for the men I teach to fight. In the training square we pit you against each other, but on the battlefield you have to stand together, and Thorn Bathu fights everyone. Men would have died so she could play with swords. They’re better off without her. And they’re better off without you.”

“Mother War picks who fights,” said Brand.

Hunnan only shrugged. “She can find a ship for you, then. You’re a good fighter, Brand, but you’re not a good man. A good man stands for his shoulder-man. A good man holds the line.”

Maybe Brand should’ve snarled, “It isn’t fair,” as Thorn had when Hunnan broke her hopes. But Brand wasn’t much of a talker, and he had no words then. No anger in him when he actually needed it. He didn’t make even a mouse’s squeak while Hunnan turned and walked away. Didn’t even bunch his fists while the lads followed their master-at-arms toward the sea. The lads he’d trained with these ten years.

Some looked at him with scorn, some with surprise. One or two even gave him a sorry pat on the shoulder as they passed. But they all passed. Down the beach, toward the breaking waves and their hard-won places on the ships that rocked there. Down to their oaths of loyalty and off on the raid that Brand had dreamed of all his life. It was Rauk who went last, one hand slack on the hilt of his fine new sword, grinning over his shoulder.

“See you when we get back.”

Brand stood alone for a long time, not moving. Alone, in his borrowed mail, with the gulls crying over that vast stretch of sand, empty apart from the bootprints of the men he’d thought his brothers. Alone, long after the last ship had pushed off from the shore and out to sea, carrying Brand’s hopes away with it.

So it goes, with hopes.

POISON

She Who Sings the Wind sang one hell of a wind on the way over from Skekenhouse and they were washed leagues off-course.

They rowed like fury while Rulf roared abuse at them until his voice was hoarse and their oars were all tangled and every one of them was blowing like a fish and soaked with Mother Sea's salt spray. Thorn was quite extremely terrified but she put a brave face on. The only faces she had were brave, though this was a green one, as the thrashing of the ship like an unbroken horse soon made her sick as she'd never been sick in her life. It felt as if everything she'd ever eaten went over the side, over her oar, or over her knees, and half that through her nose.

Thorn had a fair storm blowing on the inside too. The giddy wave of gratitude at being given back her life had soon soaked away, leaving her chewing over the bitter truth that she had traded a future as a proud warrior for one as a minister's slave, collared by her own overhasty oath, for purposes Father Yarvi had no intention of sharing.

To make matters even worse, she could feel her blood coming and her guts were stabbed through with aches and her chest was sore and she had a rage in her even beyond the usual. The mocking laughter of the crew at her puking might've moved her to murder if she could've unpeeled her death-gripping fingers from the oar.

So it was on wobbling legs she staggered onto the wharf at Yaletoft, the stones of Throvenland pocked with puddles from last night's storm, twinkling in this morning's sun. She blundered through the crowds with her shoulders hunched around her ears, every hawker's squawk and seagull's call, every wagon's rattle and barrel's clatter a knife in her, the over-hearty slaps on the back and snide chuckles of the men who were supposed to be her fellows cutting deeper still.

She knew what they were thinking. *What do you expect if you put a girl in a man's place?* And she muttered curses and swore elaborate revenges, but didn't dare lift her head in case she spewed again.

Some revenge that would be.

"Don't be sick in front of King Fynn," said Rulf, as they approached the looming hall, its mighty roof beams wonderfully carved and gilded. "The man's famous for his temper."

But it was not King Fynn but his minister, Mother Kyre, who greeted them at the dozen steps, each one cut of a different-colored marble. She was a handsome woman, tall and slender with a ready smile that did not quite reach her eyes. She reminded Thorn of her mother, which was a dark mark against her from the off. Thorn trusted few enough people, but hardly any had ready smiles and none at all looked like her mother.

"Greetings, Father Yarvi," said King Fynn's handsome minister. "You are ever welcome in Yaletoft, but I fear the king cannot see you."

"I fear you have advised him not to see me," answered Father Yarvi, planting one damp boot on the lowest step. Mother Kyre did not deny it. "Perhaps I might see Princess Skara? She can have been no

more than ten years old when we last met. We were cousins then, before I took the Minister's Test—"

"But you did take the test," said Mother Kyre, "and gave up all your family but the Ministry, as did I. In any case, the princess is away."

"I fear you sent her away when you heard I was coming."

Mother Kyre did not deny that either. "Grandmother Wexen has sent me an eagle, and I know why you are here. I am not without sympathy."

"Your sympathy is sweet, Mother Kyre, but King Fynn's help in the trouble that comes would be far sweeter yet. It might prevent the trouble altogether."

Mother Kyre winced the way someone does who has no intention of helping. The way Thorn's mother used to wince when Thorn spoke of her hero's hopes.

"You know my master loves you and his niece Queen Laithlin," she said. "You know he would stand against half the world to stand with you. But you know he cannot stand against the wishes of the High King." A sea of words, this woman, but that was ministers for you. Father Yarvi was hardly a straight talker. "So he sends me, wretched with regret, to deny you audience, but to humbly offer you all food, warmth, and shelter beneath his roof."

Which, apart from the food, sounded well enough to Thorn.

King Fynn's hall was called the Forest for it was filled with a thicket of grand columns, said to have been floated down the Divine River from Kalyiv, beautifully carved and painted with scenes from the history of Throvenland. Somewhat less beautiful were the many, many guards, closely watching the *South Wind*'s disheveled crew as they shuffled past, Thorn most disheveled of all, one hand clutched to her aching belly.

"Our reception in Skekenhouse was ... not warm." Yarvi leaned close to Mother Kyre and Thorn heard his whisper. "If I didn't know better I might say I am in danger."

"No danger will find you here, Father Yarvi, I assure you." Mother Kyre gestured at two of the most unreassuring guards Thorn had ever seen, flanking the door to a common room that stank of stale smoke.

"Here you have water." She pointed out a barrel as if it was the highest of gifts. "Slaves will bring food and ale. A room for your crew to sleep in is made ready. No doubt you will wish to be away with the first glimpse of Mother Sun, to catch the tide and carry your news to King Uthil."

Yarvi scrubbed unhappily at his pale hair with the heel of his twisted hand. "It seems you have thought of everything."

"A good minister is always prepared." And Mother Kyre shut the door as she left them, lacking only the turning of a key to mark them out as prisoners.

"As warm a welcome as you thought we'd get," grunted Rulf.

"Fynn and his minister are predictable as Father Moon. They are cautious. They live in the shadow of the High King's power, after all."

"A long shadow, that," said Rulf.

"Lengthening all the time. You look a little green, Thorn Bathu."

"I'm sick with disappointment to find no allies in Throvenland," she said.

Father Yarvi had the slightest smile. "We shall see."

THORN'S EYES SNAPPED OPEN in the fizzing darkness.

She was chilly with sweat under her blanket, kicked it off, felt the sticky wetness of blood between

her legs and hissed a curse.

Beside her Rulf gave a particularly ripping snore then rolled over. She could hear the rest of the crew breathing, wriggling, muttering in their sleep, squashed in close together on dirty mats, tight as the fresh catch on market day.

They had made no special arrangements for her and she had asked for none. She wanted none. None except a fresh cloth down her trousers, anyway.

She stumbled down the corridor, hair in a tangle and guts in an aching knot, her belt undone with the buckle slapping at her thighs and one hand shoved down her trousers to feel how bad the bleeding was. All she needed to stop the mocking was a great stain around her crotch, and she cursed He Who Sprouts the Seed for inflicting this stupid business on her, and she cursed the stupid women who thought it was something to celebrate, her stupid mother first among them, and she cursed—

There was a man in the shadows of the common room.

He was dressed in black and standing near the water butt. In one hand he held its lid. In the other a little jar. As if he'd just poured something in. The place was lit by only one guttering candle and he had a bad squint, but Thorn got the distinct feeling he was staring right at her.

They stood unmoving, he with his jar over the water, she with her hand down her trousers, then the man said, "Who are you?"

"Who am I? Who are you?"

Know where your nearest weapon is, her father used to tell her, and her eyes flickered to the table where the wreckage of their evening meal was scattered. An eating knife was wedged into the wood, short blade faintly gleaming. Hardly a hero's blade, but when surprised at night with your belt open you take what you can get.

She gently eased her hand out of her trousers, gently eased toward the table and the knife. The man gently eased the jar away, eyes fixed on her, or at least somewhere near her.

"You're not supposed to be here," he said.

"*I'm* not? What're you putting in our water?"

"What're you doing with that knife?"

She wrenched it from the table and held it out, somewhat shaky, her voice high. "Is that poison?"

The man tossed down the barrel's lid and stepped toward her. "Now don't do anything stupid, girl." As he turned she saw he had a sword at his belt, his right hand reaching for the hilt.

Perhaps she panicked then. Or perhaps she thought more clearly than she ever had. Before she knew it she sprang at him, caught his wrist with one hand and drove the knife into his chest with the other.

It wasn't hard to do. Much easier than you'd think.

He heaved in a wheezing breath, sword no more than quarter drawn, eyes more crossed than ever, pawing at her shoulder.

"You ..." And he crashed over on his back, dragging her on top of him.

Thorn tore his limp hand away and struggled up. His black clothes turned blacker as blood soaked them, the eating knife wedged in his heart to the handle.

She squeezed her eyes shut, but when she opened them, he was still there.

Not a dream.

"Oh, gods," she whispered.

"They rarely help." Father Yarvi stood frowning in the doorway. "What happened?"

“He had poison,” muttered Thorn, pointing weakly at the fallen jar. “Or ... I think he did ...”

The minister squatted beside the dead man. “You have a habit of killing people, Thorn Bathu.”

“That’s a bad thing,” she said in a voice very small.

“It does rather depend on who you kill.” Yarvi slowly stood, looked about the room, walked over to her, peering at her face. “He hit you?”

“Well ... no—”

“Yes.” He punched her in the mouth and she sprawled against the table. By then he was already throwing the door wide. “Bloodshed in King Fynn’s Hall! To arms! To arms!”

First came Rulf, who blinked down at the corpse and softly said, “That works.”

Then came guards, who blinked down at the corpse and made their weapons ready.

Then came the crew, who shook their shaggy heads and rubbed their stubbled jaws and murmured prayers.

And finally came King Fynn.

Thorn had moved among the powerful since she killed Edwal. She had met five ministers and three kings, one of them High, and the only one to impress her was the one who killed her father. Fynn might have been famed for his anger, but the first thing that struck Thorn was what a strangely shapeless man the King of Throvenland was. His chin melted into his neck, his neck into his shoulders, his shoulders into his belly, his sparse gray hairs in wafting disarray from the royal bed.

“Kneeling isn’t your strength, is it?” hissed Rulf, dragging Thorn down along with everyone else. “And for the gods’ sake fasten your damn belt!”

“What happened here?” roared the king, spraying his wincing guards with spit.

Thorn kept her eyes down as she fumbled with her buckle. Crushing with rocks looked inevitable now. Certainly for her. Possibly for the rest of the crew too. She saw the looks on their faces. *This is what happens if you give a girl a blade. Even a little one.*

Mother Kyre, immaculate even in her nightclothes, took up the fallen jar between finger and thumb, sniffed at it and wrinkled her nose. “Ugh! Poison, my king.”

“By the gods!” Yarvi put his hand on Thorn’s shoulder. The same hand he had just punched her with. “If it wasn’t for this girl’s quick thinking, I and my crew might have passed through the Last Door before morning.”

“Search every corner of my hall!” bellowed King Fynn. “Tell me how this bastard got in!”

A warrior who had knelt to root through the dead man’s clothes held out his palm, silver glinting. “Coins, my king. Minted in Skekenhouse.”

“There is altogether too much from Skekenhouse in my hall of late.” Fynn’s quivering jowls had a pink flush. “Grandmother Wexen’s coins, Grandmother Wexen’s eagles, Grandmother Wexen’s demands too. Demands of me, the King of Throvenland!”

“But think of your people’s welfare, my king,” coaxed Mother Kyre, still clinging to her smile, but it hardly touched her mouth now, let alone her eyes. “Think of Father Peace, Father of Doves, who makes of the fist—”

“I have suffered many indignities on behalf of Father Peace.” The flush had spread to King Fynn’s cheeks. “Once the High King was the first among brothers. Now he gives a father’s commands. How men should fight. How women should trade. How all should pray. Temples to the One God spring up across Throvenland like mushrooms after the rains, and I have held my tongue!”

“You were wise to do so,” said Mother Kyre, “and would be wise to—”

“Now Grandmother Wexen sends assassins to my land?”

“My king, we have no proof at all—”

Fynn bellowed over his minister, doughy face heating from pink to blazing crimson. “To my very house? To poison my guests?” He stabbed at the corpse with one sausage of a finger. “Beneath my own roof and under my protection?”

“I would counsel caution—”

“You always do, Mother Kyre, but there is a limit on my forbearance, and the High King has stepped over it!” With face now fully purple he seized Father Yarvi’s good hand. “Tell my beloved niece Queen Laithlin and her honored husband that they have a friend in me. A friend whatever the costs! I swear it!”

Mother Kyre had no smile ready for this moment, but Father Yarvi certainly did. “Your friendship is all they ask for.” And he lifted King Fynn’s hand high.

The guards cheered this unexpected alliance between Throvenland and Gettland with some surprise, the *South Wind*’s crew with great relief, and Thorn Bathu should no doubt have applauded loudest of all. Killing a man by accident had made her a villain. Killing another on purpose had made her a hero.

But all she could do was frown at the body as they dragged it out, and feel there was something very odd in all this.

LOST AND FOUND

Brand was proper drunk.

He often had been, lately.

Lifting on the docks was the best work he could find, and a day of that was thirsty work indeed. So he'd started drinking, and found he'd a real gift for it. Seemed he'd inherited something from his father after all.

The raid had been a mighty success. The Islanders were so sure the High King's favor would protect them they were taken unawares, half their ships captured and half the rest burned. Brand had watched the warriors of Gettland swagger up through the twisting streets of Thorlby when they landed, laden with booty and covered in glory and cheered from every window. He heard Rauk took two slaves, and Sordaf got himself a silver arm-ring. He heard Uthil dragged old King Styr naked from his hall, made him kneel and swear a sun-oath and a moon-oath never to draw a blade against another Gettlander.

All heroes' news, like something from the songs, but there's nothing like others' successes to make your own failures sting the worse.

Brand walked the crooked walk down some alley or other, between some houses or other, and shouted at the stars. Someone shouted back. Maybe the stars, maybe from a window. He didn't care. He didn't know where he was going. Didn't seem to matter anymore.

He was lost.

"I'm worried," Rin had said.

"Try having all your dreams stolen," he'd spat at her.

What could she say to that?

He tried to give her the dagger back. "I don't need it and I don't deserve it."

"I made it for you," she'd said. "I'm proud of you whatever." Nothing made her cry but she had tears in her eyes then, and they hurt worse than any beating he'd ever taken and he'd taken plenty.

So he asked Fridlif to fill his cup again. And again. And again. And Fridlif shook her gray head to see a young life wasted and all, but it was hardly the first time. Filling cups was what she did.

At least when he was drunk Brand could pretend other people were to blame. Hunnan, Thorn, Rauk, Father Yarvi, the gods, the stars above, the stones under his feet. Sober, he got to thinking he'd brought this on himself.

He blundered into a wall in the darkness and it spun him about, the anger flared up hot and he roared, "I did good!" He threw a punch at the wall and missed, which was lucky, and fell in the gutter, which wasn't.

Then he was sick on his hands.

“Are you Brand?”

“I was,” he said, rocking back on his knees and seeing the outline of a man, or maybe two.

“The same Brand who trained with Thorn Bathu?”

He snorted at that, but his snorting tasted of sick and nearly made him spew again. “Sadly.”

“Then this is for you.”

Cold water slapped him in the face and he spluttered on it, tried to scramble up and slipped over in the gutter. An empty bucket skittered away across the cobbles. Brand scraped the wet hair out of his eyes, saw a strip of lamplight across an old face, creased and lined, scarred and bearded.

“I should hit you for that, you old bastard,” he said, but getting up hardly seemed worth the effort.

“But then I’d hit you back, and a broken face won’t mend your troubles. I know. I’ve tried it.” The old man put hands on knees and leaned down close. “Thorn said you were the best she used to train with. You don’t look like the best of anything to me, boy.”

“Time hasn’t been kind.”

“Time never is. A fighter keeps fighting even so. Thought you were a fighter?”

“I was,” said Brand.

The old man held out his broad hand. “Good. My name’s Rulf, and I’ve got a fight for you.”

THEY’D MADE THE TORCHLIT storehouse up like a training square, ropes on the old boards marking the edge. There wasn’t as big an audience as Brand was used to, but what there was made him want to be sick again.

On one of the stools, with the key to the kingdom’s treasury gleaming on her chest, sat Laithlin, Golden Queen of Gettland. Beside her was the man who had once been her son and was now her minister, Father Yarvi. Behind them were four silver-collared slaves—two huge Inglings with hard axes at their belts and even harder frowns on their rock-chiselled faces, and two girls like as the halves of a walnut, each with braids so long they had them looped around and around one arm.

And leaning against the far wall with one boot up on the stonework and that mocking little lop-sided smile on her lips was Brand’s least favorite sparring partner, Thorn Bathu.

And the strange thing was, though he’d spent long drunk hours blaming her for all his woes, Brand was happy to see her face. Happier than he’d been in a long while. Not because he liked her so much, but because the sight of her reminded him of a time when he liked himself. When he could see his future, and liked what he saw. When his hopes stood tall and the world seemed full of dares.

“Thought you’d never get here.” She worked her arm into the straps of a shield and picked out a wooden sword.

“Thought they crushed you with rocks,” said Brand.

“It’s still very much a possibility,” said Father Yarvi.

Rulf gave Brand a shove between the shoulderblades and sent him tottering into the square. “Get to it, then, lad.”

Brand knew he didn’t have the fastest mind, and it was far from its fastest then, but he got the gist. He walked almost a straight line to the practice weapons and picked out a sword and shield, keenly aware of the queen’s cold eyes judging his every movement.

Thorn was already taking her mark. “You’re a sorry bloody sight,” she said.

Brand looked down at his vest, soaked and somewhat sick-stained, and had to nod. “Aye.”

That wrinkle to her mouth twisted into a full sneer. “Weren’t you always telling me you’d be a rich

man after your first raid?"

That stung. "I didn't go."

"Hadn't marked you for a coward."

That stung more. She'd always known how to sting him. "I didn't get picked," he grunted.

Thorn burst out laughing, no doubt showing off in front of the queen. She'd never tired of spouting how much she admired the woman. "Here's me full of envy, expecting you all puffed up like a hero, and what do I find but some drunk beggar-boy?"

Brand felt a cold flush through him then, sweeping the drink away more surely than any ice water. He'd done more than his share of begging, that was true. But it's the true ones that sting.

Thorn was still chuckling at her cleverness. "You always were an idiot. Hunnan stole my place, how did you toss yours away?"

Brand would've liked to tell her how he'd lost his place. He would've liked to scream it in her face, but he couldn't get the words out because he'd started growling like an animal, growling louder and louder until the room throbbed with it, and his chest hummed with it, his lips curled back and his jaw clenched so hard it seemed his teeth would shatter, and Thorn was frowning at him over the rim of her shield like he'd gone mad. Maybe he had.

"Begin!" shouted Rulf, and he was on her, hacked her sword away, struck back so hard he sent splinters from her shield. She twisted, quick, she'd always been deadly quick, made enough space to swing but he wasn't hesitating this time.

He shrugged the blow off his shoulder, barely felt it, bellowed as he pressed in blindly, driving her staggering back, shield-rims grinding together, almost lifting her as she tripped over the rope and crashed into the wall. She tried to twist her sword free but he still had it pinned useless over his shoulder, and he caught her shield with his left hand and dragged it down. Too close for weapons, he flung his practice blade away and started punching her, all his anger and his disappointment in it, as if she was Hunnan, and Yarvi, and all those so-called friends of his who'd done so well from doing nothing, stolen his place, stolen his future.

He hit her in the side and heard her groan, hit her again and she folded up, eyes bulging, hit her again and she went down hard, coughing and retching at his feet. He might've been about to set to kicking her when Rulf caught him around the neck with one thick forearm and dragged him back.

"That's enough, I reckon."

"Aye," he muttered, going limp. "More'n enough."

He shook the shield off his arm, shocked of a sudden at what he'd done and nowhere near proud of it, knowing full well what it felt like on the other side of a beating like that. Maybe there was more than one thing he'd inherited from his father. He didn't feel like he was standing in the light right then. Not at all.

Queen Laithlin gave a long sigh, Thorn's coughing and dribbling in the background, and turned on her stool. "I was wondering when you'd arrive."

And it was only then Brand noticed another watcher, slouched in the shadows of a corner in a cloak of rags every shade of gray. "Always when I am sorest needed and least expected." A woman's voice from within the hood and a strange accent on it. "Or hungry."

"Did you see it?" asked Yarvi.

"I had that questionable privilege."

"What do you think?"

“She is wretched. She is all pride and anger. She has too much confidence and too little. She does not know herself.” The figure pushed back her hood. A black-skinned old woman with a face lean as famine and hair shaved to gray fuzz. She picked her nose with one long forefinger, carefully examined the results, then flicked them away. “The girl is stupid as a stump. Worse. Most stumps have the dignity to rot quietly without causing offense.”

“I’m right here,” Thorn managed to hiss from her hands and knees.

“Just where the drunk boy put you.” The woman flashed a smile at Brand that seemed to have too many teeth. “I like him, though: he is pretty and desperate. My favorite combination.”

“Can anything be done with her?” asked Yarvi.

“Something can always be done, given enough effort.” The woman peeled herself away from the wall. She had the strangest way of walking—wriggling, jerking, strutting—as though she was dancing to music only she could hear. “How much effort will you pay for me to waste upon her worthless carcass, is the question? You owe me already, after all.” A long arm snaked from her cloak with something in the hand.

It was a box perhaps the size of a child’s head—dark, square, perfect, with golden writing etched into the lid. Brand found his eyes drawn to it. It took an effort not to step closer, to look closer. Thorn was staring too. And Rulf. And the queen’s thralls. All fascinated and afraid at once, as if by the sight of a terrible wound. None of them could read, of course, but you did not have to be a minister to know those were elf-letters on the box. Letters written before the Breaking of God.

Father Yarvi swallowed, and with the one finger of his crippled hand eased the box open. Whatever was inside, a pale light shone from it. A light that picked out the hollows of the minister’s face as his mouth fell open, that reflected in Queen Laithlin’s widening eyes which a moment before Brand had thought nothing could surprise.

“By the gods,” she whispered. “You have it.”

The woman gave an extravagant bow, the hem of her cloak sending up a wash of straw-dust from the storehouse floor. “I deliver what I promise, my most gilded of queens.”

“Then it still works?”

“Shall I make it turn?”

“No,” said Father Yarvi. “Make it turn for the Empress of the South, not before.”

“There is the question of—”

Without taking her eyes from the box, the Queen held out a folded paper. “Your debts are all canceled.”

“The very question I had in mind.” The black-skinned woman frowned as she took it between two fingers. “I have been called a witch before but here is sorcery indeed, to trap such a weight of gold in a scrap of paper.”

“We live in changing times,” murmured Father Yarvi, and he snapped the box shut, putting the light out with it. Only then Brand realized he’d been holding his breath, and slowly let it out. “Find us a crew, Rulf, you know the kind.”

“Hard ones, I’m guessing,” said the old warrior.

“Oarsmen and fighters. The outcasts and the desperate. Men who don’t get weak at the thought of blood or the sight of it. The journey is long and the stakes could not be higher. I want men with nothing to lose.”

“My kind of crew!” The black-skinned woman slapped her thigh. “Sign me up first!” She slipped

between the stools and strutted over toward Brand, and for a moment her cloak of rags came open and he saw the glint of steel. “Can I buy you a drink, young man?”

“I think the boy has drunk enough.” Queen Laithlin’s gray eyes were on him, and the eyes of her four slaves as well, and Brand swallowed, his sick-tasting mouth suddenly very dry. “Though my first husband gave me two sons, for which I will always be grateful, he drank too much. It spoils a bad man. It ruins a good one.”

“I ... have decided to stop, my queen,” mumbled Brand. He knew then he wasn’t going back. Not to the ale-cup, nor to begging, nor to lifting on the docks.

The black woman puffed out her cheeks in disappointment as she made for the door. “Young people these days have no ambition in them.”

Laithlin ignored her. “The way you fight reminds me of an old friend.”

“Thank you—”

“Don’t. I had to kill him.” And the queen of Gettland swept out, her slaves following in her wake.

“I’ve a crew to gather.” Rulf took Brand under the arm. “And no doubt your gutter’s missing you —”

“It’ll manage without me.” Rulf was strong but Brand wouldn’t be moved. He’d remembered how it felt to fight, and how it felt to win, and he was more sure of the good thing to do than he’d ever been in his life. “Luck’s with you, old man,” he said. “Now you need to gather one less.”

Rulf snorted. “This ain’t no two-day jaunt, boy, nor even a raid to the Islands. We’re headed far up the Divine River and down the Denied, over the tall hauls and beyond. We go to speak to the Prince of Kalyiv. To seek an audience with the Empress of the South in the First of Cities, even! All kinds of dangers on that journey, even if you’re not seeking allies against the most powerful man in the world. We’ll be gone months. If we come back at all.”

Brand swallowed. Dangers, no doubt, but opportunities too. Men won glory on the Divine. Men won fortunes beyond it. “You need oarsmen?” he said. “I can pull an oar. You need loads lifted? I can lift a load. You need fighters?” Brand nodded toward Thorn, who’d managed to stand, wincing as she kneaded at her battered ribs. “I can fight. You want men with nothing to lose? Look no further.”

Rulf opened his mouth but Father Yarvi spoke over him. “The way may be hard, but we go to smooth the path for Father Peace. We go to find allies.” The minister gave Brand the slightest nod. “We might need one man aboard who spares some thought for doing good. Give him a marker, Rulf.”

The old warrior scratched at his gray beard. “Yours’ll be the lowest place, boy. The worst work for the thinnest rewards. Back oar.” He jerked his head over at Thorn. “Opposite that article.”

Thorn gave Brand a long, hard frown and spat, but it only made him smile wider. He saw his future once again, and he liked what he saw. Compared to lifting loads on the docks, he liked it a lot.

“Looking forward to it.” He plucked the marker from Rulf’s hand, the minister’s dove carved into the face, and he wrapped his fingers painfully tight about it.

It seemed Mother War had found a crew for him after all. Or Father Peace had.

II.

DIVINE
AND DENIED

THE FIRST LESSON

The *South Wind* rocked on the tide, boasting new oars and a new sail, freshly painted and freshly provisioned, lean and sleek as a racing dog and with minister's doves gleaming white at high prow and stern. It was, without doubt, a beautiful ship. A ship fit for high deeds and heroes' songs.

Sadly, her new crew were not quite of that caliber.

"They seem a ..." Thorn's mother always found a pretty way to put things, but even she was stumped. "*Varied* group."

" 'Fearsome' is the word I'd have reached for," grunted Thorn.

She might well have tripped over "desperate," "disgusting" or "axbitten" on the way. All three seemed apt for the gathering of the damned crawling over the *South Wind* and the wharf beside it, hefting sacks and barrels, hauling at ropes, shoving, bellowing, laughing, threatening, all under Father Yarvi's watchful eye.

Fighting men, these, but more like bandits than warriors. Men with many scars and few scruples. Men with beards forked and braided and shaved in strange patches and dyed hair chopped into spikes. Men whose clothes were ragged but whose muscled arms and thick necks and calloused fingers glittered with gold and silver ring-money, proclaiming to the world the high value they put on themselves.

Thorn wondered what mountain of corpses this lot might have heaped up between them, but she wasn't one to be easily intimidated. Especially when she had no choice. She set down her sea-chest, everything she had inside, her father's old sword wrapped in an oilcloth on top. She put on her bravest face, stepped up to the biggest man she could see and tapped him on the arm.

"I'm Thorn Bathu."

"I am Dosduvoi." She found herself staring sharply up at one of the biggest heads she ever saw, tiny features squeezed into the center of its doughy expanse, looming so high above her that at first she thought its owner must be standing on a box. "What bad luck brings you here, girl?" he asked, with a faintly tragic quiver to his voice.

She wished she had a different answer, but snapped out, "I'm sailing with you."

His face retreated into an even tinier portion of his head as he frowned. "Along the Divine River, to Kalyiv and beyond?"

She thrust her chin up at him in the usual manner. "If the boat floats with so much meat aboard."

"Reckon we'll have to balance the benches with some little ones." This from a man small and hard as Dosduvoi was huge and soft. He had the spikiest shag of red hair and the maddest eyes, bright blue, shining wet and sunken in dark sockets. "My name is Odda, famed about the Shattered Sea."

"Famed for what?"

“All kinds of things.” He flashed a yellow wolf-smile and she saw his teeth were filed across the front with killer’s grooves. “Can’t wait to sail with you.”

“Likewise,” Thorn managed to croak, stepping back despite herself and nearly tripping over someone else. He looked up as she turned and, brave face or no, she shrank back the other way. A huge scar started at the corner of one eye, all dragged out of shape to show the pink lid, angled across his stubbled cheek and through both lips. To make matters worse, she realized from his hair, long and braided back around his face, that they would be sailing with a Vansterman.

He met her ill-concealed horror with a mutilated blankness more terrible than any snarl and said mildly, “I am Fror.”

It was either bluster or look weak and Thorn reckoned that no choice at all, so she puffed herself up and snapped out, “How did you get the scar?”

“How did *you* get the scar?”

Thorn frowned. “What scar?”

“That’s the face the gods gave you?” And with the faintest of smiles the Vansterman went back to coiling rope.

“Father Peace protect us,” squeaked Thorn’s mother as she edged past. “Fearsome is a fair word for them.”

“They’ll be the ones scared of me soon enough,” said Thorn, wishing, and not for the first time, that saying a thing firmly enough makes it so.

“That’s a good thing?” Her mother stared at a shaven-headed man with runes stating his crimes tattooed on his face, laughing jaggedly with a bony fellow whose arms were covered in flaking sores. “To be feared by men like these?”

“Better to be feared than afraid.” Her father’s words and, as always, her mother was ready for them.

“Are those life’s only two choices?”

“They’re a warrior’s two choices.” Whenever Thorn traded more than ten words with her mother she somehow ended up defending an indefensible position. She knew what came next. *Why fight so hard to be a warrior if all you can win is fear?* But her mother only shut her mouth, and looked pale and scared, and piled guilt on Thorn’s simmering anger. As ever.

“You can always go back to the house,” snapped Thorn.

“I want to see my only child on her way. Can’t you give me that? Father Yarvi says you might be gone a year.” Her mother’s voice took on an infuriating quiver. “If you come back at all—”

“Fear not, my doves!” Thorn jumped as someone flung an arm around her shoulders. The strange woman who had watched Thorn fight Brand a few days before thrust her gray-stubbed skull between her and her mother. “For the wise Father Yarvi has placed your daughter’s education in my dextrous hands.”

Thorn hadn’t thought her spirits could drop any lower, but the gods had found a way. “Education?”

The woman hugged them tighter, her smell a heady mix of sweat, incense, herbs and piss. “It’s where I teach and you learn.”

“And who ...” Thorn’s mother gave the ragged woman a nervous look, “or what ... are you?”

“Lately, a thief.” When that sharpened nervousness into alarm she added brightly, “but also an experienced killer! And navigator, wrestler, stargazer, explorer, historian, poet, blackmailer, brewer ... I may have forgotten a few. Not to mention an accomplished amateur prophet!”

The old woman scraped a spatter of fresh bird-droppings from a post, tested its texture with her thumb, smelled it closely, seemed on the point of tasting it, then decided against and wiped the mess on her ragged cloak.

“Inauspicious,” she grunted, peering up at the wheeling gulls. “Add to all that my unchallenged expertise in ...” she gave a suggestive wiggling of the hips, “*the romantic arts* and you can see, my doves, there are few areas of interest to the modern girl in which I am not richly qualified to instruct your daughter.”

Thorn should have enjoyed the rare sight of her mother rendered speechless, but was, for once, speechless herself.

“Thorn Bathu!” Rulf shouldered his way through the bustle. “You’re late! Get your skinny arse down the wharf and start shifting those sacks. Your friend Brand has already ...” He swallowed. “I didn’t know you had a sister.”

Thorn sourly worked her tongue. “Mother.”

“Surely not!” Rulf combed at his beard with his fingers in a vain attempt to tame the brown-and-gray tangle. “If you can suffer a compliment from a plain old fighting man, your beauty lights these docks up like a lamp at twilight.” He glanced at the silver key on her chest. “Your husband must be —”

Thorn’s mother could suffer the compliment. Indeed she clutched it with both hands. “Dead,” she said quickly. “Eight years, now, since we howed him up.”

“Sorry to hear that.” Though Rulf sounded, in fact, anything but sorry. “I’m Rulf, helmsman of the *South Wind*. The crew may seem rough but I’ve learned never to trust a smooth one. I picked these men and each knows his business. Thorn’ll be rowing right beneath my beard and I’ll treat her with just as soft a heart and firm a hand as I would my own daughter.”

Thorn rolled her eyes, but it was wasted effort. “You have children?” her mother asked.

“Two sons, but it’s years since I saw them. The gods parted me from my family for too long.”

“Any chance they could part you from mine?” grunted Thorn.

“Shush,” hissed her mother, without taking her eyes from Rulf, and the thick-linked golden chain he wore in particular. “It will be a great comfort to know that a man of your quality looks to my daughter’s welfare. Prickly though she may be, Hild is all I have.”

A lot of strong wind and no doubt not a little strong ale had rendered Rulf ruddy about the cheeks already, but Thorn thought she saw him blush even so. “As for being a man of quality you’ll find many to disagree, but as to looking to your daughter’s welfare I promise to do my best.”

Thorn’s mother flashed a simpering smile. “What else can any of us promise?”

“Gods,” hissed Thorn, turning away. The one thing she hated worse than being fussed over was being ignored.

Brinyolf the Prayer-Weaver had wrought murder on some unwitting animal and was daubing its blood on the *South Wind*’s prow-beast, red to the wrists as he wailed out a blessing to Mother Sea and She Who Finds the Course and He Who Steers the Arrow and a dozen other small gods whose names Thorn had never even heard before. She’d never been much for prayers and had her doubts the weather was that interested in them either.

“How does a girl end up on a fighting crew?”

She turned to see a young lad had stolen up on her. Thorn judged him maybe fourteen years, slight, with a bright eye and a twitchy quickness to him, a mop of sandy hair and the first hints of beard on

his sharp jaw.

She frowned back. “You saying I shouldn’t be?”

“Not up to me who gets picked.” He shrugged, neither scared nor scornful. “I’m just asking how you did.”

“Leave her be!” A small, lean woman gave the lad a neat cuff around the ear. “Didn’t I tell you to make yourself useful?” Some bronze weights swung on a cord around her neck while she herded him off toward the *South Wind*, which made her a merchant, or a storekeeper, trusted to measure fairly.

“I’m Safrit,” she said, planting her hands on her hips. “The lad with all the questions is my son Koll. He’s yet to realize that the more you learn the more you understand the size of your own ignorance. He means no harm.”

“Nor do I,” said Thorn, “but I seem to cause a lot even so.”

Safrit grinned. “It’s a habit with some of us. I’m along to mind the stores, and cook, and watch the cargo. Fingers off, understand?”

“I thought we were aiming to win friends for Gettland? We’re carrying cargo too?”

“Furs and tree-tears and walrus ivory among ... other things.” Safrit frowned toward an iron-shod chest chained up near the mast. “Our first mission is to talk for Father Peace but Queen Laithlin paid for this expedition.”

“Ha! And there’s a woman who never in her life missed out on a profit!”

“Why would I?”

Thorn turned again to find herself looking straight into the queen’s face at a distance of no more than a stride. Some folk are more impressive from far off but Laithlin was the opposite, as radiant as Mother Sun and stern as Mother War, the great key to the treasury shining on her chest, her thralls and guards and servants in a disapproving press behind her.

“Oh, gods ... I mean, forgive me, my queen.” Thorn wobbled down to one knee, lost her balance and nearly caught Laithlin’s silken skirts to steady herself. “Sorry, I’ve never been much good at kneeling—”

“Perhaps you should practice.” The queen was about as unlike Thorn’s mother as was possible for two women of an age—not soppy soft and circumspect but hard and brilliant as a cut diamond, direct as a punch in the face.

“It’s an honor to sail with you as patron,” Thorn blathered. “I swear I’ll give your son the very best service—Father Yarvi, that is,” realizing he wasn’t supposed to be her son any longer. “I’ll give your minister the very best service—”

“You are the girl who swore to give that boy a beating just before he gave you one.” The Golden Queen raised a brow. “Fools boast of what they will do. Heroes do it.” She summoned one of her servants with a snap of her fingers and was already murmuring instructions as she swept past.

Thorn might never have got off her knees had Safrit not hooked her under the arm and dragged her up. “I’d say she likes you.”

“How does she treat folk she doesn’t like?”

“Pray you never find out.” Safrit clutched at her head as she saw her son had swarmed up the mast nimbly as a monkey and was perched on the yard high above, checking the knots that held the sail. “Gods damn it, Koll, get down from there!”

“You told me to be useful!” he called back, letting go the beam with both hands to give an extravagant shrug.

“And how useful will you be when you plummet to your doom, you fool?”

“I’m so pleased to see you’re joining us.” Thorn turned once more to find Father Yarvi at her side, the old bald woman with him.

“Swore an oath, didn’t I?” Thorn muttered back.

“To do whatever service I think fit, as I recall.”

The black woman chuckled softly to herself. “Oooh, but that wording’s awfully vague.”

“Isn’t it?” said Yarvi. “Glad to see you’re making yourself known to the crew.”

Thorn glanced around at them, worked her mouth sourly as she saw her mother and Rulf still deep in conversation. “They seem a noble fellowship.”

“Nobility is overrated. You met Skifr, did you?”

“You’re Skifr?” Thorn stared at the black-skinned woman with new eyes. “The thief of elf-relics? The murderer? The one sorely wanted by Grandmother Wexen?”

Skifr sniffed at her fingers, still slightly smeared with gray, and frowned as though she could not guess how bird droppings might have got there. “As for being a thief, the relics were just lying in Strokum. Let the elves impeach me! As for being a murderer, well, the difference between murderer and hero is all in the standing of the dead. As for being wanted, well, my sunny disposition has made me always popular. Father Yarvi has hired me to do ... various things, but among them, for reasons best known to himself,” and she pressed her long forefinger into Thorn’s chest, “to teach you to fight.”

“I can fight,” growled Thorn, drawing herself up to her most fighting height.

Skifr threw back her shaved head and laughed. “Not that risible stomping about I saw. Father Yarvi is paying me to make you deadly.” And with blinding speed Skifr slapped Thorn across the face, hard enough to knock her against a barrel.

“What was that for?” she said, one hand to her stinging cheek.

“Your first lesson. Always be ready. If I can hit you, you deserve to be hit.”

“I suppose the same would go for you.”

Skifr gave a huge smile. “Of course.”

Thorn dived at her but caught only air. She stumbled, her arm suddenly twisted behind her, and the slimy boards of the wharf smashed her in the face. Her fighting scream became a wheeze of shock and then, as her little finger was savagely twisted, a long moan of pain.

“Do you still suppose I have nothing to teach you?”

“No! No!” whimpered Thorn, writhing helplessly as fire shot through every joint in her arm. “I’m keen to learn!”

“And your first lesson?”

“If I can be hit I deserve it!”

Her finger was released. “Pain is the best schoolmaster, as you will soon discover.”

Thorn clambered to her knees, shaking out her throbbing arm, to find her old friend Brand standing over her, a sack on his shoulder and a grin on his face.

Skifr grinned back. “Funny, eh?”

“Little bit,” said Brand.

Skifr slapped him across the cheek and he tottered against a post, dropped his sack on his foot, and was left stupidly blinking. “Are you teaching me to fight?”

“No. But I see no reason you shouldn’t be ready too.”

“Thorn?” Her mother was offering a hand to help her up. “What happened?”

Thorn pointedly didn't take it. "I suppose you'd know if you'd been seeing your daughter off instead of snaring our helmsman."

"Gods, Hild, you've no forgiving in you at all, have you?"

"My father called me Thorn, damn it!"

"Oh, your father, yes, him you'll forgive anything—"

"Maybe because he's dead."

Thorn's mother's eyes were already brimming with tears, as usual. "Sometimes I think you'd be happier if I joined him."

"Sometimes I think I would be!" And Thorn dragged up her sea-chest, her father's sword rattling inside as she swung it onto her shoulder and stomped toward the ship.

"I like that contrary temperament of hers," she heard Skifr saying behind her. "We'll soon have that flowing down the right channels."

One by one they clambered aboard and set their sea-chests at their places. Much to Thorn's disgust Brand took the other back oar, the two of them wedged almost into each other's laps by the tapering of the ship's sides.

"Just don't jog my elbow," she growled, in a filthier mood than ever.

Brand wearily shook his head. "I'll just throw myself in the sea, shall I?"

"Could you? That'd be perfect."

"Gods," muttered Rulf, at his place on the steering platform above them. "Will I have to listen to you two snap at each other all the way up the Divine like a pair of mating cats?"

"More than likely," said Father Yarvi, squinting up. The sky was thick with cloud, Mother Sun barely even a smudge. "Poor weather for picking out a course."

"Bad weatherluck," moaned Dosduvoi, from his oar somewhere near the middle of the boat. "Awful weatherluck."

Rulf puffed out his grizzled cheeks. "Times like this I wish Sumael was here."

"Times like this and every other time," said Father Yarvi, with a heavy sigh.

"Who's Sumael?" muttered Brand.

Thorn shrugged. "How the hell should I know who he is? No one tells me anything."

Queen Laithlin watched them push away with one palm on her child-swollen belly, gave Father Yarvi a terse nod, then turned and was gone toward the city, her gaggle of thralls and servants scurrying after. This crew were men who blew with the wind, so there was only a sorry little gathering left to wave them off. Thorn's mother was one, tears streaking her cheeks and her hand raised in farewell until the wharf was a distant speck, then the citadel of Thorlby only a jagged notching, then Gettland fading into the gray distance above the gray line of Mother Sea.

The thing about rowing, you face backward. Always looking into the past, never the future. Always seeing what you're losing, never what you've got to gain.

Thorn put a brave face on it, as always, but a brave face can be a brittle thing. Rulf's narrowed eyes were fixed ahead on the horizon. Brand kept to his stroke. If either of them saw her dashing the tears on her sleeve they had nothing to say about it.

THE SECOND LESSON

Roystock was a reeking spew of wooden shops, piled one on the other and crammed onto a rotting island at the mouth of the Divine River. The place spilled over with yammering beggars and swaggering raiders, rough-handed dockers and smooth-talking merchants. Its teetering wharves were choked by strange boats with strange crews and stranger cargoes, taking on food and water, selling off goods and slaves.

“Gods damn it I need a drink!” snarled Odda, as the *South Wind* scraped alongside her wharf and Koll sprang ashore to make her fast.

“I might be persuaded to join you,” said Dosduvoi. “As long as there are no dice involved. I have no luck at dice.” Brand could have sworn the *South Wind* rose a few fingers in the water when he heaved himself ashore. “Care to join us, boy?”

It was a sore temptation after the hell of hard work and hard words, bad weather and bad tempers they’d been through on the way across the Shattered Sea. Brand’s hopes for the wondrous voyage had so far proved a great deal more wondrous than the voyage itself, the crew less a family bound tight by a common goal than a sackful of snakes, spitting poison at each other as though their journey was a struggle that could have only one winner.

Brand licked his lips as he remembered the taste of Fridlif’s ale going down. Then he caught sight of Rulf’s disapproving face, and remembered the taste of Fridlif’s ale coming back up, and chose to stand in the light. “I’d best not.”

Odda spat in disgust. “One drink never hurt anyone!”

“One didn’t,” said Rulf.

“Stopping at one is my problem,” said Brand.

“Besides, I have a better use for him.” Skifr slipped between Brand and Thorn, one long arm hooking each of their necks. “Fetch weapons, my sprouts. It is past time the education began!”

Brand groaned. The last thing he wanted to do was fight. Especially to fight Thorn, who’d been jostling his oar at every stroke and sneering at his every word since they left Thorlby, no doubt desperate to even the score. If the crew were snakes, she was the most venomous of the lot.

“I want you all back here before midday!” yelled Yarvi as most of his crew began to melt away into the mazy alleys of Roystock, then muttered under his breath to Rulf, “We stop overnight we’ll never get this lot started again. Safrit, make sure none of them kill anyone. Especially not each other.”

Safrit was in the midst of buckling on a knife only just this side of a sword, and a well-used one at that. “A man bent on self-destruction will find his way there sooner or later.”

“Then make sure it’s later.”

“Don’t suppose you’ve a notion how I do that?”

“Your tongue’s sharp enough to goad a tree to movement.” Which brought a mad giggle from Koll as he knotted the rope. “But if that fails you, we both know you’re not too shy to stick them with your dagger instead.”

“All right, but I swear no oaths.” Safrit nodded to Brand. “Try and keep my Death-flirting son off that mast, will you?”

Brand looked at Koll, and the lad flashed him a mischief-loving grin. “Don’t suppose you’ve a notion how I do that?”

“If only,” snorted Safrit, and with a sigh she headed into town, while Rulf set a few who’d drawn short lots to scrubbing down the deck.

Brand clambered onto the wharf, firm boards seeming treacherous after so long on the shifting water, groaning as he stretched out muscles stiff from rowing and shook out clothes stiff with salt.

Skifr was frowning at Thorn with hands on hips. “Do we need to strap down your chest?”

“What?”

“A woman’s chest can make trouble in a fight, swinging about like sacks of sand.” Skifr snaked her hand out and before Thorn could wriggle away gave her chest an assessing squeeze. “Never mind. That won’t be a problem for you.”

Thorn glared at her. “Thanks for that.”

“No need for thanks, I am paid to teach you!” The old woman hopped back aboard the *South Wind*, leaving Brand and Thorn facing each other once again, wooden weapons in hand, he nearest to the town, she with the sea at her back.

“Well, children? Do you await an invitation by eagle?”

“Here?” Thorn frowned down at the few paces of narrow wharf between them, cold Mother Sea slapping at the supports below.

“Where else? Fight!”

With a growl Thorn set to work, but with so little space all she could do was jab at him. It was easy for Brand to fend her efforts off with his shield, pushing her back a quarter-step each time.

“Don’t tickle him!” barked Skifr, “Kill him!”

Thorn’s eyes darted about for an opening but Brand gave her no room, easing forward, herding her toward the end of the wharf. She came at him with her usual savagery, their shields clashing, grating, but he was ready, used his weight to doggedly shove her back. She snarled and spat, her boots scraping at the mossy boards, flailed at him with her sword but the blows were weak.

It was inevitable. With a despairing cry Thorn toppled off the end of the wharf and splashed into the welcoming arms of Mother Sea. Brand winced after her, very much doubting this would make a year of rowing beside her any easier.

Kalyiv was a long, long way off, but it was starting to seem farther than ever.

The crew chuckled to each other over the result. Koll, who’d shinned up to the *South Wind*’s yard as usual in spite of his mother’s warnings, whooped from above.

Skifr put long finger and thumb to her temples and gently rubbed at them. “Inauspicious.”

Thorn flung her shield onto the wharf and dragged herself up by a barnacle-crusted ladder, soaked to the skin and white with fury.

“You seem distressed,” said Skifr. “Is the test not fair?”

Thorn forced through her clenched teeth, “The battlefield is not fair.”

“Such wisdom in one so young!” Skifr offered out Thorn’s fallen practice sword. “Another go?”

The second time she went into the sea even faster. The third she ended up on her back tangled with the *South Wind*'s oars. The fourth she beat at Brand's shield so hard she broke off the end of her practice sword. Then he barged her off the wharf again.

By now a merry crowd had gathered on the docks to watch. Some crew from their ship, some crew from others, some folk from the town come to laugh at the girl being knocked into the sea. There was even some lively betting on the result.

"Let's stop," begged Brand. "Please." The only outcomes he could see were enraging her further or going into the sea himself, and neither particularly appealed.

"Damn your please!" snarled Thorn, setting herself for another round. No doubt she'd still have been tumbling into the sea by the light of Father Moon if she'd been given the chance, but Skifr steered her broken sword down with a gentle fingertip.

"I think you have entertained the good folk of Roystock enough. You are tall and you are strong."

Thorn stuck her jaw out. "Stronger than most men."

"Stronger than most boys in the training square, but ..." Skifr flopped one lazy hand out toward Brand. "What is the lesson?"

Thorn spat on the boards, and wiped a little stray spit from her chin, and kept sullen silence.

"Do you like the taste of salt so much you wish to try him again?" Skifr walked to Brand and seized him by the arms. "Look at his neck. Look at his shoulders. What is the lesson?"

"That he is stronger." Fror stood with his forearms dangling over the *South Wind*'s rail, rag and block in his hands. Might've been the first time Brand had heard him speak.

"Exactly so!" called Skifr. "I daresay this tight-lipped Vansterman knows battle. How did you get that scar, my dove?"

"I was milking a reindeer and she fell on me," said Fror. "She was ever so sorry afterward, but the damage was done." And Brand wondered if he winked his misshapen eye.

"Truly a hero's mark, then," grunted Thorn, curling her lip.

Fror shrugged. "Someone must bring in the milk."

"And someone must hold my coat." Skifr whipped off her cloak of rags and tossed it to him.

She was lean as a whip, narrow-waisted as a wasp, wound about with strips of cloth, coiled with belts and straps, bristling with knives and hooks, pouches and picks, scraggs, rods, papers and devices Brand could not guess at the purpose of.

"Have you never seen a grandmother without her cloak before?" And from behind her back she brought an ax with a shaft of dark wood and a thin, bearded blade. A beautiful weapon, snakes of strange letters etched into the bright steel. She held up her other hand, thumb folded in and fingers pressed together. "Here is my sword. A blade fit for the songs, no? Put me in the sea, boy, if you can."

Skifr began to move. It was a baffling performance, lurching like a drunkard, floppy as a doll, and she swung that ax back and forth, knocking the boards and striking splinters. Brand watched her over his shield's rim, trying to find some pattern to it, but he'd no idea where her next footstep might fall. So he waited for the ax to swing wide, then aimed a cautious swipe at her.

He could hardly believe how fast she moved. His wooden blade missed her by a hair as she darted in, caught the rim of his shield with that hooked ax and dragged it away, slipped past his sword arm and jabbed him hard in the chest with her fingertips, making him grunt and stagger back on his heels.

"You are dead," she said.

The ax flashed down and Brand jerked his shield up to meet it. But the blow never came. Instead he

winned as Skifr's fingers jabbed him in the groin, and looking down saw her smirking face beneath the bottom rim of his shield.

"You are dead twice."

He tried to barge her away but he might as well have barged the breeze. She somehow slipped around him, fingers jabbing under his ear and making his whole side throb.

"Dead."

She chopped him in the kidneys with the edge of her hand as he tried to turn.

"Dead."

He reeled around, teeth bared, sword flashing at neck height but she was gone. Something trapped his ankle, turning his war cry to a gurgle of shock, and he kept spinning, balance gone, lurching off the edge of the wharf—

He stopped, choking as something caught him around the neck.

"You are the deadest boy in Roystock."

Skifr had one foot on his heel, the bearded blade of her ax hooked into his collar to keep him from falling, leaning sharply away to balance his weight. He was held helpless, teetering over the cold sea. The watching crowd had fallen silent, almost as dumbstruck at Skifr's display as Brand was.

"You will not beat a strong man with strength any more than I will beat you with youth," Skifr hissed at Thorn. "You must be quicker to strike and quicker when you do. You must be tougher and cleverer, you must always look to attack, and you must fight without honor, without conscience, without pity. Do you understand?"

Thorn slowly nodded. Of all those in the training square, she'd been the one who hated most being taught. But she'd been the one quickest to learn.

"Whatever happened here?" Dosduvoi had strolled up and stood staring at Brand as he dangled spluttering over the water.

"They're training," called Koll, who'd leaned out from the mast to flip a copper coin nimbly across his knuckles. "Why are you back so soon?"

"I lost terribly at dice." He rubbed sadly at his great forearm, where a couple of silver rings had gone missing. "Awful luck, it was."

Skifr gave a disgusted hiss. "Those with bad luck should at least attempt to balance it with good sense." She twisted her wrist. The ax blade tore through Brand's shirt collar and it was his turn to plunge flailing into cold water. His turn to drag himself up the ladder. His turn to stand dripping under the scorn of the crowd.

He found he enjoyed his turn even less than he had Thorn's.

The Vansterman threw Skifr's ragged cloak back to her. "An impressive performance."

"Like magic!" Koll tossed his coin high but fumbled it on the way back so it flickered down toward the sea.

"Magic?" The old woman darted out a hand to pluck Koll's coin from the air between finger and thumb. "That was training, and experience, and discipline. Perhaps I will show you magic another day, but let us all hope not." She flicked the coin spinning far into the air and Koll laughed as he caught it. "Magic has costs you will not wish to pay."

Skifr shrugged her coat back on with a snapping of cloth. "This style of fighting you have learned," she said to Thorn, "standing in a row with shield and mail and heavy blade, it does not suit you. It is not meant to suit you." Skifr dragged the shield from Thorn's arm and tossed it rattling among the

chests on the *South Wind*. “You will fight with lighter, quicker weapons. You will fight in lighter armor.”

“How will I stand in the shield wall without a shield?”

“Stand?” Skifr’s eyes went wide as cups. “You are a killer, girl! You are the storm, always moving! You rush to meet your enemy, or you trick him into meeting you, and on the ground of your choosing, in the manner of your choosing, you *kill him*.”

“My father was a famous warrior, he always said—”

“Where is your father?”

Thorn frowned for a moment, mouth half open, then touched her hand to a lump in her damp shirt, and slowly shut it. “Dead.”

“So much for his expertise.” Skifr tossed over the long ax and Thorn plucked it from the air, and weighed it in her hand, and swished it cautiously one way and the other. “What do the letters on the blade mean?”

“They say in five languages, ‘to the fighter everything must be a weapon.’ Good advice, if you are wise enough to take it.”

Thorn nodded, frowning. “I am the storm.”

“As yet, more of a drizzle,” said Skifr. “But we are only beginning.”

THE THIRD LESSON

The Divine River.

Thorn remembered listening entranced to her father's stories of journeys up it and down its sister, the Denied, his eyes bright as he whispered of desperate battles against strange peoples, and proud brotherhoods forged in the crucible of danger, and hoards of gold to be won. Ever since she had dreamed of her own voyage, the names of those far places like the words of a magic spell, bursting with power and mystery: the tall hauls, Kalyiv, the First of Cities.

Strange to say, her dreams had not included arse and hands chafed raw from rowing, nor endless clouds of biting midges, nor fog so thick you only got fleeting glimpses of the fabled land, and those of bitter bog and tangled forest, the joys of which were hardly rare in Gettland.

"I was hoping for more excitement," grunted Thorn.

"So it is with hopes," muttered Brand.

She was a long way from forgiving him for humiliating her in front of Queen Laithlin, or for all those drops into Roystock's cold harbor, but she had to give a grim snort of agreement.

"There'll be excitement enough before we're back this way," said Rulf, giving a nudge to the steering oar. "Excitement enough you'll be begging for boredom. If you live through it."

Mother Sun was sinking toward the ragged treetops when Father Yarvi ordered the *South Wind* grounded for the night and Thorn could finally ship her oar, flinging it roughly across Brand's knees and rubbing at her blistered palms.

They dragged the ship from the water by the prow rope in a stumbling, straining crowd, the ground so boggy it was hard to tell where river ended and earth began.

"Gather some wood for a fire," called Safrit.

"Dry wood?" asked Koll, kicking through the rotten flotsam clogged on the bank.

"It does tend to burn more easily."

"Not you, Thorn." Skifr was leaning on one of the ship's spare oars, the blade high above her head. "In the day you belong to Rulf, but at dawn and dusk you are mine. Whenever there is light, we must seize every chance to train."

Thorn squinted at the gloomy sky, huddled low over the gloomy land. "You call this light?"

"Will your enemies wait for morning if they can kill you in the dark?"

"What enemies?"

Skifr narrowed her eyes. "The true fighter must reckon everyone their enemy."

The sort of thing Thorn used to airily proclaim to her mother. Heard from someone else, it sounded like no fun at all. "When do I rest, then?"

"In the songs of great heroes, do you hear often of resting?"

She watched Safrit tossing flat loaves among the crew, and her mouth flooded with spit. “You sometimes hear of eating.”

“Training on a full stomach is unlucky.”

Even Thorn had precious little fight left after a long day competing with Brand at the oar. But she supposed the sooner they started, the sooner they’d finish. “What do we do?”

“I will try to hit you. You will try not to be hit.”

“With an oar?”

“Why not? To hit and not be hit is the essence of fighting.”

“There’s no way I could work this stuff out on my own,” grunted Thorn.

She didn’t even gasp when Skifr darted out a hand and cuffed her across the cheek. She was getting used to it.

“You will be struck, and when you are, the force of it must not stagger you, the pain of it must not slow you, the shock of it must not cause you to doubt. You must learn to strike without pity. You must learn to be struck without fear.” Skifr lowered the oar so that the blade hovered near Thorn’s chest. “Though I advise you to get out of the way. If you can.”

She certainly tried. Thorn dodged, wove, sprang, rolled, then she stumbled, lurched, slipped, floundered. To begin with she hoped to get around the oar and bring Skifr down, but she soon found just staying out of its way took every grain of wit and energy. The oar darted at her from everywhere, cracked her on the head, on the shoulders, poked her in the ribs, in the stomach, made her grunt, and gasp, and whoop as it swept her feet away and sent her tumbling.

The smell of Safrit’s cooking tugged at her groaning belly, and the crew ate and drank, spreading their fingers to the warmth of the fire, propping themselves easily on their elbows, watching, chuckling, making bets on how long she could last. Until the sun was a watery glow on the western horizon and Thorn was soaked through and mud-caked from head to toe, throbbing with bruises, each breath ripping at her heaving chest.

“Would you like the chance to hit me back?” asked Skifr.

If there was one thing that could have made Thorn enthusiastic about holding an oar again, it was the chance to club Skifr with one.

But the old woman had other ideas. “Brand, bring me that bar.”

He scraped the last juice from his bowl, stood up wrapped in a blanket and brought something over, licking at his teeth. A bar of rough-forged iron, about the length of a sword but easily five times the weight.

“Thanks,” said Thorn, voice poisonous with sarcasm.

“What can I do?”

All she could think of was him wearing that same helpless look on the beach below Thorlby, as Hunnan sent three lads to kill her dreams. “What do you ever do?” Not fair, maybe, but she wasn’t feeling too fair. Wasn’t as if anyone was ever fair to her.

His brow furrowed, and he opened his mouth as if to snap something at her. Then he seemed to think better of it, and turned back to the fire, dragging his blanket tight over his hunched shoulders.

“Aye!” she called after him, “you go and sit down!” A feeble sort of jibe, since she would have liked nothing better.

Skifr slid a shield onto her arm. “Well, then? Hit me.”

“With this?” It took an effort just to lift the damn thing. “I’d rather use the oar.”

“To a fighter, everything must be a weapon, remember?” Skifr rapped Thorn on the forehead with her knuckles. “Everything. The ground. The water. That rock. Dosduvoi’s head.”

“Eh?” grunted the giant, looking up.

“Dosduvoi’s head would make a fearsome weapon, mark you,” said Odda. “Hard as stone and solid right through.”

Some chuckling at that, though laughter seemed a foreign tongue to Thorn as she weighed that length of iron in her hand.

“For now, that is your weapon. It will build strength.”

“I thought I couldn’t win with strength.”

“You can lose with weakness. If you can move that bar fast enough to hit me, your sword will be quick as lightning and just as deadly. Begin.” Skifr opened her eyes very wide and said in a piping mimicry of Thorn’s voice. “Or is the task not fair?”

Thorn set her jaw even harder than usual, planted her feet, and with a fighting growl went to work. It was far from pretty. A few swings and her arm was burning from neck to fingertips. She reeled about after the bar, struck great clods of mud from the ground, one landing in the fire and sending up a shower of sparks and a howl of upset from the crew.

Skifr danced her lurching dance, dodging Thorn’s clumsy efforts with pitiful ease and letting her lumber past, occasionally knocking the bar away with a nudge of her shield, barking out instructions Thorn could barely understand, let alone obey.

“No, you are trying to lead the way, you must follow the weapon. No, more wrist. No, elbow in. The weapon is part of you! No, angled, angled, like so. No, shoulder up. No, feet wider. This is your ground! Own it! You are queen of this mud! Try again. No. Try again. No. Try again. No, no, no, no, no. No!”

Thorn gave a shriek and flung the bar to the wet earth, and Skifr shrieked back, crashed into her with the shield, and sent her sprawling. “Never lower your guard! That is the moment you die. Do you understand?”

“I understand,” Thorn hissed back through her gritted teeth, tasting a little blood.

“Good. Let us see if your left hand has more spice in it.”

By the time Skifr called a grudging halt Father Moon was smiling in the sky and the night was noisy with the strange music of frogs. Apart from a handful keeping watch the crew was sleeping soundly, bundled in blankets, in furs and fleeces, and in the luckiest cases bags of seal-skin, sending up a thunder of snores and a smoking of breath in the ruddy light of the dying fire.

Safrit sat crosslegged, Koll sleeping with his head in her lap and her hand on his sandy hair, eyelids flickering as he dreamed. She handed up a bowl. “I saved you some.”

Thorn hung her head, face crushed up tight. Against scorn, and pain, and anger she was well-armored, but that shred of kindness brought a sudden choking sob from her.

“It’ll be all right,” said Safrit, patting her knee. “You’ll see.”

“Thanks,” whispered Thorn, and she smothered her tears and crammed cold stew into her face, licking the juice from her fingers.

She thought she saw Brand’s eyes gleaming in the dark as he shifted up to leave a space, shoving Odda over and making him mew like a kitten in his fitful sleep. Thorn would have slept happily among corpses then. She didn’t even bother to take her boots off as she dropped onto ground still warm from Brand’s body.

She was almost asleep when Skifr gently tucked the blanket in around her.

THE GODS' ANGER

The days were lost in a haze of rowing, and wood creaking, and water slopping against the *South Wind*'s flanks, Thorn's jaw muscles bunching with every stroke, Rulf's eyes narrowed to slits as he gazed upriver, Father Yarvi's withered hand clutched behind his back in his good one, Koll's endless questions and Safrit's scolding, stories told about the fire, shadows shifting over the scarred faces of the crew, the constant muttering of Skifr's instructions and the rattle, grunt and clatter of Thorn's training as Brand drifted off to sleep.

He couldn't say he liked her, but he had to admire the way she kept at it, always fighting no matter the odds, always getting up no matter how often she was put down. That was courage. Made him wish he was more like her.

From time to time they came ashore at villages belonging to no land or lord. Turf-roofed fishers' huts huddling in loops of the river, wattle hovels shepherds shared with their animals under the eaves of the silent forest, which made the one Brand had shared with Rin seem a palace indeed and brought a surge of sappy homesickness welling up in him. Father Yarvi would trade for milk and ale and still-bleating goats, knowing every tongue spoken by men or beasts, it seemed, but there were few smiles traded on either side. Smiles might be free, but they were in short supply out there on the Divine.

They passed boats heading north, and sometimes their crews were dour and watchful, and sometimes they called out cautious greetings. Whichever they did Rulf kept careful eyes on them until they were well out of sight with his black bow ready in one hand, a fearsome thing near as tall as a man, made from the great ridged horns of some beast Brand had never seen and never wanted to.

"They seemed friendly enough," he said, after one almost-merry encounter.

"An arrow from a smiling archer kills you just as dead," said Rulf, setting his bow back beside the steering oar. "Some of these crews will be heading home with rich cargo, but some will have failed, and be looking to make good on their trip by taking a fat ship, and selling her pretty young pair of back oars for slaves."

Thorn jerked her head toward Brand. "They'll only find one pretty back oar on this boat."

"You'd be prettier if you didn't scowl so much," said Rulf, which brought a particularly ugly scowl, just as it was meant to.

"Might be the minister's prow keeps the raiders off," said Brand, wedging his ax beside his sea-chest.

Thorn snorted as she slid her sword back into its sheath. "More likely our ready weapons."

"Aye," said Rulf. "Even law-abiding men forget themselves in lawless places. There's a limit on the reach of the Ministry. But the authority of steel extends to every port. It's a fine sword you have there, Thorn."

“My father’s.” After a moment of considering, she offered it up to him.

“Must’ve been quite a warrior.”

“He was a Chosen Shield,” said Thorn, puffing with pride. “He was the one made me want to fight.”

Rulf peered approvingly down the blade, which was well-used and well-kept, then frowned at the pommel, which was a misshapen lump of iron. “Don’t reckon this can be its first pommel.”

Thorn stared off toward the tangled trees, jaw working. “It had a better, but it’s strung on Grom-gil-Gorm’s chain.”

Rulf raised his brows, and there was an awkward silence as he passed the sword back. “How about you, Brand? Your father a fighting man?”

Brand frowned off toward a heron wading in the shallows of the other bank. “He could give a blow or two.”

Rulf puffed out his cheeks, clear that subject was firmly buried. “Let’s row, then!”

Thorn spat over the side as she worked her hands about her oar. “Bloody rowing. I swear, when I get back to Thorlby I’ll never touch an oar again.”

“A wise man once told me to take one stroke at a time.” Father Yarvi was just behind them. There were many bad things about being at the back oar, but one of the worst was that you never knew who might be at your shoulder.

“Done a lot of rowing, have you?” Thorn muttered as she bent to the next stroke.

“Oy!” Rulf kicked at her oar and made her flinch. “Pray you never have to learn what he knows about rowing!”

“Let her be.” Father Yarvi smiled as he rubbed at his withered wrist. “It’s not easy being Thorn Bathu. And it’s only going to get harder.”

The Divine narrowed and the forest closed in dark about the banks. The trees grew older, and taller, and thrust twisted roots into the slow-flowing water and held gnarled boughs low over it. So while Skifr knocked Thorn over with an oar the rest of the crew rolled up the sail, and took down the mast, and laid it lengthways between the sea-chests on trestles. Unable to climb it, Koll pulled out his knife and set to carving on it. Brand was expecting childish hackings and was amazed to see animals, plants, and warriors all intertwined and beautifully wrought spreading steadily down its length.

“Your son’s got talent,” he said to Safrít when she brought around the water.

“All kinds of talent,” she agreed, “but a mind like a moth. I can’t keep it on one thing for two moments together.”

“Why is it even called Divine?” grunted Koll, sitting back to stare off upriver, spinning his knife around and around in his fingers and somewhat proving his mother’s point. “I don’t see much holy about it.”

“I’ve heard because the One God blessed it above all other waters,” rumbled Dosduvoi.

Odda raised a brow at the shadowy thicket that hemmed them in on both banks. “This look much blessed to you?”

“The elves knew the true names of these rivers,” said Skifr, who’d made a kind of bed among the cargo to drape herself on. “We call them Divine and Denied because those are as close as our clumsy human tongues can come.”

The good humor guttered at the mention of elves, and Dosduvoi mumbled a prayer to the One God, and Brand made a holy sign over his heart.

Odda was less pious. “Piss on the elves!” He leapt from his sea-chest, dragging his trousers down and sending a yellow arc high over the ship’s rail. Some laughter, and some cries of upset from men behind who took a spattering as a gust blew up.

One man going often made others feel the need, and soon Rulf was ordering the boat held steady mid-stream while half the crew stood at the rail with hairy backsides on display. Thorn shipped her oar, which meant flinging it in Brand’s lap, and worked her trousers down to show a length of muscled white thigh. It was hardly doing good to watch but Brand found it hard not to, and ended up peering out the corner of his eye as she slithered up and wedged her arse over the ship’s side.

“I’m all amazement!” called Odda at her as he sat back down.

“That I piss?”

“That you do it sitting. I was sure you were hiding a prick under there.” A few chuckles from the benches at that.

“Thought the same about you, Odda.” Thorn dragged her trousers back up and hooked her belt. “Reckon we’re both disappointed.”

A proper laugh swept the ship. Koll gave a whooping snigger, and Rulf thumped at the prow-beast in appreciation, and Odda laughed loudest of all, throwing his head back to show his mouthful of filed teeth. Safrit slapped Thorn on the back as she dropped grinning back on her sea-chest and Brand thought Rulf had been right. There was nothing ugly about her when she smiled.

The gust that wetted Odda’s oarmates was the first of many. The heavens darkened and She Who Sings the Wind sent a cold song swirling about the ship, sweeping ripples across the calm Divine and whipping Brand’s hair around his face. A cloud of little white birds clattered up, a flock of thousands, twisting and swirling against the bruised sky.

Skifr slid one hand into her ragged coat to rummage through the mass of runes and charms and holy signs about her neck. “That is an ill omen.”

“Reckon a storm’s coming,” muttered Rulf.

“I have seen hail the size of a child’s head drop from a sky like that.”

“Should we get the boat off the river?” asked Father Yarvi.

“Upend her and get under her.” Skifr kept her eyes on the clouds like a warrior watching an advancing enemy. “And quickly.”

They grounded the *South Wind* at the next stretch of shingle, Brand wincing as the wind blew colder, fat spots of rain stinging his face.

First they hauled out mast and sail, then stores and sea-chests, weapons and shields. Brand helped Rulf free the prow-beasts with wedges and mallet, wrapped them carefully in oiled cloth while Koll helped Thorn wedge the oars in the rowlocks so they could use them as handles to lift the ship. Father Yarvi unlocked the iron-bound chest from its chains, the veins in Dosduvoi’s great neck bulging as he hefted its weight onto his shoulder. Rulf pointed out the spots and six stout barrels were rolled into place around their heaped-up gear, Odda wielding a shovel with marvelous skill to make pits that the tall prow and stern would sit in.

“Bring her up!” bellowed Rulf, Thorn grinning as she vaulted over the side of the ship.

“You seem happy enough about all this,” said Brand, gasping as he slid into the cold water.

“I’d rather lift ten ships than train with Skifr.”

The rain came harder, so it scarcely made a difference whether they were in the river or not, everyone soaked through, hair and beards plastered, clothes clinging, straining faces beaded with

wet.

“Never sail in a ship you can’t carry!” growled Rulf through gritted teeth. “Up! Up! Up!”

And with each shout there was a chorus of grunting, growling, groaning. Every man, and woman too, lending all their strength, the cords standing out stark from Safrit’s neck and Odda’s grooved teeth bared in an animal snarl and even Father Yarvi dragging with his one good hand.

“Tip her!” roared Rulf as they heaved her from the water. “But gently now! Like a lover, not a wrestler!”

“If I tip her like a lover do I get a kiss?” called Odda.

“I’ll kiss you with my fist,” hissed Thorn through her clenched teeth.

It had grown dark as dusk, and He Who Speaks the Thunder grumbled in the distance as they heaved the *South Wind* over, prow and stern digging deep into the boggy earth. Now they took her under the top rail, upside down, and carried her up the bank, boots mashing the ground to sliding mud.

“Easy!” called Father Yarvi. “Gently! A little toward me! Yes! And down!”

They lowered the ship onto the barrels, and Odda shrieked and flapped his hand because he’d got it caught, but that was the only injury and the *South Wind* was steady on her back. Soaked, sore and gasping they slipped under the hull and crouched huddled in the darkness.

“Good work,” said Rulf, his voice echoing strangely. “Reckon we might make a crew of this crowd of fools yet.” He gave a chuckle, and others joined him, and soon everyone was laughing, and slapping each other, and hugging each other, for they knew they’d done a fine job, each working for one another, and were bound together by it.

“She makes a noble hall,” said Dosduvoi, patting at the timbers above his head.

“One I am exceedingly grateful for in this weather,” said Odda.

The rain was pelting now, coming in sheets and curtains, coursing from the *South Wind*’s top rail which had become the eaves of their roof. They heard thunder crackle close by and the wind howled icy-chill around the barrels. Koll huddled up tighter and Brand put his arm around him, like he might’ve round Rin when they were children and had no roof at all. He felt Thorn pressed tight against him on the other side, the woody hardness of her shoulder against his, shifting as she breathed, and he wanted to put his arm around her too but didn’t much fancy her fist in his face.

Probably he should’ve taken the chance to tell her that he’d been the one went to Father Yarvi. That he’d lost his place on the king’s raid over it. Might’ve made her think twice before digging him with her oar again, at least, or with her insults either.

But the gods knew he wasn’t much good at telling things, and the gods knew even better she wasn’t easy to tell things to, and the further it all dwindled into the past the harder it got. Didn’t seem like doing good, to put her in his debt that way.

So he stayed silent, and let her shoulder press against his instead, then felt her flinch as something heavy banged against the hull.

“Hail,” whispered Skifr. The rattling grew louder, and louder yet, blows like axes on shields, and the crew peered fearfully up, or shrank against the ground, or put hands over their heads.

“Look at this.” Fror held up a stone that had rolled under the boat, a spiked and knobbled chunk of ice the size of a fist. In the gloom outside the ship Brand could see the hail pounding the wet earth, bouncing and rolling.

“You think the gods are angry with us?” asked Koll.

“It is frozen rain,” said Father Yarvi. “The gods hate those who plan badly, and help those with

good friends, good swords, and good sense. Worry less about what the gods might do and more about what you can, that's my advice."

But Brand could hear a lot of prayers even so. He'd have given it a go himself, but he'd never been much good at picking out the right gods.

Skifr was yammering away in at least three languages, not one of which he understood. "Are you praying to the One God or the many?" he asked.

"All of them. And the fish god of the Banyas, and the tree spirits of the Shends, and great eight-armed Thopal that the Alyuks think will eat the world at the end of time. One can never have too many friends, eh, boy?"

"I ... suppose?"

Dosduvoi peered out sadly at the downpour. "I went over to the worship of the One God because her priests said she would bring me better luck."

"How's that worked out?" asked Koll.

"Thus far, unluckily," said the big man. "But it may be that I have not committed myself enough to her worship."

Odda spat. "You can never bow low enough for the One God's taste."

"In that she and Grandmother Wexen are much alike," murmured Yarvi.

"Who are you praying to?" Brand muttered at Thorn, her lips moving silently while she clung to something on a thong around her neck.

He saw her eyes gleam as she frowned back. "I don't pray."

"Why?"

She was silent for a moment. "I prayed for my father. Every morning and every night to every god whose name I could learn. Dozens of the bastards. He died anyway." And she turned her back on him and shifted away, leaving darkness between them.

The storm blew on.

READY OR DEAD

“Gods,” whispered Brand.

The elf-ruins crowded in on both sides of the river, looming towers and blocks and cubes, broken elf-glass twinkling as it caught the watery sun.

The Divine flowed so broad here it was almost a lake, cracked teeth of stone and dead fingers of metal jutting from the shallows. All was wreathed with creeper, sprouting with sapling trees, choked with thickets of ancient bramble. No birds called, not even an insect buzzed over water still as black glass, only the slightest ripple where the oar-blades smoothly dipped, yet Thorn’s skin prickled with the feeling of being watched from every empty window.

All her life she had been warned away from elf-ruins. It was the one thing on which her mother and father had always stood united. Men daily risked shipwreck hugging the coast of Gettland to keep their distance from the haunted island of Strokorn, where the Ministry had forbidden any man to tread. Sickness lurked there, and death, and things worse than death, for the elves had wielded a magic powerful enough to break God and destroy the world.

And here they went, forty little people in a hollow twig, rowing through the midst of the greatest elf-ruins Thorn had ever seen.

“Gods,” breathed Brand again, twisting to look over his shoulder.

There was a bridge ahead, if you could call a thing built on that scale a bridge. It must once have crossed the river in a single dizzying span, the slender roadway strung between two mighty towers, each one dwarfing the highest turret of the citadel of Thorlby. But the bridge had fallen centuries before, chunks of stone big as houses hanging from tangled ropes of metal, one swinging gently with the faintest creak as they rowed beneath.

Rulf gripped the steering oar, mouth hanging wide as he stared up at one of the leaning towers, crouching as if he expected it to topple down and crush the tiny ship and its ant-like crew into nothingness. “If you ever needed reminding how small you are,” he muttered, “here’s a good spot.”

“It’s a whole city,” whispered Thorn.

“The elf-city of Smolod.” Skifr lounged on the steering platform, peering at her fingernails as though colossal elf-ruins were hardly worthy of comment. “In the time before the Breaking of God it was home to thousands. Thousands of thousands. It glittered with the light of their magic, and the air was filled with the song of their machines and the smoke of their mighty furnaces.” She gave a long sigh. “All lost. All past. But so it is with everything. Great or small, the Last Door is life’s one certainty.”

A sheet of bent metal stuck from the river on rusted poles, arrows sweeping across it in flaking paint, bold words written in unknowable elf-letters. It looked uncomfortably like a warning, but of

what, Thorn could not say.

Rulf tossed a twig over the side, watched it float away to judge their speed and gave a grudging nod. For once he had to bellow no encouragements—meaning insults—to get the *South Wind* moving at a pretty clip. The ship itself seemed to whisper with the prayers, and oaths, and charms of its crew, spoken in a dozen languages. But Skifr, who had something for every god and every occasion, for once let the heavens be.

“Save your prayers for later,” she said. “There is no danger here.”

“No danger?” squeaked Dosduvoi, fumbling a holy sign over his chest and getting his oar tangled with the man in front.

“I have spent a great deal of time in elf-ruins. Exploring them has been one of my many trades.”

“Some would call that heresy,” said Father Yarvi, looking up from under his brows.

Skifr smiled. “Heresy and progress often look much alike. We have no Ministry in the south to meddle with such things. Rich folk there will pay well for an elf-relic or two. The Empress Theofora herself has quite a collection. But the ruins of the south have often been picked clean. Those about the Shattered Sea have much more to offer. Untouched, some of them, since the Breaking of God. The things one can find there ...”

Her eyes moved to the iron-shod chest, secured by chains near the setting of the mast, and Thorn thought of the box, and the light from inside it. Had that been dug from the forbidden depths of a place like this one? Was there magic in it that could break the world? She gave a shiver at the thought.

But Skifr only smiled wider. “If you go properly prepared into the cities of elves, you will find less danger than in the cities of men.”

“They say you’re a witch.” Koll blew a puff of wood-chips from his latest patch of carving and looked up.

“They say?” Skifr widened her eyes so the white showed all the way around. “True and false are hard to pick apart in the weave of what *they say*.”

“You said you know magic.”

“And so I do. Enough to cause much harm, but not enough to do much good. So it is, with magic.”

“Could you show it to me?”

Skifr snorted. “You are young and rash and know not what you ask, boy.” They rowed in the shadow of a vast wall, its bottom sunk in the river, its top broken off in a skein of twisted metal. Rank upon rank of great windows yawned empty. “The powers that raised this city also rendered it a ruin. There are terrible risks, and terrible costs. Always, there are costs. How many gods do you know the names of?”

“All of them,” said Koll.

“Then pray to them all that you never see magic.” Skifr frowned down at Thorn. “Take your boots off.”

Thorn blinked. “Why?”

“So you can take a well-deserved break from rowing.”

Thorn looked at Brand and he shrugged back. Together they pulled their oars in and she worked off her boots. Skifr slipped out of her coat, folded it and draped it over the steering oar. Then she drew her sword. Thorn had never seen it drawn before, and it was long, and slender, and gently curved, Mother Sun glinting from a murderous edge. “Are you ready, my dove?”

The break from rowing suddenly did not seem so appealing. “Ready for what?” asked Thorn, in a

voice turned very small.

“A fighter is either ready or dead.”

On the barest shred of instinct Thorn jerked her oar up, the blade of Skifr’s sword chopping into it right between her hands.

“You’re mad!” she squealed as she scrambled back.

“You’re hardly the first to say so.” Skifr jabbed left and right and made Thorn hop over the lowered mast. “I take it as a compliment.” She grinned as she swished her sword back and forth, oarsmen jerking fearfully out of her way. “Take everything as a compliment, you can never be insulted.”

She sprang forward again and made Thorn slither under the mast, breath whooping as she heard Skifr’s sword rattle against it once, twice.

“My carving!” shouted Koll.

“Work around it!” snarled Skifr.

Thorn tripped on the chains that held the iron-bound chest and toppled into Odda’s lap, tore his shield from its bracket, blocked a blow with both hands before Skifr ripped it from her and kicked her over backwards.

Thorn clawed up a coil of rope and flung it in the old woman’s face, lunged for Fror’s sword but he slapped her hand away. “Find your own!”

“It’s in my chest!” she squealed, rolling over Dosduvoi’s oar and grabbing the giant from behind, peering over his great shoulder.

“God save me!” he gasped as Skifr’s blade darted past his ribs on one side then the other, nicking a hole in his shirt, Thorn dodging desperately, running out of room as the carved prow and Father Yarvi, smiling as he watched the performance, grew mercilessly closer.

“Stop!” shouted Thorn, holding up a trembling hand. “Please! Give me a chance!”

“Do the berserks of the Lowlands stop for their enemies? Does Bright Yilling pause if you say please? Does Grom-gil-Gorm give chances?”

Skifr stabbed again and Thorn leapt past Yarvi, teetered on the top strake, took one despairing stride and sprang, clear off the ship and onto the shaft of the front oar. She felt it flex under her weight, the oarsman straining to keep it level. She tottered to the next, bare foot curling desperately around the slippery wood, arms wide for balance. To hesitate, to consider, to doubt, was doom. She could only run on in great bounds, the water flickering by beneath, oars creaking and clattering in their sockets and the cheering of the crew ringing in her ears.

She gave a shrill whoop at the sheer reckless excitement of it, wind rushing in her open mouth. Running the oars was a noble feat, often sung of but rarely attempted. The feeling of triumph was short-lived, though. The *South Wind* had only sixteen oars a side and she was quickly running out. The last came rushing at her, Brand reaching over the rail, fingers straining. She made a despairing grab at his outstretched hand, he caught her sleeve—

The oar struck her hard in the side, her sleeve ripped and she tumbled headfirst into the river, surfaced gasping in a rush of bubbles.

“A creditable effort!” called Skifr, standing on the steering platform with her arm draped around Rulf’s shoulders. “And swimming is even better exercise than rowing! We will make camp a few miles further on and wait for you!”

Thorn slapped her hand furiously into the water. “Miles?”

Her rage did not slow the *South Wind*. If anything it caused it to quicken. Brand stared from the stern with that helpless look, his arm still hanging over the side, and shrugged.

Skifr's voice floated out over the water. "I'll hold on to your boots for you!"

Snarling curses, Thorn began to swim, leaving the silent ruins in her wake.

ITCHING

Brand went down hard, practice sword spinning from his hand, tumbled grunting down the slope and flopped onto his back with a groan, the jeering of the crew echoing in his ears.

Lying there, staring into the darkening sky with his many bruises throbbing and his dignity in shreds, he guessed she must have hooked his ankle. But he'd seen no hint it was coming.

Thorn stuck her own sword point-down in the knobbled turf where they'd set out their training square and offered him her hand. "Is that three in a row now, or four?"

"Five," he grunted, "as you well know." He let her haul him up. He'd never been able to afford much pride and sparring with her was taking an awful toll on what little he had. "Gods, you got quick." He winced as he arched his back, still aching from her boot. "Like a snake but without the mercy."

Thorn grinned wider at that, and wiped a streak of blood from under her nose, the one mark he'd put on her in five bouts. He hadn't meant it as a compliment but it was plain she took it as one, and Skifr did too.

"I think young Brand has taken punishment enough for one day," the old woman called to the crew. "There must be a ring-crusted hero among you with the courage to test themselves against my pupil?"

Wasn't long ago they'd have roared with laughter at that offer. Men who'd raided every bitter coast of the Shattered Sea. Men who'd lived by the blade and the feud and called the shield wall home. Men who'd spilled blood enough between them to float a longship, fighting some sharp-tongued girl.

No one laughed now.

For weeks they'd watched her training like a devil in all weathers. They'd watched her put down and they'd watched her get up, over and over, until they were sore just with the watching of it. For a month they'd gone to sleep with the clash of her weapons as a lullaby and been woken by her warcries in place of a cock's crow. Day by day they'd seen her grow faster, and stronger, and more skillful. Terrible skillful, now, with ax and sword together, and she was getting that drunken swagger that Skifr had, so you could never tell where she or her weapons would be the next moment.

"Can't recommend it," said Brand as he lowered himself wincing beside the fire, pressing gently at a fresh scab on his scalp.

Thorn spun her wooden ax around her fingers as nimbly as you might a toothpick. "None of you got the guts for it?"

"Gods damn it, then, girl!" Odda sprang up from the fire. "I'll show you what a real man can do!"

Odda showed her the howl a real man makes when a wooden sword whacks him right in the groin, then he showed her the best effort Brand had ever seen at a real man eating his own shield, then he showed her a real man's muddy backside as he went sprawling through a bramble-bush and into a puddle.

He propped himself on his elbows, caked head to toe with mud, and blew water out of his nose.

“Had enough yet?”

“I have.” Dosduvoi stooped slowly to pick up Odda’s fallen sword and drew himself up to his full height, great chest swelling. The wooden blade looked tiny in his ham of a fist.

Thorn’s jaw jutted as she scowled up at him. “The big trees fall the hardest.” Splinter in the world’s arse she might be, but Brand found himself smiling. However the odds stood against her, she never backed down.

“This tree hits back,” said Dosduvoi as he took up a fighting stance, big boots wide apart.

Odda sat down, kneading at a bruised arm. “It’d be a different story if the blades were sharpened, I can tell you that!”

“Aye,” said Brand, “a short story with you dead at the end.”

Safrit was busy cutting her son’s hair, bright shears click-clicking. “Stop squirming!” she snapped at Koll. “It’ll be over the faster.”

“Hair has to be cut.” Brand set a hand on the boy’s shoulder. “Listen to your mother.” He almost added *you’re lucky to have one*, but swallowed it. Some things are better left unsaid.

Safrit waved the shears toward Brand. “I’ll give that beard of yours a trim while I’m about it.”

“Long as you don’t bring the shears near me,” said Fror, fingering one of the braids beside his scar.

“Warriors!” snorted Safrit. “Vainer than maidens! Most of these faces are best kept from the world, but a good-looking lad like you shouldn’t be hidden in all that undergrowth.”

Brand pushed his fingers through his beard. “Surely has thickened up these past few weeks. Starting to itch a little, if I’m honest.”

A cheer went up as Dosduvoi lifted his sword high and Thorn dived between his wide-set legs, spun, and gave him a resounding kick in the arse, sending the big man staggering.

Rulf scratched at a cluster of raw insect bites on the side of his neck. “We’re all itching a little.”

“No avoiding some passengers on a voyage like this.” Odda had a good rummage down the front of his trousers. “They’re only striving to find the easiest way south, just as we are.”

“They fear a war is brewing with the High King of lice,” said Safrit, “and seek allies among the midges.” And she slapped one against the back of her neck.

Her son scrubbed a shower of sandy clippings from his hair, which still seemed wild as ever. “Are there really allies to be found out here?”

“The Prince of Kalyiv can call on so many riders the dust of their horses blots out the sun,” said Odda.

Fror nodded. “And I hear the Empress of the South has so many ships she can fashion a footbridge across the sea.”

“It’s not about ships or horses,” said Brand, rubbing gently at the callouses on his palms. “It’s about the trade that comes up the Divine. Slaves and furs go one way, silver and silk come the other. And it’s silver wins wars, just as much as steel.” He realized everyone was looking at him and trailed off, embarrassed. “So Gaden used to tell me ... at the forge ...”

Safrit smiled, toying with the weights strung about her neck. “It’s the quiet ones you have to watch.”

“Still pools are the deepest,” said Yarvi, his pale eyes fixed on Brand. “Wealth is power. It is Queen Laithlin’s wealth that is the root of the High King’s jealousy. He can shut the Shattered Sea to our ships. Cut off Gettland’s trade. With the Prince of Kalyiv and the empress on his side, he can close the Divine to us too. Throttle us without drawing a blade. With the prince and the empress as our allies, the silver still flows.”

“Wealth is power,” muttered Koll to himself, as though testing the words for truth. Then he looked over at Fror. “How did you get the scar?”

“I asked too many questions,” said the Vansterman, smiling at the fire.

Safrit bent over Brand, tugging gently at his beard, shears snipping. It was strange, having someone so close, fixed on him so carefully, gentle fingers on his face. He always told Rin he remembered their mother, but it was only stories told over and over, twisted out of shape by time until he remembered the stories but not the memories themselves. It was Rin who’d always cut his hair, and he touched the knife she’d made for him then and felt a sudden longing for home. For the hovel they’d worked so hard for, and the firelight on his sister’s face, and worry for her rushed in so sharp he winced at the sting of it.

Safrit jerked back. “Did I nick you?”

“No,” croaked Brand. “Missing home is all.”

“Got someone special waiting, eh?”

“Just my family.”

“Handsome lad like you, I can hardly believe it.”

Dosduvoi had finally put a stop to Thorn’s dodging by grabbing a handful of her unruly hair, and now he caught her belt with his other hand, jerked her up like a sheaf of hay and flung her bodily into a ditch.

“Some of us are cursed with bad love-luck,” said Rulf mournfully, as Skifr called a halt to the bout and peered into the ditch after her pupil. “I was gone from my farm too long and my wife married again.”

“Bad love-luck for you, maybe,” muttered Safrit, tossing a tuft of Brand’s beard into the fire, “but good for her.”

“Bad love-luck is swearing an oath not to have any love at all.” Father Yarvi gave a sigh. “The older I get, the less the tender care of Grandmother Wexen seems a good trade for romance.”

“I did have a wife,” said Dosduvoi, lowering himself beside the fire and gingerly seeking out a comfortable position for his bruised buttocks, “but she died.”

“It’s not bad luck if she’s crushed by your bulk,” said Odda.

“That is not funny,” said the giant, though judging from the sniggering many of the crew disagreed.

“No wife for me,” said Odda. “Don’t believe in ’em.”

“I doubt they’re any more convinced by you,” said Safrit. “Though I feel sorry for your hand, forced to be your only lover all this time.”

Odda grinned, filed teeth shining with the firelight. “Don’t be. My hand is a sensitive partner, and always willing.”

“And, unlike the rest of us, not put off by your monstrous breath.” Safrit brushed some loose hairs from Brand’s now close-cropped beard and sat back. “You’re done.”

“Might I borrow the shears?” asked Skifr.

Safrit gave the gray fuzz on her skull a look over. “Doesn’t seem you’ve much to cut.”

“Not for me.” The old woman nodded at Thorn, who’d dragged herself out of the ditch and was limping over, grimacing as she rubbed at her sore head, loose hair torn free and shooting off at all angles. “I think another of our lambs needs shearing. Dosduvoi has proved that mop a weakness.”

“No.” Thorn tossed down her battered wooden weapons and tidied a few strands back behind her ear, a strange gesture from her, who never seemed to care the least for how she looked.

Skifr raised her brows. “I would not have counted vanity among your many shortcomings.”

“I made my mother a promise,” said Thorn, snatching up a flat loaf and stuffing half of it in her mouth with dirty fingers in one go. She might not have outfought three men at once but Brand had no doubt she could have out-eaten them.

“I had no notion you held your mother in such high regard,” said Skifr.

“I don’t. She’s always been a pain in my arse. Always telling me the right way to do things and it’s never the way I want to do them.” Thorn ripped at the loaf with her teeth like a wolf at a carcass, eating and speaking at once, spraying crumbs. “Always fussing over what folk think of me, what they’ll do to me, how I might be hurt, how I might embarrass her. Eat this way, talk this way, smile this way, piss this way.”

All the while she talked Brand was thinking about his sister, left alone with no one to watch over her, and the anger stole up on him. “Gods,” he growled. “Is there a blessing made you couldn’t treat like a curse?”

Thorn frowned, cheeks bulging as she chewed. “What does that mean?”

He barked the words, suddenly disgusted with her. “That you’ve a mother who gives a damn about you, and a home waiting where you’re safe, and you still find a way to complain!”

That caused an uncomfortable silence. Father Yarvi narrowed his eyes, and Koll widened his, and Fror’s brows crept up in surprise. Thorn swallowed slowly, looking as shocked as if she’d been slapped. More shocked. She got slapped all the time.

“I bloody hate *people*,” she muttered, snatching another loaf from Safrit’s hand.

It was hardly the good thing to say but for once Brand couldn’t keep his mouth shut. “Don’t worry.” He dragged his blanket over one shoulder and turned his back on her. “They feel much the same about you.”

DAMN THEM

Thorn's nose twitched at the smell of cooking. She blinked awake, and knew right off something was odd. She could scarcely remember the last time she had woken without the tender help of Skifr's boot.

Perhaps the old witch had a heart after all.

She had dreamt a dog was licking at the side of her head, and she tried to shake the memory off as she rolled from her blankets. Maybe dreams were messages from the gods, but she was damned if she could sieve the meaning from that one. Koll was hunched at the water's edge, grumbling as he washed the pots out.

"Morning," she said, giving an almighty stretch and almost enjoying the long ache through her arms and across her back. The first few days she'd hardly been able to move in the mornings from the rowing and the training together, but she was hardening to the work now, getting tough as rope and timber.

Koll glanced up and his eyes went wide. "Er ..."

"I know. Skifr let me sleep." She grinned across the river. For the first time, Divine seemed an apt name for it. The year was wearing on and Mother Sun was bright and hot already, birds twittering in the forest and insects floating lazy over the water. The trailing branches of the trees about the bank were heavy with white flowers and Thorn took a long, blossom-scented breath in through her nose and let it sigh away. "I've a feeling it'll be a fine day." And she ruffled Koll's hair, turned around, and almost walked into Brand.

He stared at her, that helpless look of his splattered all over his face. "Thorn, your—"

"Go and die." Half the night she'd been lying awake thinking of harsh things to say to him, but when the moment came that was the best she could manage. She shouldered past and over to the embers of the fire where the crew were gathered.

"Eat well," Rulf was saying. "Might be later today we'll reach the tall hauls. You'll need all the strength you've got and more besides when we carry ... the ..." He trailed off, staring, as Thorn walked up, grabbing a spare bowl and peering into the pot.

"No need to stop for me," she said. They were all staring at her and it was starting to make her nervous.

Then Odda chuckled, spluttering food. "She looks like a brush with half the bristles plucked!"

"A lamb half-sheared," said Dosduvoi.

"A willow with half the branches lopped," murmured Fror.

"I like that one," said Odda. "That has poetry. You should speak more."

"You should speak less, but things are as they are."

A breeze floated up from the river, strangely cold against the side of Thorn's head, and she frowned down, and saw her shoulder was covered in hair. She touched one hand to her scalp, afraid of what

she might find. On the right side her hair was muddled into its usual incompetent braid. The left was shaved to patchy stubble, her fingertips trembling as they brushed the unfamiliar knobbles of her skull.

“You sleep on your right.” Skifr leaned past her shoulder, plucking a piece of meat from the pot between long thumb and forefinger. “I did the best I could without waking you. You look so peaceful when you sleep.”

Thorn stared at her. “You said you wouldn’t make me do it!”

“Which is why I did it.” And the old woman smiled as though she’d done Thorn quite the favor.

So much for the witch having a heart, and the fine day too. Thorn hardly knew then whether she wanted to weep, scream, or bite Skifr’s face. In the end all she could do was stalk off toward the river, the crew’s laughter ringing in her ears, clenching her teeth and clutching at her half-tangled, half-bald head.

Her mother’s most treasured possession was a little mirror set in silver. Thorn always teased her that she loved it because she was so vain, but knew really it was because it had been a gift from her father, brought back long ago from the First of Cities. Thorn had always hated to look at herself in it. Her face too long and her cheeks too hollow, her nose too sharp and her eyes too angry. But she would happily have traded that reflection for the lopsided mockery that peered from the still water at the river’s edge now.

She remembered her mother singing softly as she combed Thorn’s hair, her father smiling as he watched them. She remembered the laughter and the warmth of arms about her. Her family. Her home. She gripped the pouch she wore and thought what a pitiful thing it was to carry your father’s fingerbones around your neck. But it was all she had left. She bitterly shook her head as she stared at her ruined reflection and another appeared behind her—tall and lean and colorless.

“Why did you bring me out here?” she asked, slapping both reflections angrily from the water.

“To make allies of our enemies,” said Father Yarvi. “To bring help to Gettland.”

“In case you hadn’t noticed, I’ve no touch for making friends.”

“We all have our shortcomings.”

“Why bring me, then? Why pay Skifr to teach me?”

The minister squatted beside her. “Do you trust me, Thorn?”

“Yes. You saved my life.” Though looking into his pale blue eyes she wondered how far one should trust a deep-cunning man. “And I swore an oath. What choice do I have?”

“None. So trust me.” He glanced up at the wreckage of her hair. “It might take a little getting used to, but I think it suits you. Strange and fierce. One of a kind.”

She snorted. “It’s unusual, that I’ll grant you.”

“Some of us are unusual. I always thought you were happy to stand out. You seem to thrive on mockery like a flower on dung.”

“Harder work than it seems,” she muttered. “Always finding a brave face.”

“That I know, believe me.”

They stayed there, beside the water, for a while, in silence.

“Would you help me shave the other side?”

“I say leave it.”

“Like this? Why?”

Yarvi nodded over toward the crew. “Because damn them, that’s why.”

“Damn them,” muttered Thorn, scooping up water with her hand and pushing back the hair she still

had. She had to admit she was getting a taste for the idea. Leaving it half-shaved, strange and fierce, a challenge to everyone who looked at her. “Damn them.” And she snorted up a laugh.

“It’s not as though you’ll be the only odd-looking one on this crew. And anyway,” Yarvi brushed some of the clippings gently from her shoulder with his withered hand, “hair grows back.”

THAT WAS A TOUGH DAY’S WORK at the oar, fighting an angry current as the Divine narrowed and its banks steepened, Rulf frowning as he nudged the ship between rocks frothing with white water. That evening, as the sunset flared pink over the forested hills, they reached the tall hauls.

There was a strange village at the shore where no two houses were the same. Some built of timber, some of stone, some from turf like the barrows of dead heroes. It was home to folk of the Shattered Sea who had stopped on the way south, and folk from Kalyiv and the empire who had stopped on the way north, and folk from the forest tribes and the Horse People too who must have stuck on journeys east or west. Seeds blown from half the world away and chosen by some weird luck to put their roots down here.

Whatever their clothes and their customs, though, however sharp they had grown at spinning coins from passing crews, Father Yarvi had the Golden Queen’s blood in his veins and knew the best way to fleece them. He bargained with each in their own tongue, baffled them now with charming smiles and now with stony blankness, until he had them bickering over the chance to offer him the lowest prices. When he finally rented eight great bearded oxen from the village’s headwoman, he left her blinking down bewildered at the few coins in her palm.

“Father Yarvi is no fool,” said Brand as they watched him work his everyday magic.

“He’s the most deep-cunning man I ever met,” answered Rulf.

There was a graveyard of abandoned timber by the river—rollers and runners, broken masts and oars, even a warped old keel with some strakes still on it, the bones of a ship that must have come down off the hills too damaged and been broken up for parts. The crew busied themselves with axes and chisels and by the time Father Moon was showing himself they had the *South Wind* ashore with good runners mounted alongside her keel and all her cargo packed on two rented wagons.

“Do we train now?” asked Thorn, as she watched the crew settle to their usual evening merry-making about the fire, Koll causing waves of laughter by copying one of Odda’s less-than-likely stories.

Skifr looked at her, one eye gleaming in the fading light. “It is late, and there will be hard work tomorrow. Do you want to train?”

Thorn pushed some wood-shavings around with her toe. “Maybe just a little?”

“We will make a killer of you yet. Fetch the weapons.”

—

RULF KICKED THEM ALL grumbling from their beds at the first glimmer of dawn, his breath steaming on the damp air.

“Up, you turds! You’ve got the hardest day of your lives ahead of you!”

There had been no easy days since they set off from Thorlby, but their helmsman was right. Carrying a ship over a mountain is exactly as hard as it sounds.

They heaved groaning at ropes, dragged snarling at oars switched about to make handles, set their

shoulders to the keel when the runners snagged, gripping at each other in a straining, stinking, swearing tangle. Even with four of the oxen yoked to the prow they were soon all bruised from falls and raw from rope, whipped by twigs and riddled with splinters.

Safrit went ahead to clear the track of fallen branches. Koll darted in and out below the keel with a bucket of pitch and pig fat to keep the runners sliding. Father Yarvi shouted to the drovers in their tongue, who never used the goad but only crooned to the oxen in low voices.

Uphill, always uphill, the track faint and full of stones and roots. Some prowled armed through the trees about the ship, watching for bandits who might wait in the woods for crews to ambush, and rob, and sell as slaves.

“Selling a ship’s crew is much more profitable than selling things to a ship’s crew, that’s sure.” Odda’s sigh implied he spoke from experience.

“Or than dragging a ship through a wood,” grunted Dosduvoi.

“Save your breath for the lifting,” Rulf forced through clenched teeth. “You’ll need it.”

As the morning wore on Mother Sun beat down without mercy and fat flies swarmed about the toiling oxen and the toiling crew. The sweat ran down Thorn’s stubbled scalp in streaks, dripped from her brows and soaked her vest so that it chafed her nipples raw. Many of the crew stripped to their waists and a few much further. Odda struggled along in boots alone, sporting the hairiest arse ever displayed by man or beast.

Thorn should have been watching where she put her feet but her eyes kept drifting across the boat to Brand. While the others grumbled and stumbled and spewed curses he kept on, eyes ahead and wet hair stuck to his clenched jaw, thick muscles in his sweat-beaded shoulders working as he hefted all that weight with no complaints. That was strength right there. Strength like Thorn’s father had, solid and silent and certain as Father Earth. She remembered Queen Laithlin’s last words to her. *Fools boast of what they will do. Heroes do it.* And Thorn glanced across at Brand again and found herself wishing she was more like him.

“Yes, indeed,” murmured Safrit as she held the waterskin to Thorn’s cracked lips so she could drink without letting go her rope. “That is a well-made lad.”

Thorn jerked her eyes away, got half her mouthful down her windpipe and near choked on it. “Don’t know what you’re speaking of.”

“Course not.” Safrit pushed her tongue into her cheek. “That must be why you keep not looking.”

Once they even passed a ship being hauled the other way by a crowd of sweat-bathed Lowlanders, and they nodded to each other but wasted no breath on greetings. Thorn had no breath to spare, chest on fire and every muscle aching. Even her toenails hurt.

“I’m no great enthusiast ... for rowing,” she snarled, “but I’d damn sure rather ... row a ship ... than carry it.”

With one last effort they heaved the *South Wind* over a stubborn brow and onto the flat, the runners grinding to a halt.

“We’ll rest here for now!” called Father Yarvi.

There was a chorus of grateful groans, and men tied their ropes off around the nearest trees, dropping among the knotted roots where they stood.

“Thank the gods,” whispered Thorn, pushing her hands into her aching back. “The downslope’ll be easier. It has to be.”

“Guess we’ll see when we get there,” said Brand, shading his eyes. The ground dropped away

ahead but, further on, indistinct in the haze, it rose again. It rose in forested slopes, higher, and higher, to a ridge above even the one they stood on now.

Thorn stared at it, jaw hanging open in sick disbelief. “More and more, crushing with stones seems like it might have been the less painful option.”

“It’s not too late to change your mind,” said Father Yarvi. “We may be short of comforts out here, but I’m sure we can find stones.”

THE MAN WHO FOUGHT A SHIP

It was a grim and weary crew who struggled groaning from their beds, all wracked with aches and bruises from yesterday's labor and looking forward to as hard a day ahead. Even Odda had no jokes as he contemplated the long drop down the forested hillside, the hint of water glimmering in the misty distance.

"Least it's downhill," said Brand.

Odda snorted as he turned away. "Ha."

Brand soon found out his meaning. Uphill, the challenge had been dragging the *South Wind* on. Downhill, it was stopping her running off, which meant just as much work but a lot more danger. Not enough width on the crooked track for any help from the oxen, a dozen of the crew wrapped rags around sore hands, looped check-ropes around raw forearms and across aching shoulders padded with blankets and struggled along beside the ship, six of them on each side. They strained to keep her straight as she lurched down that lumpy hillside, Koll creeping ahead with his bucket, slipping in to daub the runners whenever they set to smoking.

"Steady," grumbled Rulf, holding up a hand. "Steady!"

"Easier said than bloody done," groaned Brand. He'd been given a rope, of course. The trouble with being able to lift heavy things is that when heavy things need lifting folk step out of the way and smile at you. He'd done some tough jobs to earn a crust for him and Rin but he'd never worked this hard in his life, hemp wet with sweat wound around one forearm, over his shoulders, then around the other, cutting at him with every step, legs all aquiver, boots scuffing at the loose earth and the slick leaves and the fallen pine needles, coughing on the dust Odda scuffled up ahead of him and flinching at the curses of Dosduvoi behind.

"When do we get to that damn river?" snarled Odda over his shoulder as they waited for a fallen tree to be heaved from the path.

"We'll soon be able to float the boat in the one flowing out of me." Brand shook his head and the sweat flew in fat drops from his wet hair.

"As soon as Safrit brings the water it's straight out of my back and down my crack," said Dosduvoi from behind him. "Are you going to tell us how you got the scar, Fror?"

"Cut myself shaving," the Vansterman called from the other side of the ship, then left a long pause before adding, "Never shave with an ax."

Thorn was one of five carrying the part-carved mast. Brand could feel her eyes sharp as arrows in his back and guessed she was still furious over what he'd said about her mother. He hardly blamed

her. Wasn't Thorn who'd trotted off and left Rin to fend for herself, was it? Seemed whenever Brand lost his temper it was really himself he was angry at. He knew he ought to say sorry for it but words had never come easy to him. Sometimes he'd spend days picking over the right ones to say, but when he finally got his mouth open the wrong ones came drooling straight out.

"Reckon I'd be better off if I never said another word," he grunted to himself.

"You'd get no bloody complaints from me," he heard Thorn mutter, and was just turning to give her a tongue-lashing he'd no doubt soon regret when he felt a jolt through his rope that dragged him floundering into a heap of leaves, only just keeping his feet.

"Easy!" roared Dosduvoi, and hauled back hard on his own rope. A knot slipped with a noise like a whip cracking and he gave a shocked yelp and went flying over backwards.

Odda squealed out, "Gods!" as he was jerked onto his face, knocking the next man over so he lost his grip on his own rope, the loose end snapping like a thing alive.

There was a flurry of wingbeats as a bird took to the sky and the *South Wind* lurched forward, one of the men on the other side shrieking as his rope tore across his shoulders and spun him around, knocking Fror sideways, the sudden weight dragging the rest of the men over like skittles.

Brand saw Koll leaning in with his pitch, staring up in horror as the high prow shuddered over him. He tried to scramble clear, slipped on his back under the grinding keel.

No time for first thoughts, let alone second ones. Maybe that was a good thing. Brand's father had always told him he wasn't much of a thinker.

He bounded off the track in a shower of old leaves, dragging his rope around the nearest tree, a thick-trunked old beast with gnarled roots grasping deep into the hillside.

Folk were screaming over each other, timbers groaning, wood snapping, but Brand paid them no mind, wedged one boot up against the tree and then the other. With a grunt he forced his legs and his back out straight, leaning into the rope across his shoulders, hauling it taut so he was standing sideways from the trunk like one of the branches.

If only he'd been made of wood too. The rope twanged like a harpstring and his eyes bulged at the force of it, hemp grating against bark, slipping in his hands, biting into his arms. He clenched his teeth and closed his eyes and gripped at the rags around the rope. Gripped them tight as Death grips the dying.

Too much to lift. Way too much, but once the load's on you what choice do you have?

More grinding in his ears as the *South Wind* shifted and the weight grew, and grew, and crushed a slow groan out of him, but he knew if he let his knees, or his back, or his arms bend once the rope would fold him in half.

He opened his eyes for an instant. Sunlight flickered through leaves. Blood on his quivering fists. The rope smoking about the trunk. Voices echoed far away. He hissed as the rope twitched and pinged then slipped again, biting into him surely as a saw.

Couldn't let go. Couldn't fail his crew. Bones creaking as the hemp cut into his shoulders, his arms, his hands, sure to rip him apart, the jagged breath tearing at his chest and snorting from his clenched teeth.

Couldn't let go. Couldn't fail his family. His whole body trembling, every last thread of muscle on fire with the effort.

Nothing in the world but him and the rope. Nothing but effort and pain and darkness.

And then he heard Rin's voice, soft in his ear. "Let go."

He shook his head, whimpering, straining.

“Let go, Brand!”

An ax thudded into wood and he was falling, the world turning over. Strong arms caught him, lowered him, weak as a child, floppy as rags.

Thorn, with Mother Sun behind her, glowing in the fuzz on the side of her head.

“Where’s Rin?” he whispered, but the words were just a croak.

“You can let go.”

“Uh.” His fists were still gripping. Took a mighty effort to make his pulsing fingers come open, enough for Thorn to start unwinding the rope, hemp dark with blood.

She winced, and shrieked out, “Father Yarvi!”

“I’m sorry,” he croaked.

“What?”

“Shouldn’t have said that ... about your mother—”

“Shut up, Brand.” There was a pause, then, a babble of voices in the distance, a bird sending up a trilling call in the branches above. “Thing that really burns is I’m starting to think you were right.”

“I was?”

“Don’t get carried away. Doubt it’ll happen again.”

There were people gathering about them, blurry outlines looking down.

“You ever see the like o’ that?”

“He had her whole weight for a moment.”

“A feat to sing of, all right.”

“Already setting it to a verse,” came Odda’s voice.

“You saved my life,” said Koll, staring down with wide eyes, pitch smeared up his cheek.

Safrit put the neck of the waterskin to Brand’s lips. “The ship would have crushed him.”

“The ship might’ve crushed herself,” said Rulf. “We’d have brought no help to Gettland then.”

“We’d have needed a stack of help ourselves.”

Even swallowing was an effort. “Just ... done what anyone would do.”

“You remind me of an old friend of ours,” said Father Yarvi. “Strong arm. Strong heart.”

“One stroke at a time,” said Rulf, voice a little choked.

Brand looked down at what the minister was doing and felt a surge of sickness. The rope-burns coiled up his arms like red snakes around white branches, raw and bloody.

“Does it hurt?”

“Just a tingle.”

“Just a damn tingle!” bellowed Odda. “You hear that? What rhymes with tingle?”

“It’ll hurt soon enough,” said Father Yarvi. “And leave you some scars.”

“Marks of a great deed,” murmured Fror who, when it came to scars, had to be reckoned an expert. “Hero’s marks.”

Brand winced as Yarvi wound the bandages around his forearms, the cuts burning like fury now. “Some hero,” he muttered, as Thorn helped him sit up. “I fought a rope and lost.”

“No.” Father Yarvi slid a pin through the bandages and put his withered hand on Brand’s shoulder. “You fought a ship. And won. Put this under your tongue.” And he slipped a dried leaf into Brand’s mouth. “It’ll help with the pain.”

“The knot slipped,” said Dosduvoi, blinking at the frayed end of his rope. “What kind of awful luck

is that?"

"The kind that afflicts men who don't check their knots," said Father Yarvi, glaring at him. "Safrít, make space for Brand in the wagon. Koll, you stay with him. Make sure he's moved to perform no further heroics."

Safrít made a bed among the supplies from the crew's blankets. Brand tried to tell her he could walk but they could all see he couldn't.

"You'll lie there and you'll like it!" she snapped, her pointed finger in his face.

So that was that. Koll perched on a barrel beside him and the wagon set lurching off down the slope, Brand wincing at every jolt.

"You saved my life," muttered the lad, after a while.

"You're quick. You'd have got out of the way."

"No I wouldn't. I was looking through the Last Door. Let me thank you, at least."

They looked at each other for a moment. "Fair enough," said Brand. "I'm thanked."

"How did you get that strong?"

"Work, I guess. On the docks. At the oar. In the forge."

"You've done smith work?"

"For a woman named Gaden. She took her husband's forge on when he died and turned out twice the smith he'd been." Brand remembered the feel of the hammer, the ringing of the anvil, the heat of the coals. Never thought he'd miss it, but he did. "It's a good trade, working iron. Honest."

"Why'd you stop?"

"Always dreamed of being a warrior. Winning a place in the songs. Joining a crew." Brand watched Odda and Dosduvoi squabbling under the weight of their ropes, Fror shaking his head in disgust, and smiled. "It was a cleaner crew than this I had in mind, but you have to take the family you're given." The pain was less but it seemed Yarvi's leaf had loosened his tongue. "My mother died when I was little. Told me to do good. My father didn't want me ..."

"My father died," said Koll. "Long time ago."

"Well, now you've got Father Yarvi. And all these brothers around you." Brand caught Thorn's eye for an instant before she frowned off sideways into the trees. "And Thorn for a sister too, for that matter."

Koll gave his quick grin. "Mixed blessing, that."

"Most blessings are. She's prickly, but I reckon she'd fight to the death for any one of us."

"She certainly does like fighting."

"She certainly does."

The wagon's wheels squealed, the cargo rattled, the straining crew bellowed at one another. Then Koll said, quietly, "Are you my brother, then?"

"Guess so. If you'll have me."

"Reckon I could do worse." The lad shrugged, as if it didn't matter much either way. But Brand got the feeling it did.

WITH ONE LAST HEAVE the *South Wind* slid into the churning waters of the Denied and a ragged cheer went up.

"We made it," said Brand, hardly believing it. "Did we make it?"

"Aye. You can all tell your grandchildren you carted a ship over the tall hauls." Rulf wiped the

sweat from his forehead on one thick forearm. "But we've some rowing still to do today!" he called, bringing the celebrations to a quick end. "Let's get her loaded up and make a few miles before sundown!"

"On your feet, idler." Dosduvoi swung Brand down from the wagon and onto his still-shaky legs.

Father Yarvi was talking to the leader of the drovers in the gods knew what strange tongue, then they both broke into laughter and gave each other a long hug.

"What did he say?" asked Brand.

"Beware of the Horse People," said Father Yarvi, "for they are savage and dangerous."

Thorn frowned toward the oxen, finally freed of their burden. "I don't see the joke."

"I asked him what he says to the Horse People, when he trades with them."

"And?"

"Beware of the Boat People, for they are savage and dangerous."

"Who are the Boat People?" asked Koll.

"We are," said Brand, grimacing as he clambered back aboard the *South Wind*. Every joint and sinew was aching and he went stooped in an old man's shuffle to his place at the stern, flopping onto his sea chest the moment Thorn thumped it down for him.

"You sure you can row?"

"I'll keep stroke with you all right," he muttered back at her, though it felt like a hero's effort just to sit up.

"You can barely keep stroke with me healthy," she said.

"We'll see if you can keep stroke with me, you mouthy string of gristle." Rulf was standing behind them. "You're in my place, lad."

"Where do I go?"

Rulf nodded toward the steering oar on its platform above them. "Thought for this evening you might take the helm."

Brand blinked. "Me?"

"Reckon you earned it." And Rulf slapped him on the back as he helped him up.

Grunting at the pain, Brand turned, one arm over the steering oar, and saw the whole crew watching him. Safrit and Koll with the cargo, Odda and Dosduvoi and Fror at their oars, Father Yarvi standing with Skifr near the dove-carved prow and beyond it the Denied flowing away south, Mother Sun scattering gold upon the water.

Brand grinned wide. "I like the view from here."

"Don't get used to it," said Rulf.

And all at once the crew started thumping at their oars, hammering, pounding, a thunder of flesh on wood. A drumming of respect. For him. For him who all his life had been nothing.

"To be fair, it was quite a thing you did up there." Thorn had the hint of a grin, eyes glinting as she slapped at her oar. "Quite a thing."

Brand felt pride swelling in him then like he'd never known before. He'd come a long road since Hunnan left him alone on the beach below Thorlby. He might not have sworn a warrior's oath, but he'd found a crew even so. A family to be part of. He wished Rin was there to see it, and pictured her face if she had been, and had to sniff and pretend he'd got something in his eye. Felt like standing in the light, and no mistake.

"Well don't just hit 'em, you lazy bastards!" he shouted in a broken voice. "Pull 'em!"

The crew laughed as they set to their oars, and the *South Wind* pulled smoothly off into the swift Denied, rowing with the current at last, leaving the oxen and their drivers to wait on the bank for a new burden.

STRANGE TIMES

The forest gave way to the open steppe. Terribly open. Ruthlessly flat. Mile upon mile of lush, green, waving grass.

To Thorn, brought up among the hills and mountains and cliffs of Gettland, there was something crushing in all that emptiness, all that space, stretching off under a bottomless sky to the far, far horizon.

“Why does no one farm it?” asked Koll, straddling the downed mast with the wind whipping the shavings from under his knife.

“The Horse People graze it,” said Dosduvoi. “And don’t like finding other folk out here.”

Odda snorted. “They like it so little they skin ’em alive, indeed.”

“A practice the Prince of Kalyiv taught them.”

“Who learned it in the First of Cities,” said Fror, wiping his misshapen eye with a fingertip.

“Though I understand it was taken there by travellers from Sagenmark,” said Rulf.

“Who were taught it when Bail the Builder first raided them,” said Yarvi.

“So are the skimmers skinned,” mused Skifr, watching the wind sweep patterns in the grass, “and the bloody lessons turn in circles.”

“Well enough.” Rulf scanned the river ahead, and behind, and the flat land around with eyes more fiercely narrowed than ever. “Long as we take no instruction.”

“Why are you so worried?” asked Thorn. “We haven’t seen a ship for days.”

“Exactly. Where are they?”

“Here are two,” said Father Yarvi, pointing downriver.

He had sharp eyes. It wasn’t until they came much closer that, straining over her shoulder, Thorn could see what the black heaps on the river’s bank were. The charred skeletons of a pair of small ships in a wide patch of trampled grass. The blackened circle of a spent fire. A fire just like the one they warmed their hands at every night.

“It doesn’t look good for the crews,” muttered Brand, with a knack for saying what everyone could already see.

“Dead,” said Skifr brightly. “Perhaps some lucky ones are enslaved. Or unlucky ones. The Horse People are not known as gentle masters.”

Odda frowned out across the expanse of flat grass. “You think we’ll make their acquaintance?”

“Knowing my luck,” murmured Dosduvoi.

“From now on we look for high ground to camp on!” bellowed Rulf. “And we double the guard! Eight men awake at all times!”

So it was with everyone nervous, frowning out across the steppe and startling at every sound, that

they caught sight of a ship rowing upriver.

She was of a size with the *South Wind*, sixteen oars a side or so. Her prow-beast was a black wolf, so Thorn guessed her crew to be Throvenlanders, and by the scars on the shields at the rail, men ready for a fight. Maybe even hungry for one.

“Keep your weapons close!” called Rulf, his horn bow already in his hand.

Safrit watched nervously as men struggled to manage oar-blades and war-blades at once. “Shouldn’t we smooth the path for Father Peace?”

“Of course.” Father Yarvi loosened his own sword in its sheath. “But the words of an armed man ring that much sweeter. Well met!” he called across the water.

A mailed and bearded figure stood tall at the prow of the other ship. “And to you, friends!” It would have sounded more peaceable if he hadn’t had men with drawn bows on either side of him. “Our ship is the *Black Dog*, come up the Denied from the First of Cities!”

“The *South Wind*, come down the Divine from Roystock!” Yarvi shouted back.

“How were the tall hauls?”

“Thirsty work for those who did the lifting.” Yarvi held up his crippled hand. “But I got through it.”

The other captain laughed. “A leader should share his men’s work, but take a fair share and they’ll lose all respect for him! May we draw close?”

“You may, but know we are well armed.”

“In these parts it’s the unarmed men who cause suspicion.” The captain signalled to his crew, a weathered-looking group, all scars, beards, and bright ring-money, who skilfully drew the *Black Dog* into the middle of the current and alongside the *South Wind*, prow to stern.

Their captain burst out in disbelieving laughter. “Who’s that old bastard you have at the helm there? Bad Rulf or I’m a side of ham! I was sure you were dead and had lost no sleep over it!”

Rulf barked out a laugh of his own. “A side of ham and a rotten one at that, Blue Jenner! I was sure you were dead and had tapped a keg in celebration!”

“Bad Rulf?” muttered Thorn.

“Long time ago.” The old helmsman waved it away as he set his bow down. “Folk generally get less bad with age.”

The crew of the *Black Dog* tossed their prow-rope across the water and, in spite of some cursing at their tangling oars, the crews dragged the two ships together. Blue Jenner leaned across and clasped Rulf’s arm, both men beaming.

Thorn did not smile, and kept her own hand on her father’s sword.

“How the hell did you get clear of that mess Young Halstam got us into?” Rulf was asking.

Jenner pulled off his helmet and tossed it back to his men, scrubbing at a tangle of thin gray hair. “I’m ashamed to say I took my chances with Mother Sea and swam for it.”

“You always had fine weaponluck.”

“Still took an arrow in my arse, but despite being a bony man I’ve been blessed with a fleshy arse and it’s done no lasting harm. I counted the arrow good luck, for it surely pricked me free of a thrall collar.”

Rulf fingered gently at his neck, and Thorn saw marks she’d never noticed there, below his beard. “I was less lucky. But thanks to Father Yarvi I find myself a free man again.”

“Father Yarvi?” Jenner’s eyes went wide. “Gettland’s minister? Who was once the son of the Golden Queen Laithlin?”

“The same,” said Yarvi, threading his way between the sea-chests to the back of the boat.

“Then I’m honored, for I’ve heard you named a deep-cunning man.” Blue Jenner raised his brows at Thorn. “You’ve got women pulling your oars now?”

“I’ve got whoever moves my boat,” said Rulf.

“Why the mad hair, girl?”

“Because damn you,” growled Thorn, “that’s why.”

“Oh, she’s a fierce one! Never mind the oar, I daresay she could break a man in half.”

“I’m willing to give it a go,” she said, not a little flattered.

Jenner showed his teeth, a yellowing set with several gaps. “Were I ten years younger I’d leap at the chance, but age has brought caution.”

“The less time you have, the less you want to risk what’s left,” said Rulf.

“That’s the truth of it.” Jenner shook his head. “Bad Rulf back from beyond the Last Door and girls pulling oars and heaven knows what else. Strange times, all right.”

“What times aren’t?” asked Father Yarvi.

“There’s the truth of that too!” Blue Jenner squinted up at the muddy sun. “Getting towards dinner. Shall we put ashore and swap news?”

“By swap news do you mean drink?” asked Rulf.

“I do, and that excessively.”

THEY FOUND AN EASILY-DEFENDED loop of the river, set a strong guard and built a great fire, the flames whipped sideways by the ceaseless wind, showering sparks across the water. Then each crew tapped a keg of their ale and there was much singing of ever more tuneless songs, telling of ever more unbelievable tales, and making of ever more raucous merriment. Someone ill-advisedly gave Koll beer, and he got quite a taste for it, then shortly afterward was sick and fell asleep, much to his mother’s profound disgust and everyone else’s profound amusement.

Merry-making had never made Thorn especially merry, though. In spite of the smiles everyone kept blades to hand and there were several men who laughed as little as she did. The *Black Dog*’s helmsman, called Crouch and with a white streak in his balding hair, seemed to be nursing some particular grudge against the world. When he got up to piss in the river Thorn noticed him giving the *South Wind*’s contents a thorough look-over, that iron-bound chest of Father Yarvi’s in particular.

“I don’t like the look of him,” she muttered to Brand.

He peered at her over the rim of his cup. “You don’t like the look of anyone.”

She’d never had any objection to the look of Brand at all, but she kept that to herself. “I like his look less than most, then. One of those people with nought in them but hard stares and hard words. Face like a slapped arse.”

He grinned into his ale at that. “Oh, I hate those people.”

She had to grin herself. “Beneath my forbidding exterior I’ve got hidden depths, though.”

“Well hidden,” he said, as he lifted his cup. “But I might be starting to plumb ’em.”

“Bold of you. Plumbing a girl without so much as a by your leave.”

He blew ale out of his nose, fell into a coughing fit and had to be clapped on the back by Odda, who seized the chance to honk out his ill-made verse on Brand lifting the ship. The slope got steeper and the danger greater and the feat more impressive with every telling, Safrít beaming at Brand and saying, “He saved my son’s life.” The only one to dispute the questionable facts was Brand himself,

who couldn't have looked less comfortable at all the praise if he'd been sitting on a spike.

"How are things around the Shattered Sea?" Blue Jenner asked when the song was over. "It's been a year since we've seen home."

"Much as they were," said Yarvi. "Grandmother Wexen makes ever greater demands on behalf of the High King. The latest talk is of taxes."

"A pox on him and his One God!" snapped Jenner. "A fellow should own what he takes, not have to rent it from some other thief just because he has the bigger chair."

"The more some men get the more they want," said Yarvi, and folk on both sides of the fire murmured their agreement.

"Was the Divine clear?"

"We found no trouble, anyway," said Rulf. "And the Denied?"

Jenner sucked at the gaps in his teeth. "The damn Horse People are stirred up like angry bees, attacking boats and caravans, burning steadings within sight of Kalyiv."

"Which tribe?" asked Yarvi. "Uzhaks? Barmeks?"

Jenner stared back blankly. "There are tribes?"

"All with their own ways."

"Well, they mostly shoot the same kind of arrows, far as I can see, and the Prince of Kalyiv isn't making much distinction between 'em either. He's grown sick of their taunting, and means to teach them a bloody lesson."

"The best kind," said Odda, baring his filed teeth.

"Except he's not planning to do it with his own hands."

"Princes rarely do," said Yarvi.

"He's strung a chain across the Denied and is letting no fighting crew pass until we Northerners have helped him give the Horse People their proper chastisement."

Rulf puffed up his broad chest. "Well he won't be stopping the Minister of Gettland."

"You don't know Prince Varoslaf and no sensible man would want to. There's no telling what that bald bastard will do one moment to the next. Only reason we got away is I spun him a tale about spreading the news and bringing more warriors from the Shattered Sea. If I was you I'd turn back with us."

"We're going on," said Yarvi.

"Then the very best of weatherluck to you all, and let's hope you don't need weaponluck." Blue Jenner took a long draft from his cup. "But I fear you might."

"As might anyone who takes the tall hauls." Skifr lay on her back, arms behind her head, bare feet toward the fire. "Perhaps you should test yours while you can?"

"What did you have in mind, woman?" growled Crouch.

"A friendly test of arms with practice blades." Skifr yawned wide. "My pupil has beaten everyone on our crew and needs new opponents."

"Who's your pupil?" asked Jenner, peering over at Dosduvoi, who seemed a mountain in the flickering shadows.

"Oh, no," said the giant. "Not me."

Thorn put on her bravest face, stood, and stepped into the firelight. "Me."

There was a silence. Then Crouch gave a disbelieving cackle, soon joined by others.

"This half-haired waif?"

“Can the girl even heft a shield?”

“She could heft a needle, I reckon. I need someone to stitch a hole in my sock!”

“You’ll need someone to stitch a hole in you after she’s done,” growled Odda.

A lad maybe a year older than Thorn begged for the chance to give her the first beating and the two crews gathered in a noisy circle with torches to light the contest, shouting insults and encouragement, making wagers on their crew-mate. He was a big one with great thick wrists, fierce in the eyes. Thorn’s father always said, *fear is a good thing. Fear keeps you careful. Fear keeps you alive.* That was just as well because Thorn’s heart was thudding so hard she thought her skull might burst.

“Bet on this scrap of nothing?” yelled Crouch, chopping one of his armrings in half with a hatchet and betting it against Thorn. “Might as well throw your money in the river! You having a piece of this?”

Blue Jenner quietly stroked his beard so his own armrings rattled. “I like my money where it is.”

The nerves vanished the moment their wooden blades first clashed and Thorn knew she had the lad well beaten. She dodged his second blow, steered away the third and let him stumble past. He was strong but he came at her angrily, blindly, his weight set all wrong. She ducked under a heedless sweep, almost laughing at how clumsy it was, hooked his shield down and struck him across the face with a sharp smack. He sat down hard in the dirt, blinking stupidly with blood pouring from his nose.

“You are the storm,” she heard Skifr murmur over the cheering. “Do not wait for them. Make them fear. Make them doubt.”

She sprang screaming at the next man the instant Jenner called for the fight to start, barged him into his shocked friends, chopped him across the stomach with her practice sword, and put a dent in his helmet with a ringing blow of her wooden ax. He stumbled drunkenly for a moment while the *South Wind*’s crew laughed, trying to pry the rim back up over his brows.

“Men used to fighting in the shield wall tend to think only ahead. The shield becomes a weakness. Use the flanks.”

The next man was short but thick as a tree-trunk, cautious and watchful. She let him herd her back with his shield long enough for the boos of the *Black Dog*’s crew to turn to cheers. Then she came alive, feinted left and darted right, went high with her sword and, as he raised his shield, hooked his ankle with her ax, dragged him squealing over and left her sword’s point tickling at his throat.

“Yes. Be never where they expect you. Always attack. Strike first. Strike last.”

“You useless dogs!” snapped Crouch. “I’m shamed to be one of you!” And he snatched up the fallen sword, took up a shield with a white arrow painted on it and stepped into the circle.

He was a vicious one, and fast, and clever, but she was faster and cleverer and far more vicious and Skifr had taught her tricks he never dreamed of. She danced about him, wore him down, rained blows on him until he hardly knew which way he was facing. Finally she slipped around a lunge and gave him a smack across the arse with the flat of her sword they might have heard in Kalyiv.

“This was no fair test,” he growled as he stood up. It was plain he desperately wanted to rub his stinging buttocks but was forcing himself not to.

Thorn shrugged. “The battlefield isn’t fair.”

“On the battlefield we fight with steel, girl.” And he flung the practice sword down. “It’d be a different outcome with real blades.”

“True,” said Thorn. “Rather than nursing a bruised pride and a bruised backside you’d be spilling guts out of your split arse.”

Laughter from the *South Wind*'s crew at that, and Jenner tried to calm his helmsman with an offer of more ale but he shook him off. "Get me my ax and we'll see, bitch!"

The laughter guttered out, and Thorn curled her lip and spat at his feet. "Get your ax, sow, I'm ready!"

"No," said Skifr, putting her arm across Thorn's chest. "The time will come for you to face death. This is not it."

"Hah," spat Crouch. "Cowards!"

Thorn growled in her throat, but Skifr pushed her back again, eyes narrowed. "You are a hatful of winds, helmsman. You are a hollow man."

Odda stepped past her. "Far from being hollow, he is full to the crown with turds." Thorn was surprised to see a drawn knife gleaming in his hand. "I never had a braver oarmate, man or woman. At your next insult I will take it upon myself to kill you."

"You'll have to beat me to it," rumbled Dosduvoi, tossing aside his blanket and drawing himself up to his full height.

"And me." And Brand was beside her with his bandaged hand on that fine dagger of his.

Many fingers were tickling at weapons on both sides and—what with the ale, and the injured pride, and the lost silver—things might quickly have turned exceeding ugly. But before a blow was landed Father Yarvi sprang nimbly between the two bristling crews.

"We all have enemies enough without making more among our friends! Blood shed here would be blood wasted! Let us make of the fist an open hand. Let us give the Father of Doves his day. Here!" And he reached into a pocket and tossed something glinting to Crouch.

"What's this?" growled the helmsman.

"Queen Laithlin's silver," said Yarvi, "and with her face upon it." The minister might have been lacking fingers but the ones he had were quick indeed. Coins spun and glittered in the firelight as he flicked them among the *Black Dog*'s crew.

"We don't want your charity," snarled Crouch, though many of his oarmates were already scrambling on their knees for it.

"Consider it an advance, then!" called Yarvi. "On what the queen will pay you when you present yourselves at Thorlby. She and her husband King Uthil are always seeking bold men and good fighters. Especially those who have no great love for the High King."

Blue Jenner raised his cup high. "To the beautiful and generous Queen Laithlin, then!" As his crew cheered, and charged their cups, he added more softly, "and her deep-cunning minister," and even more softly yet, with a wink at Thorn, "not to mention his formidable back oar."

"What's happening?" cried Koll, staggering up wild-eyed, wild-haired and tangled with his blanket, then he fell over and was promptly sick again, to gales of helpless laughter.

Within a few moments the two crews were once more exchanging tales, and finding old comrades in common, and arguing over whose was the better knife while Safrit dragged her son away by the ear and dunked his head in the river. Crouch was left nursing his grudge alone, standing with fists on hips and glaring daggers at Thorn.

"I've a feeling you've made an enemy there," muttered Brand, sliding his dagger back into its sheath.

"Oh, I'm always doing that. What does Father Yarvi say? Enemies are the price of success." She threw one arm around his shoulders, the other about Odda's, and hugged the two of them tight. "The

shock is that I've made some friends besides.”

A RED DAY

“Shields!” bellowed Rulf.

And Brand was hooked by panic and torn from happy dreams of home, scrambling from the comfort of his blankets and up into a chill dawn the color of blood.

“Shields!”

The crew were stumbling from their beds, bouncing off one another, charging about like startled sheep, half-dressed, half-armed, half-awake. A man kicked the embers of the fire as he ran past and sent sparks whirling. Another bellowed as he tried to struggle into his mail shirt, tangled with the sleeves.

“Arm yourselves!”

Thorn was up beside him. The unshaved side of her head was chaos these days, braids and snarls and matted worms bound up with rings of silver clipped from coins, but her weapons were oiled and polished to a ready gleam and her face was set hard. Made Brand feel braver, to see her brave. The gods knew, he needed courage. He needed courage and he needed to piss.

They’d pitched camp on the only hill for miles, a flat-topped knoll in a bend of the river, broken boulders jutting from its flanks, a few stunted trees clinging to the top. Brand hurried to the eastern crest where the crew were gathering, stared down the slope and across the flat ocean of grass that stretched away into the sunrise. As he scraped sleep from his eyes with trembling fingers he saw figures out there, ghostly riders wriggling in the dawn haze.

“Horse People?” he croaked out.

“Uzhaks, I think,” Father Yarvi shaded his pale eyes against Mother Sun, a bloody smudge on the far horizon, “but they live on the shores of the Golden Sea. I don’t know what’s brought them here.”

“A deep desire to kill us?” said Odda as the riders took shape out of the murk, red sun glinting on metal, on the blades of spears and curved swords, on helmets made to look like the heads of beasts.

“How many are there?” muttered Thorn, jaw-muscles working on the shaved side of her head.

“Eighty?” Fror watched them as calmly as a man might watch a neighbor weed his garden. “Ninety?” He opened up a pouch and spat in it, started mixing something inside with a fingertip. “A hundred?”

“Gods,” whispered Brand. He could hear the sound of hooves as the Horse People circled closer, yells and yips and strange warbles echoing across the plain, above the rattle and growl of the crew making ready their own war-gear and calling on their chosen gods for weaponluck. One rider swerved close, long hair streaming, to try an arrow. Brand shrank back but it was just a ranging shot, a taunting shot, dropping into the grass halfway up the slope.

“An old friend once told me the greater the odds the greater the glory,” said Rulf, plucking at his bowstring with calloused fingers and making it angrily hum.

Dosduvoi slipped the oil-cloth from the head of his great ax. “The chances of death also increase.”

“But who wants to meet Death old, beside the fire?” And Odda’s teeth shone with spit as he flashed his mad grin.

“Doesn’t sound such a bad outcome.” Fror pushed his hand into his pouch and pulled it out covered in blue paint, pressed it onto his face with the fingers spread to leave a great palm-print. “But I am ready.”

Brand wasn’t. He gripped his shield that Rin had painted with a dragon, it seemed a hundred years ago and half the world away. He gripped the haft of his ax, palms still sore with the rope burns underneath their bandages. The Horse People were ever-moving, their troop breaking apart and coming back together, flowing across the plain like swift-running water but always working their way closer, a white banner streaming under a horned skull. He caught glimpses of brave faces, beast faces, battle faces, teeth bared and eyes rolling. So many of them.

“Gods,” he whispered. Had he really chosen this? Instead of a nice, safe, boring life at Gaden’s forge?

“Skifr!” called Father Yarvi, low and urgent.

The old woman was sitting behind them, crosslegged beneath one of the trees, frowning into the dead fire as though the solution to their troubles might be hidden among the embers. “No!” she snapped over her shoulder.

“Arrows!” someone screeched and Brand saw them, black splinters sailing high, drifting with the wind. One flickered down near him, the feathered flights twitching. What change in the breeze might have wafted that little thing of wood and metal through his chest, and he’d have died out here under a bloody sky and never seen his sister again, or the docks, or the middens of Thorlby. Even things you always hated seem wonderful when you look back on them from a place like this.

“Get a wall together you lazy dogs!” Rulf roared, and Brand scrambled between Odda and Fror, wood and metal grating as they locked their shields together, rim behind the one on the left and in front of the one on the right. A thousand times he’d done it in the training square, arms and legs moving by themselves. Just as well, since his head felt full of mud. Men with spears and bows crowded behind them, thumping the front rank on their backs and snarling encouragements, those without shields waiting to kill anyone who broke through, to plug the gaps when men fell. When men died. Because men would die here, today, and soon.

“Before breakfast too, the bastards!” snapped Odda.

“If I had it in mind to kill a man I’d want him hungry,” grunted Fror.

Brand’s heart was beating as if it would burst his chest, his knees shaking with the need to run, jaw clenched tight with the need to stand. To stand with his crew, his brothers, his family. He wriggled his shoulders to feel them pressed tight against him. Gods, he needed to piss.

“How did you get the scar?” he hissed.

“Now?” growled Fror.

“I’d like to die knowing something about my shoulder-man.”

“Very well.” The Vansterman flashed a mad grin, good eye white in the midst of that blue handprint. “When you die, I’ll tell you.”

Father Yarvi squatted in the shadow of the shield wall, yelling words in the Horse People’s tongue, giving Father Peace his chance, but no answer came but arrows, clicking on wood, flickering overhead. Someone cried out as a shaft found his leg.

“Mother War rules today,” muttered Yarvi, hefting his curved sword. “Teach them some archery,

Rulf.”

“Arrows!” shouted the helmsman and Brand stepped back, angling his shield to make a slot to shoot through, Rulf stepping up beside him with his black bow full-drawn, string whining in fury. Brand felt the wind of the flying shaft on his cheek as he stepped back and locked his rim with Fror’s again.

A shrill howl echoed out as the arrow found its mark and the crew laughed and jeered, stuck out their tongues and showed their brave faces, beast faces, battle faces. Brand didn’t feel much like laughing. He felt like pissing.

The Horse People were known for darting in and out, tricking their enemies and wearing them down with their bows. A well-built shield wall is hard to pierce with arrows alone, though, and that horn bow of Rulf’s was even more fearsome than it looked. With the height of their little hill he had the longer reach and, in spite of the years washed by him, his aim was deadly. One by one he sent arrows whistling down the grassy slope, calm as still water, patient as stone. Twice more the crew cheered as he brought down a horse then knocked a rider from his saddle to tumble through the grass. The others fell back out of his bow’s reach and began to gather.

“They can’t get around us because of the river.” Father Yarvi pressed between them to glance over Odda’s shield. “Or make use of their horses among the boulders, and we have the high ground. My left hand picked a good spot.”

“It’s not my first dance,” said Rulf, sliding out another arrow. “They’ll come on foot, and they’ll break on our wall like Mother Sea on the rocks.”

Rocks feel no pain. Rocks shed no blood. Rocks do not die. Brand went up on his toes to peer over the wall, saw the Uzhaks sliding from their saddles, readying for a charge. So many of them. The *South Wind*’s crew was outnumbered two to one by his reckoning. Maybe more.

“What do they want?” whispered Brand, scared by the fear in his own voice.

“There is a time for wondering what a man wants,” said Fror, no fear at all in his. “And there is a time for splitting his head. This is that second time.”

“We hold ’em here!” roared Rulf, “and when I cry ‘heave’ we drive these bastards down the slope. Drive ’em, and cut ’em down, and trample ’em, and keep mercy for another day, you hear? Arrow.”

The shields swung apart and Brand caught a glimpse of men running. Rulf sent his shaft flitting down the hill into the nearest one’s ribs, left him crawling, wailing, pleading to his friends as they charged on past.

“Hold now, boys!” called Rulf, tossing aside his bow and lifting a spear. “Hold!”

Around him men growled and spat and muttered prayers to Mother War, breath echoing from the wood in front of them. The odd speckle of rain was falling, a dew on helmets and shield rims, and Brand needed to piss worse than ever.

“Oh, true God!” shouted Dosduvoi, as they heard the quick footsteps of their enemies, howling war cries coming ever closer. “All-powerful! All-knowing God! Smite these heathens!”

“I’ll smite the bastards myself!” screamed Odda.

And Brand gasped at the impact, staggered back a half-step, then forwards, putting all his weight to his shield, boots sliding at the wet grass. Metal clanged and rattled and battered against wood. A storm of metal. Something pinged against the rim of his shield and he ducked away, splinters in his face, a devil’s broken voice shrieking on the other side.

Fror’s misshapen eye bulged as he bellowed words from the *Song of Bail*. “Hand of iron! Head of

iron! Heart of iron!” And he lashed blindly with his sword over the shield wall. “Your death comes, sang the hundred!”

“Your death comes!” roared Dosduvoi. Some time for poetry, but others took up the cry, fire in their throats, fire in their chests, fire in their maddened eyes. “Your death comes!”

Whether it was the Horse People’s death or theirs they didn’t say. It didn’t matter. Mother War had spread her iron wings over the plain and cast every heart into shadow. Fror lashed again and caught Brand above the eye with the pommel of his sword, set his ears ringing.

“Heave!” roared Rulf.

Brand ground his teeth as he pushed, shield grinding against shield. He saw a man fall yelling as a spear darted under a rim and ripped into his leg, kept shoving anyway. He heard a voice on the other side, so clear the words, so close the enemy, just a plank’s thickness from his face. He jerked up, chopping over his shield with his ax, and again, a grunt and a gurgle, the blade caught on something. A spear jabbed past, scraped against his shield rim and a man howled. Fror butted someone, their nose popping against his forehead. Men growled and spluttered, stabbing and pushing, all tangled one with another.

“Die, you bastard, die!”

An elbow caught Brand’s jaw and made him taste blood. Mud flicked in his face, half-blinded him, and he tried to blink it away, and snarled, and cursed, and shoved, and slipped, and spat salt, and shoved again. The slope was with them and they knew their business and slowly but surely the wall began to shift, driving their enemies back, forcing them down the hill the way they’d come.

“Your death comes, sang the hundred!”

Brand saw an oarsman biting at an Uzhak’s neck. He saw Koll stabbing a fallen man with a knife. He saw Dosduvoi fling a figure tumbling with a sweep of his shield. He saw the point of a blade come out of a man’s back. Something bounced from Brand’s face and he gasped. At first he thought it was an arrow, then realized it had been a finger.

“Heave, I said! Heave!”

They pressed in harder, a hell of snarling and straining bodies, crowded too tight to use his ax and he let it fall, snaked his arm down and slid out the dagger Rin forged for him.

“Hand of iron! Heart of iron!”

The feel of its grip in his hand made him think of Rin’s face, firelit in their little hovel. These bastards were between him and her and a rage boiled up in him. He saw a face, rough metal rings in braided hair, and he jerked his shield up into it, snapped a head back, stabbed under the rim, metal squealing, stabbed again, hand sticky-hot. The man fell and Brand trampled over him, stumbling and stomping, dragged up by Odda, spitting through his clenched teeth.

“Your death comes!”

How often had he listened breathless to that song, mouthing the words, dreaming of claiming his own place in the wall, winning his own glory? Was this what he’d dreamed of? There was no skill here, only blind luck. No matching of noble champions, only a contest of madness. No room for tricks or cleverness or even courage, unless courage was to be carried helpless by the surge of battle like a storm washes driftwood. Perhaps it was.

“Kill them!”

The noise of it was horrifying, a clamor of rattling metal and battering wood and men swearing at the tops of their broken voices. Sounds Brand couldn’t understand. Sounds that had no meaning. The

Last Door stood wide for them all and each of them faced it as best he could.

“Your death comes!”

The rain was getting heavier, boots ripping the grass and churning the red earth to mud and he was tired and sore and aching but there was no stopping. Gods, he needed to piss. Something smashed against his shield, near tore it from his arm. A red blade darted past his ear and he saw Thorn beside him.

The side of her face was spotted with blood and she was smiling. Smiling like she was home.

BATTLE-JOY

Thorn was a killer. That, no one could deny.

The muddied and bloodied and boot-trampled stretch of grass behind the shifting shield wall was her ground, and to anyone who trod there she was Death.

With a hammering louder than the hail on the *South Wind's* hull the shield wall edged down the hillside, shoving, hacking, trampling over men and dragging them between their shields, swallowing them up like a hungry serpent. One tried to get up and she stabbed him in the back with her father's sword, his bloodied face all fear and pain and panic as he fell.

It should have been harder than with a practice blade, but it was so much easier. The steel so light, so sharp, her arm so strong, so quick. Her weapons had minds of their own. Ruthless minds, fixed on murder.

She was a killer. Skifr had said so and here was the proof, written in blood on the skins of her enemies. She wished her father had been there to see it. Maybe his ghost was, cheering her on at her shoulder. She wished Hunnan had been there, so she could shove his face in the blood she'd spilled. So she could dare him to deny her a place. So she could kill him too.

The Horse People didn't understand this way of fighting and they swarmed at the wall in a mess, in ones and twos, their own courage their undoing. Thorn saw one clumsily angling a spear over the shields, aiming to stab at Brand. She darted forward, hooked him around the back with her ax, its pointed beard sinking deep into his shoulder, dragged him between the shields and into her arms.

They tottered in a hug, snapping at each other, his long hair in her mouth, digging with knees and elbows, then Father Yarvi slashed him across the back of his legs and she screamed as she tore her ax free, hacked it into the side of his skull, ripping off his helmet and sending it bouncing up the ruined hillside.

She'd heard her father speak of the battle-joy. The red joy Mother War sends her most favored children. She'd listened to his tales wide-eyed and dry-mouthed beside the fire. Her mother had told him those were no stories for a daughter's ear but he'd leaned close and spoken on in a throaty whisper, so close she felt his warm breath on her cheek. She'd heard him speak of the battle-joy, and now she felt it.

The world burned, blazed, danced, her ripping breath a furnace in her throat as she rushed to the end of the wall, which was flexing now, twisting, threatening to break apart. Two Uzhaks had clambered up between the boulders on the hill's flank and got around Dosduvoi. She hacked one in the side, folded him double. The spear of the other seemed to move as slowly as if it came through honey and she laughed as she slipped around it, chopped his legs away with her ax, sent him reeling.

An arrow flickered past her and Dosduvoi snatched her behind his shield, two shafts already lodged near its rim. The wall was buckling in the center, faces twisted as men strained to hold it together. There was a crash, a crewman fell, drooling teeth, and the wall split apart. A huge Uzhak

stood in the gap, wearing a mask made from a walrus jaw with the tusks on either side of his leering face, snorting like a bull as he swung a great toothed club in both fists, sending men staggering, tearing the breach wider.

Thorn had no fear in her. Only the battle-joy, fiercer than ever.

She raced at the giant, blood surging like Mother Sea. His maddened eyes rolled toward her and she dropped, slid on her side between his great boots, turned, slashed as his club thudded into the ground behind her, caught him across the back of his leg, blood frozen in black spots as he lurched onto his knees. Fror stepped forward and hacked him down with thudding blows, one, two, three, the blue hand on his face red-speckled.

Thorn saw the Horse People scattering, bounding away down the slope toward the open plain and their waiting horses and she held her weapons high and screamed, burning to the tips of her fingers. Her father's ghost urged her on and she sprang after her fleeing enemies like a hound after hares.

"Stop her!" roared Rulf, and someone dragged her back, cursing and struggling, the hair she still had tangled across her face. It was Brand, his beard scratching her cheek and his left arm under hers so that his shield was across her. Beyond the running Uzhaks she saw others stalking forward through the grass, bows drawn and faces eager. Lots of them, and close behind the ebbing battle-joy a wave of fear washed in on her.

"Close up the wall!" roared Rulf, spit flecking from his teeth. The men edged back, shuffled together, stopping up the gaps, shields wobbling and rattling and the daylight flickering between them. Thorn heard arrows click against lime-wood, saw one spin from the rim of Brand's shield and over his shoulder. Odda was down, a shaft in his side, spewing curses as he dragged himself up the hill.

"Back! Back! Steady, now!"

She caught Odda under his arms and started to haul him away, while he grunted and kicked and blew bloody bubbles. She fell with him on top of her, nearly cut herself with her own ax, struggled up and dragged him on, then Koll was there to help and between them they pulled him back to the crest of the hill, the shield wall edging after them. Back to where they'd stood a few mad moments ago, the river at their backs and the plain stretching away before them.

Thorn stood there dumb, numb, not sure how many of the crew were dead. Three? Four? Everyone had scratches and some were hurt bad. Didn't know if she was hurt. Didn't know whose blood was on her. From the look of that arrow she held no high hopes for Odda. She held no high hopes for anything. Through the gaps in the battered shields she could see the trampled slope scattered with bodies, some still moving, groaning, pawing at their wounds.

"Push it through or pull it out?" snapped Safrit, kneeling beside Odda, gripping his bloody hand tight.

Father Yarvi only stared down, and rubbed at his lean jaw, fingertips leaving red streaks across his cheek.

The fury was gone as though it had never been, the fire in her guttered to ashes. Thorn's father never told her that the battle-joy is borrowed strength and must be repaid double. She gripped the pouch with his fingerbones in it but there was no comfort there. She saw the leaking wounds and the men moaning and the slaughter they'd done. The slaughter she'd done.

She was a killer, that there was no denying.

She hunched over as if she'd been punched in the guts and coughed thin puke into the grass, straightened shivering, and staring, with the world too bright and her knees all a-wobble and her eyes

swimming.

She was a killer. And she wanted her mother.

She saw Brand staring at her over his shoulder, his face all grazed down one side and his neck streaked with blood into the collar of his shirt and the tattered bandages flapping about the red dagger in his hand.

“You all right?” he croaked at her.

“Don’t know,” she said, and was sick again, and if she’d eaten anything she might never have stopped.

“We have to get to the *South Wind*,” someone said in a voice squeaky with panic.

Father Yarvi shook his head. “They’d rain down arrows on us from the bank.”

“We need a miracle,” breathed Dosduvoi, eyes turned toward the pink sky.

“Skifr!” shouted Yarvi, and the old woman winced as though a fly was bothering her, muttering and hunching her shoulders. “Skifr, we need you!”

“They’re coming again!” someone called from the ragged wall.

“How many?” asked Yarvi.

“More than last time!” shouted Rulf, nocking an arrow to his black bow.

“How many more?”

“A lot more!”

Thorn tried to swallow but for once could find no spit. She felt so weak she could hardly lift her father’s sword. Koll was bringing water to the shield wall and they were drinking, and snarling, and wincing at their wounds.

Fror swilled water around his mouth and spat. “Time to sell our lives dearly, then. Your death comes!”

“Your death comes,” a couple of men muttered, but it was more lament than challenge.

Thorn could hear the Horse People coming, could hear their warcries and their quick footsteps on the hillside. She heard the growling of the crew as they made ready to meet the charge and, weak though she was, she clenched her teeth and hefted her red-speckled ax and sword. She walked toward the wall. Back to that trampled stretch of mud behind it, though the thought gave her anything but joy.

“Skifr!” screamed Father Yarvi.

With a shriek of anger the old woman sprang up, throwing off her coat. “Be damned, then!” And she began to chant, soft and low at first but growing louder. She strode past, singing words Thorn did not understand, had never heard the like of. But she guessed the language and it was no tongue of men.

These were elf-words, and this was elf-magic. The magic that had shattered God and broken the world, and as if at a chill wind every hair on Thorn’s body bristled.

Skifr chanted on, higher and faster and wilder, and from the straps about her body she drew two studded and slotted pieces of dark metal, sliding one into the other with a snap like a closing lock.

“What is she doing?” said Dosduvoi but Father Yarvi held him back with his withered hand.

“What she must.”

Skifr held the elf-relic at arm’s length. “Stand aside!”

The wavering shield wall split in two and Thorn stared through the gap. There were the Horse People, a crawling mass of them, weaving between the bodies of their fallen, springing swift and merciless with death in their eyes.

There was a clap like thunder close at hand, a flash of light and the nearest of the Uzhaks was flung

tumbling down the hillside as though flicked by a giant finger. Another crack and a disbelieving murmur went up from the crew, another man sent spinning like a child's toy, his shoulder on fire.

Skifr's wailing went higher and higher, splinters of shining metal tumbling from the elf-relic in her hand and falling to smoke in the grass at her feet. Men whimpered, and gaped, and clutched at talismans, more fearful of this sorcery than they were of the Uzhaks. Six strokes of thunder rolled across the plain and six men were left ruined and burning and the rest of the Horse People ran squealing in terror.

"Great God," whispered Dosduvoi, making a holy sign over his heart.

There was a silence then. The first in some time. Only the whisper of the wind in the grass and the rough clicking of Odda's breath. There was a smell like burning meat. One of the fallen splinters had caught fire in the grass. Skifr stepped forward grimly and ground the flame out under her boot.

"What have you done?" whispered Dosduvoi.

"I have spoken the name of God," said Skifr. "Written in fire and caught in elf-runes before the Breaking of the World. I have torn Death from her place beside the Last Door and sent her to do my bidding. But there is always a price to be paid."

She walked over to where Odda was slumped pale against one of the stunted trees, Safrit bent over him trying to tease out the arrow.

"The name of God has seven letters," she said, and she pointed that deadly piece of metal at him. "I am sorry."

"No!" said Safrit, trying to put herself between them, but Odda pushed her gently away.

"Who wants to die old?" And he showed his mad grin, the filed lines in his teeth turned red with blood. "Death waits for us all."

There was another deafening crack, and Odda arched his back, trembling, then fell still, smoke rising from a blackened hole in his mail.

Skifr stood looking down. "I said I would show you magic."

NOT LIKE THE SONGS

“They’re running.” The wind whipped Thorn’s hair about her bloody face as she stared after the Uzhaks, the riders, and the horses without their riders, dwindling specks now far out across the ocean of grass.

“Can’t say I blame ’em,” muttered Brand, watching Skifr wrap her coat tight about herself and slump again crosslegged, gripping at the holy signs around her neck, glowering at the embers of the fire.

“We fought well,” said Rulf, though his voice sounded hollow.

“Hands of iron.” Fror nodded as he wiped the paint from his face with a wetted rag. “We won a victory to sing of.”

“We won, anyway.” Father Yarvi picked up one of the bits of metal Skifr had left in the grass and turned it this way and that so it twinkled in the sun. A hollow thing, still with a little smoke curling out. How could that reach across the plain and kill a man?

Safrit was frowning toward Skifr as she wiped her bloody hands clean. “We won using some black arts.”

“We won.” Father Yarvi shrugged. “Of the two endings to a fight that is the better. Let Father Peace shed tears over the methods. Mother War smiles upon results.”

“What about Odda?” Brand muttered. The little man had seemed invincible, but he was gone through the Last Door. No more jokes.

“He would not have survived the arrow,” said Yarvi. “It was him or all of us.”

“A ruthless arithmetic,” said Safrit, her mouth set in a hard line.

The minister did not look at her. “Such are the sums a leader must solve.”

“What if this sorcery brings a curse on us?” asked Dosduvoi. “What if we risk a second Breaking of God? What if we—”

“We won.” Father Yarvi’s voice was as cold and sharp as drawn steel, and he curled the fingers of his good hand about that little piece of elf-metal and made a white-knuckled fist of it. “Thank whatever god you believe in for your life, if you know how. Then help with the bodies.”

Dosduvoi shut his mouth and walked away, shaking his great head.

Brand pried open his sore fingers and let his shield drop, Rin’s painted dragon all hacked and gouged, the rim bright with new scratches, the bandages on his palm blood-spotted. Gods, he was bruised and grazed and aching all over. He hardly had the strength to stand, let alone to quibble over the good thing to have done. The more he saw, the less sure he was of what the good thing might be. There was a burning at his neck, wet when he touched it. A scratch there, from friend or enemy he couldn’t say. The wounds hurt just as much whoever dealt them.

“Lay them out with dignity,” Father Yarvi was saying, “and fell these trees for pyres.”

“Those bastards too?” Koll pointed to the Horse People scattered torn and bloody down the slope, several of the crew picking over their bodies for anything worth the taking.

“Them too.”

“Why give them a proper burning?”

Rulf caught the lad by the arm. “Because if we beat beggars here, we’re no better than beggars. If we beat great men, we’re greater still.”

“Are you hurt?” asked Safrit.

Brand stared at her as if she was speaking a foreign tongue. “What?”

“Sit down.”

That wasn’t hard to do. He was so weak at the knees he was near falling already. He stared across the windswept hilltop as the crew put aside their weapons and started dragging the corpses into lines, others setting about the stunted trees with axes to make a great pyre. Safrit leaned over him, probing at the cut on his neck with strong fingers.

“It’s not deep. There’s plenty worse off.”

“I killed a man,” he muttered, to no one in particular. Maybe it sounded like a boast, but it surely wasn’t meant to be. “A man with his own hopes, and his own worries, and his own family.”

Rulf squatted beside him, scratching at his gray beard. “Killing a man is nowhere near so light a matter as the bards would have you believe.” He put a fatherly hand on Brand’s shoulder. “You did well today.”

“Did I?” muttered Brand, rubbing his bandaged hands together. “Keep wondering who he was, and what brought him here, and why we had to fight. Keep seeing his face.”

“Chances are you’ll be seeing it till you step through the Last Door yourself. That’s the price of the shield wall, Brand.” And Rulf held out a sword to him. A good sword, with silver on the hilt and a scabbard stained from long use. “Odda’s. But he’d have wanted you to take it. A proper warrior should have a proper blade.”

Brand had dreamed of having his own sword, now looking at it made him feel sick. “I’m no warrior.”

“Yes y’are.”

“A warrior doesn’t fear.”

“A fool doesn’t fear. A warrior stands in spite of his fear. You stood.”

Brand plucked at his damp trousers. “I stood and pissed myself.”

“You won’t be the only one.”

“The hero never pisses himself in the songs.”

“Aye, well.” Rulf gave his shoulder a parting squeeze, and stood. “That’s why those are songs, and this is life.”

Mother Sun was high over the steppe when they set off, the pyre-smoke slowly rising. Though the blood had drained from the sky and left only a clear and beautiful blue, it was still crusted dark under Brand’s fingernails, and in his bandages, and at his throbbing neck. It was still a red day. He felt every day he lived would be a red day now.

Four oars lay still beside the mast, the ashes of the men who’d pulled them already whirling out across the plains. Skifr sat brooding among the cargo, hood drawn up, the nearest oarsmen all shuffled as far from her as they could get without falling out of the boat.

Brand glanced across at Thorn as they settled to rowing and she looked back, her face as pale and hollow as Odda's had been when they stacked the wood around him. He tried to smile, but his mouth wouldn't find the shape of it.

They'd fought in the wall. They'd stood at the Last Door. They'd faced Death and left a harvest for the Mother of Crows. Whatever Master Hunnan might've said, they were both warriors now.

But it wasn't like the songs.

WHAT GETTLAND NEEDS

Kalyiv was a sprawling mass, infesting one bank of the Denied and spreading like a muddy sickness onto the other, the bright sky above smudged with the smoke of countless fires and dotted with scavenging birds.

The prince's hall stood on a low hill over the river, gilded horses carved upon its vast roof beams, the wall around it made as much from mud as masonry. Crowding outside that was a riot of wooden buildings ringed by a fence of stout logs, the spears of warriors glinting at the walkway. Crowding outside that, a chaos of tents, yurts, wagons, shacks and temporary dwellings of horrible wretchedness sprawled out over the blackened landscape in every direction.

"Gods, it's vast," muttered Brand.

"Gods, it's ugly," muttered Thorn.

"Kalyiv is as a slow-filling bladder," said Skifr, thoughtfully picking her nose, considering the results, then wiping them on the shoulder of the nearest oarsman so gently he didn't even notice. "In spring it swells with northerners, and folk from the empire, and Horse People from across the steppe all swarming here to trade. In summer it splits its skin and spills filth over the plains. In winter they all move on and it shrivels back to nothing."

"It surely smells like a bladder," grunted Rulf, wrinkling his nose.

Two huge, squat towers of mighty logs had been thrown up on either side of the river and a web of chains strung between them, links of black iron spiked and studded, bowing under the weight of frothing water, snarled up with driftwood and rubbish, stopping dead all traffic on the Denied.

"Prince Varoslaf has fished up quite a catch with his iron net," said Father Yarvi.

Thorn had never seen so many ships. They bobbed on the river, and clogged the wharves, and had been dragged up on the banks in tight-packed rows stripped of their masts. There were ships from Gettland and Vansterland and Throvenland. There were ships from Yutmark and the Islands. There were strange ships which must have come up from the south, dark-hulled and far too fat-bellied for the trip over the tall hauls. There were even two towering galleys, each with three ranks of oars, dwarfing the *South Wind* as they glided toward the harbor.

"Look at those monsters," murmured Brand.

"Ships from the Empire of the South," said Rulf. "Crews of three hundred."

"It's the crews he's after," said Father Yarvi. "To fight his fool's war against the Horse People."

Thorn was far from delighted at the thought of fighting more Horse People. Or for that matter of staying in Kalyiv for the summer. It had smelled a great deal better in her father's stories. "You think he'll want our help?"

“Certainly he’ll want it, as we want his.” Yarvi frowned up toward the prince’s hall. “Will he demand it, is the question.”

He had demanded it of many others. The harbor thronged with sour-faced men of the Shattered Sea, all mired in Kalyiv until Prince Varoslaf chose to loosen the river’s chains. They lazed in sullen groups about slumping tents and under rotten awnings, and played loaded dice, and drank sour ale, and swore at great volume, and stared at everything with hardened eyes, the newest arrivals in particular.

“Varoslaf had better find enemies for these men soon,” murmured Yarvi, as they stepped from the *South Wind*. “Before they find some nearer to hand.”

Fror nodded as he made fast the prow-rope. “Nothing more dangerous than idle warriors.”

“They’re all looking at us.” Brand’s bandages had come off that morning and he kept picking nervously at the rope-scabs snaking up his forearms.

Thorn dug him with her elbow. “Maybe your hero’s fame goes ahead of us, Ship-lifter.”

“More likely Father Yarvi’s does. I don’t like it.”

“Then pretend you do,” said Thorn, putting her bravest face on and meeting every stare with a challenge. Or the most challenge she could manage with a hot wind whipping grit in her eyes and flapping her shirt against her sweaty back.

“Gods, it stinks,” choked Brand as they made it off the creaking wharves and onto Father Earth, and Thorn could not have disagreed even if she could have taken a full breath to do it. The crooked streets were scattered with baking dung, dogs squabbling over rubbish, dead animals skewered on poles beside doorways.

“Are they selling those?” muttered Brand.

“They’re offering them up,” answered Father Yarvi, “so their gods can see which houses have made sacrifices and which have not.”

“What about those?” Thorn nodded toward a group of skinned carcasses dangling from a mast raised in the middle of a square, gently swinging and swarming with flies.

“Savages,” murmured Rulf, frowning up at them.

With an unpleasant shifting in her stomach, Thorn realized those glistening bodies were man-shaped. “Horse People?” she croaked.

Father Yarvi grimly shook his head. “Vanstermen.”

“What?” The gods knew there were few people who liked Vanstermen less than Thorn, but she could see no reason for the Prince of Kalyiv to skin them.

Yarvi gestured toward some letters scraped into a wooden sign. “A crew that defied Prince Varoslaf’s wishes and tried to leave. Other men of the Shattered Sea are discouraged from following their example.”

“Gods,” whispered Brand, only just heard over the buzzing of the flies. “Does Gettland want the help of a man who does this?”

“What we want and what we need may be different things.”

A dozen armed men were forcing their way through the chaos of the docks. The prince might have been at war with the Horse People, but his warriors did not look much different from the Uzhaks Thorn had killed higher up the Denied. There was a woman in their midst, very tall and very thin, coins dangling from a silk headscarf wound around her black, black hair.

She stopped before them and bowed gracefully, a satchel swinging from her slender neck. “I am

servant to Varoslaf, Great Prince of Kalyiv.”

“Well met, and I am—”

“You are Father Yarvi, Minister of Gettland. The prince has given me orders to conduct you to his hall.”

Yarvi and Rulf exchanged a glance. “Should I be honored or scared?”

The woman bowed again. “I advise you to be both, and prompt besides.”

“I have come a long way for an audience and see no reason to dawdle. Lead on.”

“I’ll pick out some men to go with you,” growled Rulf, but Father Yarvi shook his head.

“I will take Thorn and Brand. To go lightly attended, and by the young, is a gesture of trust in one’s host.”

“You trust Varoslaf?” muttered Thorn, as the prince’s men gathered about them.

“I can pretend to.”

“He’ll know you pretend.”

“Of course. On such twisted foundations are good manners built.”

Thorn looked at Brand, and he stared back with that helpless expression of his.

“Have a care,” came Skifr’s voice in her ear. “Even by the ruthless standards of the steppe Varoslaf is known as a ruthless man. Do not put yourself in his power.”

Thorn looked to the great chains strung across the river, then to those dangling bodies swinging, and could only shrug. “We’re all in his power now.”

THE PRINCE OF KALYIV’S HALL seemed even bigger on the inside, its ribs fashioned from the trunks of great trees still rooted in the hard-packed earth, shafts of sunlight filled with floating dust spearing down from windows high above. There was a long firepit but the flames burned low and the echoing space seemed almost chill after the heat outside.

Varoslaf, Prince of Kalyiv, was much younger than Thorn had expected. Only a few years older than Yarvi, perhaps, but without a hair on his head, nor his chin, nor even his brows, all smooth as an egg. He was not raised up on high, but sat on a stool before the firepit. He was not a big man, and he wore no jewels and boasted no weapon. He had no terrible frown upon his hairless face, only a stony blankness. There was nothing she could have described to make him seem fearsome to a listener, and yet he was fearsome. More so, and more, the closer they were led across that echoing floor.

By the time she and Brand stood at Father Yarvi’s shoulders a dozen strides from his stool, Thorn feared Prince Varoslaf more than anyone she had ever met.

“Father Yarvi.” His voice was dry and whispery as old papers and sent a sweaty shiver down her back. “Minister of Gettland, high is our honor at your visit. Welcome all to Kalyiv, Crossroads of the World.” His eyes moved from Brand, to Thorn, and back to Yarvi, and he reached down to stroke the ears of a vast hound curled about the legs of his stool. “It is a well-judged compliment that a man of your standing comes before me so lightly attended.”

Thorn did indeed feel somewhat lonely. As well as that bear of a dog there were many guards scattered about the hall, with bows and curved swords, tall spears and strange armor.

But if Yarvi was overawed, the minister did not show a grain of it. “I know I will want for nothing in your presence, great prince.”

“Nor will you. I hear you have that witch Scarayoi with you, the Walker in the Ruins.”

“You are as well-informed as a great lord should be. We call her Skifr, but she is with us.”

“Yet you keep her from my hall.” Varoslaf’s laugh was harsh as a dog’s bark. “That was well-judged too. And who are these young gods?”

“The back oars of my crew. Thorn Bathu, who killed six Uzhaks in a skirmish on the Denied, and Brand who took the whole weight of our ship across his shoulders as we crossed the tall hauls.”

“Slayer of Uzhaks and Lifter of Ships.” Brand shifted uncomfortably as the prince gave the two of them a searching gaze. “It warms me to see such strength, and skill, and bravery in those so young. One could almost believe in heroes, eh, Father Yarvi?”

“Almost.”

The prince jerked his head toward his willow-thin servant. “A token for tomorrow’s legends.”

She drew something from the satchel around her neck and pressed it into Brand’s palm, then did the same to Thorn. A big, rough coin, crudely stamped with a prancing horse. A coin of red gold. Thorn swallowed, trying to judge its value, and guessed she had never held so much in her hand before.

“You are too generous, great prince,” croaked Brand, staring down with wide eyes.

“Great deeds deserve great rewards from great men. Or else why raise men up at all?” Varoslaf’s unblinking gaze shifted back to Yarvi. “If they are your back oars what wonders might the others perform?”

“I daresay some of them could make the rest of your gold vanish before your eyes.”

“No good crew is without a few bad men. We cannot all be righteous, eh, Father Yarvi? Those of us who rule especially.”

“Power means having one shoulder always in the shadows.”

“So it does. How is the jewel of the north, your mother, Queen Laithlin?”

“She is my mother no more, great prince, I gave up my family when I swore my oath to the Ministry.”

“Strange customs, you northerners have,” and the prince fiddled lazily with the ears of his hound. “I think the bonds of blood cannot be severed with a word.”

“The right words can cut deeper than swords, and oaths especially. The queen is with child.”

“An heir to the Black Chair perhaps? News rich as gold in these unhappy times.”

“The world rejoices, great prince. She speaks often of her desire to visit Kalyiv again.”

“Not too soon, I pray! My treasury still bears the scars of her last visit.”

“Perhaps we can forge an agreement that will mend those scars and make your treasury swell besides?”

A pause. Varoslaf looked to the woman and she shook herself gently, the coins dangling from her scarf twisting and twinkling on her forehead. “Is that why you have come so far, Father Yarvi? To make my treasury swell?”

“I have come seeking help.”

“Ah, you too desire the bounty of great men.” Another pause. Thorn felt a game was played between these two. A game of words, but no less skillful than the exercises in the training square. And even more dangerous. “Only name your desire. As long as you do not seek allies against the High King in Skekenhouse.”

Father Yarvi’s smile did not slip by so much as a hair. “I should have known your sharp eyes would see straight to the heart of the matter, great prince. I—and Queen Laithlin, and King Uthil—fear Mother War may spread her wings across the Shattered Sea in spite of all our efforts. The High King has many allies, and we seek to balance the scales. Those who thrive on the trade down the Divine

and the Denied may need to pick a side—”

“And yet I cannot. As you have seen I have troubles of my own, and no help to spare.”

“Might I ask if you have help to spare for the High King?”

The prince narrowed his eyes. “Ministers keep coming south with that question.”

“I am not the first?”

“Mother Scaer was here not a month ago.”

Father Yarvi paused at that. “Grom-gil-Gorm’s minister?”

“On behalf of Grandmother Wexen. She came before me with a dozen of the High King’s warriors and warned me not to paddle in the Shattered Sea. One might almost say she made threats.” The hound lifted its head and gave a long growl, a string of drool slipping from its teeth and spattering the ground. “Here. In my hall. I was sore tempted to have her skinned in the public square but ... it did not seem politic.” And he stilled his dog with the slightest hiss.

“Mother Scaer left with her skin, then?”

“It would not have fit me. She headed southward in a ship bearing the High King’s prow, bound for the First of Cities. And though I much prefer your manners to hers, I fear I can only give you the same promise.”

“Which was?”

“To help all my good friends about the Shattered Sea equally.”

“Meaning not at all.”

The Prince of Kalyiv smiled, and it chilled Thorn even more than his frown. “You are known as a deep-cunning man, Father Yarvi. I am sure you need no help to sift out my meaning. You know where I sit. Between the Horse People and the great forests. Between the High King and the empress. At the crossroads of the world and with perils all about me.”

“We all have perils to contend with.”

“But a prince of Kalyiv must have friends in the east, and the west, and the north, and the south. A prince of Kalyiv thrives on balance. A prince of Kalyiv must keep a foot over every threshold.”

“How many feet do you have?”

The dog pricked up its ears and gave another growl. Varoslaf’s smile faded as slowly as melting snow. “A word of advice. Stop this talk of war, Father Yarvi. Return to Gettland and smooth the way for Father Peace, as I understand a wise minister should.”

“I and my crew are free to leave Kalyiv, great prince?”

“Force Uthil’s minister to stay against his will? That would not be politic either.”

“Then I thank you humbly for your hospitality and for your advice, well meant and gratefully received. But we cannot turn back. We must go on with all haste to the First of Cities, and seek help there.”

Thorn glanced across at Brand, and saw him swallow. To go on to the First of Cities, half the world away from home. She felt a flicker of excitement at that thought. And a flicker of fear.

Varoslaf merely snorted his disdain. “I wish you luck. But I fear you will get nothing from the empress. She has grown ever more devout in her old age, and will have no dealings with those who do not worship her One God. The only thing she hungers after more than priest-babble is spilled blood. That and elf-relics. But it would take the greatest ever unearthed as a gift to win her favor.”

“Oh, great prince, wherever would I find such a thing?” Father Yarvi bowed low, all innocence and humility.

But Thorn saw the deep-cunning smile at the corner of his mouth.

III.

FIRST
OF CITIES

LUCK

The gods knew, there'd been a stack of disappointments on that journey high as Brand's head. Plenty of things sadly different from the tales whispered and the songs sung back in Thorlby. And plenty of things folk tended to leave out altogether.

The vast bogs about the mouth of the Denied, for one—clouds of stinging insects haunting banks of stinking sludge where they'd woken to gray mornings soaked with marshwater and bloated with itching bites.

The long coast of the Golden Sea, for another—mean little villages in mean little fences where Father Yarvi argued in strange tongues with shepherds whose faces were tanned to leather by the sun. Beaches of pebbles where the crew pitched rings of spitting torches and lay watching the night, startling at every sound, sure bandits were waiting just beyond the light.

The memory of the battle with the Horse People prowled in their wake, the face of the man Brand killed haunting his thoughts, the hammering of steel on wood finding him in his sleep.

“Your death comes!”

Jerking awake in the sticky darkness to nothing but the quick thud of his heart and the slow chirp of crickets. There was nothing in the songs about regrets.

The songs were silent on the boredom too. The oar, the oar, and the buckled shoreline grinding by, week after week. The homesickness, the worry for his sister, the weepy nostalgia for things he'd always thought he hated. Skifr's endless barking and Thorn's endless training and the endless beatings she gave out to every member of the crew and Brand especially. Father Yarvi's endless answers to Koll's endless questions about plants, and wounds, and politics, and history, and the path of Father Moon across the sky. The chafing, the sickness, the sunburn, the heat, the flies, the thirst, the stinking bodies, the worn-through seat of his trousers, Safrit's rationing, Dosduvoi's toothache, the thousand ways Fror got his scar, the bad food and the running arses, the endless petty arguments, the constant fear of every person they saw and, worst of all, the certain knowledge that, to get home, they'd have to suffer through every mile of it again the other way.

Yes, there'd been a stack of frustrations, hardships, hurts, and disappointments on that journey.

But the First of Cities exceeded every expectation.

It was built on a wide promontory that jutted miles out into the straits, covered from sea to sea with buildings of white stone, with proud towers and steep roofs, with lofty bridges and strong walls within strong walls. The Palace of the Empress stood on the highest point, gleaming domes clustered inside a fortress so massive it could have held the whole of Thorlby with room for two Roystocks left over.

The whole place blazed with lights, red and yellow and white, so many they tinged the blue evening clouds with welcoming pink and set a thousand thousand reflections dancing in the sea, where ships from every nation of the world swarmed like eager bees.

Perhaps they'd seen greater buildings up there on the silence of the Divine, but this was no elf-ruin but the work of men alone, no crumbling tomb to lost glories but a place of high hopes and mad dreams, bursting with life. Even this far distant Brand could hear the city's call. A hum at the edge of his senses that set his very fingertips tingling.

Koll, who'd swarmed up the half-carved mast to cling to the yard for the best view, started flailing his arms and whooping like a madman. Safrit clutched her head below muttering, "I give up. I give up. He can plunge to his death if he wants to. Get down from there, you fool!"

"Did you ever see anything like it?" Brand whispered.

"There is nothing like it," said Thorn, a crazy grin on a face grown leaner and tougher than ever. She had a long pale scar through the stubble on the shorn side of her head, and rings of red gold to go with the silver in her tangled hair, clipped from the coin Varoslaf had given her. A hell of an indulgence to wear gold on your head, Rulf had said, and Thorn had shrugged and said it was as good a place to keep your money as any.

Brand kept his own in a pouch around his neck. It was a new life for Rin, and he didn't plan on losing that for anything.

"There she is, Rulf!" called Father Yarvi, clambering between the smiling oarsmen toward the steering platform. "I've a good feeling."

"Me too," said the helmsman, a cobweb of happy lines cracking the skin at the corners of his eyes.

Skifr frowned up at the wheeling birds. "Good feelings, maybe, but poor omens." Her mood had never quite recovered from the battle on the Denied.

Father Yarvi ignored her. "We will speak to Theofora, the Empress of the South, and we will give her Queen Laithlin's gift, and we shall see what we shall see." He turned to face the crew, spreading his arms, tattered coat flapping in the breeze. "We've come a long and dangerous way, my friends! We've crossed half the world! But the end of the road is ahead!"

"The end of the road," murmured Thorn as the crew gave a cheer, licking her cracked lips as if she was a drunk and the First of Cities a great jug of ale on the horizon.

Brand felt a childish rush of excitement and he splashed water from his flask all over Thorn, spray sparkling as she slapped it away and shoved him off his sea-chest with her boot. He punched her on the shoulder, which these days was like punching a firmly-held shield, and she caught a fistful of his frayed shirt, the two of them falling in a laughing, snarling, sour-smelling wrestle in the bottom of the boat.

"Enough, barbarians," said Rulf, wedging his foot between them and prying them apart. "You are in a civilized place, now! From here on we expect civilized behavior."

THE DOCKS WERE ONE vast riot.

Folk shoved and tugged and tore at each other, lit by garish torchlight, the crowd surging like a thing alive as fights broke out, fists and even blades flashing above the crowd. Before a gate a ring of warriors stood, dressed in odd mail like fishes' scales, snarling at the mob and occasionally beating at them with the butts of their spears.

"Thought this was a civilized place?" muttered Brand as Rulf guided the *South Wind* toward a wharf.

"The most civilized place in the world," murmured Father Yarvi. "Though that mostly means folk prefer to stab each other in the back than the front."

“Less chance of getting blood on your fine robe that way,” said Thorn, watching a man hurry down a wharf on tiptoe holding his silken skirts above his ankles.

A huge, fat boat, timbers green with rot, was listing badly in the harbor, half its oars clear of the water, evidently far overloaded and with panicked passengers crammed at its rail. While Brand pulled in his oar two jumped—or were pushed—and tumbled flailing into the sea. There was a haze of smoke on the air and a smell of charred wood, but stronger still was the stink of panic, strong as hay-reek and catching as the plague.

“This has the feel of poor luck!” called Dosduvoi as Brand clambered onto the wharf after Thorn.

“I’m no great believer in luck,” said Father Yarvi. “Only in good planning and bad. Only in deep cunning and shallow.” He strode to a grizzled northerner with a beard forked and knotted behind his neck, frowning balefully over the loading of a ship much like theirs.

“A good day to—” the minister began.

“I don’t think so!” the man bellowed over the din. “And you won’t find many who do!”

“We’re with the *South Wind*,” said Yarvi, “come down the Denied from Kalyiv.”

“I’m Ornulf, captain of the *Mother Sun*.” He nodded toward his weatherbeaten vessel. “Came down from Roystock two years hence. We were trading with the Alyuks in spring, and had as fine a cargo as you ever saw. Spices, and bottles, and beads, and treasures our womenfolk would’ve wept to see.” He bitterly shook his head. “We had a storehouse in the city and it was caught up in the fire last night. All gone. All lost.”

“I’m sorry for that,” said the minister. “Still, the gods left you your lives.”

“And we’re quitting this bloody place before we lose those too.”

Yarvi frowned at a particularly blood-curdling woman’s shriek. “Are things usually like this?”

“You haven’t heard?” asked Ornulf. “The Empress Theofora died last night.”

Brand stared at Thorn, and she gave a grimace and scratched at the scar on her scalp.

The news sucked a good deal of the vigor from Father Yarvi’s voice. “Who rules, then?”

“I hear her seventeen-year-old niece Vialine was enthroned as thirty-fifth Empress of the South this morning.” Ornulf snorted. “But I received no invitation to the happy event.”

“Who rules, then?” asked Yarvi, again.

The man’s eyes swiveled sideways. “For now, the mob. Folk taking it upon themselves to settle scores while the law sleeps.”

“Folk love a good score down here, I understand,” said Rulf.

“Oh, they hoard ’em up for generations. That’s how that fire got started, I hear, some merchant taking vengeance on another. I swear they could teach Grandmother Wexen a thing or two about old grudges here.”

“I wouldn’t bet on that,” muttered Father Yarvi.

“The young empress’s uncle, Duke Mikedas, is having a stab at taking charge. The city’s full of his warriors. Here to keep things calm, he says. While folk adjust.”

“To having him in power?”

Ornulf grunted. “I thought you were new here.”

“Wherever you go,” murmured the minister, “the powerful are the powerful.”

“Perhaps this duke’ll bring order,” said Brand, hopefully.

“Looks like it’d take five hundred swords just to bring order to the docks,” said Thorn, frowning toward the chaos.

“The duke has no shortage of swords,” said Ornulf, “but he’s no lover of northerners. If you’ve a license from the High King you’re among the flowers but the rest of us are getting out before we’re taxed to a stub or worse.”

Yarvi pressed his thin lips together. “The High King and I are not on the best of terms.”

“Then head north, friend, while you still can.”

“Head north now you’ll find yourself in Prince Varoslaf’s nets,” said Brand.

“He’s still fishing for crews?” Ornulf grabbed his forked beard with both fists as though he’d tear it from his jaw. “Gods damn it, so many wolves! How’s an honest thief to make a living?”

Yarvi passed him something and Brand saw the glint of silver. “If he has sense, he presents himself to Queen Laithlin of Gettland, and says her minister sent him.”

Ornulf stared down at his palm, then at Yarvi’s shrivelled hand, then up, eyes wide. “You’re Father Yarvi?”

“I am.” The line of warriors had begun to spread out from their gate, shoving folk ahead of them though there was nowhere to go. “And I have come for an audience with the empress.”

Rulf gave a heavy sigh. “Unless Theofora can hear you through the Last Door, it’ll have to be this Vialine we speak to.”

“The empress dies the very day we turn up,” Brand leaned close to mutter. “What do you think about luck now?”

Father Yarvi gave a long sigh as he watched a loaded cart heaved off the docks and into the sea, the uncoupled horse kicking out wildly, eyes rolling with terror. “I think we could use some.”

BEHIND THE THRONE

“I look like a clown,” snapped Thorn, as she wove through the teeming streets after Father Yarvi.

“No, no,” he said. “Clowns make people smile.”

He’d made her wash, and put some bitter-smelling herb in the searing water to kill off her lice, and she felt as raw under her chafing new clothes as the skinned men on the docks of Kalyiv. Safrit had clipped half her hair back to stubble, then hacked at the matted side with a bone comb but given up in disgust once she broke three teeth off it. She’d given Thorn a tunic of some blood-colored cloth with gold stitching about the collar, so fine and soft it felt as if you were wearing nothing, then when Thorn demanded her old clothes back Safrit had pointed out a heap of burning rags in the street and asked if she was sure.

Thorn might’ve been a head taller but Safrit was as irresistible as Skifr in her way and would not be denied. She had ended up with jingling silver rings on her arms and a necklace of red glass beads wound around and around her neck. The sort of things that would have made her mother clasp her hands with pride to see her daughter wearing, but had always felt as comfortable as slave’s chains to Thorn.

“People here expect a certain ...” Yarvi waved his crippled hand at a group of black-skinned men whose silks were set with flashing splinters of mirror. “Theater. They will find you fascinatingly fearsome. Or fearsomely fascinating. You look just right.”

“Huh.” Thorn knew she looked an utter fool because when she finally emerged in all her perfumed absurdity Koll had sniggered, and Skifr had puffed out her cheeks, and Brand had just stared at her in silence as if he’d seen the dead walk. Thorn’s face had burned with the humiliation and had hardly stopped burning since.

A man in a tall hat gaped at her as she passed. She would have liked to show him her father’s sword but foreigners weren’t allowed to carry weapons in the First of Cities. So she leaned close and snapped her teeth at him instead, which proved more than enough armament to make him squeak in fear and scurry off.

“Why haven’t you made any effort?” she asked, catching up to Yarvi. He seemed to have a knack of slipping unnoticed through the press while she had to shoulder after him leaving a trail of anger in her wake.

“I have.” The minister brushed down his plain black coat, not a trace of adornment anywhere. “Among these gaudy crowds I will stand out for my humble simplicity, a trustworthy servant of the Father of Doves.”

“You?”

“I said I’d look like one, not that I’d be one.” Father Yarvi shook his head as she dragged at the

over-tight seat of her new trousers yet again. “Honestly, Brand was right when he said there is no blessing you cannot treat like a curse. Most people would be thankful for fine new clothes. I can scarcely take you to the palace reeking like a beggar, can I?”

“Why are you taking me to the palace at all?”

“Should I go alone?”

“You could take someone who won’t say the worst thing at the worst time. Safrit, or Rulf, or Brand, even? He’s got one of those faces folk trust.”

“He’s got one of those faces folk take advantage of. And not to dismiss the towering diplomatic talents of Safrit, or Rulf, or Brand, but there’s always the chance the young Empress Vialine will warm to a woman her own age.”

“Me? Folk never warm to me!” Thorn remembered the contempt of the girls in Thorlby, the dagger-stares and the poison-laughter and, even though she’d killed eight men, she shivered at the thought.

“Women my age least of all.”

“This will be different.”

“Why?”

“Because you will be keeping your tongue still and smiling ever so sweetly.”

Thorn raised her brows at that. “Doesn’t sound much like me. You sure?”

Yarvi’s narrowed eyes slid across to hers. “Oh, I am sure. Wait, now.”

Thorn’s jaw dropped at the sight of six strange monsters crossing the street, each fastened to the one behind by a silver chain, necks long as a man was tall swaying mournfully.

“We’re a long way from Gettland,” she muttered as she watched them plod off between white buildings so high the crooked lane was like a shadowy canyon. She remembered the damp, dark stone of Gettland, the morning mist over gray Mother Sea, her breath smoking on the dawn chill, huddling about the fire for warmth in the long evening, her mother’s voice crooning out the night prayer. It seemed another life. It seemed another world. One Thorn had never thought she might miss.

“Yes we are,” said Yarvi, setting briskly off through the sticky, stinking heat of the First of Cities. Thorn knew the year was wearing on, but autumn here was far hotter than midsummer in Thorlby.

She thought of the hard miles they’d traveled. The months of rowing. The slaving over the tall hauls. The constant danger of the steppe. Not to mention the brooding presence of Prince Varoslaf across the path. “Could the empress give us any help even if she chose to try?”

“Perhaps not in steel, but in silver, most definitely.” Yarvi murmured an apology in some unknown language as he stepped around a group of women in dark veils, their paint-rimmed eyes following Thorn as if she was the strange one.

“The odds at home will still be long.” Thorn counted the enemies off on her calloused fingers. “The High King’s own men in Yutmark, and the Ingling, and the Lowlanders, and the Vanstermen, and the Islanders—”

“You may be surprised to learn I had thought of this already.”

“And we’ve got only the Throvenlanders on our side.”

Yarvi snorted. “That alliance is milk left in the noon heat.”

“Eh?”

“Won’t last.”

“But King Fynn said—”

“King Fynn is a bloated bag of guts with little authority even in his own kingdom. Only his vanity

will bind him to us, and that will melt before Grandmother Wexen's wrath in due course like snow before Mother Sun. That little trick only bought us time."

"Then ... we'll stand alone."

"My uncle Uthil would stand alone against the world and insist that steel is the answer."

"That sounds brave," said Thorn.

"Doubtless."

"But ... not wise."

Yarvi gave her a smile. "I'm impressed. I expected you to learn swordsmanship, but never prudence. Don't worry, though. I hope to find other ways to shorten the odds."

AS SOON AS THEY stepped through the towering bronze doors of the palace Thorn went from embarrassment at being dressed like a princess to shame at being dressed like a peasant. The slaves here looked like queens, the guards like heroes of legend. The hall in which they were received was crowded with jewel-encrusted courtiers as brightly colored, as pompous and, as far as Thorn could tell, every bit as useless as the peacocks that swaggered about the immaculate gardens outside.

She would happily have shrivelled away into her new boots but they had great thick soles, and she had grown the past few months, and she stood taller than Father Yarvi now, who was taller than most himself. As always she was left with no choice but to push her shoulders back and her chin up and put on that bravest face of hers, however much the coward behind it might be sweating through her absurd crimson tunic.

Duke Mikedas sat above them in a golden chair on a high dais, one leg slung casually over its carven arm, his fabulous armor covered with gilded swirls. He was one of those handsome men who fancies himself more handsome than he is, dark-skinned and with a twinkling eye, his black hair and beard streaked with silver.

"Greetings, friends, and *welcome* to the First of Cities!" He flashed a winning smile, though it won nothing from Thorn but the deepest suspicion. "How is my mastery of your tongue?"

Father Yarvi bowed low and Thorn followed. Bow when I bow, he had said, and that seemed to mean whenever possible. "Flawless, your grace. A most welcome and impressive—"

"Remind me of your names again, I have the most *abysmal* memory for names."

"He is Father Yarvi, Minister of Gettland."

The woman who spoke was long and lean and very pale, her head close shaven. Elf-bangles rattled on one tattooed forearm, ancient steel, and gold, and broken crystal glittering. Thorn curled her lips back from her teeth, and only just remembered in time not to spit on the highly polished floor.

"Mother Scaer," said Yarvi. "Every time our paths cross it is a fresh delight."

The Minister of Vansterland, who whispered in the ear of Grom-gil-Gorm, and had been sent south by Grandmother Wexen to warn Prince Varoslaf not to paddle in the Shattered Sea.

"I wish I could say the same," said Mother Scaer. "But none of our three meetings has been altogether pleasant." She moved her ice-blue gaze to Thorn. "This woman I do not know."

"In fact you met in Skekenhouse. She is Thorn Bathu, daughter of Storn Headland."

Thorn was somewhat gratified to see Mother Scaer's eyes widen. "Whatever have you been feeding her?"

"Fire and whetstones," said Yarvi, smiling, "and she has quite the appetite. She is a proven warrior now, tested against the Uzhaks."

“What curious warriors you have!” Duke Mikedas sounded more amused than impressed and his courtiers tittered obediently. “I’d like to see her matched against a man of my household guard.”

“How about two of ’em?” snapped Thorn, before she even realized her mouth was open. The voice hardly sounded like hers, a grating challenge echoing loud and savage from the silver-fretted marble walls.

But the duke only laughed. “Wonderful! The exuberance of the young! My niece is the same. She thinks anything can be done, in spite of tradition, in spite of the feelings of others, in spite of ... *realities*.”

Yarvi bowed again. “Those who rule, and those beside them, must be always mindful of realities.”

The duke wagged his finger. “I like you already.”

“I believe, in fact, we have a friend in common.”

“Oh?”

“Ebdel Aric Shadikshirram.”

The duke’s eyes widened, and he swung his leg down from the chair and sat forward. “How is she?”

“I am sorry to tell you she has passed through the Last Door, your grace.”

“Dead?”

“Killed by a treacherous slave.”

“Merciful God.” The duke slumped back. “She was a singular woman. I asked her to marry me, you know. I was a young man then, of course, but ...” He shook his head in wonderment. “She *refused* me.”

“A singular woman indeed.”

“The years trickle like water through our fingers. It seems only yesterday ...” The duke gave a long sigh, and his eyes hardened. “But, to the matter.”

“Of course, your grace.” Father Yarvi bowed again. His head was bobbing like an apple in a bucket. “I come as emissary from Queen Laithlin and King Uthil of Gettland, and seek an audience with her radiance Vialine, Empress of the South.”

“Hmmm.” The duke propped himself on one elbow and rubbed unhappily at his beard. “Where is Guttland again?”

Thorn ground her teeth but Father Yarvi’s patience was steel-forged. “Gettland is on the western shore of the Shattered Sea, your grace, north of the High King’s seat at Skekenhouse.”

“So many little countries up there it takes a scholar to keep track of them!” A tinkling of laughter from the courtiers and Thorn felt a powerful urge to put her fist in their faces. “I wish I could honor *every* suppliant with an audience, but you must understand this is a difficult time.”

Yarvi bowed. “Of course, your grace.”

“So many enemies to be tamed and friends to be reassured. So many alliances to tend to and some ... less important than others, no disrespect intended.” His brilliant smile exuded disrespect like the stink from an old cheese.

Yarvi bowed. “Of course, your grace.”

“The Empress Vialine is not a woman of ...” he gestured at Thorn as if at an unpromising horse in his stable, “*this* type. She is little more than a girl. Impressionable. Innocent. She has so very much to learn about how things truly *are*. You understand I must be cautious. You understand you must be patient. For a nation as wide and varied as ours to ford the river from one ruler to another is

always ... a *bumpy* crossing. But I will send for you in due course.”

Yarvi bowed. “Of course, your grace. Might I ask when?”

The duke waved him away with a flourish of his long fingers. “Due course, Father, er ...”

“Yarvi,” hissed out Mother Scaer.

Thorn was no diplomat, but she got the strong impression due course meant never.

Mother Scaer was waiting for them in the statue-lined hallway outside with two warriors of her own, a scowling Vansterman and a great Lowlander with a face like a stone slab. Thorn was in a black mood and set straight away to bristling, but neither seemed willing to be stared down.

Nor did their mistress. “I am surprised to see you here, Father Yarvi.”

“And I you, Mother Scaer.” Though neither of them looked surprised in the least. “We both find ourselves half the world from our proper places. I thought you would be beside your king, Grom-gil-Gorm. He needs you to speak for Father Peace, before Mother War drags him to ruin against Gettland.”

Mother Scaer’s look grew even icier, if that was possible. “I would be with him, had Grandmother Wexen not chosen me for this mission.”

“A high honor.” The slightest curl at the corner of Yarvi’s mouth suggested it was closer to a sentence of exile, and they both knew it. “You must truly have delighted Grandmother Wexen to earn it. Did you speak up for your country? Did you stand for your king and his people, as a minister should?”

“When I make an oath I keep it,” snapped Scaer. “A loyal minister goes where her grandmother asks her.”

“Just like a loyal slave.”

“You are the expert there. Does your neck still chafe?”

Yarvi’s smile grew strained at that. “The scars are quite healed.”

“Are they?” Scaer leaned close, her thin lips curling from her teeth. “If I were you, I would return to the Shattered Sea before you pick up some more.” And she brushed past, Thorn and the Vansterman exchanging one more lingering scowl before he strode away.

“She’s trouble,” whispered Thorn once they were out of earshot.

“Yes.”

“And she’s close with the duke.”

“Yes.”

“And was sent here ahead of us.”

“Yes.”

“So ... Grandmother Wexen guessed what you’d do long before you did it.”

“Yes.”

“I’ve a feeling we’re not going to get an audience with anything this way.”

Yarvi looked sourly across at her. “See? You’re a diplomat after all.”

OLD FRIENDS

Gods, she was quick now. Brand was twice the fighter he'd been when they left Thorlby just from fighting her, but every day he was less her equal. He felt like a lumbering hog against her, always three steps behind. Alone he had no chance at all, whatever the ground. Even with two comrades beside him he was starting to feel outnumbered. Less and less she was on the defensive, more and more she was the hunter and they the helpless prey.

"Koll," called Brand, jerking his head, "take the left." They started to spread out about the courtyard of the crumbling palace Yarvi had found for them, trying to trap her, trying to tempt her with the gaps between them. "Dosduvoi, get—"

Too late he realized Thorn had lured the big man into the one bright corner of the yard and Dosduvoi cringed as Mother Sun stabbed him suddenly in the eyes.

Thorn was on him like lightning, staggered him in spite of his size with a splintering ax-blow on the shield, slid her sword under the rim and rammed the point into his considerable gut. She reeled away laughing as Brand lashed at the air where she'd stood a moment before, making sure one of the flaking pillars that ringed the yard was between her and Koll.

"Oh, God," wheezed Dosduvoi as he folded up, clutching at his belly.

"Promising," said Skifr, circling them with her hands clasped behind her back. "But don't let your own wind sweep you away. Treat every fight as if it is your last. Every enemy as though they are your worst. The wise fighter seems less than they are, however mean the opposition."

"Thanks for that," Brand forced through gritted teeth, trying to wipe some trickling sweat off on his shoulder. Gods, it was hot. Sometimes it didn't seem there was a breath of wind anywhere in this cursed city.

"My father used to say never get proud." Thorn's eyes darted from Brand to Koll and back as they tried to herd her into a corner. "He said great warriors start believing their own songs, start thinking it'll have to be a great thing that kills them. But a little thing can kill anyone."

"Scratch gone bad," said Safrit, watching with hands on hips.

"Frayed shield strap," grunted Brand, trying to keep his eyes on Thorn's weapons but finding her clinging vest something of a distraction.

"Slip on a sheep's turd," said Koll, nipping in and jabbing at Thorn but giving her the chance to land a crashing blow on his shield and slip around him into space again.

"Your father sounds a sensible man," said Skifr. "How did he die?"

"Killed in a duel with Grom-gil-Gorm. By all accounts, he got proud."

Thorn changed direction in an instant and, fast as Koll was getting, she was far faster. Fast as a scorpion and less merciful. Her ax thudded into the lad's leg, made it buckle and he gasped as he staggered sideways. Her sword slapped into his side and he went tumbling across the courtyard with a despairing cry.

But that gave Brand his chance. Even off-balance she managed to turn his sword away so it thudded hard into her shoulder. Gods, she was tough, she didn't even flinch. He crashed into her with his shield, drove her snarling back against the wall, rim gouging out a shower of loose plaster. They staggered in an ungainly tussle and, for a moment, he was sure he had her. But even as he was forcing her back she somehow twisted her foot behind his, growled as she switched her weight and sent him tumbling over it.

They went down hard, him on the bottom. Gods, she was strong. It was like Bail wrestling the great eel in the song, but more than likely with a worse outcome.

"You're supposed to be killing him!" called Skifr, "not coupling with him! That you can do on your own time."

They rolled in a tangle and came out with Thorn on top, teeth bared as she tried to work her forearm up under his jaw to choke him, he with a grip on her elbow, straining to twist it away, both snarling in each other's faces.

So close her two eyes blurred into one. So close he could see every bead of sweat on her forehead. So close her chest pressed against him with each quick, hot, sour-sweet breath.

And for a moment it felt as if they weren't fighting at all, but something else.

Then the heavy door shuddered open and Thorn sprang off him as quickly as if she'd been slapped.

"Another win?" snapped Father Yarvi, stepping over the threshold with Rulf frowning at his shoulder.

"Of course," said Thorn, as if there was nothing in her mind but giving Brand a beating. What else would there be?

He clambered up, brushing himself off, pretending his skin wasn't burning from his face to his toes. Pretending he was hunching over because of an elbow in the ribs rather than any swelling lower down. Pretending everything was the same as ever. But something had changed that day she stepped into the courtyard in her new clothes, the same but so, so different, the light catching the side of her frown and making one eye gleam, and he couldn't speak for staring at her. Everything had fallen apart all of a sudden. Or maybe it had fallen together. She wasn't just his friend or his rival or his oarmate any more, one of the crew. She still was, but she was something else as well, something that excited and fascinated but mostly scared the hell out of him. Something had changed in the way he saw her and now when he looked at her he couldn't see anything else.

They were sleeping on the floor of the same crumbling room. Hadn't seemed anything strange about it when they moved in, they'd been sleeping on top of each other for months. Only now he lay awake half the sticky-hot night thinking about how close she was. Listening to the endless sounds of the city and trying to make out her slow breath. Thinking how easy it would be to reach out and touch her ...

He realized he was looking sidelong at her arse again, and forced his eyes down to the floor. "Gods," he mouthed, but he'd no idea which one you prayed to for help with a problem like this.

"Well I'm tremendously glad someone's winning," snapped Yarvi.

"No luck at the palace?" croaked out Brand, still bent over and desperate to find a distraction.

"The palace has no luck in it at all," said Rulf.

"Another day wasted." Yarvi sank down on a bench with his shoulders slumped. "We'll be lucky if we get another chance to be insulted by Duke Mikedas, let alone his niece."

"I thought you didn't believe in luck?" asked Thorn.

"Right now, I'm down to hoping it believes in me."

Father Yarvi looked rattled, and Brand had never seen that before. Even when they fought the Horse People, he had always seemed certain of what to do. Now Brand wondered whether that was a mask the minister had made himself. A mask which was starting to crack. For the first time he was painfully aware Yarvi was only a few years older than he was, and had the fate of Gettland to carry, and only one good hand to do it.

"I wonder what they're doing in Thorlby right now?" murmured Koll wistfully, shaking out his hurt leg.

"Coming close to harvest time, I reckon," said Dosduvoi, who'd rolled his shirt up to check his own bruises.

"Fields golden with swaying barley," said Skifr.

"Lots of traders coming to the markets." Safrif toyed with the merchant's weights around her neck. "Docks swarming with ships. Money being made."

"Unless the crops have been burned by the Vanstermen's raids," snapped Yarvi. "And the merchants have been held at Skekenhouse by Grandmother Wexen. Fields black stubble and the docks sitting empty. She could have roused the Lowlanders by now. The Inglings too, with Bright Yilling at their head. Thousands of them, marching on Gettland."

Brand swallowed, thinking of Rin in their fragile little hovel outside the walls. "You think so?"

"No. Not yet. But soon, maybe. Time drains away and I do nothing. There's always a way." The minister stared down at the ground, good fingers fussing with the nail on his twisted thumb. "Half a war is fought with words, won with words. The right words to the right people. But I don't have either."

"It'll come right," muttered Brand, wanting to help but with no idea what he could do.

"I wish I could see how." Yarvi put his hands over his pale face, the bad one like a twisted toy next to the good. "We need a damn miracle."

And there was a thumping knock on the door.

Skifr raised an eyebrow. "Are we by any chance expecting visitors?"

"We're hardly overburdened with friends in the city," said Thorn.

"You're hardly overburdened with friends anywhere," said Brand.

"It could be that Mother Scaer has sent a welcoming party," said Yarvi.

"Weapons," growled Rulf. He tossed Thorn's sword to her and she snatched it from the air.

"By God, I'm happy to fight anyone," said Dosduvoi, seizing a spear, "as long as it's not her."

Brand drew the blade that had been Odda's, the steel frighteningly light after the practice sword. Fear had quickly solved the problem in his trousers, if nothing else.

The door shuddered from more knocks, and it was not a light door.

Koll crept over to it, going up on tiptoe to peer through the spy-hole.

"It's a woman," he hissed. "She looks rich."

"Alone?" asked Yarvi.

"Yes, I'm alone," came a muffled voice through the door. "And I'm a friend."

"That's just what an enemy would say," said Thorn.

"Or a friend," said Brand.

"The gods know we could use one," said Rulf, but nocking an arrow to his black bow even so.

"Open it," said Yarvi.

Koll whipped back the bolt as though it might burn him and sprung away, a knife at the ready in

each hand. Brand crouched behind his shield, fully expecting a flight of arrows to come hissing through the archway.

Instead the door creaked slowly open and a face showed itself at the crack. A woman's face, dark-skinned and dark-eyed with black hair loosely twisted up and held with jewelled pins. She had a little scar through her top lip, a notch of white tooth showing as she smiled.

"Knock, knock," she said, slipping through and pushing the door shut behind her. She wore a long coat of fine white linen and around her neck a golden chain, each link worked to look like an eye. She raised one brow at all the sharpened steel and slowly put up her palms. "Oh, I surrender."

Rulf gave a great whoop, and flung his bow skittering across the floor, rushed over to the woman and gathered her in a great hug.

"Sumael!" he said, squeezing her tight. "Gods, how I've missed you!"

"And I you, Rulf, you old bastard," she wheezed, slapping him on the back, then groaning as he lifted her off her feet. "Had my suspicions when I heard a ship called the *South Wind* had landed. Nice touch, by the way."

"It reminds us where we came from," said Yarvi, good hand rubbing at his neck.

"Father Yarvi," said Sumael, slipping free of the helmsman's embrace. "Look at you. Lost at sea and desperately in need of someone to pick out the course."

"Some things never change," he said. "You look ... prosperous."

"You look awful."

"Some things never change."

"No hug for me?"

He gave a snort, almost a sob. "I'm worried if I do I might never let go."

She walked over, their eyes fixed on each other. "I'll take the risk." And she put her arms around him, going up on her toes to hold him close. He put his head on her shoulder, and tears glistened on his gaunt cheeks.

Brand stared at Thorn, and she shrugged back. "I guess now we know who Sumael is."

"SO THIS IS THE EMBASSY of Gettland?" Sumael poked at a lump of mold-speckled plaster and it dropped from the wall and scattered across the dusty boards. "You've an eye for a bargain."

"I am my mother's son," said Yarvi. "Even if she's not my mother anymore." The crumbling hall they ate in could have seated forty but most of the crew had gone their own ways and the place had a hollow echo to it now. "What are you doing here, Sumael?"

"Apart from catching up with old friends?" She sat back in her chair and let one stained boot, strangely at odds with her fine clothes, drop onto the scarred tabletop. "I helped my uncle build a ship for the Empress Theofora and one thing led to another. Much to the annoyance of several of her courtiers, she made me inspector of her fleet." A strand of hair fell across her face and she stuck her bottom lip out and blew it back.

"You always had a touch with boats." Rulf was beaming at her as if at a favorite daughter unexpectedly come home. "And annoying people."

"The empire's boats were rotting in the harbor of Rugora, down the coast. Which, as it happens, was also where the empress's niece Vialine was being educated." That strand of hair fell loose again and she blew it back again. "Or imprisoned, depending how you look at it."

"Imprisoned?" asked Brand.

“There’s little trust within the royal family here.” Sumael shrugged. “But Vialine wanted to understand the fleet. She wants to understand everything. We became friends, I suppose. When Theofora fell ill and Vialine was called back to the First of Cities, she asked me to go with her, and ...” She lifted the chain of eyes with a fingertip and let it fall clinking. “By some strange magic I find myself counselor to the Empress of the South.”

“Talent floats to the top,” said Rulf.

“Like turds,” grunted Thorn.

Sumael grinned back. “You must be buoyant, then.”

Brand laughed, and Thorn gave him a glare, and he stopped.

“So you sit at the right hand of the most powerful woman in the world?” asked Rulf, shaking his balding head.

“By no means alone.” That strand fell again and Sumael gave a twitch of annoyance and started pulling the pins from her hair. “There’s a council of dozens, and most of them belong to Duke Mikedas. Vialine may be empress in name but he holds the power, and has no intention of sharing.”

“He shared nothing with us,” said Yarvi.

“I heard.” The hair fell in a black curtain across half of her face, the other eye twinkling. “At least you came away with your heads.”

“You think we’ll keep them if we stay?” asked Yarvi.

Sumael’s eye slid across to Thorn. “That depends on how diplomatic you can be.”

“I can be diplomatic,” snarled Thorn.

Sumael only smiled the wider. She seemed immune to intimidation. “You remind me of a ship’s captain Yarvi and I used to sail with.”

Yarvi burst out laughing, and so did Rulf, and Thorn frowned through it. “Is that an insult or a compliment?”

“Call it a little of both.” Yarvi sat forward, elbows on the table and his shrivelled hand clasped in the other. “The High King is making ready for war, Sumael. Who knows, war might already have started.”

“What allies do you have?” she asked, sweeping her hair up with both hands and gathering it in a knot.

“Fewer than we need.”

“Some things never change, eh, Yarvi?” Sumael slid the pins back with nimble fingers. “The duke is not so taken with the One God as Theofora was, but he means to honor the alliance with Grandmother Wexen, even so. He can pick a winner.”

“We shall see,” said Yarvi. “I need to speak to the empress.”

Sumael puffed out her cheeks. “I can try. But more than a hearing I cannot promise.”

“You don’t owe me anything.”

She held his eye as she flicked the last pin home, its jewelled end glittering. “It’s not a question of debts. Not between us.”

Yarvi looked to be caught between laughing and crying, and in the end he sat back, and gave a ragged sigh. “I thought I’d never see you again.”

Sumael smiled, that notch of white tooth showing, and Brand found he was starting to like her. “And?”

“I’m glad I was wrong.”

“So am I.” That strand of hair fell into her face again and she frowned cross-eyed at it a moment, and blew it back.

HOPES

Thorn pushed through a grumbling throng flooding into a temple for prayers. So many temples here, and so much crowding into them to pray.

“Worshipping this One God takes up a lot of time,” grunted Brand, trying to work his broad shoulders through the press.

“The tall gods and the small gods have their own business to be about. The One God only seems to care for meddling in everyone else’s.”

“And bells.” Brand winced at another clanging peel from a white tower just above them. “If I never hear another bloody bell I won’t complain.” He leaned close to whisper. “They bury their dead unburned. Bury them. In the ground. Unburned.”

Thorn frowned at the overgrown yard beside the temple, crammed with marking stones wonky as a beggar’s teeth, each one, she guessed, with a corpse beneath it, rotting. Hundreds of them. Thousands. A charnel pit right inside the city.

She gave a sweaty shudder at the thought, squeezing at the pouch that held her father’s fingerbones. “Damn this city.” He might have loved talking about the place, but she was starting to hate it. Far too big, the size of it was crushing. Far too noisy so you couldn’t think straight. Far too hot, always sticky and stinking day or night. Rubbish and flies and rot and beggars everywhere, it made her dizzy. So many people, and all of them passing through, no one knowing each other, or wanting anything from each other but to claw out a profit.

“We should go home,” she muttered.

“We only just got here.”

“Best time to leave a place you hate.”

“You hate everything.”

“Not everything.” She glanced sideways and caught Brand looking at her, and felt that tingling in her stomach again as he quickly looked away.

Turned out he didn’t just have the puzzled look and the helpless look, he had another, and now she was catching it all the time. Eyes fixed on her, bright behind a few stray strands of hair. Hungry, almost. Scared, almost. The other day, when they’d been pressed together on the ground, so very close, there’d been ... something. Something that brought the blood rushing to her face, and not just her face either. In her guts she was sure. Just below her guts, even more so. But the doubts crowded into her head like the faithful into their temples at prayer time.

Could you just ask? I know we used to hate each other but I’ve come to think I might like you quite a lot. Any chance you like me, at all? Gods, it sounded absurd. All her life she’d been pushing folk away, she had no idea where to start at pulling one in. What if he looked at her as if she was mad? The thought yawned like a pit at her feet. What do you mean *like*? Like, *like* like? Should she just take hold of him and kiss him? She kept thinking about it. She hardly thought about anything else anymore.

But what if a look was just a look? What if it was like her mother said—what man would want someone as strange and difficult and contrary as she was? Not one like Brand who was well-made and well-liked and what a man should be and could have anyone he wanted—

Suddenly his arm was around her, herding her back into a doorway. Her heart was in her mouth, she even gave a little girlish squeak as he pressed up tight against her. Then everyone was scrambling to the sides of the lane as horses clattered by, feathers on their bridles thrashing and gilded armor glinting and tall riders in tall helmets caring nothing for those who cowered to either side. Duke Mikedas's men, no doubt.

"Someone could get hurt," Brand muttered, frowning after them.

"Aye," she croaked. "Someone could."

She was fooling herself. Had to be. They were friends. They were oarmates. That was all they needed to be. Why ruin it by pushing for something she couldn't have, didn't deserve, wouldn't get ... then she caught his eye, and there was that damn look again that set her heart going as if she'd rowed a hard mile. He jerked away from her, gave an awkward half-smile, strode on as the crowds pressed back in after the horsemen.

What if he felt the same as her, wanting to ask but scared to ask and not knowing how to ask? Every conversation with him felt dangerous as a battle. Sleeping in the same room was torture. They'd just been oarmates on one floor when they first threw their blankets down, laughing at the state of the great ruin Yarvi had bought, daylight showing through the roof. But now she only pretended to sleep while she thought about how close he was, and sometimes she thought he was pretending too, could swear his eyes were open, watching her. But she was never sure. The thought of sleeping next to him made her miserable, and the thought of not sleeping next to him made her miserable.

Do you ... *like* me? Like? *Like*?

The whole thing was a bloody riddle in a language she couldn't speak.

Brand puffed out his cheeks and wiped sweat from his forehead, no doubt blissfully unaware of the trouble he was causing. "Guess we'll be gone soon as we strike a deal with the empress."

Thorn tried to swallow her nerves and talk normally, whatever that meant. "I'm thinking that won't happen."

Brand shrugged. Calm and solid and trusting as ever. "Father Yarvi'll find a way."

"Father Yarvi's deep-cunning all right but he's no sorcerer. If you'd been at the palace, seen that duke's face ..."

"Sumael will find a way for him, then."

Thorn snorted. "You'd think Mother Sun was up that woman's arse for the light she's shining into everyone's lives."

"Not yours, I reckon."

"I don't trust her."

"You don't trust anyone."

She almost said, "I trust you," but swallowed it at the last moment and settled for a grunt.

"And Rulf trusts her," Brand went on. "With his life, he told me. Father Yarvi too, and he's hardly the trusting type."

"Wish I knew more about what happened with those three," said Thorn. "There's a story there."

"Sometimes you'll be happier for knowing less."

"That's you. Not me." She glanced over at him and caught him looking back. Hungry almost, scared

almost, and she felt that tingle deep in her stomach and would have been off on a mad argument with herself yet again if they hadn't come to the market.

One of the markets, anyway. The First of Cities had dozens, each one big as Roystock. Places of mad bustle and noise, cities of stalls choked with people of every shape and color. Great scales clattered and abacuses rattled and prices were screamed in every tongue over the braying and clucking and honking of the livestock. There was a choking reek of cooking food and sickly-sweet spice and fresh dung and the gods knew what else. Everything else. Everything in the world for sale. Belt buckles and salt. Purple cloth and idols. Monstrous, sad-eyed fishes. Thorn squeezed her eyes shut and forced them open, but the every-colored madness still boiled before her.

"Just meat," said Thorn plaintively, weighing Father Yarvi's purse in her hand. "We just want meat." Safrif hadn't even asked for a certain kind. She dodged as a woman in a stained apron strode past with a goat's head under her arm. "Where the hell do we start?"

"Hold up." Brand had stopped at a stall where a dark-skinned merchant was selling strings of glass beads and lifting one so Mother Sun sparkled through the yellow glass. "Pretty, ain't they? Sort of thing a girl likes as a gift."

Thorn shrugged. "I'm no expert on pretty. Girls neither, for that matter."

"You are one, aren't you?"

"So my mother tells me." She added in a mutter, "Opinion's divided."

He held up another necklace, green and blue this time. "Which ones would you want?" And he grinned sideways. "For a gift?"

Thorn felt that tingling in her stomach, stronger than ever. Close to actual vomiting. If ever she was going to get proof then here it was. A gift. For her. Hardly the one she would have chosen but with luck that might be next. If she picked out the right words. What to say? Gods, what to say? Her tongue seemed twice its usual size of a sudden.

"Which ones would I want, or ..." She kept her eyes on him and let her head drop to one side, tried to make her voice soft. Winsome, whatever that sounded like. She couldn't have been soft more than three times in her life and winsome never, and it came out a clumsy growl. "Which ones *do* I want?"

The puzzled look, now. "I mean, which ones would you want brought back? If you were in Thorlby."

And in spite of the cloying heat a coldness spread out, starting in Thorn's chest and creeping slowly to her very fingertips. Not for her. For someone back in Thorlby. Of course they were. She'd let herself get blown away on her own wind, in spite of Skifr's warnings.

"Don't know," she croaked, trying to shrug as if it was nothing, but it wasn't nothing. "How should I know?" She turned away, her face burning as Brand talked prices with the merchant, and she wished the ground would open up and eat her unburned like the southern dead.

She wondered what girl those beads were for. Wasn't as if there were that many in Thorlby the right age. More than likely Thorn knew her. More than likely Thorn had been laughed at and pointed at and sneered at by her. One of the pretty ones her mother always told her to be more like. One of the ones who knew how to sew, and how to smile, and how to wear a key.

She thought she'd made herself tough right through. Slaps and punches and shield blows hardly hurt her. But everyone has chinks in their armor. Father Yarvi might have stopped them crushing her with stones, but casually as that Brand crushed her just as flat with a string of beads.

He was still grinning as he slipped them into a pocket. "She'll like them, I reckon."

Thorn's face twisted. Never even occurred to him she might think they were for her. Never even occurred to him to think of her the way she'd come to think of him. It was as if all the color had drained out of the world. She'd spent a lot of her life feeling shamed and foolish and ugly, but never so much as this.

"I'm such a stupid shit," she hissed.

Brand blinked at her. "Eh?"

The helpless look, this time, and the temptation to sink her fist into it was almost overpowering, but she knew it wasn't his fault. It was no one's fault but her own, and punching yourself never solves anything. She tried to put a brave face on but she couldn't find it right then. She wanted just to get away. To get anywhere, and she took one step and stopped dead.

The scowling Vansterman who had stood beside Mother Scaer in the palace was blocking her path, his right hand hidden in a rolled up cloak where, she had no doubt, it held a blade. There was a rat-faced little man at his shoulder and she could feel someone moving over on her left. The big Lowlander, she guessed.

"Mother Scaer wants a word with you," said the Vansterman, showing his teeth, and far from a pretty set. "Be best if you came quietly."

"Better yet, we'll go our own way quietly," said Brand, plucking at Thorn's shoulder.

She shook him off, hot shame turned to chill rage in an instant. She needed to hurt someone, and these idiots had come along at just the right moment.

Right for her. Wrong for them.

"I'll be doing nothing quietly." And she flicked one of Father Yarvi's silver coins to the holder of the nearest stall, covered in tools and timber.

"What's this for?" he asked as he caught it.

"The damage," said Thorn, and she snatched up a hammer, flung it underhand so it bounced from the Vansterman's skull, sending him stumbling back, all amazement.

She grabbed a heavy jug from another stall and smashed it over his head before he could get his balance, spraying them both with wine. She caught him as he fell and dug the jagged remains of the handle into his face.

A knife came at her and she dodged it on an instinct, jerking back from the waist so the blade hissed by her, eyes wide as she followed the flashing metal. The rat-faced man stabbed again and she reeled sideways, lurched over a stall, its owner wailing about his goods. She came up clutching a bowl of spice, flung it at Rat-face in a sweet-smelling orange cloud. He coughed, spat, lunged at her blindly. She used the bowl like a shield, the knife-blade buried itself in the wood and she wrenched it from his hand.

He came at her with a clumsy punch but she got her arm inside it, felt his fist scuff her cheek as she stepped in and kneed him full in the gut, then again between the legs and made him squeal. She caught him around the jaw, arching back, and butted him with all her strength in his rat face. The jolt of it dizzied her for a moment, but not half as much as it did him. He flopped onto his hands and knees, drooling blood, and she stepped up with a wild swing of her boot and kicked him onto his back, a table going over and half-burying him in an avalanche of glistening fish.

She turned, saw Brand being forced backward over a stall stacked with fruit, the big Lowlander trying to push a knife into his face, Brand's tongue wedged between his teeth, eyes crossed as he stared at the bright point.

When you're training, fighting your oarmates, there's always a little held back. Thorn held back nothing now. She caught the Lowlander's thick wrist with one hand and hauled his arm straight behind him, screamed as she drove the heel of her other hand down into his elbow. There was a crunch and his arm bent the wrong way, knife tumbling from his flopping hand. He screamed until Thorn chopped him in the neck just the way Skifr taught her and he fell jerking onto the next stall, sending broken pottery flying.

"Come on!" she spat, but there was no one left to fight. Only the shocked stall-holders and the scared bystanders and a mother holding her hand over her daughter's eyes. "Go quietly, will I?" she shrieked, lifting her boot to stomp on the Lowlander's head.

"No!" Brand caught her under the arm and dragged her through the wreckage, folk scrambling to give them room as they half-walked, half-ran into the mouth of a side-street.

"Did you kill them?" he was squeaking.

"With any luck," snarled Thorn, tearing herself free of him. "Why? Did you plan to buy 'em beads, did you?"

"What? We were sent to get meat, not make corpses!" They took a quick turn, past a group of surprised beggars and on through the shadows of a rotten alley, the commotion fading behind them. "Don't want to cause trouble for Father Yarvi. Don't want to see you crushed with rocks either if I can help it."

She saw he was right, and that made her angrier than ever. "You're such a coward," she hissed, which surely wasn't fair but she wasn't feeling very fair right then. There was something tickling her eye, and she wiped it, and her hand came away red.

"You're bleeding," he said, reaching out, "here—"

"Get your hand off me!" She shoved him against the wall, then, when he bounced off, shoved him again even harder. He shrank back, one hand up as she stood over him with her fists clenched, and he looked confused, and hurt, and scared.

It was a look that gave her a tingle, all right, but not in a good way. In that look she saw her silly bloody hopes as twisted and broken as she'd left that Lowlander's arm, and it was no one's fault but her own. She shouldn't have let herself hope, but hopes are like weeds: however often you root them out they keep on springing up.

She gave a growl of frustration, and stalked off down the alleyway.

RUINS

He'd ruined it.

Brand leant against the crumbling wall of the courtyard between Rulf and Father Yarvi, watching Thorn give Fror a pasting. He'd spent half his time watching her, since they reached the First of Cities. But now he did it with the mournful longing of an orphan at a baker's stall, taunting himself with the sight of treats he knows he'll never have. A feeling Brand knew all too well. A feeling he'd hoped never to have again.

There'd been something good between them. A friendship, if nothing else. A friendship a long, hard time in the making.

Like the blundering oaf he was, he'd ruined it.

He'd come back to their room and her things were gone and she was sleeping with Safrin and Koll and she hadn't said why. She hadn't said one word to him since that day in the market. She must've seen how he was looking at her, guessed what he was thinking. Wasn't as though he was any good at hiding it. But judging by the way she looked at him now, or rather the way she didn't, the thought made her flesh crawl. Of course it did.

Why would someone like her—so strong, and sharp, and confident—want a dullard like him? Anyone could see at one glance she was something truly special and he was nothing, and would always be nothing, just like his father used to tell him. A cringing dunce who'd begged for scraps, and picked through rubbish, and dragged sacks around the docks for a pittance and been grateful to get it.

He wasn't sure exactly how he'd done it, but he'd found a way to let everyone down. His crew. His family. Himself. Thorn. He'd ruined it.

Koll slid back the bolt on the door and Sumael stepped into the courtyard. She had two others with her: a small servant in a hooded cloak and a big-shouldered man with a watchful frown and a scar through one gray brow.

The servant pushed her hood back. She was slight and dark-haired, with quick eyes that missed no detail as she watched the fight. If you could call it a fight. Fror was one of the best warriors on the crew, but it only took Thorn a few more moments to put him down and she wasn't even breathing hard afterward.

"I'm done," he groaned, clutching at his ribs with one hand while he held the other up for mercy.

"Most encouraging," said Skifr, catching the wooden blade of Thorn's ax before she could hit him again regardless. "I delight in the way you are fighting today, my dove. No doubts, no conscience, no mercy. Who will be next to face you ...?"

Dosduvoi and Koll found the corners of the courtyard suddenly fascinating. Brand held up helpless palms as Skifr's eyes fell on him. The mood Thorn was in, he wasn't sure he'd come through a bout alive. The old woman gave a sigh.

"I fear you have nothing left to learn from your oarmates. The time has come for stiffer opposition."

She pulled her coat off and tossed it over Fror's back. "How did you get that scar, Vansterman?"

"I kissed a girl," he grunted, crawling toward the wall, "with a very sharp tongue."

"Further proof that romance can be more dangerous than swordplay," said Skifr, and Brand could only agree with that. She pulled out a wooden sword and ax of her own. "Now, my dove, we shall truly see what you have learned—"

"Before you begin," said Sumael, "I've—"

"Red-toothed war waits for nothing!" Skifr sprang, weapons darting out quick and deadly as striking snakes, Thorn twisting and writhing as she dodged and parried. Brand could hardly count how many crashing blows they traded in the time it took him to take a breath. Eight? Ten? They broke apart as suddenly as they met, circling each other, Thorn weaving between the columns in a prowling crouch, Skifr swaggering sideways, weapons drifting in lazy circles.

"Oh, this is something," murmured Rulf, grinning wide.

Fror winced as he rubbed at his ribs. "It's a lot more fun than fighting her yourself, that's sure."

Sumael's frowning companion murmured something under his breath, and Father Yarvi smiled.

"What did he say?" whispered Brand.

"He said the girl is extraordinary."

Brand snorted. "That's bloody obvious."

"Very good," Skifr was saying. "But do not wait for me to hand you an opening. I am no gift-giver."

"I'll cut my own, then!" Thorn darted forward so fast Brand took a wobbly step back, her ax and sword flashing in circles, but Skifr twisted, reeled, somehow finding a path between them and away to safety.

"Please," said Sumael, louder. "I need to—"

"There is no place for please on the battlefield!" screamed Skifr, unleashing another blinding flurry, wood clattering on wood, herding Thorn into the corner of the yard then her blade raking stone as Thorn ducked under it, rolled away and came up swinging. Skifr gasped as she stumbled back, Thorn's sword missing the end of her nose by a finger's breadth.

Koll gave a disbelieving titter. Father Yarvi puffed out his cheeks, eyes bright. Rulf shook his balding head in disbelief. "I never saw the like."

"Excellent," said Skifr, eyes narrowed. "I am glad to see my wisdom has not been wasted." She spun her ax in her fingers so quickly it became a blur. "Truly excellent, but you will find—"

"Stop!" screamed Sumael, dragging every face sharply toward her. To Brand's surprise she sank to one knee, sweeping her arm toward her servant. "May I present her radiance Vialine, Princess of the Denied, Grand Duke of Napaz, Terror of the Alyuks, Protector of the First of Cities and Thirty-fifth Empress of the South."

For a moment Brand thought it some elaborate joke. Then he saw Father Yarvi drop to one knee, and everyone else in the yard just afterward, and any hint of laughter quickly died.

"Gods," he whispered, getting his own knee to the paving so fast it hurt.

"Sorry," croaked Thorn, hastily doing the same.

The empress stepped forward. "Don't be. It was a most instructive display." She spoke the Tongue with a heavy accent, but her voice was rich and full of confidence.

"Your radiance—" said Yarvi.

"Do I seem all that radiant to you?" The empress laughed. An open, friendly laugh that echoed about the courtyard. "I would rather we speak plainly. I get very little plain speaking at the palace."

Except from Sumael, of course.”

“I find Sumael’s speaking just a little too plain at times.” Father Yarvi brushed off his knees as he stood. “We are truly honored by your visit.”

“It is I who should be honored. You have traveled across half the world to speak with me, after all. I would hate to be the sort of person who would not walk half a mile from my palace gate to speak with you.”

“I will try not to waste your time, then, empress.” The minister took a step toward her. “Do you understand the politics of the Shattered Sea?”

“I know a little. Sumael has told me more.”

Yarvi took another step. “I fear Mother War will soon spread her bloody wings across its every shore.”

“And you seek my help. Even though we pray to different gods? Even though my aunt made an alliance with the High King?”

“Her alliance, not yours.”

The empress folded her arms and stepped sideways. She and the minister began to circle each other warily, very much as Thorn and Skifr had done a few moments before. “Why should I forge a new one with Gettland?”

“Because you wish to favor the winning side.”

Vialine smiled. “You are too bold, Father Yarvi.”

“King Uthil would say there is no such thing as *too* bold.”

“Gettland is a small nation, surrounded by enemies—”

“Gettland is a rich nation surrounded by paupers. Queen Laithlin has made sure of it.”

“The Golden Queen,” murmured Vialine. “Her fame as a merchant has spread even this far. Is it true she has found a way to catch gold and silver in paper?”

“She has. One of many wonders, the secrets of which she would happily share with her allies.”

“You offer me gold and silver, then?”

“The High King offers nothing but prayers.”

“Is gold and silver everything to you, Father Yarvi?”

“Gold and silver is everything to everyone. Some of us have enough of it to pretend otherwise.”

The empress gave a little gasp at that.

“You asked for honesty.” Yarvi snapped his fingers toward Thorn and she stood up. “But as it happens my mother has sent something made of neither gold nor silver. A gift, brought the long, hard road down the Divine and the Denied from the darkest corners of the Shattered Sea.” And he slid the black box from inside his coat and handed it to Thorn.

“An elf-relic?” said the empress, scared and curious at once.

The frowning man moved closer to her, frowning even deeper.

Thorn held the box out awkwardly. They might have been of an age, but Vialine looked like a child next to her. Her head barely came to Thorn’s chest, let alone her shoulder. As though realizing how strange a pair they made, Thorn dropped to one knee so she could hold the gift at a more fitting angle, the elf-letters etched on the lid glinting as they caught the light. “Sorry.”

“Don’t be. I wish I was tall.” Vialine pushed back the lid of the box, and that pale light flooded out, and her eyes went wide. Brand felt Rulf stiffen beside him, heard Koll give a gasp of amazement, Fror murmuring a breathless prayer. He’d seen the light before and still he strained forward, longing

to see what made it. The lid of the box was in the way, though.

“It is beautiful,” breathed the empress, reaching out. She gasped as she touched whatever was inside, the light on her face shifting from white to pink and back as she jerked her hand away. “Great God! It still turns?”

“It does,” said Skifr. “It senses you, Empress, and shifts to match your mood. It was brought from the elf-ruins of Strokom, where no man has trodden since the Breaking of God. There may not be another like it in the world.”

“Is it ... safe?”

“No truly wonderful thing can be entirely safe. But it is safe enough.”

Vialine stared into the box, her wide eyes reflecting its glow. “It is too grand a gift for me.”

“How could any gift be too grand for the Empress of the South?” asked Yarvi, taking a gentle step toward her. “With this upon your arm, you will seem radiant indeed.”

“It is beautiful beyond words. But I cannot take it.”

“It is a gift freely given—”

Vialine looked up at him through her lashes. “I asked you to speak honestly, Father Yarvi.” And she snapped the box shut, and put the light out with it. “I cannot help you. My aunt Theofora made promises I cannot break.” She lifted her small fist high. “I am the most powerful person in the world!” Then she laughed, and let it fall. “And there is nothing I can do. Nothing I can do about anything. My uncle has an understanding with Mother Scaer.”

“A ruler must plow her own furrow,” said Yarvi.

“Easier said than done, Father Yarvi. The soil is very stony hereabouts.”

“I could help you dig it over.”

“I wish you could. Sumael says you are a good man.”

“Above average.” Sumael had a little smile at the corner of her mouth. “I’ve known worse men with both their hands.”

“But you cannot help me. No one can.” Vialine drew up her hood, and with one last glance toward Thorn, still kneeling in the middle of the courtyard with the box in her hand, the Empress of the South turned to leave. “And I am sorry, but I cannot help you.”

It was hardly what they’d all been hoping for. But so it goes, with hopes.

SOME BLOODY DIPLOMAT

Skifr came at her again but this time Thorn was ready. The old woman grunted in surprise as Thorn's ax caught her boot and sent her lurching. She parried the next blow but it rocked her on her heels and the one after tore her sword from her hand and knocked her clean on her back.

Even on the ground Skifr was dangerous. She kicked dust in Thorn's face, rolled and flung her ax with deadly accuracy. But Thorn was ready for that too, hooked it from the air with her own and sent it skittering into the corner, pressing on, teeth bared, and pinning Skifr against one of the pillars, the point of her sword tickling the old woman's sweat-beaded throat.

Skifr raised her gray brows. "Auspicious."

"I won!" bellowed Thorn, shaking her notched wooden weapons at the sky. It had been months since she dared hope she might ever get the better of Skifr. Those endless mornings being beaten with the oar as Mother Sun rose, those endless evenings trying to hit her with the bar by the light of Father Moon, those endless blows and slaps and slides into the mud. But she had done it. "I beat her!"

"You beat her," said Father Yarvi, nodding slowly.

Skifr winced as she clambered up. "You have beaten a grandmother long years past her best. There will be sterner challenges ahead for you. But ... you have done well. You have listened. You have worked. You have become deadly. Father Yarvi was right—"

"When am I wrong?" The minister's smile vanished at a hammering on the door. He jerked his head toward Koll and the boy slid back the bolt.

"Sumael," said Yarvi, smiling as he did whenever she visited. "What brings—"

She was breathing hard as she stepped over the threshold. "The empress wishes to speak to you."

Father Yarvi's eyes widened. "I'll come at once."

"Not you." She was looking straight at Thorn. "You."

BRAND HAD SPENT MOST of his life feeling out of place. Beggar among the rich. Coward among the brave. Fool among the clever. But a visit to the Palace of the Empress opened up whole new gulfs of crippling inadequacy.

"Gods," he whispered, every time he crept around another corner after Thorn and Sumael into some new marbled corridor, or gilded stairway, or cavernous chamber, each richer than the last. He tiptoed down a hallway lit with candles tall as a man. Dozens of them, each worth more in Thorlby than he was, left burning on the chance that someone might happen by. Everything was jewelled or silvered, panelled or painted. He looked at a chair inlaid with a dozen kinds of wood, and thought how much more it must have cost than everything he had earned in his life. He wondered if he was

dreaming it, but knew he didn't have a good enough imagination.

"Wait here," said Sumael, as they reached a round room at the top of a flight of steps, every bit of the marble walls carved as finely as Koll's mast with scenes from some story. "Touch nothing." And she left Brand alone with Thorn. The first time since that day in the market.

And look how that turned out.

"Quite a place," he muttered.

Thorn stood with her back to him, turning her head to show a sliver of frown. "Is that why Father Yarvi sent you along? To say what anyone could see?"

"I don't know why he sent me along." Chill silence stretched out. "I'm sorry if I dragged you back. The other day. You're far the better fighter, I should've let you take the lead."

"You should've," she said, without looking at him.

"Just ... seems like you're angry with me, and whatever I—"

"Does now seem like the time?"

"No." He knew some things were better left unsaid but he couldn't stand thinking she hated him. He had to try and put things right. "I just—" He glanced across at her, and she caught him looking, the way she had dozens of times the last few weeks, but now her face twisted.

"Just shut your bloody mouth!" she snarled, white with fury, and looked ready to give him a bloody mouth as well.

He looked down at the floor, so highly polished he could see his own stricken face staring stupidly back, and had nothing to say. What could you say to that?

"If you love-birds are quite finished," said Sumael from the doorway, "the empress is waiting."

"Oh, we're finished," snapped Thorn, stalking off.

Sumael shrugged her shoulders at Brand, and two frowning guards shut the doors on him with a final-sounding *click*.

THE GARDENS WERE LIKE something from a dream, all lit in strange colors by the purple sunset and the shifting torchlight, flames flickering from cages of coals that sent sparks dancing with every breath of wind. Nothing was the way the gods had made it, everything tortured by the hands of man. Grass shaved as carefully as a romancer's jaw. Trees clipped into unnatural shapes and bowing under the weight of their own bloated, sweet-smelling blossom. Birds too, twittering from the twisted branches, and Thorn wondered why they didn't fly away until she saw they were all tethered to their perches with silver chains fine as spider's threads.

Paths of white stone twisted between statues of impossibly stern, impossibly slender women wafting scrolls, books, swords. Empresses of the past, Thorn reckoned, and all wondering why this half-shaved horror had been allowed among them. The guards looked as if they had the same question. Lots of guards, every mirror-bright sword and spear making her acutely aware of how unarmed she was. She sloped after Sumael around a star-shaped pool, crystal water tinkling into it from a fountain carved like snakes coiled together, up to the steps of a strange little building, a dome set on pillars with a curved bench beneath it.

On the bench sat Vialine, Empress of the South.

She had undergone quite a transformation since she visited Father Yarvi's crumbling house. Her hair was twisted into a shining coil netted with golden wire and hung with jewels. Her bodice was set with tiny mirrors that twinkled blue and pink with the fading light, red and orange with the torch-

flames. From a streak of dark paint across the bridge of her nose, her eyes gleamed brightest of all.

Thorn wasn't sure she'd ever felt so far out of her depth. "What do I say?"

"She's just a person," said Sumael. "Talk to her like she's a person."

"What the hell do I know about talking to a person?"

"Just be honest." Sumael slapped Thorn on the back and sent her stumbling forward. "And do it now."

Thorn edged onto the lowest stair. "Your radiance," she croaked out, trying to go down on one knee then realizing it couldn't really be done on a set of steps.

"Vialine, and please don't kneel. A week ago I was nobody much. It still makes me nervous."

Thorn froze awkwardly halfway down, and wobbled back to an uncertain stoop. "Sumael says you sent for—"

"What is your name?"

"Thorn Bathu, your—"

"Vialine, please. The Thorn seems self-explanatory. The Bathu?"

"My father won a famous victory there the day I was born."

"He was a warrior?"

"A great one." Thorn fumbled for the pouch about her neck. "Chosen Shield to a queen of Gettland."

"And your mother?"

"My mother ... wishes I wasn't me." Sumael had told her to be honest, after all.

"My mother was a general who died in battle against the Alyuks."

"Good for her," said Thorn, then instantly thought better of it. "Though ... not for you." Worse and worse. "I suppose, your radiance ..."

She trailed off into mortified silence. Some bloody diplomat.

"Vialine." The empress patted the bench beside her. "Sit with me."

Thorn stepped up into the little pavilion, around a table, a silver platter on it heaped with enough perfect fruit to feed an army, and to a waist-high rail.

"Gods," she breathed. She had scarcely thought about how many stairs she climbed, but now she saw they were on the palace roof. There was a cliff-like drop to more gardens far below. The First of Cities was spread out under the darkening sky beyond, a madman's maze of buildings, lights twinkling in the blue evening, as many as stars in the sky. In the distance, across the black mirror of the straight, other clusters of lights. Other towns, other cities. Strange constellations, faint in the distance.

"And all this is yours," Thorn whispered.

"All of it and none of it." There was something in the set of Vialine's jaw, jutting proudly forward, that Thorn thought she recognized. That she had seen in her mother's mirror, long ago. That made her think the empress was used to wearing a brave face of her own.

"That must be quite a weight to carry," she said.

Vialine's shoulders seemed to sag a little. "Something of a burden."

"Empress, I don't know anything about politics." Thorn perched herself on the bench in a manner she hoped was respectful, whatever that looked like, she'd never been too comfortable sitting unless it was at an oar. "I don't know anything about anything. You'd be much better talking to Father Yarvi —"

"I don't want to talk about politics."

Thorn sat in prickling awkwardness. "So ..."

“You’re a woman.” Vialine leaned forward, her hands clasped in her lap and her eyes fixed on Thorn’s face. Disarmingly close. Closer than Thorn was used to having anyone, let alone an empress.

“So my mother tells me,” she muttered. “Opinion’s divided ...”

“You fight men.”

“Yes.”

“You beat men.”

“Sometimes ...”

“Sumael says you beat them three at a time! Your crew respect you. I could see it in their faces. They *fear* you.”

“Respect, I don’t know. Fear, maybe, your—”

“Vialine. I never saw a woman fight like you. Can I?” Before Thorn could answer the empress had put her hand on Thorn’s shoulder and squeezed at it. Her eyes went wide. “Great God, you’re like wood! You must be so strong.” She let her hand drop, much to Thorn’s relief, and stared down at it, small and dark on the marble between them. “I’m not.”

“Well, you won’t beat a strong man with strength,” murmured Thorn.

The empress’s eyes flickered to hers, white in the midst of that black paint, torch flames gleaming in the corners. “With what, then?”

“You must be quicker to strike and quicker when you do. You must be tougher and cleverer, you must always look to attack, and you must fight without honor, without conscience, without pity.” Skifr’s words, and Thorn realized only then how completely she had learned them, how totally she had taken them in, how much the old woman had taught her. “So I’m told, anyway—”

Vialine snapped her fingers. “*That* is why I sent for you. To learn how to fight strong men. Not with swords, but the principles are the same.” She propped her chin on her hands, a strangely girlish gesture in a woman who ruled half the world. “My uncle wants me to be nothing more than prow-beast for his ship. Less, if anything. The prow-beast at least goes at the keel.”

“Our ships have one at the stern as well.”

“Marvelous. He wants me to be that one, then. To sit in the throne and smile while he makes the choices. But I refuse to be his puppet.” Vialine clenched her fist and thumped the table, scarcely even making the tiny fruit knife rattle on the platter. “I refuse, do you hear me?”

“I do, but ... I’m not sure my hearing will make much difference.”

“No. It’s my uncle’s ears I need to open.” The empress glared off across the darkening gardens. “I stood up to him again in the council today. You should have seen his face. He couldn’t have been more shocked if I’d stabbed him.”

“You can’t know that for sure until you stab him.”

“Great God, I’d like to!” Vialine grinned across at her. “I bet no one makes a puppet of you, do they? I bet no one dares! Look at you.” She had an expression Thorn wasn’t used to seeing. Almost ... admiring. “You’re, you know—”

“Ugly?” muttered Thorn.

“No!”

“Tall?”

“No. Well, yes, but, *free*.”

“Free?” Thorn gave a disbelieving snort.

“Aren’t you?”

“I’m sworn to serve Father Yarvi. To do whatever he thinks necessary. To make up for ... what I did.”

“What did you do?”

Thorn swallowed. “I killed a boy. Edwal was his name, and I don’t reckon he deserved to die, but ... I killed him, all right.”

Vialine was just a person, as Sumael had said and, in spite of her clothes and her palace, or maybe because of them, there was something in her even, earnest gaze that drew the words out.

“They were all set to crush me with stones for it, but Father Yarvi saved me. Don’t know why, but he did. It was Skifr taught me to fight.” Thorn smiled as she touched her fingers to the shaved side of her head, thinking how strong she’d thought herself back then and how weak she’d been. “We fought Horse People on the Denied. Killed a few of them, then I was sick. And we fought men in the market, the other day. Me and Brand. Not sure whether I killed those, but I wanted to. Angry, about those beads ... I reckon ...” She trailed off, realizing she’d said a lot more than she should have.

“Beads?” asked Vialine, the painted bridge of her nose crinkled with puzzlement.

Thorn cleared her throat. “Wouldn’t worry about it.”

“I suppose freedom can be dangerous,” said the empress.

“I reckon.”

“Perhaps we look at others and see only the things we don’t have.”

“I reckon.”

“Perhaps we all feel weak, underneath.”

“I reckon.”

“But you fight men and win, even so.”

Thorn sighed. “At that, I win.”

Vialine counted the points off on her small fingers. “So, quickness to strike, and cleverness, and aggression without conscience, honor or pity.”

Thorn held up her empty hands. “They’ve got me everything I have.”

The empress laughed. A big laugh, from such a small woman, loud and joyous with her mouth wide open. “I like you, Thorn Bathu!”

“You’re joining a small group, then. Sometimes feels like it’s shrinking all the time.” And Thorn eased out the box, and held it between them. “Father Yarvi gave me something for you.”

“I told him I could not take it.”

“He told me I had to give it to you even so.” Thorn bit her lip as she eased the box open and the pale light spilled out, more strange and more beautiful than ever in the gathering darkness. The perfect edges of the elf-bangle gleamed like dagger-blades, glittering metal polished and faceted, winking with the lamplight, dark circles within circles shifting in the impossible depths beneath its round window. A relic from another world. A world thousands of years gone. A thing beside which the priceless treasures of the palace seemed petty baubles, worthless as mud.

Thorn tried to make her voice soft, persuasive, diplomatic. It came out rougher than ever. “Father Yarvi’s a good man. A deep-cunning man. You should speak to him.”

“I did.” Vialine looked from the bangle to Thorn’s eyes. “And you should be careful. Father Yarvi is a man like my uncle, I think. They give no gift without expecting something in return.” She snapped the box closed, then took it from Thorn’s hand. “But I will take it, if that is what you want. Give Father Yarvi my thanks. But tell him I can give him no more.”

"I will." Thorn looked out at the garden as it sank into gloom, fumbling for something else to say, and noticed that where the guard had stood beside the fountain there were only shadows. All of them were gone. She and the empress were alone. "What happened to your guards?"

"That's odd," said Vialine. "Ah! But here are more."

Thorn counted six men climbing the steps at the far end of the gardens. Six imperial soldiers, fully armed and armored, clattering quickly down the path through pools of orange torchlight toward the empress's little house. Another man followed them. A man with gold on his breastplate and silver in his hair and a smile brighter than either upon his handsome face.

Duke Mikedas, and as he saw them he gave a jaunty wave.

Thorn had a feeling, then, as though the guts were draining out of her. She reached for the silver plate and slipped the little fruit knife between her fingers. A pitiful weapon, but better than none at all.

She stood as the soldiers stepped smartly around the fountain and between two statues, felt Vialine stand at her shoulder as they spread out. Thorn recognized one of them as the breeze caught the glowing coals and light flared across his face. The Vansterman she had fought in the market, cuts and purple bruises down one cheek and a heavy ax in his fist.

Duke Mikedas bowed low, but with a twist to his mouth, and his men did not bow at all. Vialine spoke in her own language and the duke answered, waving a lazy hand toward Thorn.

"Your grace," she forced through clenched teeth. "What an honor."

"My apologies," he said in the Tongue. "I was telling her radiance that I simply *could* not miss your visit. A gift, indeed, to find the two of you alone!"

"How so?" asked Vialine.

The duke raised his brows high. "Northern interlopers have come to the First of Cities! *Barbarians*, from Guttland, or wherever. Set on exporting their petty squabbles to our shores! They have tried to drive a wedge between us and our ally, the High King, who has accepted our One God into his heart. When that failed ..." He sternly shook his head. "They have sent an *assassin* to the palace. An unnatural murderer, hoping to prey upon the innocent good nature of my idiot niece."

"I suppose that'd be me?" growled Thorn.

"Oh, *fiend* in woman's shape! Roughly woman's shape, anyway, you're rather too ... muscular for my taste. I seem to remember you wanted to try two of my guards?" Mikedas grinned, and all the while his men edged forward, steel glimmering as it caught the light. "How d'you feel about six of 'em?"

Always look less than you are. Thorn cringed back, hunched her shoulders, made herself look small and full of fear even though a strange calm had come on her. As if the Last Door did not yawn at her heels, but she saw it all from outside. She judged the distances, noted the ground, the statues, the torches, the table, the pillars, the steps, the long drop behind them.

"An empress really shouldn't take such chances with her safety," the duke was saying, "but do not despair, my dear niece, I shall avenge you!"

"Why?" whispered Vialine. Thorn could feel her fear, and that was useful. Two weak, and scared, and helpless girls, and behind her back she curled her fingers tight around that tiny knife.

The duke's lip curled. "Because you prove to be an utter pain in my arse. We all like a girl with spirit, don't we?" He stuck out his bottom lip and shook his head in disappointment. "But there is a limit. Really there is."

Thorn's father used to tell her, *if you mean to kill, you kill, you don't talk about it*. But fortunately for her the duke was no killer, prating and boasting and savoring his power, giving Thorn time to judge her enemy, time to choose her best chance.

She reckoned the duke himself a small threat. He wore a sword and dagger but she doubted they had ever been drawn. The others knew their business, though. Good swords out, and good shields on their arms, and good daggers at their belts. Good armor too, scaled mail twinkling in the twilight, but weak at the throat. The insides of the elbows. The backs of the knees. That was where she had to strike.

She alone, against seven. She almost laughed then. Absurd odds. Impossible odds. But the only ones she had.

"Theofora could never do as she was told," the duke blathered on, "but then she was too old a horse to learn obedience. I really had hoped a seventeen-year-old empress could be led by the nose." He gave a sigh. "Some ponies just chafe at the bridle, though. They kick and bite and refuse to be ridden. Better to destroy them before they throw their master. The throne will pass to your cousin Asta next." He showed those perfect teeth of his. "She's four. Now that's a woman you can work with!" Finally tiring of his own cleverness, he sent two of his men forward with a lazy gesture. "Let's get it done."

Thorn watched them come. One had a big, often-broken nose. The other a pocked and pitted face, smiling in a faintly uninterested way. Swords drawn but not raised as they came onto the first step. You couldn't blame them for being confident. But they were so confident they never even considered she might give them a fight.

And Thorn would give them a fight.

"Careful, your grace," said the Vansterman. "She's dangerous."

"Please," scoffed the duke, "she's just a girl. I thought you northerners were all fire and—"

The wise wait for their moment, as Father Yarvi had often told her, but never let it pass. The big-nosed man took the next step, squinting as the light from the torches in the pavilion shone into his eyes, then looking mildly surprised when Thorn darted forward and slit his throat with the fruit knife.

She angled the cut so blood sprayed the pock-faced man beside and he flinched. Just for an instant, but long enough for Thorn to jerk Big Nose's knife from his belt as he stumbled backward and ram it under the rim of Pockmark's helmet, into the shadow between his neck and his collarbone, all the way to the grip.

She planted her boot against his chest as he made a strangled groan and kicked him back, toppling from the first step and tangling with the two men behind. She caught his sword, cutting her hand on the blade but tearing it from his slack grip, bloody fingers around the crosspiece so she held it overhand like a dagger. She screamed as she ripped it upward, scraping the rim of the next man's shield and catching him under the jaw, the point raking across his face and knocking his helmet askew.

He reeled away screeching, blood bubbling between his clutching fingers, tottering into the duke who gasped and shoved him into the bushes, staring at the black specks down his breastplate as though they were a personal affront.

Big Nose was stumbling drunkenly back, looking even more surprised than before, desperately trying to hold his neck together but his whole left side was already dark with blood. Thorn reckoned she could put him out of her mind.

To deal with three that quickly was fine weaponluck indeed, but surprise had been her one

advantage. It was spent, and the odds still four to one.

“God damn it!” bellowed the duke, wiping at his blood-spattered cloak. “Kill them!”

Thorn shuffled back, keeping a pillar close on her left like a shield, eyes darting back and forth as the men closed in, shields and swords and axes plenty ready now, hard steel and hard eyes all gleaming red with the torchlight. She could hear Vialine behind her, almost whimpering with each breath.

“Brand!” she screamed at the top of her lungs. “Brand!”

RAGE

Brand stood there, staring at the jug of water on the table, and the goblets beside it, thinking they must be there for visitors but not daring to touch them even though he was thirsty as a man lost in the desert.

What if they were meant for better visitors than him?

He twisted his shoulders in a vain effort to peel his clinging shirt from his sticky skin. Gods, the heat, the endless, strangling heat, even as night crept in. He went to the window, closed his eyes and took a long breath, feeling the warm breeze on his face and wishing it was the salt wind of Thorlby.

He wondered what Rin was doing now. Rolled his eyes to the twilit skies and sent a prayer up to Father Peace to keep her well. In his eagerness to be a warrior, and find a crew, and make himself a new family he'd forgotten about the one he had. He was a man you could rely on, all right. To make a damn mess of things. He heaved up a heavy sigh.

And then he heard it, faint. Like someone calling his name. Thought he was dreaming it at first, then it came again, and he was sure. It sounded like Thorn, and the way things were between them she wouldn't be calling him without a reason.

He shoved the door open, thinking to rouse the guards.

But the guards were gone. Only the empty corridor, shadowy steps up at the far end. He thought he heard fighting, felt a stab of worry. Metal, and cries, and his name screamed out again.

He started running.

THORN SNATCHED UP THE SILVER PLATTER, fruit tumbling, shrieked as she flung it at the Vansterman and he ducked behind his big ax, stumbling away as the plate bounced from his shoulder and spun off into the bushes.

Tethered songbirds flapped and squawked and fluttered in a helpless panic and Thorn wasn't much better off, penned behind the pillars of the pavilion as if it was a cage. Beside the Vansterman there were two soldiers still standing—one tall and rangy with a hell of a reach, one short and beefy with a neck thick as a tree. The duke loitered at the back, pointing at Thorn with his dagger and shouting in a broken voice. A clever man, maybe, but a man used to everything going his way.

“Got blood on your shoes have I?” she snarled at him. “Y’old bastard?”

She made a grab for one of the torches, ripping it from its sconce, ignoring the sparks that scattered searing up her arm.

Thick Neck darted toward her and she blocked his sword with hers, steel clashing, chopped at him and struck splinters from his shield, stepped away, trying to give herself room to think of something, slipped on fallen fruit in the darkness and lurched against the table. A sword chopped into her leg. The meat of her left thigh, above the knee. She gave a kind of swallowing yelp as the tall soldier pulled it free of her, readying for a thrust.

You will be struck, and when you are the force of it must not stagger you, the pain of it must not

slow you, the shock of it must not cause you to doubt. She lashed at the tall soldier with the torch and he brought his shield up just in time, tottering down the steps as red coals spilled from the cage and across his back in a shower of glowing dust.

She ducked on an instinct, Thick Neck's sword whistling by and clanging against the nearest pillar, splinters of marble spinning, fighting shadows flickering, dodging, stabbing all around them. Thorn swung for him but her leg had no strength in it, her sword bounced from his armored shoulder, only checked him for a moment.

She saw her blood, gleaming black in the torchlight, a trail of spots and spatters leading to the point of the tall man's sword. She saw the duke's face twisted with rage. She heard the empress screaming something over the rail. Calling for help, but there was no help coming. Thick Neck had his front foot on the top step, hard eyes fixed on her over his shield rim. Tall was clawing at his back, trying to brush the coals from his smoldering cloak.

She had to fight, while she still had blood to fight with. Had to attack, and it had to be now.

She shoved herself from the table as Thick Neck stabbed at her and sprang down the steps, over a fallen body. Her wounded thigh gave as she came down but she was ready for that, fell forward, rolled under Tall's hard-swung sword, the wind from the blade catching her hair, came up on her good side, slashing at him as she passed.

She caught Tall behind the knee and he grunted, trying to turn and falling to all fours in front of her. She lifted the sword high, arching back, brought it crashing down on his helmet. The force of it jolted her arm so hard it made her teeth buzz. The blade shattered, shards of steel bouncing away. But it left a mighty dent, one of Tall's legs kicking wildly as he flopped on his face, mouth open in a silent yawn. Thorn tottered against a statue, broken sword still clutched in her fist.

Good weaponluck, Odda would've said, because the Vansterman chose that moment to swing his ax and it missed her by a hair, heavy blade knocking a great chunk of marble loose. Thorn shoved him away with the torch, a few last sparks whirling on the breeze. Her leg was throbbing, pulsing, no strength in it at all.

Thick Neck stepped carefully toward her, shield up. There's always a way, Father Yarvi used to say, but Thorn couldn't see it. She was too hurt. The odds were too long. She clutched hard to that broken sword, bared her teeth, showed him her bravest face. She could smell flowers. Flowers and blood.

"Your death comes," she whispered.

Vialine shrieked as she leapt between the pillars and onto the short man's back, grabbing him around his bull neck, clutching at the wrist of his sword arm. He tried to throw her off, shield flailing, but that left a gap. Thorn dived at him, her left knee buckled, pain stabbing through her leg but she caught his armor as she fell and dragged herself up, snarled as she drove the broken sword blade up under his jaw. He spoke blood, the empress squealing as they crashed down on top of her.

Thorn rolled just in time, the Vansterman's heavy ax flashing past, thudding through Thick Neck's mail and deep into his chest. Thorn half-scrambled, half hopped up as he struggled to drag his ax free, the breath burning in her heaving chest.

"Brand!" she screamed in a broken voice. She heard a step behind her, lurched around and saw a flash of metal. The duke punched her in the cheek, made her head jolt, but it was a feeble sort of blow, barely even staggering her.

She clutched at his gilded breastplate. "That your best?" she hissed, but the words were blood,

drooling down her chin. There was something in her mouth. Cold, and hard, across her tongue. That was when she realized he'd stabbed her. He'd stabbed her and the dagger was right through her face, between her jaws, his hand still around the grip.

They stared at each other in the darkness, neither quite believing what had happened. Neither quite believing she was still standing. Then, by the glimmering of torchlight, she saw his eyes go hard.

She felt the blade shift in her mouth as he tried to tear it free and she bit down on it, kneed him in his side with her wounded leg, twisted her head, twisting the bloody grip of the dagger out of his limp hand. She shoved him clumsily away, staggering sideways as the Vansterman swung at her, his ax grazing her shoulder and ripping a shower of leaves from the bushes as she hopped back toward the fountain.

Everyone's got a plan until they start bleeding and she was bleeding now. Her leg was hot with it, her face sticky with it. No plans any more. She snorted and blew a red mist.

She caught the grip and dragged the dagger out of her face. Came out easy enough. Might have been a tooth came with it, though. Gods, she was dizzy. Her leg had stopped throbbing. Just numb. Numb and wet and her knee trembling. She could hear it flapping inside her blood-soaked trousers.

Drowsy.

She shook her head, trying to shake the dizziness out but it only made things worse, the blurry gardens tipping one way then back the other.

Duke Mikedas had drawn his sword, was dragging the corpse of the thick-necked man away so he could get at the empress.

Thorn waved the knife around but it was so heavy. As if there was an anvil hanging off the point. The torches flashed and flickered and danced.

"Come on," she croaked, but her tongue was all swollen, couldn't get the words around it.

The Vansterman smiled as he herded her back toward the fountain.

She tripped, clutched at something, knee buckling, just staying upright.

Kneeling in water. Fish flitting in the darkness.

Vialine screamed again. Her voice was getting hoarse from it.

The Vansterman wafted his ax back and forward and the big blade caught the light and left orange smears across Thorn's blurred sight.

The empress said *don't kneel* but she couldn't get up.

She could hear her own breath, wheezing, wheezing.

Didn't sound too good.

Gods, she was tired.

"Brand," she mumbled.

HE CAME UP THE steps running.

Caught a glimpse of a darkened garden, a path of white stones between flowering trees, and statues, and dead men scattered in the shadows about a torchlit fountain—

He saw Thorn kneeling in it, clutching at wet stone carved like snakes, a dagger in her other hand. Her face was tattered red and her clothes torn and stuck to her dark and the water pink with blood.

A man stood over her with an ax in his hand. The Vansterman from the market.

Brand made a sound like a boiling kettle. A sound he never made before and never heard a man make.

He tore down that path like a charging bull and as the Vansterman turned, eyes wide, Brand caught him, snatched him off his feet like the north gale snatches up a leaf and rammed him at a full sprint into a statue.

They hit it so hard the world seemed to shake. So hard it rattled Brand's teeth in his head. So hard the statue broke at the waist and the top fell in dusty chunks across the grass.

Brand might've heard the Vansterman's shattered groan if it wasn't for the blood pounding in his skull like Mother Sea on a storm day, blinding him, deafening him. He seized the Vansterman's head with both hands and rammed it into the marble pedestal, two times, three, four, chips of stone flying until his skull was bent and dented and flattened and Brand flung him down ruined onto the path.

Thorn was slumped against the fountain, her face all the wrong colors, skin waxy pale and streaked with blood and her torn cheeks and her mouth and her chin all clotted black.

"Stay back!" someone shrieked. An older man in a gilded breastplate with a sheen of sweat across his face. He had the Empress Vialine about the neck, a jewelled sword to her throat, but it was too long for the task. "I am Duke Mikedas!" he bellowed, as if the name was a shield.

But a name's just a name. Brand's lips curled back and he took a step forward, the growling in his throat hot as dragon's fire, kicking a corpse out of his way.

The duke whipped the sword from Vialine's neck and pointed it wobbling toward Brand. "I'm warning you, stay—"

The empress grabbed his hand and bit it, twisting free as he screamed. He raised his sword but Brand was on him, making that sound again, that shrieking, keening, gurgling sound, not thinking of doing good, or of standing in the light, or anything but breaking this man apart with his hands.

The sword grazed his head and bounced off his shoulder. Maybe it cut him and maybe it didn't and Brand didn't care. His arms closed tight about the duke like a lock snapping shut. He was a big man, but Brand once held the weight of a ship across his shoulders. He hoisted Duke Mikedas into the air as if he was made of straw.

Four charging steps he took, thudding across the dark lawn, lifting the duke higher and higher.

"You can't—" he screeched, then Brand flung him into space. Over the stone rail he tumbled. He seemed to hang there for a moment against the dusky sky, astonished, sword still in his hand. His screech turned to a coughing gurgle and he plummeted flailing out of sight.

"God," croaked Vialine.

There was a crunch far below as her uncle hit the ground. Then a long clatter.

Then silence.

DEBTS AND PROMISES

Thorn's eyes opened and it was dark.
The darkness beyond the Last Door?
She tried to move, and gasped at the pain.
Surely the one good thing about death was that the pain stopped?
She felt bandages across her face, remembered the jolt as Duke Mikedas's knife punched through her mouth, gave a rusty groan, her throat dry as old bones.
She squinted toward a slit of brightness, fumbled back blankets and slowly, ever so slowly, swung her legs down, everything bruised and battered and stabbed through with cramps. She moaned as she tried to put weight on her left leg, pain catching fire in her thigh, creeping up into her back, down through her knee.
She hopped and she shuffled, clutching at the wall. Gods, the pain in her leg, but when she winced at that, gods, the pain in her face, and when she whimpered at that, gods, the pain in her chest, up her throat, in her eyes as the tears flowed, and she made it to that strip of light, the light under a door, and pawed it open.
She shuffled forward with one hand up to shield her sore eyes, like staring into the blinding sun even though it was only a single candle. A thick candle with long, jewelled pins stuck into the wax. She saw crumbling plaster, fallen clothes casting long shadows across the boards, the dark folds on a rumpled bed—
She froze. A dark-skinned back, a bare back, lean muscles shifting. She heard a slow grunting, a woman's voice and a man's, together, and Thorn saw a pale arm slip up that back, a long, wasted arm and on the end was a shrivelled hand with just one stump of a finger.
“Uh,” she croaked, eyes wide, and the woman's head jerked around. Black hair across her face, and a scar through her top lip, and a notch of white tooth showing. Sumael, and with Father Yarvi underneath her.
“Uh.” Thorn couldn't go forward, couldn't go back, and she stared at the floor, burning with pain and embarrassment, trying to swallow but feeling as if she'd never have spit again in the aching hole of her mouth.
“You're awake.” Father Yarvi scrambled from the bed and into his trousers.
“Am I?” she wanted to ask, but it came out, “Uh.”
“Back to bed before you set that leg bleeding.” And the minister slipped his arm around her and started helping her to hop and shuffle back toward the dark doorway.
Thorn couldn't help glancing over her shoulder as they passed the threshold, saw Sumael stretched out naked as though nothing could be more ordinary, looking sideways at her through narrowed eyes.

“In pain?” asked Father Yarvi as he lowered her onto the bed.

“Uh,” she grunted.

Water sloshed into a cup, a spoon rattled as he mixed something in. “Drink this.”

It tasted beyond foul and her ripped mouth and her swollen tongue and her dry throat burned from it, but she fought it down, and at least she could make words afterward.

“I thought,” she croaked, as he swung her legs back into the bed and checked the bandages around her thigh, “you swore ... an oath.”

“I swore too many. I must break some to keep another.”

“Who decides which ones you keep?”

“I’ll keep my first one.” And he closed the fingers of his good hand and made a fist of it. “To be revenged upon the killers of my father.”

She was growing drowsy. “I thought ... you did that ... long ago.”

“On some of them. Not all.” Yarvi pulled the blankets over her. “Sleep, now, Thorn.”

Her eyes drifted closed.

“DON’T GET UP.”

“Your radiance—”

“For God’s sake: Vialine.” The empress had some scratches across her cheek, but no other sign of her brush with Death.

“I should—” Thorn winced as she tried to sit and Vialine put her hand on her shoulder, and gently but very firmly pushed her back onto the bed.

“Don’t get up. Consider that an imperial edict.” For once, Thorn decided not to fight. “Are you badly hurt?”

She thought about saying no, but the lie would hardly have been convincing. She shrugged, and even that was painful. “Father Yarvi says I’ll heal.”

The empress looked down as though she was the one in pain, her hand still on Thorn’s shoulder. “You will have scars.”

“They’re expected on a fighter.”

“You saved my life.”

“They would have killed me first.”

“Then you saved both our lives.”

“Brand played his part, I hear.”

“And I have thanked him. But I have not thanked you.” Vialine took a long breath. “I have dissolved the alliance with the High King. I have sent birds to Grandmother Wexen. I have let her know that, regardless of what gods we pray to, the enemy of Gettland is my enemy, the friend of Gettland is my friend.”

Thorn blinked. “You’re too generous.”

“I can afford to be, now. My uncle ruled an empire within the empire, but without him it has fallen like an arch without its keystone. I have taken your advice. To strike swiftly, and without mercy. Traitors are being weeded out of my council. Out of my guard.” There was a hardness in her face, and just then Thorn was glad she was on Vialine’s right side. “Some have fled the city, but we will hunt them down.”

“You will be a great empress,” croaked Thorn.

"If my uncle has taught me anything, it is that an empress is only as great as those around her."

"You have Sumael, and you—"

Vialine's hand squeezed her shoulder, and she looked down with that earnest, searching gaze.

"Would you stay?"

"Stay?"

"As my bodyguard, perhaps? Queens have them, do they not, in the North? What do you call them?"

"A Chosen Shield," whispered Thorn.

"As your father was. You have proved yourself more than qualified."

A Chosen Shield. And to the Empress of the South. To stand at the shoulder of the woman who ruled half the world. Thorn fumbled for the pouch around her neck, felt the old lumps inside, imagining her father's pride to hear of it. What songs might be sung of that in the smoky inns, and in the narrow houses, and in the high Godshall of Thorlby?

And at that thought a wave of homesickness surged over Thorn, so strong she nearly choked. "I have to go back. I miss the gray cliffs. I miss the gray sea. I miss the *cold*." She felt tears in her eyes, then, and blinked them away. "I miss my mother. And I swore an oath."

"Not all oaths are worth keeping."

"You keep an oath not for the oath but for yourself." Her father's words, whispered long ago beside the fire. "I wish I could split myself in half."

Vialine sucked at her teeth. "Half a bodyguard would be no good to me. But I knew what your answer would be. You are not one to be held, Thorn Bathu, even with a gilded chain. Perhaps one day you will come back of your own accord. Until then, I have a gift for you. I could only find one worthy of the service you have done me."

And she brought out something that cast pale light across her face, and struck a spark in her eyes, and stopped Thorn's breath in her throat. The elf-bangle that Skifr had dug from the depths of Stokom, where no man had dared tread since the Breaking of God. The gift the *South Wind* had carried all the long road down the Divine and the Denied. A thing too grand for an empress to wear.

"Me?" Thorn wriggled up the bed in an effort to get away from it. "No! No, no, no!"

"It is mine to give, well-earned and freely given."

"I can't take it—"

"One does not refuse the Empress of the South." Vialine's voice had iron in it, and she raised her chin and glared down her nose at Thorn with an authority that was not to be denied. "Which hand?"

Thorn mutely held out her left, and Vialine slipped the elf-bangle over it and folded the bracelet shut with a final sounding click, the light from its round window glowing brighter, shifting to blue-white, metal perfect as a cut jewel gleaming, and circles within circles slowly shifting beneath the glass. Thorn stared at it with a mixture of awe and horror. A relic beyond price. Beautiful beyond words. Sitting now, on her ridiculous bony wrist, with the bizarre magnificence of a diamond on a dung-heap.

Vialine smiled, and finally let go of her shoulder. "It looks well on you."

THE SHEARS CLICK-CLICKED OVER the left side of Thorn's scalp and the hair fluttered down onto her shoulder, onto her bandaged leg, onto the cobbles of the yard.

"Do you remember when I first clipped your head?" asked Skifr. "You howled like a wolf cub!"

Thorn picked up a tuft of hair and blew it from her fingers. "Seems you can get used to anything."

“With enough work.” Skifr tossed the shears aside and brushed the loose hair away. “With enough sweat, blood, and training.”

Thorn worked her tongue around the unfamiliar inside of her mouth, rough with the stitches, and leaned forward to spit pink. “Blood I can give you.” She grimaced as she stretched her leg out, the elf-bangle flaring angry purple with her pain. “But training might be difficult right now.”

Skifr sat, one arm about Thorn’s shoulders, rubbing her hand over her own stubbled hair. “We have trained for the last time, my dove.”

“What?”

“I have business I must attend to. I have ignored my own sons, and daughters, and grandsons, and granddaughters too long. And only the most wretched of fools would dare now deny that I have done what Father Yarvi asked of me, and made you deadly. Or helped you make yourself deadly, at least.”

Thorn stared at Skifr, an empty feeling in her stomach. “You’re leaving?”

“Nothing lasts forever. But that means I can tell you things I could not tell you before.” Skifr folded her in a tight, strange-smelling hug. “I have had twenty-two pupils in all, and never been more proud of one than I am of you. None worked so hard. None learned so fast. None had such courage.” She leaned back, holding Thorn at arm’s length. “You have proved yourself strong, inside and out. A loyal companion. A fearsome fighter. You have earned the respect of your friends and the fear of your enemies. You have demanded it. You have *commanded* it.”

“But ...” muttered Thorn, rocked far more by compliments than blows, “I’ve still got so much to learn ...”

“A fighter is never done learning. But the best lessons one teaches oneself. It is time for you to become the master.” And Skifr held out her ax, letters in five languages etched on the bearded blade. “This is for you.”

Thorn had dreamed of owning a weapon like that. A thing fit for a hero’s song. Now she took it numbly, and laid it on her lap, and looked down at the bright blade. “To the fighter, everything must be a weapon,” she muttered. “What will I do without you?”

Skifr leaned close, her eyes bright, and gripped her tight. “Anything! Everything! I am no mean prophet and I foresee great things for you!” Her voice rose higher and higher, louder and louder, and she pointed one clawing finger toward the sky. “We will meet again, Thorn Bathu, on the other side of the Last Door, if not on this one, and I will thrill to the tales of your high deeds, and swell with pride that I played my own small part in them!”

“Damn right you will,” said Thorn, sniffing back her tears. She had held this strange woman in contempt. She had hated her, and feared her, and cursed her name all down the Divine and the Denied. And now she loved her like a mother.

“Be well, my dove. Even more, be ready.” Skifr’s hand darted out but Thorn caught it by the wrist before it could slap her and held it trembling between them.

Skifr smiled wide. “And always strike first.”

FATHER YARVI SMILED AS he peeled away the bandages. “Good. Very good.” He pressed gently at the sore flesh of her cheeks with his fingertips. “You are healing well. Walking already.”

“Lurching like a drunk already.”

“You are lucky, Thorn. You are very lucky.”

“Doubtless. Not every girl gets to be stabbed through the face.”

“And by a duke of royal blood too!”

“The gods have smiled on me, all right.”

“It could have been through your eye. It could have been through your neck.” He started to bathe her face with a flannel that smelled of bitter herbs. “On the whole I would prefer to be scarred than dead, wouldn’t you?”

Thorn pushed her tongue into the salty hole her missing tooth had left. It was hard to think of herself as lucky just then. “How are the scars? Tell me the truth.”

“They will take time to heal, but I think they will heal well. A star on the left and an arrow on the right. There must be some significance in that. Skifr might have told us, she had an eye for portents—”

Thorn did not need Skifr to see into her face’s future. “I’ll be monstrous, won’t I?”

“I know of people with uglier deformities.” And Yarvi put his withered hand under her nose and let the one finger flop back and forth. “Next time, avoid the blade.”

She snorted. “Easily said. Have you ever fought seven men?”

Drops trickled into the steaming bowl as he wrung out the flannel, the water turning a little pink. “I could never beat one.”

“I saw you win a fight once.”

He paused. “Did you indeed?”

“When you were king, I saw you fight Keimdal in the square.” He stared at her for a moment, caught for once off-balance. “And when you lost, you asked to fight him again, and sent your mother’s Chosen Shield in your place. And Hurik ground Keimdal’s face into the sand on your behalf.”

“A warrior fights,” murmured Yarvi. “A king commands.”

“So does a minister.”

He started to smear something on her face that made the stitches sting. “I remember you now. A dark-haired girl, watching.”

“Even then you were a deep-cunning man.”

“I have had to be.”

“Your trip to the First of Cities has turned out better than anyone could’ve hoped.”

“Thanks to you.” He unwound a length of bandage. “You have done what no diplomat could achieve, and made an ally of the Empire of the South. Almost enough to make me glad I didn’t crush you with rocks. And you have your reward.” He tapped at the elf-bangle, its faint light showing through her sleeve.

“I’d give it back if I could open it.”

“Skifr says it cannot be opened. But you should wear it proudly. You have earned it, and more besides. I may not be my mother’s son any longer, but I still have her blood. I remember my debts, Thorn. Just as you remember yours.”

“I’ve had a lot of time for remembering, the last few days. I’ve been remembering Throvenland.”

“Another alliance that no one could have hoped for.”

“You have a habit of coming away with them. I’ve been thinking about the man who poisoned the water.”

“The man you killed?”

Thorn fixed his pale blue eye with hers. “Was he your man?”

Father Yarvi’s face showed no surprise, no confirmation and no denial. He wound the bandages around her head as if she had not spoken.

“A deep-cunning man,” she went on, “in need of allies, knowing King Fynn’s ready temper, might have staged such a thing.”

He pushed a pin gently through the bandages to hold them firm. “And a hot-headed girl, a thorn in the world’s arse, not knowing anything, might have got herself caught up in the gears of it.”

“It could happen.”

“You are not without some cunning of your own.” Father Yarvi put the bandages and the knife carefully away in his bag. “But you must know a deep-cunning man would never lay bare his schemes. Not even to his friends.” He patted her on the shoulder, and stood. “Keep your lies as carefully as your winter grain, my old teacher used to tell me. Rest, now.”

“Father Yarvi?” He turned back, a black shape in the bright outline of the door. “If I hadn’t killed that poisoner ... who would have drunk the water?”

A silence, then, and with the light behind him she could not see his face. “Some questions are best not asked, Thorn. And certainly best not answered.”

“RULF’S BEEN GETTING THE CREW back together.” Brand pushed some invisible dust around with the toe of his boot. “Few new men but mostly the same old faces. Koll can’t wait to get started carving the other side of the mast, he says. And Dosduvoi’s thinking of preaching the word of the One God up north. Fror’s with us too.”

Thorn touched a finger to her bandages. “Reckon folk’ll be asking me how I got the scars, now, eh?”

“Hero’s marks,” said Brand, scratching at the ones that snaked up his own forearms. “Marks of a great deed.”

“And it’s hardly like my looks were ever my strongest point, is it?” Another awkward silence. “Father Yarvi says you killed Duke Mikedas.”

Brand winced as though the memory was far from pleasant. “The ground killed him. I just made the introduction.”

“You don’t sound proud of it.”

“No. Not sure I’m touched by Mother War like you are. Don’t have your ...”

“Fury?”

“I was going to say courage. Anger I’ve got plenty of. Just wish I didn’t.”

“Father Yarvi says you carried me back. He says you saved my life.”

“Just what an oarmate does.”

“Thanks for doing it, even so.”

He stared at the ground, chewing at his lip, and finally looked up at her. “I’m sorry. For whatever I did. For ...” He had that helpless look of his again, but rather than making her want to hold him, it made her want to hit him. “I’m sorry.”

“Not your fault,” she grated out. “Just the way things are.”

“I wish they were a different way.”

“So do I.” She was too tired, too sore, too hurting inside and out to try and make it pretty. “Not as if you can make yourself like someone, is it?”

“Guess not,” he said in a meek little voice that made her want to hit him even more. “Been through a lot together, you and me. Hope we can be friends, still.”

She made her voice cold. Cold and sharp as a drawn blade. It was that or she might set to crying

and she wouldn't do it. "Don't think that'll work for me, Brand. Don't see how this just goes back the way it was."

His mouth gave a sorry twist at that. As if he was the one hurt. Guilt, more than likely, and she hoped it stung. Hoped it stung half as much as she did. "Up to you." He turned his back on her. "I'll be there. If you need me."

The door shut, and she bared her teeth at it, and that made her face ache, and she felt tears in her eyes, and dashed them hard away. Wasn't fair. Wasn't fair at all, but she guessed love's even less fair than the battlefield.

To fool herself once was once too often. She had to rip those hopes up before they could take root. She had to kill the seeds. As soon as she could she limped off to find Rulf and asked for a different oar to pull on the way back home.

Owed her that much, didn't they?

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

“So you’re leaving?” asked Sumael, her heavy footsteps echoing down the corridor.

“Within the week,” said Father Yarvi. “We may not make it home before the Divine freezes as it is. You could always come with us. Don’t pretend you don’t miss the northern snows.”

She laughed. “Oh, every balmy day here I wish I was frozen near to death again. You could always stay with us. Don’t you enjoy the southern sun?”

“I am a little too pale. I burn before I brown.” He gave a ragged sigh. “And I have an oath to keep.” Her smile faded. “I didn’t think you took your oaths that seriously.”

“This one I do,” said Father Yarvi.

“Will you break the world to keep it?”

“I hope it won’t come to that.”

Sumael snorted. “You know how it is, with hopes.”

“I do,” murmured Brand. He got the feeling there were two conversations going on. One in plain sight and one hidden. But he’d never been much good with conversations, or with things he couldn’t see, so he said no more.

Sumael swung a gate open with a squealing of rusted hinges, rough steps dropping into darkness. “She’s down there.”

The vaulted passage at the bottom was caked with mold, something scurrying away from the flickering light of Brand’s torch.

“Just follow my lead,” said Yarvi.

Brand gave a weary nod. “What else would I do?”

They stopped before a barred opening. Brand saw the glimmer of eyes in the shadows and stepped close, raising his torch.

Mother Scaer, once minister of Vansterland, then emissary of Grandmother Wexen, now sat against a wall of mossy rock with her shaved head on one side, her tattooed forearms on her knees and her long hands dangling. She had five elf-bangles stacked on one wrist, gold and glass and polished metal glinting. Brand would’ve been awestruck at the sight of them once but now they seemed petty, gaudy, broken things beside the one Thorn wore.

“Ah, Father Yarvi!” Scaer stretched a long leg toward them, chains rattling from an iron band about her bare ankle. “Have you come to gloat?”

“Perhaps a little. Can you blame me? You did conspire to murder the Empress Vialine, after all.”

Mother Scaer gave a hiss. “I had no part of that. Grandmother Wexen sent me here to stop that puffed-up bladder of arrogance Duke Mikedas from doing anything foolish.”

“How did that work out?” asked Yarvi.

Mother Scaer held up a length of chain to show them, and let it drop in her lap. “You should know better than anyone, a good minister gives the best advice they can, but in the end the ruler does what the ruler does. Did you bring this one to frighten me?” Mother Scaer’s blue eyes fell on Brand, and even through the bars he felt a chill. “He is not frightening.”

“On the contrary, I brought him to make you feel comfortable. My frightening one picked up a scratch killing seven men when she saved the empress and ruined all your plans.” Brand didn’t point out that he’d killed two of those men. He took no pride in it, and he was getting the feeling that wasn’t the story everyone wanted to tell. “But she’s healing nicely. Perhaps she can frighten you later.”

Mother Scaer looked away. “We both know there is no later for me. I should have killed you at Amwend.”

“You wanted to leave my guts for the crows, I remember. But Grom-gil-Gorm said, why kill what you can sell?”

“His first mistake. He made a second when he trusted you.”

“Well, like King Uthil, Gorm is a warrior, and warriors tend to prefer action to thought. That is why they need ministers. That is why he needs your advice so very badly. That, I suspect, is why Grandmother Wexen was so keen to prize you from his side.”

“He will get no help from me now,” said Mother Scaer. “You, and Grandmother Wexen, and Duke Mikedas between you have made sure of that.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” said Yarvi. “I am heading back up the Divine within the week. Back to the Shattered Sea.” He pushed out his lips and tapped at them with his forefinger. “To send a passenger on to Vulsgard would not be too much trouble, eh, Brand?”

“Not too much,” said Brand.

Yarvi raised his brows as though the idea had just occurred. “Perhaps we could find room for Mother Scaer?”

“We’ve lost one mysterious bald woman.” Brand shrugged. “We’ve space for another.”

Gorm’s minister frowned up at them. Interested, but not wanting to seem interested. “Don’t toy with me, boy.”

“Never been much good at toying,” said Brand. “I had a short childhood.”

Mother Scaer slowly unfolded her long limbs and stood, bare feet flapping on damp stone as she walked to the bars until the chains were taut, then leaned a little farther, shadows shifting in the hollows of her gaunt face.

“Are you offering me my life, Father Yarvi?”

“I find it in my hands, and have no better use for it.”

“Huh.” Mother Scaer raised her brows very high. “What tasty bait. And no hook in it, I suppose?”

Yarvi leaned closer to the bars himself, so the two minister’s faces were no more than a foot’s length apart. “I want allies.”

“Against the High King? What allies could I bring you?”

“There is a Vansterman on our crew. A good man. Strong at the oar. Strong in the wall. Would you say so, Brand?”

“Strong at the oar.” Brand remembered Fror bellowing out the *Song of Bail* on that hill above the Denied. “Strong in the wall.”

“Seeing him fight beside men of Gettland made me realize again how much alike we are,” said Yarvi. “We pray to the same gods under the same skies. We sing the same songs in the same tongue.”

And we both struggle under the ever-weightier yoke of the High King.”

Mother Scaer’s lip curled. “And you would free Vansterland from her bondage, would you?”

“Why not? If at the same time I can free Gettland from hers. I did not enjoy wearing a galley captain’s thrall-collar. I enjoy being slave to some drooling old fool in Skekenhouse no more.”

“An alliance between Gettland and Vansterland?” Brand grimly shook his head. “We’ve been fighting each other since before there was a High King. Since before there was a Gettland. Madness, surely.”

Yarvi turned to look at him, a warning in his eye. “The line between madness and deep-cunning has ever been a fine one.”

“The boy is right.” Mother Scaer pushed her arms through the bars and let them dangle. “There are ancient feuds between us, and deep hatreds—”

“There are petty squabbles between us, and shallow ignorance. Leave the wrathful words to the warriors, Mother Scaer, you and I know better. Grandmother Wexen is our true enemy. She is the one who tore you from your place to do her slave-work. She cares nothing for Vansterland, or Gettland, or any of us. She cares only for her own power.”

Mother Scaer let her head fall on one side, blue eyes narrowed. “You will never win. She is too strong.”

“Duke Mikedas was too strong, and both his power and his skull lie in ruins.”

They narrowed further. “King Uthil will never agree.”

“Let me worry about King Uthil.”

Further still. “Grom-gil-Gorm will never agree.”

“Do not underestimate yourself, Mother Scaer, I do not doubt your own powers of persuasion are formidable.”

Blue slits, now. “Less so than yours, I think, Father Yarvi.” Of a sudden she opened her eyes wide, and pushed her hand out through the bars so fast that Brand flinched back and nearly dropped his torch. “I accept your offer.”

Father Yarvi took her hand and, stronger than she looked, she pulled him close by it. “You understand I can promise nothing.”

“I am less interested in promises than I used to be. The way to bend someone to your will is to offer them what they want, not to make them swear an oath.” Yarvi twisted his hand free. “It will be cold on the Divine, as the year grows late. I’d pack something warm.”

As they walked off into the darkness, Father Yarvi put his hand on Brand’s shoulder. “You did well.”

“I scarcely said a thing.”

“No. But the wise speaker learns first when to stay silent. You’d be surprised how many clever people never take the lesson.”

Sumael was waiting for them at the gate. “Did you get what you wanted?”

Yarvi stopped in front of her. “Everything I wanted and far more than I deserved. But now it seems I must leave it behind.”

“Fate can be cruel.”

“It usually is.”

“You could stay.”

“You could come.”

“But in the end we must all be what we are. I am counselor to an empress.”

“I am minister to a king. We both have our burdens.”

Sumael smiled. “And when you’ve a load to lift ...”

“You’re better lifting than weeping.”

“I will miss you, Yarvi.”

“It will be as if I left the best piece of myself behind.”

They looked at each other for a moment longer, then Sumael dragged in a sharp breath. “Good luck on the journey.” And she strode away, shoulders back.

Father Yarvi’s face twisted and he leaned against the gate as if he might fall. Brand was on the point of offering his hand, but the wise speaker learns first when to stay silent. Soon enough the minister drew himself up without help.

“Gather the crew, Brand,” he said. “We’ve a long way to go.”

IV.

HIGH DEEDS

FAREWELLS

Thorn gently slid her oar from its port and gave the sweat-polished wood a fond final stroke with her fingertips.

“Fare you well, my friend.” The oar was all indifference, though, so with a parting sigh she hefted her sea-chest rattling onto the wharf and sprang up after it.

Mother Sun smiled down on Thorlby from a clear sky, and Thorn closed her eyes and tipped her face back, smiling as the salt breeze kissed her scarred cheeks.

“Now that’s what weather should be,” she whispered, remembering the choking heat of the First of Cities.

“Look at you.” Rulf paused in tying off the prow-rope to shake his balding head in wonder. “Hard to believe how you’ve grown since you first sat at my back oar. And not just in height.”

“From girl to woman,” said Father Yarvi, clambering from the *South Wind*.

“From woman to hero,” said Dosduvoi, catching Thorn in a crushing hug. “Remember that crew of Throvenmen singing a song about you on the Divine? The she-devil who killed ten warriors and saved the Empress of the South! A woman who breathes fire and looks lightning!”

“Snake for a tail, wasn’t it?” grunted Fror, winking his smaller eye at her.

“All that time spent staring at your arse,” mused Koll, “and I never noticed the tail—ow!” As his mother clipped him around the head.

Dosduvoi was still chuckling over the Throvenmen. “Their faces when they realized you were sitting right in front of them!”

“And then they begged to fight you.” Rulf laughed with him. “Bloody fools.”

“We warned ’em,” grunted Fror. “What did you say, Safrif?”

“She might not breathe fire, but you’ll get burned even so.”

“And she kicked their white arses one after another and dumped their captain in the river!” shouted Koll, springing up onto the ship’s rail and balancing there with arms spread wide.

“Lucky he didn’t drown with all that ice,” said Rulf.

In spite of the warmth, Thorn shivered at the memory. “Gods, but it was cold up there on the Divine.”

The ice had come early, crackling against the keel, and just a week north of the tall hauls it had locked the river tight. So they’d dragged the *South Wind* over and made a hall of her again, and lived there huddled like a winter flock for two freezing months.

Thorn still trained as hard as if she could hear Skifr’s voice. Harder, maybe. She fought Dosduvoi and Fror and Koll and Rulf, but though she saw him watching, she never asked for Brand.

She still woke when Skifr would’ve woken her. Earlier, maybe. She’d look down in the chill darkness through the smoke of her breath and see him lying, chest slowly shifting, and wish she could drop down beside him in the warmth the way she used to. Instead she’d force herself out into the

bitter chill, teeth clenched against the aching in her leg as she ran across a white desert, the elf-bangle glowing chill white at her wrist, the streak of the crew's campfire the one feature in the great white sky.

She had what she'd always wanted. Whatever Hunnan and his like might say she had proved herself a warrior, with a favored place on a minister's crew and songs sung of her high deeds. She had sent a dozen men through the Last Door. She had won a prize beyond price from the most powerful woman in the world. And here was the harvest.

A thousand miles of lonely nothing.

Thorn had always been happiest in her own company. Now she was as sick of it as everyone else was. So she stood on the docks of Thorlby and hugged Safrit tight, and dragged Koll down from the rail and scrubbed his wild hair while he squirmed in embarrassment, then caught Rulf and kissed him on his balding pate, and seized hold of Dosduvoi and Fror and hauled them into a struggling, sour-smelling embrace. A frowning giant and a scarred Vansterman, foul as dung and frightening as wolves when she met them, grown close to her as brothers.

"Gods damn it but I'll miss you horrible bastards."

"Who knows?" said Mother Scaer, still stretched out among their supplies where she had spent most of the homeward voyage. "Our paths may cross again before too long."

"Let's hope not," Thorn muttered under her breath, looked over those familiar faces, and gave it one last try. "How'd you get the scar, Fror?"

The Vansterman opened his mouth as if to toss out one of his jokes. He always had one ready, after all. Then his eyes flickered to her scarred cheeks and he stopped short, thinking. He took a long breath, and looked her straight in the eye.

"I was twelve years old. The Gettlanders came before dawn. They took most of the villagers for slaves. My mother fought and they killed her. I tried to run, and their leader cut me with his sword. Left me for dead with nothing but this scar."

There was the truth, then, and it was ugly enough. But there was something else in the way Fror looked at her. Something that made the hairs stand on Thorn's neck. Her voice cracked a little when she asked the question. "Who was their leader?"

"They called him Headland."

Thorn stared down at the sword she wore. The sword that had been her father's. "This sword, then?"

"The gods cook strange recipes."

"But you sailed with Gettlanders! You fought beside me. Even though you knew I was his daughter?"

"And I'm glad I did." Fror shrugged. "Vengeance only walks a circle. From blood, back to blood. Death waits for us all. You can follow your path to her bent under a burden of rage. I did, for many years. You can let it poison you." He took a long breath, and let it sigh away. "Or you can let it go. Be well, Thorn Bathu."

"You too," she muttered, hardly knowing what to say. Hardly knowing what to think.

She took a last look at the *South Wind*, tame now, at the wharf, the paint flaking on the white doves mounted at prow and stern. That ship had been her home for a year. Her best friend and her worst enemy, every plank and rivet familiar. Seemed a different ship to the one they set out in. Weathered and worn, scarred and seasoned. A little bit like Thorn. She gave it a final, respectful nod, jerked her

sea-chest up onto her shoulder, turned—

Brand stood behind her, close enough that she could almost smell his breath, sleeves rolled up to show the snaking scars about his forearms, stronger and quieter and better-looking than ever.

“Reckon I’ll be seeing you, then,” he said.

His eyes were fixed on her, gleaming behind those strands of hair across his face. It seemed she’d spent most of the last six months trying not to think about him, which was every bit as bad as thinking about him but with the added frustration of failing not to. Hard to forget someone when they’re three oars in front of you. His shoulder moving with the stroke. His elbow at his oar. A sliver of his face as he looked back.

“Aye,” she muttered, putting her eyes to the ground. “I reckon.” And she stepped around him, and down the bouncing planks of the wharf, and away.

Maybe it was hard, to leave it at that after all they had been through. Maybe it was cowardly. But she had to put him behind her, and leave her disappointment and her shame and her foolishness along with him. When something has to be done, there’s nothing to be gained by putting it off but pain.

Damn, but she was starting to sound like Skifr.

That thought rather pleased her.

Thorlby was changed. Everything so much smaller than she remembered. Grayer. Emptier. The wharves were nowhere near so crowded as they used to be, a sorry few fisherman working at their squirming catches, scales flashing silver. Warriors stood guard on the gate, but young ones, which made Thorn wonder what the rest were busy at. She knew one from the training square, his eyes going wide as ale cups as she strutted past.

“Is that her?” she heard someone mutter.

“Thorn Bathu,” a woman whispered, voice hushed as if she spoke a magic spell.

“The one they’re singing of?”

Her legend had marched ahead of her, would you believe? So Thorn put her shoulders back, and her bravest face on, and she let her left arm swing, the elf-bangle shining. Shining in the sunlight, shining with its own light.

Up the Street of Anvils she went, and the customers turned to stare, and the hammering ceased as the smiths looked out, and Thorn whistled a song as she walked. The song those Throvenmen had sung, about a she-devil who saved the Empress of the South.

Why not? Earned it, hadn’t she?

Up the steep lanes she’d walked down with Father Yarvi when he led her from the citadel’s dungeons and off to Skekenhouse, to Kalyiv, to the First of Cities. A hundred years ago it seemed, as she turned down a narrow way where every stone was familiar.

She heard muttering behind and saw she’d picked up a little gaggle of children, peering awestruck from around the corner. Just like the ones that had followed her father when he was in Thorlby. Just as he used to she gave them a cheery wave. Then just as he used to she bared her teeth and hissed, scattered them screaming.

Skifr always said that history turns in circles.

The narrow house, the step worn in the middle, the door her father badly carved, all the same, yet somehow they made her nervous. Her heart was hammering as she reached up to shove the door wide, but at the last moment she bunched her fist and knocked instead. She stood waiting, awkward as a beggar even though this was her home, fingers clutched tight around the pouch at her neck, thinking

about what Fror had told her.

Maybe her father hadn't been quite the hero she always reckoned him. Maybe her mother wasn't quite the villain either. Maybe no one's all one or all the other.

It was her mother who answered. Strange, to see her looking just the same after all that had happened. Just another hair or two turned gray, and for a moment Thorn felt like a child again, clamping a brave face over her anger and her fear.

"Mother ... " She tried to tame the tangled side of her head, plucking at the gold and silver rings bound up in her matted hair. A fool's effort, as she couldn't have combed that thicket with an ax. She wondered what her mother's tongue would stab at first: the madness of her hair or the ugliness of her scars or the raggedness of her clothes, or the—

"Hild!" Her face lit up with joy and she caught Thorn in her arms and held her so tight she made her gasp. Then she jerked her out to arm's length and looked her up and down, beaming, then clutched her tight again. "I'm sorry, Thorn—"

"You can call me Hild. If you like." Thorn snorted out a laugh. "It's good to hear you say it."

"You never used to like it."

"There's a lot changed this past year."

"Here too. War with the Vanstermen, and the king ill, and Grandmother Wexen keeping ships from the harbor ... but there'll be time for that later."

"Aye." Thorn slowly pushed the door shut and leaned back against it. It was only then she realized how tired she was. So tired she nearly slid down onto her arse right there in the hall.

"You were expected back weeks ago. I was starting to worry. Well, I started worrying the day you left—"

"We got caught in the ice."

"I should've known it would take more than half the world to keep my daughter away. You've grown. Gods, how you've grown!"

"You're not going to say anything about my hair?"

Her mother reached out, and tidied a loose worm of it behind Thorn's ear, touched her scarred cheek gently with her fingertips. "All I care about is that you're alive. I've heard some wild stories about—Father Peace, what's that?" Her mother caught Thorn's wrist and lifted it, the light from the elf-bangle falling across her face, eyes glittering with golden reflections as she stared down.

"That ..." muttered Thorn, "is a long story."

GREETINGS

Brand said he'd help them unload.

Maybe because that was the good thing to do. Maybe because he couldn't bear to leave the crew quite yet. Maybe because he was scared to see Rin. Scared she'd come to harm while he was gone. Scared she might blame him for it.

So he said as long as he didn't have to lift the ship he'd help them unload it, and told himself it was the good thing to do. There aren't many good things don't have a splinter of selfishness in them somewhere, after all.

And when the unloading was done and half the crew already wandered their own ways he hugged Fror, and Dosduvoi, and Rulf, and they laughed over things Odda had said on the way down the Divine. Laughed as Mother Sun sank toward the hills behind Thorlby, shadows gathering in the carvings that swirled over the whole mast from its root to its top.

"You did one hell of a job on that mast, Koll," said Brand, staring up at it.

"It's the tale of our voyage." Koll had changed a deal since they set out, twitchy-quick as ever but deeper in the voice, stronger in the face, surer in the hands as he slid them gently over the carved trees, and rivers, and ships, and figures all wonderfully woven into one another. "Thorlby's here at the base, the Divine and Denied flow up this side and down the other, the First of Cities at the mast-head. Here we cross the Shattered Sea. There Brand lifts the ship. There we meet Blue Jenner."

"Clever boy, isn't he?" said Safrit, hugging him tight. "Just as well you didn't fall off the bloody yard and smash your brains out."

"Would've been a loss," murmured Brand, gazing up at the mast in more wonder than ever.

Koll pointed out more figures. "Skifr sends Death across the plain. Prince Varoslaf chains the Denied. Thorn fights seven men. Father Yarvi seals his deal with the empress, and ..." He leaned close, made a few more cuts to a kneeling figure at the bottom with his worn-down knife and blew the chippings away. "Here's me, now, finishing it off." And he stepped back, grinning. "Done."

"It's master's work," said Father Yarvi, running his shrivelled hand over the carvings. "I've a mind to have it mounted in the yard of the citadel, so every Gettlander can see the high deeds done on their behalf, and the high deed of carving it not least among them."

The smiles faded then and left them dewy-eyed, because they all saw the voyage was over, and their little family breaking up. Those whose paths had twined so tight together into one great journey would each be following their own road now, scattered like leaves on a gale to who knew what distant ports, and it was in the hands of the fickle gods whether those paths would ever cross again.

"Bad luck," murmured Dosduvoi, slowly shaking his head. "You find friends and they wander from your life again. Bad, bad luck—"

"Oh, stop prating on your luck you huge fool!" snapped Safrit. "My husband had the poor luck to be stolen by slavers but he never stopped struggling to return to me, never gave up hope, died fighting to

the last for his oarmates.”

“That he did,” said Rulf.

“Saved my life,” said Father Yarvi.

“So you could save mine and my son’s.” Safrit gave Dosduvoi’s arm a shove which made the silver rings on his wrist rattle. “Look at all you have! Your strength, and your health, and your wealth, and friends who maybe one day wander back into your life!”

“Who knows who you’ll pass on this crooked path to the Last Door?” murmured Rulf, rubbing thoughtfully at his beard.

“That’s good luck, damn it, not bad!” said Safrit. “Give praise to whatever god you fancy for every day you live.”

“I never thought of it like that before,” said Dosduvoi, forehead creased in thought. “I’ll endeavor to think on my blessings.” He carefully rearranged the ring-money on his great wrist. “Just as soon as I’ve had a little round of dice. Or two.” And he headed off toward the town.

“Some men never bloody learn,” muttered Safrit, staring after him with hands on hips.

“None of ’em do,” said Rulf.

Brand held out his hand to him. “I’ll miss you.”

“And I you,” said the helmsman, clasping him by the arm. “You’re strong at the oar, and strong at the wall, and strong there too.” And he thumped Brand on his chest, and leaned close. “Stand in the light, lad, eh?”

“I’ll miss all of you.” Brand looked toward Thorlby, the way that Thorn had gone, and had to swallow the lump in his throat. To walk off with scarcely a word that way, as if he was nothing and nobody. That hurt.

“Don’t worry.” Safrit put her hand on his shoulder and gave it a squeeze. “There are plenty of other girls about.”

“Not many like her.”

“That’s a bad thing?” asked Mother Scaer. “I know of a dozen back in Vulsgard who’d tear each other’s eyes out for a lad like you.”

“That’s a good thing?” asked Brand. “On balance, I’d prefer a wife with eyes.”

Mother Scaer narrowed hers, which made him more nervous still. “That’s why you pick the winner.”

“Always sensible,” said Father Yarvi. “It is time you left us, Mother Scaer.” He frowned toward the warriors standing at the city’s gate. “Vanstermen are less popular even than usual in Thorlby, I think.”

She growled in her throat. “The Mother of Crows dances on the border once again.”

“Then it is our task as ministers to speak for the Father of Doves, and make of the fist an open hand.”

“This alliance you plan.” Scaer scrubbed unhappily at her shaved head. “To sponge away a thousand years of blood is no small deed.”

“But one that will be worth singing of.”

“Men prefer to sing of the making of wounds, fools that they are.” Her eyes were blue slits as she stared into Yarvi’s. “And I fear you stitch one wound so you can carve a deeper. But I gave my word, and will do what I can.”

“What else can any of us do?” The elf-bangles rattled on Mother Scaer’s long arm as Yarvi clasped

her hand in farewell. Then his eyes moved to Brand, cool and level. “My thanks for all your help, Brand.”

“Just doing what you paid me for.”

“More than that, I think.”

“Just trying to do good, then, maybe.”

“The time may come when I need a man who is not so concerned about the greater good, but just the good. Perhaps I can call on you?”

“It’d be my honor, Father Yarvi. I owe you for this. For giving me a place.”

“No, Brand, I owe you.” The minister smiled. “And I hope soon enough to pay.”

BRAND HEADED ACROSS THE hillside, threading between the tents and shacks and ill-made hovels sprouted up outside the gates like mushrooms after the rains. Many more than there used to be. There was war with the Vanstermen, and folk had fled homes near the border to huddle against Thorlby’s walls.

Lamplight gleamed through chinks in wattle, voices drifting into the evening, a fragment of a sad song echoing from somewhere. He passed a great bonfire, pinched faces of the very old and very young lit by whirling sparks. The air smelled strong of smoke and dung and unwashed bodies. The sour stink of his childhood, but it smelled sweet to him then. He knew this wouldn’t be his home much longer.

As he walked he felt the pouch shifting underneath his shirt. Heavy it was, now. Red gold from Prince Varoslaf and yellow gold from the Empress Vialine and good silver with the face of Queen Laithlin stamped upon it. Enough for a fine house in the shadow of the citadel. Enough that Rin would never want for anything again. He was smiling as he shoved the door of their shack rattling open.

“Rin, I’m—”

He found himself staring at a clutch of strangers. A man, a woman, and how many children? Five? Six? All crushed tight about the firepit where he used to warm his aching feet and no sign of Rin among them.

“Who the hell are you?” Fear clutched at him, and he put his hand on his dagger.

“It’s all right!” The man held up his palms. “You’re Brand?”

“Damn right I am. Where’s my sister?”

“You don’t know?”

“If I knew would I be asking? Where’s Rin?”

IT WAS A FINE HOUSE in the shadow of the citadel.

A rich woman’s house of good cut stone with a full second floor and a dragon’s head carved into its roof beam. A homely house with welcoming firelight spilling around its shutters and into the evening. A handsome house with a stream gurgling through a steep channel beside it and under a narrow bridge. A well-kept house with a door new-painted green, and hanging over the door a shingle in the shape of a sword, swinging gently with the breeze.

“Here?” Brand had labored up the steep lanes with crates and barrels to the homes of the wealthy often enough, and he knew the street. But he’d never been to this house, had no notion why his sister might be inside.

“Here,” answered the man, and gave the door a beating with his knuckles.

Brand stood there wondering what sort of pose to strike, and was caught by surprise halfway between two when the door jerked open.

Rin was changed. Even more than he was, maybe. A woman grown, she seemed now, taller, and her face leaner, dark hair cut short. She wore a fine tunic, clever stitching about the collar, like a wealthy merchant might.

“You all right, Hale?” she asked.

“Better,” said the man. “We had a visitor.” And he stepped out of the way so the light fell across Brand’s face.

“Rin ...” he croaked, hardly knowing what to say, “I’m—”

“You’re back!” And she flung her arms around him almost hard enough to knock him over, and squeezed him almost hard enough to make him sick. “You just going to stand on the step and stare?” And she bundled him through the doorway. “Give my love to your children!” she shouted after Hale.

“Be glad to!”

Then she kicked the door shut and dragged Brand’s sea-chest from his shoulder. As she set it on the tiled floor a chain hung down, a silver chain with a silver key gleaming on it.

“Whose key’s that?” he muttered.

“Did you think I’d get married while you were gone? It’s my own key to my own locks. You hungry? You thirsty? I’ve got—”

“Whose house is this, Rin?”

She grinned at him. “It’s yours. It’s mine. It’s ours.”

“This?” Brand stared at her. “But ... how did—”

“I told you I’d make a sword.”

Brand’s eyes went wide. “Must’ve been a blade for the songs.”

“King Uthil thought so.”

Brand’s eyes went wider still. “King Uthil?”

“I found a new way to smelt the steel. A hotter way. The first blade cracked when we quenched it, but the second held. Gaden said we had to give it to the king. And the king stood up in the Godshall and said steel was the answer, and this was the best steel he ever saw. He’s carrying it now, I hear.” She shrugged, as if King Uthil’s patronage was no great honor. “After that, everyone wanted me to make them a sword. Gaden said she couldn’t keep me. She said I should be the master and she the apprentice.” Rin shrugged. “Blessed by She who Strikes the Anvil, like we used to say.”

“Gods,” whispered Brand. “I was going to change your life. You did it by yourself.”

“You gave me the chance.” Rin took his wrist, frowning down at the scars there. “What happened?”

“Nothing. Rope slipped going over the tall hauls.”

“Reckon there’s more to that story.”

“I’ve got better ones.”

Rin’s lip wrinkled. “Long as they haven’t got Thorn Bathu in ’em.”

“She saved the Empress of the South from her uncle, Rin! The Empress! Of the South.”

“That one I’ve heard already. They’re singing it all over town. Something about her beating a dozen men alone. Then it was fifteen. Might’ve even been twenty last time I heard it. And she threw some duke off a roof and routed a horde of Horse People and won an elf-relic and lifted a ship besides, I hear. Lifted a ship!” And she snorted again.

Brand raised his brows. “I reckon songs have a habit of outrunning the truth.”

“You can tell me the truth of it later.” Rin took down the lamp and drew him through another doorway, stairs going up into the shadows. “Come and see your room.”

“I’ve got a room?” muttered Brand, eyes going wider than ever. How often had he dreamed of that? When they hadn’t a roof over their heads, or food to eat, or a friend in the world besides each other?

She put her arm around his shoulders and it felt like home. “You’ve got a room.”

WRONG IDEAS

“Reckon I need a new sword.”

Thorn sighed as she laid her father’s blade gently on the table, the light of the forge catching the many scratches, glinting on the deep nicks. It was worn almost crooked from years of polishing, the binding scuffed to greasy shreds, the cheap iron pommel rattling loose.

The apprentice gave Thorn’s sword one quick glance and Thorn herself not even that many. “Reckon you’re right.” She wore a leather vest scattered with burns, gloves to her elbow, arms and shoulders bare and beaded with sweat from the heat, hard muscles twitching as she turned a length of metal in the glowing coals.

“It’s a good sword.” Thorn ran her fingers down the scarred steel. “It was my father’s. Seen a lot of work. In his day and in mine.”

The apprentice didn’t so much as nod. Somewhat of a gritty manner she had, but Thorn had one of those herself, so she tried not to hold it too much against her.

“Your master about?” she asked.

“No.”

Thorn waited for more, but there wasn’t any. “When will he be back?”

The girl just snorted, slid the metal from the coals, looked it over, and rammed it hissing back in a shower of sparks.

Thorn decided to try starting over. “I’m looking for the blade-maker on Sixth Street.”

“And here I am,” said the girl, still frowning down at her work.

“You?”

“I’m the one making blades on Sixth Street, aren’t I?”

“Thought you’d be ... older.”

“Seems thinking ain’t your strength.”

Thorn spent a moment wondering whether to be annoyed by that, but decided to let it go. She was trying to let things go more often. “You’re not the first to say so. Just not common, a girl making swords.”

The girl looked up then. Fierce eyes, gleaming with the forge-light through the hair stuck across her strong-boned face, and something damned familiar about her but Thorn couldn’t think what. “Almost as uncommon as one swinging ’em.”

“Fair point,” said Thorn, holding out her hand. “I’m—”

The sword-maker slid the half-made blade from the forge, glowing metal passing so close Thorn had to snatch her hand back. “I know who y’are, Thorn Bathu.”

“Oh. Course.” Thorn guessed her fame was running off ahead of her. She was only now starting to

see that wasn't always a good thing.

The girl took up a hammer and Thorn watched her knock a fuller into the blade, watched her strike the anvil-music, as the smiths say, and quite a lesson it was. Short, quick blows, no wasted effort, all authority, all control, each one perfect as a master's sword thrust, glowing dust scattering from the die. Thorn knew a lot more about using swords than making them, but an idiot could've seen this girl knew her business.

"They say you make the best swords in Thorlby," said Thorn.

"I make the best swords in the Shattered Sea," said the girl, holding up the steel so the glow from it fell across her sweat-shining face.

"My father always told me never get proud."

"Ain't a question of pride. It's just a fact."

"Would you make me one?"

"No. Don't think I will."

Folk who are the best at what they do sometimes forego the niceties, but this was getting strange.

"I've got money."

"I don't want your money."

"Why?"

"I don't like you."

Thorn wasn't usually slow to rise to an insult but this was so unexpected she was caught off-guard.

"Well ... I guess there are other swords to be found."

"No doubt there are."

"I'll go and find one, then."

"I hope you find a long one." The swordmaker on Sixth Street leaned down to blow ash from the metal with a gentle puff from her pursed lips. "Then you can stick it up your arse."

Thorn snatched her old sword up, gave serious thought to clubbing the girl across the head with the flat, decided against and turned for the door. Before she quite made it to the handle, though, the girl spoke again.

"Why'd you treat my brother that way?"

She was mad. Had to be. "Who's your damn brother?"

The girl frowned over at her. "Brand."

The name rocked Thorn surely as a kick in the head. "Not Brand who was with me on—"

"What other Brand?" She jabbed at her chest with her thumb. "I'm Rin."

Thorn surely saw the resemblance, now, and it rocked her even more, so it came out a guilty squeak when she spoke. "Didn't know Brand had a sister ..."

Rin gave a scornful chuckle. "Why would you? Only spent a year on the same boat as him."

"He never told me!"

"Did you ask?"

"Of course! Sort of." Thorn swallowed. "No."

"A year away." Rin rammed the blade angrily back into the coals. "And the moment he sees me, do you know what he sets to talking about?"

"Er ..."

She started pounding at the bellows like Thorn used to pound Brand's head in the training square.

"Thorn Bathu ran the oars in the middle of an elf-ruin. Thorn Bathu saved his life in the shield wall.

Thorn Bathu made an alliance that'll put the world to rights. And when I could've bitten his face if I heard your name one more time, what do you think he told me next?"

"Er ..."

"Thorn Bathu scarcely spoke a word to him the whole way back. Thorn Bathu cut him off like you'd trim a blister. I tell you what, Thorn Bathu sounds something of a bloody bitch to me, after all he's done for her and, no, I don't much fancy making a sword for—"

"Hold it there," snapped Thorn. "You don't have the first clue what happened between me and your brother."

Rin let the bellows be and glared over. "Enlighten me."

"Well ..." Last thing Thorn needed was to rip that scab off again just when there was a chance of letting it heal. She wasn't about to admit that she made a fool's mistake, and burned herself bad, and had to make herself not look at Brand or talk to Brand or have anything to do with Brand every moment of every day in case she burned herself again. "You got it back to front is all!"

"Strange how people are always getting the wrong idea about you. How often does that have to happen, 'fore you start thinking maybe they got the right idea?" And Rin dragged the iron from the forge and set it back on the anvil.

"You don't know me," growled Thorn, working up the bellows on some anger of her own. "You don't know what I've been through."

"No doubt we've all had our struggles," said Rin, lifting her hammer. "But some of us get to weep over 'em in a big house our daddy paid for."

Thorn threw up her hands at the fine new forge behind the fine home near the citadel. "Oh, I see you and Brand have barely been scraping by!"

Rin froze, then, muscles bunching across her shoulders, and her eyes flicked over, and she looked angry. So angry Thorn took a little step back, a cautious eye on that hovering hammer.

Then Rin tossed it rattling down, pulled her gloves off and flung them on the table. "Come with me."

"MY MOTHER DIED WHEN I was little."

Rin had led them outside the walls. Downwind, where the stink of Thorlby's rubbish wouldn't bother the good folk of the city.

"Brand remembers her a little. I don't."

Some of the midden heaps were years covered over and turned to grassy mounds. Some were open and stinking, spilling bones and shells, rags and the dung of men and beasts.

"He always says she told him to do good."

A mangy dog gave Thorn a suspicious eye, as though it considered her competition, and went back to sniffing through the rot.

"My father died fighting Grom-gil-Gorm," muttered Thorn, trying to match ill-luck for ill-luck. Honestly, she felt a little queasy. From the look of this place, and the stink of it, and the fact she had scarcely even known it was here because her mother's slaves had always carted their rubbish. "They laid him out in the Godshall."

"And you got his sword."

"Less the pommel," grunted Thorn, trying not to breathe through her nose. "Gorm kept that."

"You're lucky to have something from your father." Rin didn't seem bothered by the stench at all.

“We didn’t get much from ours. He liked a drink. Well. I say *a* drink. He liked ’em all. He left when Brand was nine. Gone one morning, and maybe we were better off without him.”

“Who took you in?” asked Thorn in a small voice, getting the sense she was far outclassed in the ill-luck contest.

“No one did.” Rin let that sink in a moment. “There were quite a few of us living here, back then.”

“Here?”

“You pick through. Sometimes you find something you can eat. Sometimes you find something you can sell. Winters.” Rin hunched her shoulders and gave a shiver. “Winters were hard.”

Thorn could only stand there and blink, feeling cold all over even if summer was well on the way. She’d always supposed she’d had quite the tough time growing up. Now she learned that while she raged in her fine house because her mother didn’t call her by the name she liked, there had been children picking through the dung for bones to chew. “Why are you telling me this?”

“Cause Brand didn’t say and you didn’t ask. We begged. I stole.” Rin gave a bitter little smile. “But Brand said he had to do good. So he worked. He worked at the docks and the forges. He worked anywhere folk would give him work. He worked like a dog and more than once he was beaten like one. I got sick and he got me through it and I got sick again and he got me through it again. He kept on dreaming of being a warrior, and having a place on a crew, a family always around him. So he went to the training square. He had to beg and borrow the gear, but he went. He’d work before he trained and he’d work after, and even after that if anyone needed help he’d be there to help. Do good, Brand always said, and folk’ll do good for you. He was a good boy. He’s become a good man.”

“I know that,” growled Thorn, feeling the hurt all well up fresh, sharper than ever for the guilt that welled up with it, now. “He’s the best man I know. This isn’t bloody news to me!”

Rin stared at her. “Then how could you treat him this way? If it wasn’t for him I’d be gone through the Last Door, and so would you, and this is the thanks—”

Thorn might have been wrong about a few things, and she might not have known a few others she should have, and she might have been way too wrapped up in herself to see what was right under her nose, but there was a limit on what she’d take.

“Hold on, there, Brand’s secret sister. No doubt you’ve opened my eyes wider than ever to my being a selfish arse. But me and him were oarmates. On a crew you stand with the men beside you. Yes, he was there for me, but I was there for him, and—”

“Not that! Before. When you killed that boy. Edwal.”

“What?” Thorn felt queasier still. “I remember that day well enough and all Brand did was bloody stand there.”

Rin gaped at her. “Did you two talk at all that year away?”

“Not about Edwal, I can tell you that!”

“Course you didn’t.” Rin closed her eyes and smiled as though she understood it all. “He’d never take the thanks he deserves, the stubborn fool. He didn’t tell you.”

Thorn understood nothing. “Tell me what, damn it?”

“He went to Father Yarvi.” And Rin took Thorn gently but firmly by the shoulder and let the words fall one by one. “He told him what happened on the beach. Even though he knew it’d cost him. Master Hunnan found out. So it cost him his place on the king’s raid, and his place as a warrior, and everything he’d hoped for.”

Thorn made a strange sound then. A choked-off cluck. The sound a chicken makes when its neck

gets wrung.

“Brand went to Father Yarvi,” she croaked.

“Yes.”

“Brand saved my life. And lost his place for it.”

“Yes.”

“Then I mocked him over it, and treated him like a fool the whole way down the Divine and the Denied and the whole way back up again.”

“Yes.”

“Why didn’t he just bloody *say*—” And that was when Thorn saw something gleaming just inside the collar of Rin’s vest. She reached out, hooked it with a trembling finger, and eased it into the light.

Beads. Glass beads, blue and green.

The ones Brand bought that day in the First of Cities. The ones she’d thought were for her, then for some other lover back in Thorlby. The ones she now saw were for the sister she’d never bothered to ask if he had.

Thorn made that squawking sound again, but louder.

Rin stared at her as if she’d gone mad. “What?”

“I’m such a stupid shit.”

“Eh?”

“Where is he?”

“Brand? At my house. Our house—”

“Sorry.” Thorn was already backing away. “I’ll talk to you about the sword later!” And she turned and started running for the gate.

HE LOOKED BETTER THAN ever. Or maybe she just saw him differently, knowing what she knew.

“Thorn.” He looked surprised to see her and she could hardly blame him. Then he looked worried. “What’s wrong?”

She realized she must look worse even than usual and wished she hadn’t run all the way, or at least waited to knock until she’d caught her breath and wiped the sweat from her forehead. But she’d been dancing around this far too long. Time to face it, sweaty or not.

“I talked to your sister,” she said.

He looked more worried. “What about?”

“About you having a sister, for one thing.”

“That’s no secret.”

“That might not be.”

He looked even more worried. “What did she tell you?”

“That you saved my life. When I killed Edwal.”

He winced. “I told her not to say anything!”

“Well, that didn’t work.”

“Reckon you’d best come in. If you want to.” He stepped back from the door and she followed him into the shadowy hallway, heart pounding harder than ever. “You don’t have to thank me.”

“Yes,” she said. “I do.”

“I wasn’t trying to do anything noble, just ... something good. And I wasn’t sure, and it took me too long, and I made a bloody mess of it—”

She took a step toward him. “Did you go to Father Yarvi?”

“Yes.”

“Did Father Yarvi save my life?”

“Yes.”

“Did you lose your place because of it?”

He worked his mouth as though looking for a way to deny it, but couldn’t. “I was going to tell you, but ...”

“I’m not easy to tell things to.”

“And I’m not much good at telling.” He pushed his hair back and scrubbed at his head as though it hurt. “Didn’t want you feeling in my debt. Wouldn’t have been fair.”

She blinked at that. “So ... you didn’t just risk everything for my sake, you kept it to yourself so I wouldn’t feel bad about it.”

“One way of putting it ... maybe.” And he looked at her from under his brows, eyes gleaming in the shadows. That look, as if there was nothing he would rather be looking at. And however she’d tried to weed those hopes away they blossomed in a riot, and the want came up stronger than ever.

She took another little step toward him. “I’m so sorry.”

“You don’t have to be.”

“But I am. For how I treated you. On the way back. On the way out, for that matter. I’m sorry, Brand. I’ve never been sorrier. I’ve never been sorry at all, really. Got to work on that. Just ... I got the wrong idea about ... something.”

He stood there, silent. Waiting. Looking. No bloody help at all.

Just say it. How hard could it be? She’d killed men. Just say it. “I stopped talking to you ... because ...” But getting the words out was like hauling anvils out of a well. “I ... like ...” It was as if she tottered out onto a frozen lake, not knowing whether the next step might send her plunging to an icy doom. “I’ve always ... liked ...” She couldn’t make the “you.” She couldn’t have made the “you” if it was that or die. She squeezed her eyes shut. “What I’m trying to say is—Whoa!”

She snapped her eyes open. He’d touched her cheek, fingertips brushing the scar there.

“You’ve got your hand on me.” Stupidest thing she’d ever said and that with some fierce competition. They could both see he had his hand on her. Wasn’t as if it fell there by accident.

He jerked it away. “I thought—”

“No!” She caught his wrist and guided it back. “I mean ... Yes.” His fingertips were warm against her face, hers sliding over the back of his hand, pressing it there and it felt ... Gods. “This is happening, is it?”

He stepped a little closer, the knobble on his neck bobbing as he swallowed. “I reckon.” He was looking at her mouth. Looking at it as though there was something really interesting in there and she wasn’t sure she’d ever been so scared.

“What do we do?” she found she’d squeaked out, voice running away from her, higher and higher. “I mean, I know what we *do* ... I guess.” Gods, that was a lie, she hadn’t a clue. She wished now Skifr had taught her a little less about swords and a bit more about the arts of love, or whatever. “I mean, what do we do *now* we know that, you know—”

He put his thumb gently across her lips. “Shut up, Thorn.”

“Right,” she breathed, and she realized she had her hand up between them, as if to push him away. So used to pushing folk away, and him in particular, and she forced it to go soft, laid it gently on his

chest, hoped he couldn't feel it trembling.

Closer he came, and she was taken suddenly with an urge to run for it, and then with an urge to giggle, and she made a stupid gurgle swallowing her laughter, and then his lips were touching hers. Gently, just brushing, one way, then the other, and she realized she had her eyes open and snapped them shut. Couldn't think what to do with her hands. Stiff as a woman made of wood, she was, for a moment, but then things started to go soft.

The side of his nose nudged hers, ticklish.

He made a noise in his throat, and so did she.

She caught his lip between hers, tugged at it, slipped that hand on his chest up around his neck, and pulled him closer, their teeth knocked awkwardly together and they broke apart.

Not much of a kiss, really. Nothing like she'd imagined it would be, and the gods knew she'd imagined it enough, but it left her hot all over. Maybe that was just the running, but she'd done a lot of running and never felt quite like this.

She opened her eyes and he was looking at her. That look, through the strands of hair across his face. Wasn't the first kiss she ever had, but the others had felt like children playing. This was as different from that as a battle from the training square.

"Oh," she croaked. "That ... wasn't so bad."

She let go of his hand and caught a fistful of his shirt, started dragging him back toward her, caught the smile at the corner of his mouth and smiled herself—

There was a rattle outside the door.

"Rin," muttered Brand, and as if that was the starting word on a race they both took off running. Pelted down the corridor like thieves caught in the act, tangling on a stairway, giggling like idiots as they scrambled into a room and Brand wrestled the door shut, leaning back against it as if there were a dozen angry Vanstermen outside.

They hunched in the shadows, their breath coming quick.

"Why did we run?" he whispered.

"I don't know," Thorn whispered back.

"You think she can hear us?"

"What if she can?" asked Thorn.

"I don't know."

"So this is your room, is it?"

He straightened up, grinning like a king who'd won a victory. "I have a room."

"Quite the distinguished citizen," she said, strolling around in a circle, taking it in. Didn't take long. There was a pallet bed in one corner with Brand's worn-out old blanket on it, and his sea chest sitting open in another, and the sword that used to be Odda's leaning against the wall, and aside from that just bare boards and bare walls and a lot of shadows. "Ever wonder if you've overdone the furniture?"

"It's not quite finished."

"It's not quite started," she said, the circle taking her back toward him.

"If it's not what you were used to at the empress's palace, I won't keep you."

She snorted. "I lived under a boat with forty men in it. Reckon I can stand this a while."

His eyes were on her as she came close. That look. Little bit hungry, little bit scared. "Staying, then?"

“I’ve got nothing else pressing.”

And they were kissing again, harder this time. She wasn’t worrying about Brand’s sister anymore, or about her mother, or about anything. There was nothing on her mind but her mouth and his. Not to begin with, at least. But soon enough some other parts started making themselves known. She wondered what was prodding at her hip and stuck her hand down there to check and then she realized what was prodding at her hip and had to break away she felt so foolish, and scared, and hot, and excited, and hardly knew what she felt.

“Sorry,” he muttered, bending over and lifting one leg as if he was trying to hide the bulge and looking so ridiculous she spluttered with laughter.

He looked hurt. “Ain’t funny.”

“It is kind of.” She took his arm and pulled him close, then she hooked her leg around his and he gasped as she tripped him, put him down hard on his back with her on top, straddling him. Familiar territory in its way, but everything was different now.

She pressed her hips up against his, rocking back and forward, gently at first, then not so gently. She had her hand tangled in his hair, dragging his face against hers, his beard prickling at her chin, their open mouths pressed together so her head seemed to be full of his rasping breath, hot on her lips.

She was fair grinding away at him now and liking the feel of it more than a bit, then she was scared she was liking the feel of it, then she decided just to do it and worry later. She was grunting in her throat with each breath and one little part of her thinking that must sound pretty foolish but a much bigger part not caring. One of his hands slipped up her back under her shirt, the other up her ribs, one by one, and made her shiver. She pulled away, breathing hard, looking down at him, propped up on one elbow.

“Sorry,” he whispered.

“For what?” She ripped her shirt open and dragged it off, got it caught over the elf-bangle on her wrist, finally tore it free and flung it away.

She felt a fool for a moment, knew she was nothing like a woman should be, knew she was pale and hard and nothing but gristle. But he looked anything but disappointed, slid his hands up her sides and around her back, pulled her down against him, kissing at her, nipping at her lips with his teeth. The pouch with her father’s fingerbones fell in his eye and she slapped it back over her shoulder. She set to pulling his shirt open, pushing her hand up his stomach, fingers through the hairs on his chest, the bangle glowing soft gold, reflected in the corners of his eyes.

He caught her hand. “We don’t have to ... you know ...”

No doubt they didn’t have to, and no doubt there were a hundred reasons not to, and right then she couldn’t think of one she gave a damn about.

“Shut up, Brand.” She twisted her hand free and started dragging his belt open. She didn’t know what she was doing, but she knew some right idiots who’d done it.

How hard could it be?

SORT OF ALONE

They'd gone to sleep holding each other but it hadn't lasted long. Brand never knew anyone to thrash about so much in the night. She twitched and twisted, jerked and shuddered, kicked and rolled until she kicked him awake and rolled him right out of his own bed.

So he was left sitting on his sea chest, the lid polished to a comfortable gloss by hundreds of miles of his own rowing backside, watching her.

She'd ended up facedown with her arms spread wide, a strip of sunlight from the narrow window angled across her back, one hand hanging off the bed and the elf-bangle casting a faint glow on the floor. One long leg poked out from under the blanket, a puckered scar across the thigh, hair bound with rings of silver and gold, tangled across her face so all he could see was half of one shut eye and a little piece of cheek with that arrow-shaped mark on it.

To begin with he'd sat with a stupid smile on his face, listening to her snore. Thinking how she'd snored in his ear all the way down the Divine and the Denied. Thinking how much he liked hearing it. Hardly able to believe his luck that she was there, now, naked, in his bed.

Then he'd started worrying.

What would people think when they found out they'd done this? What would Rin say? What would Thorn's mother do? What if a child came? He'd heard it wasn't likely but it happened, didn't it? Sooner or later she'd wake. What if she didn't want him anymore? How could she want him anymore? And, lurking at the back of his mind, the darkest worry of all. What if she woke and she did want him still? What then?

"Gods," he muttered, blinking up at the ceiling, but they'd answered his prayers by putting her in his bed, hadn't they? He could hardly pray for help getting her out.

With a particularly ripping snort Thorn jerked, and stretched out, clenching her fists, and stretching her toes, her muscles shuddering. She blew snot out of one nostril, wiped it on the back of her hand, rubbed her eyes on the back of the other and dragged her matted hair out of her face. She froze, and her head jerked around, eyes wide.

"Morning," he said.

She stared at him. "Not a dream, then?"

"I'm guessing no." A nightmare, maybe.

They looked at each other for a long moment. "You want me to go?" she asked.

"No!" he said, too loud and too eager. "No. You want to go?"

"No." She sat up slowly, dragging the blanket around her shoulders, knobbled knees toward him, and gave a huge yawn.

"Why?" he found he'd said. She stopped halfway through, mouth hanging open. "Wasn't like last

night went too well did it?"

She flinched at that like he'd slapped her. "What did I do wrong?"

"You? No! You didn't ... it's me I'm talking of." He wasn't sure what he was talking of, but his mouth kept going even so. "Rin told you, didn't she?"

"Told me what?"

"That my own father didn't want me. That my own mother didn't want me."

She frowned at him. "I thought your mother died."

"Same bloody thing isn't it?"

"No. It isn't."

He was hardly listening. "I grew up picking through rubbish. I had to beg to feed my sister. I carted bones like a slave." He hadn't meant to say any of it. Not ever. But it just came puking out.

Thorn shut her mouth with a snap. "I'm an arse, Brand. But what kind of arse would I be if I thought less of you for that? You're a good man. A man who can be trusted. Everyone who knows you thinks so. Koll worships you. Rulf respects you. Even Father Yarvi likes you, and he doesn't like anyone."

He blinked at her. "I never speak."

"But you listen when other people speak! And you're handsome and well-made as Safrit never tired of telling me."

"She did?"

"She and Mother Scaer spent a whole afternoon discussing your arse."

"Eh?"

"You could have anyone you wanted. Specially now you don't live in a midden. The mystery is why you'd want me."

"Eh?" He'd never dreamed she had her own doubts. Always seemed so damn sure about everything.

But she drew the blanket tight around her shoulders and looked down at her bare feet, mouth twisted with disgust. "I'm selfish."

"You're ... ambitious. I like that."

"I'm bitter."

"You're funny. I like that too."

She rubbed gently at her scarred cheek. "I'm ugly."

Anger burned up in him then, so hot it took him by surprise. "Who bloody said so? Cause first they're wrong and second I'll punch their teeth out."

"I can punch 'em myself. That's the problem. I'm not ... you know." She stuck a hand out of the blanket and scrubbed her nails against the shaved side of her head. "I'm not how a girl should be. Or a woman. Never have been. I'm no good at ..."

"What?"

"Smiling or, I don't know, sewing."

"I don't need anything sewed." And he slid off his sea chest and knelt down in front of her. His worries had faded. Things had got ruined before somehow and he wouldn't let them get ruined again. Not for lack of trying. "I've wanted you since the First of Cities. Since before, maybe." He reached out and put his hand on hers where it rested on the bed. Clumsy, maybe, but honest. "Just never thought I'd get you." He looked into her face, groping for the right words. "Looking at you, and thinking you want me, makes me feel like ... like I won."

“Won something no one else would want,” she muttered.

“What do I care what they want?” he said, that anger catching fire again and making her look up. “If they’re too damn stupid to see you’re the best woman in the Shattered Sea that’s my good luck, isn’t it?” He fell silent, and felt his face burning, and thought for sure he’d ruined the whole thing again.

“That might be the nicest thing anyone ever said to me.” She reached up and pushed the hair out of his face. Gentle as a feather, her touch. He hadn’t realized she could be so gentle. “No one ever says anything nice to me, but even so.” The blanket slipped off her bare shoulder and he set his hand on it, slid it down her side and around her back, skin hissing on skin, warm, and smooth, her eyes closing, and his—

A thumping echoed through the house. Someone beating on the front door, and knocks that weren’t to be ignored. Brand heard the bolt drawn back, voices muttering.

“Gods,” said Thorn, eyes wide. “Could be my mother.”

They hadn’t moved so fast even when the Horse People came charging across the steppe, grabbing up clothes and tossing them to each other, pulling them on, him fumbling with his belt and getting it all messed up because he was watching her wriggle her trousers over her arse out of the corner of his eye.

“Brand?” came his sister’s voice.

They both froze, he with one boot on, she with none, then Brand called out a cracked, “Aye?”

“You all right?” Rin’s voice coming up the steps.

“Aye!”

“You alone?” Just outside the door now.

“Course!” Then, when he realized she might come in, he followed up with a guilty, “Sort of.”

“You’re the worst liar in Gettland. Is Thorn Bathu in there with you?”

Brand winced. “Sort of.”

“She’s in there or she’s not. Are you bloody in there, Thorn Bathu?”

“Sort of?” said Thorn at the door in a tiny voice.

A long pause. “That was Master Hunnan.”

The name was like a bucket of cold water down Brand’s trousers and no mistake.

“He said a dove came with news of a raid at Halleby, and with all the men gone north to fight, he’s gathering what’s left to go and see to it. Some who are training, some who are wounded, some who failed a test. They’re meeting on the beach.”

“He wants me?” called Brand, a quiver in his voice.

“He says Gettland needs you. And he says for any man who does his duty there’ll be a warrior’s place.”

A warrior’s place. Always to have brothers at your shoulder. Always to have something to fight for. To stand in the light. And quick as that the ashes of old dreams that had seemed for months burned out flared up hot and bright again. Quick as that he was decided.

“I’ll be down,” called Brand, heart suddenly beating hard, and he heard his sister’s footsteps move away.

“You’re going with that bastard?” asked Thorn. “After what he did to you? What he did to me?”

Brand pulled the blanket off the bed. “Not for his sake. For Gettland.”

She snorted. “For you.”

“All right, for me. Don’t I deserve it?”

Her jaw worked for a moment. “I notice he didn’t ask for me.”

“Would you have followed him?” he asked, putting his few things onto the blanket and making a bundle of it.

“Course I would. Then I’d have kicked his face in.”

“Maybe that’s why he didn’t ask for you.”

“Hunnan wouldn’t ask for me if I was holding a bucket of water and he was on fire. None of them would. Warriors of Gettland. There’s a bloody joke! Not a funny one, mind.” She paused halfway through dragging one boot on. “You’re not so keen to go just so you can get away from me, are you? Cause if you’re thinking better of this just tell me. I reckon we’ve had enough secrets—”

“That’s not it,” he said, even though he wondered if it was part of it. Just get some room to breathe. Just get some time to think.

“Sometimes I wish I’d stayed in the First of Cities,” she said.

“You’d never have bedded me then.”

“When I died rich and storied that could’ve been my life’s one great regret.”

“Just give me a week,” he said, strapping on Odda’s sword. “I’m not thinking better of anything, but I have to do this. I might never get another chance.”

She curled her lips back and made a long hiss. “One week. Then I go after the next man I find who can lift a ship.”

“Done.” And he kissed her one more time. Her lips were scummy, and her mouth was sour, and he didn’t care. He slung his shield over his shoulder, and hefted the little bundle he’d made with his blanket, and he took a long breath, and headed off to the iron embrace of Mother War.

Something stopped him in the doorway, though, and he took one last look back. As if to make sure she was really there. She was, and smiling at him. They were rare, her smiles, but that made them precious. Precious as gold, it seemed, and he was mightily pleased with himself for being the cause of it.

THE CHOSEN SHIELD

The citadel of Thorlby had not been happy ground for Thorn. The last time she visited it had been as a murderer, herded in chains to the cells. The time before it had been to see her father laid out in the Godshall, pale and cold beneath the dome, her mother sobbing beside her, and she'd looked up at the hard faces of the tall gods and known her prayers had all been wasted. She had to swallow a shadow of the anger she'd felt then, the anger that had burned at her ever since, gripping at the pouch that held her father's fingerbones as she frowned toward the great doors of the Godshall.

There were boys training in the yard, beneath the ancient cedar. Training in the square, the way Thorn used to, their master-at-arms barking out orders as they scrambled into a rickety shield wall. They seemed so young now. So slow and so clumsy. She could hardly believe she had ever been one of them as Koll led her past.

"You are Thorn Bathu?"

An old man sat at the corner of the square, swathed in a thick black fur in spite of the warmth, a drawn sword cradled in his arms. He seemed so withered, and hunched, and pale, that even with the golden circle on his brow it took Thorn a moment to recognize him.

She wobbled down onto one knee beside Koll, staring at the grass. "I am, my king."

King Uthil cleared his throat. "I hear unarmed you killed seven men, and forged an alliance with the Empress of the South. I did not believe it." He narrowed his watery eyes as he looked her up and down. "Now I begin to."

Thorn swallowed. "It was only five men, my king."

"Only five, she says!" And he gave a throaty chuckle to the old warriors about him. A couple just about cracked smiles. The faces of the others grew more dour with every word. No deed would ever be high enough to raise her in their estimation: she was as much an object of contempt as ever. "I like you, girl!" said the king. "We should practice together."

So she could practice with him, as long as she didn't presume to fight for him. Thorn lowered her eyes in case she let her anger show and ended up visiting the citadel's dungeons for a second time. "That would be a high honor," she managed to say.

Uthil broke into a coughing fit, and drew his cloak tight about his shoulders. "Once my minister's potions have worked their magic and I am past this illness. I swear those dung-tasting brews only make me weaker."

"Father Yarvi is a deep-cunning healer, my king," said Thorn. "I would have died without his wisdom."

"Aye," murmured Uthil, staring off into the distance. "I hope his wisdom works soon for me. I must go north, and teach these Vanstermen a lesson. The Breaker of Swords has questions for us." His

voice had withered to a crackling wheeze. “What should be our answer?”

“Steel!” hissed Thorn, and the other warriors about the king murmured the word as one.

Uthil’s pale hand trembled as he clutched his drawn sword close, and Thorn did not think she would be practicing with the king any time soon. “Steel,” he breathed, and settled slowly into his fur, wet eyes fixed on the boys in the square, as if he had forgotten Thorn was there.

“Father Yarvi’s waiting,” murmured Koll. He led her away across the grass, into a shadowy hall and up a long flight of steps, the scraping of their boots echoing in the darkness, the shouts of the training boys fading behind them.

“Is Brand all right?”

“How the hell should I know?” Thorn snapped, and felt guilty right away. “I’m sorry. I hope he is.”

“Are you and him ...” Koll peered at her sideways. “You know.”

“I don’t know what me and him are,” she snapped, another wave of temper and another slow wash of guilt. “Sorry.”

“You’re bored.”

“I’m idle,” she growled, “while high deeds are being done.”

Her mood had been filthy for days and the scorn of Uthil’s warriors hadn’t helped. She had nothing to do but worry. Worry that Brand wouldn’t want her when he came back or that she wouldn’t want him when he came back or that he wouldn’t come back at all. She had more doubts and frustrations spinning faster around her head than before she’d bedded him and there was nothing she could do about any of it.

“Bloody men,” she muttered. “We’d be better off without them.”

“What did I do?” asked Koll.

“You don’t count.” She grinned, and ruffled his hair. “Yet.”

A heavy door squealed open on a cave of wonders. A round room, ill-lit by flickering lamps, smelling of spice and fust and lined with shelves, the shelves stacked with books, with jars of dried leaves and colored dust, with animals’ skulls and broken sticks, with bunches of herbs and stones glittering with crystals.

Safrit stood in there, beckoning Thorn up some steps toward another archway. She leaned close to whisper. “Don’t worry.”

“Eh?”

“It’ll work out fine, whatever you decide.”

Thorn stared at her. “Now I’m worried.”

Father Yarvi sat on a stool by a firepit in the room beyond, the elf-metal staff that leaned beside him gleaming with reflected fire.

Safrit knelt so low at the threshold she nearly butted the floor, but Thorn snorted as she swaggered forward.

“Having good folk kneel before you, Father Yarvi? I thought you gave up being a king—” The rest of the room came into view and Thorn saw Queen Laithlin sitting on the other side of the fire. Her robe was shrugged back, one pale shoulder bare, and she clasped a bundle of fur to her chest. Prince Druin, Thorn realized, heir to the Black Chair.

“Gods.” Thorn was being ambushed by royalty around every corner. She scrambled down to one knee, knocked a jar off a shelf with her elbow, dislodged another when she shot out a hand to catch it, ended up clumsily crowding the clinking mess back with her chest. “Sorry, my queen. I’ve never been

much good at kneeling.” She remembered she had said the very same thing the last time they met, on the docks of Thorlby before the *South Wind* left, and she felt her face burning just as hot as it had then.

But Laithlin did not seem to notice. “The best people aren’t.” She gestured to another stool beside the firepit. “Sit instead.”

Thorn sat, but that was no more comfortable. Queen and minister both tipped their heads back and looked at her through narrowed gray eyes. The resemblance between them was uncanny. Mother and son still, whatever oaths he might have sworn to give up all family but the Ministry. They both gazed at her in calm silence. A double assessment that made Thorn feel the size of a pinhead, and all the while the infant prince sucked, sucked, sucked, and a tiny hand slipped from the fur and pulled at a strand of yellow hair.

“Last time we met,” said Laithlin, in the end, “I told you that fools boast of what they will do, while heroes do it. It seems you took my words to heart.”

Thorn tried to swallow her nerves. Thorlby might have seemed smaller after all she had seen, famed warriors feeble after all she had done, but the Golden Queen was as awe-inspiring as ever. “I’ve tried to, my queen.”

“Father Yarvi tells me you have become most deadly. He tells me you killed six Horse People in battle on the Denied. That seven men came for the Empress of the South and you fought them alone, unarmed, and won.”

“I had help. The best of teachers, and a good man beside me—men, that is. Good men beside me.”

Laithlin gave the slightest smile. “You have learned humility, then.”

“Thanks to Father Yarvi I’ve learned many things, my queen.”

“Tell me about the Empress of the South.”

“Well ...” All Thorn could think of then was how very different she was from Queen Laithlin. “She is young, and small, and clever—”

“And generous.” The queen glanced down at the elf-bangle on Thorn’s wrist, which flared with its own pink as she blushed again.

“I tried not to take it, my queen, but—”

“It was meant to break an alliance. It helped forge a new one. I could not have hoped for a better return on my investment. Do you wish you had stayed in the First of Cities?”

Thorn blinked. “I ...”

“I know the empress asked you to. To stand at her shoulder, and protect her from her enemies, and help steer the course of a great nation. Few indeed will ever receive such an offer.”

Thorn swallowed. “Gettland is my home.”

“Yes. And here you languish in Thorlby while Grandmother Wexen closes the Shattered Sea to our ships and the Vanstermen swarm across the border, a storied warrior sitting on her strong hands while unripe boys and doddering old men are called upon to fight. My husband the king must seem quite a fool to you. Like a man who goes to mow his meadow with a spoon, and leaves his fine new scythe to rust upon the shelf.” The queen peered down at her infant son. “The world changes. It must. But Uthil is a man of iron, and iron does not bend easily to new ways.”

“He does not seem himself,” murmured Thorn.

The minister and queen exchanged a glance she could not plumb the meaning of. “He is not well,” said Yarvi.

“And he must soothe the feelings of older and even more rigid men,” said Laithlin.

Thorn licked her lips. “I’ve done too many foolish things to accuse anyone else of folly, least of all a king.”

“But you would like to fight?”

Thorn lifted her chin and held the queen’s eye. “It’s what I’m made for.”

“It must grate on your warrior’s pride to be ignored.”

“My father told me never to get proud.”

“Fine advice.” The prince had fallen asleep and Laithlin eased him from her breast and passed him up to Safrit, shrugging her robe closed. “Your father was a Chosen Shield for a time, I understand.”

“To King Uthil’s mother,” murmured Yarvi.

“What became of him?” asked the queen, while Safrit rocked the prince in her arms and gently cooed to him.

Thorn felt the pouch weigh against her chest as she shifted uncomfortably. “He was killed in a duel with Grom-gil-Gorm.”

“The Breaker of Swords. A fearsome warrior. A terrible enemy to Gettland. And now we face him again. I once had a Chosen Shield of my own.”

“Hurik,” said Thorn. “I saw him fight in the training square. He was a great warrior.”

“He betrayed me,” said the queen, her cold eyes on Thorn. “I had to kill him.”

She swallowed. “Oh ...”

“I have never found one worthy to take his place.” There was a long and pregnant silence. “Until now.”

Thorn’s eyes went wide. She looked at Yarvi, and back to the queen. “Me?”

Yarvi held up his crippled hand. “Not me.”

Thorn’s heart was suddenly hammering. “But ... I never passed my warrior’s test. I never swore a warrior’s oath—”

“You’ve passed far sterner tests,” said the queen, “and the only oath a Chosen Shield must swear is to me.”

Thorn slid off her stool and knelt at Laithlin’s feet, this time without knocking anything into the fire. “Tell me the words, my queen.”

“You are a brave one.” Laithlin leaned forward, putting her fingertips gently on Thorn’s scarred cheek. “But you should not be rash.”

“You should be careful what oaths you swear,” said Father Yarvi.

“This is a burden as well as an honor. You might have to fight for me. You might have to die for me.”

“Death waits for us all, my queen.” Thorn did not have to think. It felt more right than anything she had ever done. “I’ve dreamed of this since I could hold a sword. I am ready. Tell me the words.”

“Father Yarvi?” Koll hurried into the room, flushed with excitement and greatly out of breath.

“Not now, Koll—”

“A crow’s come!” And he held out a little scrap of paper, tiny marks scrawled across it.

“Mother Scaer replies, at last.” Yarvi spread it out upon his knees, eyes flickering over the signs. Thorn watched in wonder. To capture words in lines on a scrap of nothing seemed like magic to her as surely as what Skifr had done out on the steppe.

“What does it say?” asked Laithlin.

“Grom-gil-Gorm accepts King Uthil’s challenge. His raids will cease until midsummer’s day. Then the warriors of Vansterland and Gettland will meet in battle at Amon’s Tooth.” Yarvi turned the paper over, and narrowed his eyes.

“What else?”

“The Breaker of Swords makes a challenge of his own. He asks if King Uthil will meet him in the square, man against man.”

“A duel,” said Laithlin.

“A duel.”

“The king is not well enough to fight.” Laithlin looked over at her son. Her minister. “He cannot be well enough to fight.”

“With the favor of Father Peace, it will never come to that.”

“Your circles move, Father Yarvi.”

He crumpled up the paper and tossed it into the firepit. “They move.”

“Then we must be ready to ride north within the week.” Queen Laithlin stood, tall and stern, wise and beautiful, and kneeling at her feet Thorn thought there could never have been a woman more worth following. “Teach her the words.”

HALLEBY

It had rained, and the fire was gone. Everything was gone, more or less. A few charred uprights. A few tottering chimney stacks. The rest of the village of Halleby was mud-churned ash and splinters. A few people picking through for anything worth saving and not finding much. A few others gathered around some fresh turned earth, heads hanging.

“A sorry place at the best of times,” muttered Brand.

“And these ain’t them,” said Rauk.

An old man knelt in the wreckage of a house, all smeared with soot and his wispy hair blowing, croaking at the sky, “They took my sons. They took my sons. They took my sons,” over and over.

“Poor bastard.” Rauk wiped his running nose on the back of one hand and winced again as he hefted his shield. He’d been wincing ever since they left Thorlby.

“Your arm hurt?” asked Brand.

“Took an arrow a few weeks back. I’m all right.” He didn’t look all right. He looked thin, and drained out, and his watery eyes held none of the challenge they used to. Brand would never have thought he might miss that. But he did.

“You want me to haul your shield awhile?”

A flicker of that old pride, then Rauk seemed to sag. “Thanks.” He let his shield drop, groaned through clenched teeth as he worked his arm around in a circle. “Didn’t look much of a wound but, gods, it hurts.”

“No doubt it’s on the mend already,” said Brand, swinging the extra shield across his back.

Didn’t look like they’d need it today, the Vanstermen were long gone. Just as well, because it was some sorry scrapings Hunnan had gathered. A couple dozen boys with gear that didn’t fit, hardly older than Koll and a lot less use, staring at the burned-out wreckage with big, scared eyes. A handful of greybeards, one without a tooth in his head, another without a hair on his, a third with a sword speckled hilt to blunt point with rust. Then there were the wounded. Rauk, and a fellow who’d lost an eye whose bandages kept leaking, and another with a bad leg who’d slowed them down the whole way, and Sordaf, who’d nothing wrong with him at all far as Brand could tell. Apart from being as big an idiot as ever, of course.

He puffed his cheeks out and gave a weary sigh. He’d left Thorn. Naked. In his bed. No clothes at all. For this. The gods knew he’d made some awful decisions but that had to be the worst. Damn standing in the light, he should’ve been lying in the warm.

Rauk was kneading his shoulder with his pale hand. “Hope it heals soon. Can’t stand in the shield wall with a bad arm. You stood in the wall?” There’d have been a barb in that question, once, but now there was only a hollow dread in his voice.

“Aye, on the Denied.” There’d have been a pride in that, once, but now all Brand could think of was the feel of his dagger sinking into flesh and he’d a dread of his own as he spoke. “We fought the

Horse People there. Don't know why, really, but ... we fought 'em. You?"

"I have. A skirmish against some Vanstermen, few months back." Rauk gave another long sniff, both of 'em chewing at memories they didn't much like the taste of. "You kill anyone?"

"I did." Brand thought of the man's face, still so clear. "You?"

"I did," said Rauk, frowning at the ground.

"Thorn killed six." Brand said it far too loud and far too jolly, but desperate to talk about anything but his own part in it. "Should have seen her fight! Saved my life."

"Some folk take to it." Rauk's watery eyes were still fixed on the mud. "Seemed to me most just get through it though, best they can."

Brand frowned at the burned out wreckage that used to be a village. Used to be some folks' lives. "Being a warrior ... not all brotherhood and back-slapping, is it?"

"It's not like the songs."

"No." Brand pulled the two shields higher up his shoulder. "No it isn't."

"They took my sons. They took my sons. They took my sons ..."

Master Hunnan had been talking to a woman who'd got away when the Vanstermen came. Now he strode back over with the thumb of his sword-hand tucked in his belt, gray hair flicked by the wind about a frown harder even than usual.

"They came at sunset two days ago. She thinks two dozen but she's not sure and I reckon fewer. They had dogs with 'em. They killed two men, took ten for slaves, and five or so were sick or old they let burn in their houses."

"Gods," whispered one of the boys, and he made a holy sign over his chest.

Hunnan narrowed his eyes. "This is what war is, boy. What were you expecting?"

"They've been gone two days, then." Brand cast an eye over the old men, and that young lad with the bad leg. "And we're not the fastest moving crew you ever saw. We'll never catch 'em now."

"No." Hunnan's jaw worked as he stared off hard-eyed toward the north. Toward Vansterland. "But we can't let this pass either. There's a Vanstermen's village not far from here. Just over the river."

"Rissentoft," said Sordaf.

"You know it?"

He shrugged. "It's got a good sheep-market. Used to drive lambs there with my uncle in the spring. I know a ford nearby."

"Won't it be watched?" asked Brand.

"We weren't watching it."

"There we go, then." Hunnan worked his sword hilt from the sheath then slapped it back in. "We cross at this ford and head for Rissentoft. Get your skinny arses moving!" And the master-at-arms put his head down and started walking.

Brand hurried after him, speaking low, not wanting to start an argument in front of the others, they'd got doubts enough as it was. "Master Hunnan, wait. If it was wrong when they did it to us, how's it right if we do it to them?"

"If we can't hurt the shepherds, we'll have to hurt the flock."

"It wasn't sheep did this, nor shepherds neither. It was warriors."

"This is war," said Hunnan, his mouth twisting. "Right's got nothing to do with it. King Uthil said steel is the answer, so steel it has to be."

Brand waved his hand toward the miserable survivors, picking over the wreckage of their homes.

“Shouldn’t we stay and help them? What good will burning some other village do just ’cause it’s across a river—”

Hunnan rounded on him. “Might help the next village, or the one after that! We’re warriors not nursemaids! You got a second chance, boy, but I’m starting to think I was right after all, and you’ve got more Father Peace than Mother War in you.” Looking at Mother War’s handiwork behind them, Brand wondered whether that was such a bad thing. “What if it was your family died here, eh? Your house burned? Your sister made some Vansterman’s slave? Would you be for vengeance then?”

Brand looked over his shoulder toward the other lads, following in a meager straggle. Then he gave a sigh and hefted the two shields.

“Aye,” he said. “I guess I would.”

But he couldn’t see how any good would come of this.

FIRE

“Reckon I need a new sword.”

Thorn tossed her father’s rattling down on the table.

Rin gave the blade she was working on another grating stroke with the polishing stone and frowned over at her. “This seems familiar.”

“Very. But I’m hoping for a different answer this time around.”

“Because you bedded my brother?”

“Because there’s going to be a battle, and Queen Laithlin wants her Chosen Shield suitably armed.”

Rin set her stone aside and walked over, slapping dust from her hands. “The Queen’s Chosen Shield? You?”

Thorn raised her chin and stared back. “Me.”

They watched each other for a long moment, then Rin picked up Thorn’s sword, spun it over, rubbed at the cheap pommel with her thumb, laid it back down and planted her hands on her hips. “If Queen Laithlin says it’s so, I guess it’s so.”

“It’s so,” said Thorn.

“We’ll need some bone.”

“What for?”

“To bind with the iron and make steel.” Rin nodded over at the bright blade clamped to the bench, gray steel-dust gathered under it. “I used a hawk’s for that one. But I’ve used a wolf’s. A bear’s. Do it right, you trap the animal’s spirit in the blade. So you pick something strong. Something deadly. Something that means something to you.”

Thorn thought about that for a moment, then the idea came and she started to smile. She pulled the pouch from around her neck and tipped the smooth and yellowed little lumps out across the table. She’d worn them long enough. Time to put them to better use. “How about a hero’s bones?”

Rin raised her brows at them. “Even better.”

THEY STOPPED IN AN ash-scattered clearing by the river, a ring of stones in the center blackened as if it had held one hell of a fire.

Rin swung the big bag of tools down from her shoulder. “We’re here.”

“Did we have to come so far?” Thorn dumped the coal sacks, stretching out her back and wiping her sweating face on her forearm.

“Don’t want my secrets stolen. Talking of which, tell anyone what happens here I’ll have to kill you.” Rin tossed Thorn a shovel. “Now get in the river and dig out some clay.”

Thorn frowned sideways, sucking at the hole in her teeth. “I’m starting to think Skifr was an easier master.”

“Who’s Skifr?”

“Never mind.”

She waded out to her waist in the stream, the water so cold it made her gasp in spite of the summer warmth, and set to cutting clay from the bed and slopping it onto the bank in gray shovelfuls.

Rin put some dull lumps of iron-stone in a jar, along with the black ash of Thorn’s father’s bones, and a sprinkle of sand, and two glass beads, then she started smearing clay around the lid, sealing it shut.

“What’s the glass for?” asked Thorn.

“To trick the dirt out of the iron,” murmured Rin, without looking up. “The hotter we get the furnace the purer the steel and the stronger the blade.”

“How did you learn all this?”

“I was apprentice to a smith called Gaden. I watched some others. I talked to some sword-merchants from down the Divine.” Rin tapped at the side of her head and left a smear of clay there. “The rest I worked out for myself.”

“You’re a clever girl, aren’t you?”

“When it comes to steel.” Rin set the clay jar carefully in the middle of the ring of stones. “Back in the river, then.”

So Thorn sloshed out shivering into the stream again while Rin built the furnace. She heaped coal up inside, stones outside, and mortared them with clay until she’d built a thing looked like a great domed bread-oven, chest high, with an opening at the bottom.

“Help me seal it.” Rin dug up clay with her hands and Thorn did the same, smearing it thick over the outside. “What’s it like? Being a Chosen Shield?”

“Dreamed of it all my life,” said Thorn, puffing herself up. “And I can’t think of anyone I’d rather serve than Queen Laithlin.”

Rin nodded. “They don’t call her the Golden Queen for nothing.”

“It’s a high honor.”

“No doubt. But what’s it like?”

Thorn sagged. “So far, boring. Since I swore the oath I’ve spent most of my time standing in the queen’s counting house, frowning at merchants while they ask her for favors that might as well be in a foreign tongue for all I understand them.”

“Wondering if you made a mistake?” asked Rin, digging up another handful of gray mush.

“No,” snapped Thorn, and then, after a moment spent squashing more clay into the cracks, “Maybe. It’d hardly be my first.”

“You ain’t at all as tough you make out, are you?”

Thorn took a long breath. “Who is?”

RIN BLEW GENTLY ON her shovel, the coals rustling as they glowed bright, then she got on her belly and rammed them deep into the mouth of the furnace, puffing out her cheeks as she blew hard, over and over. Finally she rocked back on her heels, watching the fire taking the coal, flame flickering orange inside the vent.

“What’s happening between you and Brand?” she asked.

Thorn had known it was coming, but that didn’t make it any more comfortable. “I don’t know.”

“Not that complicated a question, is it?”

“You wouldn’t think so.”

“Well, are you done with him?”

“No,” said Thorn, surprised by how firm she sounded.

“Did he say he was done with you?”

“We both know Brand’s not much at saying things. But I wouldn’t be surprised. Not exactly what men dream of, am I?”

Rin frowned at her for a moment. “I reckon different men dream of different things. Just like different women.”

“Couldn’t have taken off running much sooner, though, could he?”

“He’s wanted to be a warrior a long time. That was his chance.”

“Aye.” Thorn took a long breath. “Thought it’d get simpler when ... you know.”

“But it didn’t get simpler?”

Thorn scrubbed at her shaved head, feeling the bald scar in the stubble. “No, it bloody didn’t. I don’t know what we’re doing, Rin. I wish I did but I don’t. I’ve never been any good at anything but fighting.”

“You never know. You might find a talent at working bellows too.” And Rin dropped them beside the mouth of the furnace.

“When you’ve a load to lift,” muttered Thorn as she knelt, “you’re better lifting than weeping.” And she gritted her teeth and made those bellows wheeze until her shoulders were aching and her chest was burning and her vest was soaked through with sweat.

“Harder,” said Rin. “Hotter.” And she started singing out prayers, soft and low, to He Who Makes the Flame, and She Who Strikes the Anvil, and Mother War too, the Mother of Crows, who gathers the dead and makes the open hand a fist.

Thorn worked until that vent looked like a gate to hell in the gathering darkness, like a dragon’s maw in the twilight. Worked until, even though she’d helped carry a ship each way over the tall hauls, she wasn’t sure she’d ever worked harder.

Rin snorted. “Out of the way, killer, I’ll show you how it’s done.”

And she set to, as calm and strong and steady at the bellows as her brother at the oar. The coals glowed up hotter yet as the stars came out above, and Thorn muttered out a prayer of her own, a prayer to her father, and reached for the pouch around her neck but his bones were gone into the steel, and that felt right.

She sloshed out into the river and drank, soaked to the skin, and sloshed back out to take another turn, imagining the bellows were Grom-gil-Gorm’s head, on and on until she was dried out by the furnace then soaked with sweat again. Finally they worked together, side by side, the heat like a great hand pressing on Thorn’s face, red-blue flames flickering from the vent and smoke pouring from the baked clay sides of the furnace and sparks showering up into the night where Father Moon sat big and fat and white above the trees.

Just when it seemed Thorn’s chest was going to burst and her arms come right off her shoulders Rin said, “Enough,” and the pair of them flopped back, soot-smeared and gasping.

“What now?”

“Now we wait for it to cool.” Rin dragged a tall bottle out of her pack and pulled out the stopper. “And we get a little drunk.” She took a long swig, soot-smeared neck shifting as she swallowed, then

handed the bottle to Thorn, wiping her mouth.

“You know the way to a woman’s heart.” Thorn closed her eyes, and smelled good ale, and soon after tasted it, and soon after swallowed it, and smacked her dry lips. Rin was setting the shovel in the shimmering haze on top of the furnace, tossed bacon hissing onto the metal.

“You’ve got all kinds of skills, don’t you?”

“I’ve done a few jobs in my time.” And Rin cracked eggs onto the shovel that straight away began to bubble. “There’s going to be a battle, then?”

“Looks that way. At Amon’s Tooth.”

Rin sprinkled salt. “Would Brand fight in it?”

“I guess we both would. Father Yarvi’s got other ideas, though. He usually does.”

“I hear he’s a deep-cunning man.”

“No doubt, but he’s not sharing his cleverness.”

“Deep-cunning folk don’t tend to,” said Rin, flipping the bacon with a knife blade.

“Gorm’s offered a challenge to King Uthil to settle it.”

“A duel? There’s never been a finer swordsman than Uthil, has there?”

“Not at his best. But he’s far from his best.”

“I heard a rumor he was ill.” Rin pulled the shovel from the furnace and dropped down on her haunches, laying it between them, the smell of meat and eggs making Thorn’s mouth flood with spit.

“Saw him in the Godshall yesterday,” said Thorn. “Trying to look like he was made of iron but, in spite of Father Yarvi’s plant-lore, I swear, he could hardly stand.”

“Doesn’t sound good, with a battle coming.” Rin pulled a spoon out and offered it to Thorn.

“No. It doesn’t sound good.”

They started stuffing food in and, after all that work, Thorn wasn’t sure she’d ever tasted better. “Gods,” she said around a mouthful, “a woman who can make fine eggs and fine swords *and* brings fine ale with her? It doesn’t work out with Brand I’ll marry you.”

Rin snorted. “If the boys show as much interest as they’ve been doing I might count that a fine match.”

They laughed together at that, and ate, and got a little drunk, the furnace still hot on their faces.

“YOU SNORE, DO YOU know that?”

Thorn jerked awake, rubbing her eyes, Mother Sun just showing herself in the stony sky. “It has been commented on.”

“Time to break this open, I reckon. See what we’ve got.”

Rin set to knocking the furnace apart with a hammer, Thorn raking the still smoking coals away, hand over her face as a tricking breeze sent ash and embers whirling. Rin delved in with tongs and pulled the jar out of the midst, yellow hot. She swung it onto a flat stone, broke it open, knocking white dust away, pulling something from inside like a nut from its shell.

The steel bound with her father’s bones, glowing sullen red, no bigger than a fist.

“Is it good?” asked Thorn.

Rin tapped it, turned it over, and slowly began to smile. “Aye. It’s good.”

RISSENTOFT

In the songs, Angulf Clovenfoot's Gettlanders fell upon the Vanstermen like hawks from an evening sky.

Master Hunnan's misfits fell on Rissentoft like a herd of sheep down a steep flight of steps.

The lad with the game leg could hardly walk by the time they reached the river and they'd left him sore and sorry on the south bank. The rest of them got soaked through at the ford and one lad had his shield carried off by the current. Then they got turned around in an afternoon mist and it wasn't until near dark, all worn-out, clattering and grumbling, that they stumbled on the village.

Hunnan cuffed one boy around the head for quiet then split them up with gestures, sent them scurrying in groups of five down the streets, or down the hardened dirt between the shacks, at least.

"Stay close!" Brand hissed to Rauk, who was straggling behind, shield dangling, looking more pale and tired than ever.

"The place is empty," growled the toothless old-timer, and he looked to have the right of it. Brand crept along a wall and peered through a door hanging open. Not so much as a dog moving anywhere. Apart from the stink of poverty, an aroma he was well familiar with, the place was abandoned.

"They must've heard us coming," he muttered.

The old man raised one brow. "You think?"

"There's one here!" came a scared shriek, and Brand took off running, scrambled around the corner of a wattle shack, shield up.

An old man stood at the door of a house with his hands raised. Not a big house, or a pretty house. Just a house. He had a stoop to his back, and gray hair braided beside his face the way the Vanstermen wore it. Three of Hunnan's lads stood in a half-circle about him, spears levelled.

"I'm not armed," he said, holding his hands higher. They had something of a shake to them and Brand hardly blamed him. "I don't want to fight."

"Some of us don't," said Hunnan, stepping between the lads with his sword drawn. "But sometimes a fight finds us anyway."

"I got nothing you want." The old man stared about nervously as they gathered around him. "Please. Just don't want my house burned. Built it with my wife."

"Where's she?" asked Hunnan.

The old man swallowed, his gray-stubbed throat shifting. "She died last winter."

"What about those in Halleby? You think they wanted their houses burned?"

"I knew folk in Halleby." The man licked his lips. "I didn't have nought to do with that."

"Not surprised to hear about it, though, are you?" And Hunnan hit him with his sword. It opened a great gash in his arm and he yelped, staggered, clutched at his doorframe as he fell.

"Oh," said one of the boys.

Hunnan stepped up with a snarl and chopped the old man in the back of the head with a sound like a

spade chopping earth. He rolled over, shuddering, tongue stuck out rigid. Then he lay still, blood spreading across his door-stone, pooling in the deep-cut runes of the gods that guarded his house.

Same gods that guarded the houses in Thorlby. Seemed they weren't watching right then.

Brand stared, cold all over. Happened so fast he'd no time to stop it. No time to think about whether he wanted to stop it, even. Just happened, and they all stood there and watched.

"Spread out," said Hunnan. "Search the houses, then burn 'em. Burn 'em all." The bald old man shook his head, and Brand felt sick inside, but they did as they were bid.

"I'll stay here," said Rauk, tossing down his shield and sitting on it.

Brand shouldered open the nearest door and froze. A low room, much like the one he and Rin used to share, and by the firepit a woman stood. A skinny woman in a dirty dress, couple of years older than Brand. She stood with one hand on the wall, staring at him, breathing hard. Scared out of her wits, he reckoned.

"You all right?" called Sordaf from outside.

"Aye," said Brand.

"Well, bloody hell!" The fat lad grinned as he ducked his head under the low doorway. "Not quite empty, I reckon." He uncoiled some rope, sawed off a length with his knife, and handed it over. "Reckon she'll get a decent price, you lucky bastard."

"Aye," said Brand.

Sordaf went out shaking his head. "War's all bloody luck, I swear ..."

The woman didn't speak and neither did Brand. He tied the rope around her neck, not too tight, not too loose, and she didn't so much as twitch. He made the other end fast around his wrist, and all the while he felt numb and strange. This was what warriors did in the songs, wasn't it? Take slaves? Didn't seem much like doing good to Brand. Didn't seem anywhere near it. But if it wasn't him took her it'd be one of the others. That was what warriors did.

Outside they were already torching the houses. The woman made a sort of moan when she saw the dead old man. Another when the thatch on her hovel went up. Brand didn't know what to say to her, or to anyone else, and he was used to keeping silent, so he said nothing. One of the boys had tears streaking his face as he set his torch to the houses, but he set it to them all the same. Soon the air was thick with the smell of burning, wood popping and crackling as the fire spread, flaming straw floating high into the gloom.

"Where's the sense in this?" muttered Brand.

But Rauk just rubbed at his shoulder.

"One slave." Sordaf spat with disgust. "And some sausages. Not much of a haul."

"We didn't come for a haul," said Master Hunnan, frown set tight. "We came to do good."

And Brand stood, holding on to a rope tied around a woman's neck, and watched a village burn.

THEY ATE STALE BREAD in silence, stretched out on the chill ground in silence. They were still in Vansterland and could afford no fire, every man alone with his thoughts, all darkling strangers to each other.

Brand waited for the faintest glimmer of dawn, gray cracks in the black cloud overhead. Wasn't as if he'd been sleeping, anyway. Kept thinking about that old man. And the boy crying as he set fire to the thatch. Kept listening to the woman breathing who was now his slave, his property, because he'd put a rope around her neck and burned her house.

“Get up,” hissed Brand, and she slowly stood. He couldn’t see her face but there was a slump to her shoulders like nothing mattered any more.

Sordaf was on watch, now, blowing into his fat hands and rubbing them together and blowing into ’em again.

“We’re going off a bit,” said Brand, nodding toward the treeline not far away.

Sordaf gave him a grin. “Can’t say I blame you. Chilly night.”

Brand turned his back on him and started walking, tugged at the rope and felt the woman shuffling after. Under the trees and through the undergrowth they went, no words said, sticks cracking under Brand’s boots, until the camp was far behind. An owl hooted somewhere and he dragged the woman down into the brush, waiting, but there was no one there.

He wasn’t sure how long it took them to reach the far side of the wood, but Mother Sun was a gray smudge in the east when they stepped from the trees. He pulled out the dagger Rin made for him and cut the rope carefully from around the woman’s neck.

“Go, then,” he said. She just stood staring. He pointed out the way. “Go.”

She took one step, and looked back, then another, as if she expected some trick. He stood still.

“Thanks,” she whispered.

Brand winced. “I don’t deserve thanking. Just go.”

She took off fast. He watched her run back the way they’d come, through the wet grass, down the gentle slope. As Mother Sun crawled higher he could see Rissentoft in the distance, a black smear on the land, still smoldering.

He reckoned it must’ve looked a lot like Halleby before the war started.

Now it did again.

FROZEN LAKES

The king's household halted in the spitting rain above the camp, a thousand fires sprawling under the darkening sky, pinprick torches trickling into the valley as the warriors of Gettland gathered. Thorn sprang down and offered the queen her hand. Not that Laithlin needed any help, she was twice the rider Thorn was. But Thorn was desperate to be useful.

In the songs, Chosen Shields protected their queens from assassins, or carried secret messages into the mouth of danger, or fought duels on which the fates of nations rested. Probably she should have learned by now not to take songs too seriously.

She found herself lost among an endlessly shifting legion of slaves and servants, trailing after the Golden Queen like the tail after a comet, besieging her with a thousand questions to which, whether she was nursing the heir to the throne at the time or not, she always had the answers. King Uthil might have sat in the Black Chair but, after a few days in Laithlin's company, it was plain to Thorn who really ruled Gettland.

There was no trace of the easy companionship she'd had with Vialine. No earnest talks or demands to be called by her first name. Laithlin was more than twice Thorn's age: a wife and mother, a peerless merchant, the mistress of a great household, as beautiful as she was deep-cunning as she was masterfully controlled. She was everything a woman should be and more. Everything Thorn wasn't.

"My thanks," Laithlin murmured, taking Thorn's hand and making even sliding down from a saddle look graceful.

"I want only to serve."

The queen did not let go of her hand. "No. You were not born to stand in dusty meetings and count coins. You want to fight."

Thorn swallowed. "Give me the chance."

"Soon enough." Laithlin leaned close, gripping Thorn's hand tight. "An oath of loyalty cuts both ways. I forgot that once, and never will again. We shall do great things together, you and I. Things to sing of."

"My king?" Father Yarvi's voice, and sharp with worry.

Uthil had stumbled climbing from his own saddle and now he was leaning heavily on his minister, gray as a ghost, chest heaving as he clutched his drawn sword against it.

"We will speak later," said Laithlin, letting go of Thorn's hand.

"Koll, boil water!" called Father Yarvi. "Safrit, bring my plants!"

"I saw that man walk a hundred miles through the ice and never falter," said Rulf, standing beside Thorn with his arms folded. "The king is not well."

"No." Thorn watched Uthil shamle into his tent with one arm over his minister's shoulders. "And

with a great battle coming. Poor luck indeed.”

“Father Yarvi doesn’t believe in luck.”

“I don’t believe in helmsmen, but they dog me even so.”

Rulf chuckled at that. “How’s your mother?”

Thorn frowned across at him. “Unhappy with my choices, as always.”

“Still striking sparks from each other?”

“Since you ask, not near so much as we used to.”

“Oh? I reckon one of you must have grown up a little.”

Thorn narrowed her eyes. “Maybe one of us had a wise old warrior to teach them the value of family.”

“Everyone should be so lucky.” Rulf peered down at the ground, rubbing at his beard. “I’ve been thinking, perhaps ... I should pay her a visit.”

“You asking my permission?”

“No. But I’d like to have it, still.”

Thorn gave a helpless shrug. “Far be it from me to come between a pair of young lovers.”

“Or me.” Rulf gave a meaningful look past her from under his brows. “Which is why I’ll be dwindling into the west, I think ...”

Thorn turned, and Brand was walking toward her.

She had been hoping she might see him, but as soon as she did she felt a surge of nerves. As if she was stepping into the training square for the first time and he was her opponent. They should have been familiar to each other now, surely? But of a sudden she had no idea how to be with him. Prickly-playful, like one oar-mate with another? Simpering soft, like a maiden with a suitor? Frosty-regal, like Queen Laithlin with a debtor? Creepy-cautious, like a clever gambler keeping her dice well hidden?

Each step he came closer felt like a step back out onto that frozen lake, ice creaking under her weight, no notion what the next footfall might bring.

“Thorn,” he said, looking her in the eye.

“Brand,” she said, looking back.

“Couldn’t stand to wait for me any longer, eh?”

Prickly-playful, then. “The suitors were queued up outside my house all the way to the bloody docks. There’s only so much of men weeping over my beauty I can stand.” And she pressed a fingertip to one side of her nose and blew snot into the mud out of the other.

“You’ve a new sword,” he said, looking down at her belt.

She hooked a finger under the plain crosspiece and drew it halfway so he could draw it the rest with the faintest ringing. “From the best blade-maker in the Shattered Sea.”

“Gods, she’s got good.” He brushed Rin’s mark on the fuller with his thumb, swished the blade one way and the other, lifted it to peer with one eye down the length, Mother Sun flashing along the bright steel and glinting on the point.

“Didn’t have time to do anything fancy with it,” said Thorn, “but I’m getting to like it plain.”

Brand softly whistled. “That is fine steel.”

“Cooked with a hero’s bones.”

“Is that so?”

“Reckon I’d had my fathers fingers about my neck for long enough.”

He grinned as he offered the sword back to her, and she found she was grinning too. “I thought Rin said no to you?”

“No one says no to Queen Laithlin.”

Brand had that old puzzled look of his. “Eh?”

“She wanted her Chosen Shield suitably armed,” she said, slapping the sword back into its scabbard.

He gaped at her in silence while that sank in.

“I know what you’re thinking.” Thorn’s shoulders slumped. “I don’t even have a shield.”

He snapped his mouth shut. “I’m thinking you are the shield, and none better. If I was a queen I’d pick you.”

“Hate to crush your hopes, but I doubt you’ll ever be queen.”

“None of the gowns would suit me.” He slowly shook his head, starting to smile again. “Thorn Bathu, Chosen Shield.”

“What about you? Did you save Gettland, yet? Saw you gathering on the beach. Quite the crowd of young champions. Not to mention a couple of ancient ones.”

Brand winced. “Can’t say we saved much of anything. We killed an old farmer. We stole some sausages. We burned a village ’cause it was on the wrong side of a river. We took a slave.” Brand scratched at his head. “I let her go.”

“You just can’t help doing good, can you?”

“Don’t think Hunnan sees it that way. He’d like to tell everyone I’m a disgrace but he’d have to admit his raid was a disgrace, so ...” He puffed out his cheeks, looking more puzzled than ever. “I’m swearing my warrior’s oath tomorrow. Along with some lads never swung a blade in anger.”

Thorn put on Father Yarvi’s voice. “Let Father Peace spill tears over the methods! Mother War smiles upon results! You must be pleased.”

He looked down at the ground. “I suppose so.”

“You’re not?”

“Do you ever feel bad? About those men you’ve killed?”

“Not a lot. Why should I?”

“I’m not saying you should. I’m just asking if you do.”

“I don’t.”

“Well, you’re touched by Mother War.”

“Touched?” Thorn snorted. “She’s slapped me purple.”

“Being a warrior, brothers at my shoulder, it’s what I always wanted ...”

“There’s no disappointment like getting what you’ve always wanted.”

“Some things are worth the wait,” he said, looking her in the eye.

She had no doubts at all what that look meant now. She was starting to wonder if getting across this frozen lake of theirs might not be so hard. Maybe you just took one step at a time, and tried to enjoy the thrill of it. So she took a little pace closer to him. “Where are you sleeping?”

He didn’t back off. “Under the stars, I reckon.”

“A Chosen Shield gets a tent.”

“You trying to make me jealous?”

“No, it’s only a small one.” She moved another little step. “But it’s got a bed.”

“I’m getting to like this story.”

“Bit cold, though.” She moved another little step, and they were both smiling. “On my own.”

“I could have a word with Sordaf for you, reckon he could warm a blanket with one fart.”

“Sordaf’s everything most women could ask for, but I’ve always had odd tastes.” She reached up, using her fingers like a comb, and pushed the hair out of his face. “I had someone else in mind.”

“There’s a lot of folk watching,” said Brand.

“Like I care a damn.”

COWARDICE

They knelt in a line. Three of the young lads and Brand. Two had pointed spears at an old farmer. One had cried as he set fire to some houses. The last had let the only slave they took go.

Some warriors.

Yet here they were, with the fighting men of Gettland gathered about them in an armed and armored crowd, ready to welcome them into their brotherhood. Ready to have them at their shoulders when they met Grom-gil-Gorm and his Vanstermen at the appointed place. Ready to carry them into the iron embrace of Mother War.

King Uthil had changed a lot in the year since Brand saw him last, and not for the better. His skin had turned the same iron-gray as his hair, rheumy eyes sunken in dark shadows. He seemed shrivelled in his chair, scarcely moving, as though the King's Circle on his brow was a crushing weight, hands trembling as he hugged his naked sword.

Father Yarvi perched on a stool at the king's side, Queen Laithlin sat bolt upright on the other, shoulders back, fists clenched on her knees, sweeping the crowd with her pale stare as though she could make up for her husband's weakness with her strength.

Thorn stood at the queen's shoulder, pointed chin up and with a challenge in her eyes, arms folded and the elf-bangle burning a chill white on her wrist. She looked like something from the songs, a Chosen Shield from her toes to her half-shaved scalp. Brand could hardly believe he'd clambered out of her bed an hour before. At least he had one thing to feel pleased about.

The king looked slowly down the line of boys to Brand, and cleared his throat.

"You are young," he said, voice so crackly quiet it could hardly be heard over the wind flapping the tent cloth. "But Master Hunnan has judged you worthy, and Gettland is beset by enemies." He raised himself a little in his seat, a glimpse of the man whose speech Brand had thrilled to on the beach before Thorlby. "We march to Amon's Tooth to meet the Vanstermen in battle, and we need every shield!" He was caught by a coughing fit, and croaked out, "Steel is the answer." Then slumped back in his chair, Father Yarvi leaning close to whisper in his ear.

Master Hunnan stepped up with sword in hand and frown on face to stand over the first of the boys. "Do you swear loyalty to Gettland?"

The lad swallowed. "I do."

"Do you swear to serve your king?"

"I do."

"Do you swear to stand by your shoulder-man in the shield wall, and obey your betters?"

"I do."

"Then rise a warrior of Gettland!"

The boy did, looking a lot more scared than happy, and all about him men drummed fists on their chests, clattered ax-hafts on shield rims, thumped boots on the earth in approval.

It took a moment's struggle for Brand to swallow. Soon it would be his turn. Should have been the proudest day of his life. But as he thought of the ashes of Halleby and Rissentoft, of the old man bleeding on his doorstep and the woman with the rope around her neck, pride wasn't his first feeling.

The crowd cheered as the second boy said his third "I do" and the man behind jerked him to his feet like a fish from a pond.

Brand caught Thorn's eye, and her mouth curled up in the faintest smile. He would've smiled back, if he hadn't been churning with doubts. Do good, his mother told him with her dying breath. What good had they done at Rissentoft the other night?

The third lad had tears in his eyes again as he swore his oaths, but the warriors took them for tears of pride and gave him the loudest cheer so far, the clashing of weapons cutting at Brand's jangling nerves.

Hunnan worked his jaw, frown hardening even further as Brand stepped up to him, and the men fell silent.

"Do you swear loyalty to Gettland?"

"I do," croaked Brand, his mouth dry.

"Do you swear to serve your king?"

"I do," croaked Brand, heart thumping in his ears.

"Do you swear to stand by your shoulder-man in the shield wall, and obey your betters?"

Brand opened his mouth, but the words didn't come. Silence stretched out. Smiles faded. He felt every eye on him. There was a faint scraping of metal as warriors stirred uneasily.

"Well?" snapped Hunnan.

"No."

The silence stretched for a pregnant moment longer, like the silence before a cloudburst, then a disbelieving mutter started up.

Hunnan stared down, astonished. "What?"

"Stand, boy," came the king's rasping voice, the noise growing angrier as Brand got to his feet. "I never heard of such a thing before. Why will you not swear your oath?"

"Because he's a coward," snarled Hunnan.

More muttering, angrier still. The boy beside Brand stared at him with wide eyes. Rulf bunched his fists. Father Yarvi raised one brow. Thorn took a step forward, her mouth twisting, but the queen stopped her with a raised finger.

With a wincing effort the king held up one bony hand, eyes on Brand, and his warriors fell silent. "I asked him."

"Maybe I am a coward," said Brand, though his voice sounded out a good deal more boldly than usual. "Master Hunnan killed an old farmer the other night, and I was too coward to stop him. We burned a village and I was too coward to speak out. He set three students on one as a test and I was too coward to stand for the one. Standing for the weak against the strong. Isn't that what a warrior should be?"

"Damn you for a liar!" snarled Hunnan, "I'll—"

"You'll hold your tongue!" growled Father Yarvi, "until the king asks you to speak."

The master-at-arms' frown was murderous, but Brand didn't care. He felt as if a load was lifted. As if he'd had the *South Wind's* weight across his shoulders again, and suddenly let go. He felt, for the first time since he left Thorlby, as if he was standing in the light.

“You want someone with no fear?” He stuck his arm straight out. “There she stands. Thorn Bathu, the Queen’s Chosen Shield. In the First of Cities she fought seven men alone and saved the Empress of the South. They’re singing songs of it all about the Shattered Sea! And yet you’d rather take boys who scarcely know which end of a spear to hold. What mad pride is that? What foolishness? I used to dream of being a warrior. To serve you, my king. To fight for my country. To have a loyal brother always at my shoulder.” He looked Hunnan right in the eye, and shrugged. “If this is what it means to be a warrior, I want no part of it.”

The anger burst out once again, and once again King Uthil had to lift a trembling hand for silence.

“Some here might not care for your words,” he said. “But they are not the words of a coward. Some men are touched by Father Peace.” His tired eyes swiveled toward Yarvi, and then toward Thorn, and one eyelid began to flicker. “Just as some women are touched by Mother War. Death ... waits for us all.” The hand upon his sword was suddenly trembling worse than ever. “We each must find our own ... right path ... to her door ...”

He keeled forward. Father Yarvi darted from his stool and caught the king before he fell, his sword sliding from his lap and clattering in the mud. Between him and Rulf they lifted Uthil from his chair and walked him back into his tent. His head lolled. His feet dragged in the dirt. The muttering came up stronger than ever, but shocked and fearful now.

“The king dropped his sword.”

“An ill omen.”

“Poor weaponluck.”

“The favor of the gods is elsewhere ...”

“Calm yourselves!” Queen Laithlin stood, sweeping the crowd with icy scorn. “Are these warriors of Gettland or prattling slavegirls?” She had taken the king’s sword from the dirt, hugging it to her chest as he had done, but there was no quiver to her hand, no dampness in her eye, no weakness in her voice. “This is no time for doubts! The Breaker of Swords waits for us at Amon’s Tooth! The king may not be with us, but we know what he would say.”

“Steel is the answer!” barked Thorn, the elf-bangle flaring hot red.

“Steel!” roared Master Hunnan, holding high his sword, and metal hissed as more blades were drawn, and stabbed toward the sky.

“Steel! Steel! Steel!” came the chant from a hundred throats.

Brand was the only one who stayed silent. He’d always thought doing good meant fighting alongside his brothers. But maybe doing good meant not fighting at all.

THE APPOINTED PLACE

The armies of Vansterland and Gettland glared at each other across a shallow valley of lush, green grass.

“A fine spot to graze a herd of sheep,” said Rulf.

“Or to fight a battle.” Thorn narrowed her eyes and scanned the ridge opposite. She had never in her life seen a host half the size, the warriors picked out black on the crest against the bright sky, here or there a blade flashing as it caught the light of Mother Sun. The Vanstermen’s shield wall was drawn up loose, their shields blobs of bright-painted color and their spears a bristling forest behind. Grom-gil-Gorm’s dark banner hung limp over the center, a dusting of archers thrust out in front, more lightly armed skirmishers on each wing.

“So like our own army we might be looking in a great mirror,” murmured Yarvi.

“Apart from that damn elf-tower,” said Thorn.

Amon’s Tooth rose from a rocky outcrop at the far end of the Vanstermen’s line, a hollow tower thirty times a man’s height, tall and slender as a tapering sword blade, made from hollow cobwebs of elf-metal bars.

“What did it used to be?” asked Koll, gazing up at it in wonder.

“Who can say now?” said the minister. “A signal tower? A monument to the arrogance of the elves? A temple to the One God they broke into many?”

“I can tell you what it will be.” Rulf gazed grimly at the host gathered in its shadow. “A grave-marker. A grave for many hundreds.”

“Many hundreds of Vanstermen,” snapped Thorn. “I reckon our host the larger.”

“Aye,” said Rulf. “But it’s seasoned warriors win battles, and the numbers there are much the same.”

“And Gorm is known for keeping some horsemen out of sight,” said Father Yarvi. “Our strength is closely matched.”

“And only one of us has our king.” Rulf glanced back toward the camp. Uthil had not left his sick bed since the previous evening. Some said the Last Door stood open for him, and Father Yarvi had not denied it.

“Even a victory will leave Gettland weakened,” said the minister, “and Grandmother Wexen well knows it. This battle is all part of her design. She knew King Uthil could never turn down a challenge. The only victory here is if we do not fight at all.”

“What elf-spell have you worked to make that happen?” asked Thorn.

Father Yarvi gave his brittle smile. “I hope a little minister’s magic may do the trick.”

Koll plucked at his sparse shadow of a beard as he looked across the valley. "I wonder if Fror's among them."

"Maybe," said Thorn. A man they had trained with, laughed with, fought beside, rowed beside.

"What will you do if you meet him in the battle?"

"Probably kill him."

"Let's hope you don't meet, then." Koll lifted an arm to point. "They're coming!"

Gorm's banner was on the move, a party of horsemen breaking from the center of his host and coming down the slope. Thorn nudged her way through the king's most favored warriors to Laithlin's side, but the queen waved her away. "Keep to the back, Thorn, and stay hooded."

"My place is beside you."

"Today you are not my shield but my sword. Sometimes a blade is best hidden. If your moment comes, you will know it."

"Yes, my queen."

Reluctantly, Thorn pulled up her hood, waited until the rest of the royal party had set off, then slouching in her saddle like a thief, in a place no songs are sung of, followed at the back. Down the long slope they trotted, hooves flicking mud from the soft ground. Two standard-bearers went with them, Laithlin's gold and Uthil's iron-gray bravely snapping as the breeze took them.

Closer drew the Vanstermen, and closer. Twenty of their most storied warriors, high-helmed, stern-frowned, braids in their hair and gold rings forged into their mail. And at the fore, the necklace of pommels twisted from the swords of his fallen enemies four-times looped about his great neck, came the man who killed Thorn's father. Grom-gil-Gorm, the Breaker of Swords, in his full battle glory. On his left rode his standard-bearer, a great Shend slave with a garnet-studded thrall collar, black cloth flapping behind him. On his right rode two stocky white-haired boys, one with a mocking smile and Gorm's huge shield upon his back, the other with a warlike sneer and Gorm's great sword. Between them and the king, her jaw working so hard that her shaved scalp squirmed, rode Mother Scaer.

"Greetings, Gettlanders!" The hooves of Gorm's towering horse squelched as he pulled it up in the valley's marshy bottom and grinned into the bright sky. "Mother Sun smiles upon our meeting!"

"A good omen," said Father Yarvi.

"For which of us?" asked Gorm.

"For both of us, perhaps?" Laithlin nudged her own mount forward. Thorn itched to ride up close beside where she could protect her, but forced her heels to be still.

"Queen Laithlin! How can your wisdom and beauty so defy the passing years?"

"How can your strength and courage?" asked the queen.

Gorm scratched thoughtfully at his beard. "When last I was in Thorlby I did not seem to be held in such high regard."

"The gods give no finer gift than a good enemy, my husband always says. Gettland could ask for no better enemy than the Breaker of Swords."

"You flatter me, and I enjoy it hugely. But where is King Uthil? I was so looking forward to renewing the friendship we forged in his Godshall."

"I fear my husband could not come," said Laithlin. "He sends me in his place."

Gorm gave a disappointed pout. "Few warriors so renowned. The battle will be the lesser for his absence. But the Mother of Crows waits for no man, whatever his fame."

"There is another choice." Yarvi eased his horse up beside the queen's. "A way in which

bloodshed could be spared. A way in which we of the north could free ourselves from the yoke of the High King in Skekenhouse.”

Gorm raised a brow. “Are you a magician as well as a minister?”

“We both pray to the same gods, both sing of the same heroes, both endure the same weather. Yet Grandmother Wexen turns us one against the other. If there is a battle at Amon’s Tooth today, whoever is the victor, only she will win. What could Vansterland and Gettland not achieve together?” He leaned eagerly forward in his saddle. “Let us make of the fist an open hand! Let there be an alliance between us!”

Thorn gave a gasp at that, and she was not alone. A muttering went through the warriors on both sides, breathed oaths and angry glances, but the Breaker of Swords held up his hand for quiet.

“A bold idea, Father Yarvi. No doubt you are a deep-cunning man. You speak for Father Peace, as a minister should.” Gorm worked his mouth unhappily, took a long breath through his nose, and let it sigh away. “But I fear it cannot be. My minister is of a different mind.”

Yarvi blinked at Mother Scaer. “She is?”

“My new minister is.”

“Greetings, Father Yarvi.” Gorm’s young white-haired sword- and shield-bearers parted to let a rider through, a cloaked rider upon a pale horse. She pushed her hood back and the wind blew up chill, lashing the yellow hair about her gaunt face, eyes fever-bright as she smiled. A smile so twisted with bitterness it was hard to look upon.

“You know Mother Isriun, I think,” murmured Gorm.

“Odem’s brat,” hissed Queen Laithlin, and it was plain from her voice that this was no part of her plans.

“You are mistaken, my queen.” Isriun gave her a crooked smile. “My only family now is the Ministry, just as Father Yarvi’s is. Our only parent is Grandmother Wexen, eh, *brother*? After her abject failure in the First of Cities, she did not feel Sister Scaer could be trusted.” Scaer’s face twitched at that title. “She sent me to take her place.”

“And you allowed it?” muttered Yarvi.

Gorm worked his tongue sourly around his mouth, clearly a long stride from pleased. “I have an oath to the High King to consider.”

“The Breaker of Swords is wise as well as strong,” said Isriun. “He remembers his proper place in the order of things.” Gorm looked sourer yet at that, but kept a brooding silence. “Something you of Gettland have forgotten. Grandmother Wexen demands you be chastised for your arrogance, your insolence, your disloyalty. Even now the High King raises a great army of Lowlanders and Ingling in their countless thousands. He summons his champion, Bright Yilling, to command them! The greatest army the Shattered Sea has ever seen! Ready to march on Throvenland for the glory of the One God!”

Yarvi snorted. “And you stand with them, do you, Grom-gil-Gorm? You kneel before the High King? You prostrate yourself before his One God?”

The long hair fluttered across Gorm’s scarred face in the wind, his frown carved from stone. “I stand where my oaths have put me, Father Yarvi.”

“Still,” said Isriun, her thin hands twisting eagerly together, “the Ministry speaks always for peace. The One God offers always forgiveness, however little it may be deserved. To spare bloodshed is a noble desire. We stand by our offer of a duel of kings to settle the issue.” Her lip curled. “But I fear Uthil is too old, and weak, and riddled with sickness to fight. No doubt the One God’s punishment for

his disloyalty.”

Laithlin glanced across at Yarvi, and the minister gave the slightest nod. “Uthil sends me in his place,” she said, and Thorn felt her heart, already beating hard, begin to thud against her ribs. “A challenge to a king must be a challenge to his queen also.”

Mother Isriun barked scornful laughter. “Will you fight the Breaker of Swords, gilded queen?”

Laithlin’s lip curled. “A queen does not fight, child. My Chosen Shield will stand for me.”

And Thorn felt a terrible calm settle upon her, and inside her hood she began to smile.

“This is trickery,” snapped Isriun, her own smile vanished.

“This is law,” said Yarvi. “As minister to a king you should understand it. You gave the challenge. We accept.”

Gorm waved a great hand as though at a bothersome fly. “Trickery or law, it is the same. I will fight anyone.” He sounded almost bored. “Show me your champion, Laithlin, and at dawn tomorrow we will meet on this ground, and I will kill him, and break his sword, and add its pommel to my chain.” He turned his dark eyes on the warriors of Gettland. “But your Chosen Shield should know that Mother War breathed on me in my crib, and it has been foreseen no man can kill me.”

Laithlin gave a chill smile, and it was as if all things slotted smoothly into place like the workings of a lock, and the gods’ purpose for Thorn Bathu was suddenly revealed.

“My Chosen Shield is not a man.”

So it was time for the sword to be drawn. Thorn pulled off the cloak and flung it away. In silence Gettland’s warriors parted and she nudged her horse between them, her gaze fixed on the King of Vansterland.

And as he saw her come his great brow furrowed with doubt.

“Grom-gil-Gorm,” she said softly as she rode between Laithlin and Yarvi. “Breaker of Swords.” Mother Isriun’s horse shied back out of her way. “Maker of Orphans.” Thorn reined in beside him, his frowning face lit red by the blazing light of her elf-bangle, and she leaned from her saddle to whisper.

“Your death comes.”

A BRAVE FACE

For a while afterward they didn't move. Her hair tickling his face, her ribs pressing on his with each hot breath. She kissed his open mouth, nuzzled his face, and he lay still. She slid off him, stretched out beside him with a contented grunt, and he lay still. She wriggled against him, working her head into his shoulder, breath getting slower, softer, and he lay still.

No doubt he should've been holding her like a miser clutches his gold, making the most of every moment they had.

But instead Brand felt sore, and surly, and scared. Instead her clammy skin against his felt as if it was trapping him, her heat smothering him, and he twisted free of her and stood, caught his head on the canvas in the darkness and thrashed it away with his hand, cursing, making the fabric flap and wobble.

"You surely taught my tent a lesson," came Thorn's voice.

He could hardly see any sign of her. Maybe a little crescent of light on her shoulder as she propped herself on one elbow. A gleam at the corners of her eyes. A glint of gold in her hair.

"You're going to fight him, then?" he said.

"I reckon."

"Grom-gil-Gorm."

"Unless he's so scared he decides not to turn up."

"The Breaker of Swords. The Maker of Orphans." The names dropped dead in the darkness. Names great warriors quailed at. Names mothers scared their children with. "How many duels has he fought?"

"They say a score."

"How many have you?"

"You know how many, Brand."

"None."

"It's around that number."

"How many men has he killed?"

"Pits full of them." Her voice was getting hard, now, a fiery glow under the blanket from her elf-bangle. "More than any man around the Shattered Sea, maybe."

"How many pommels on that chain of his? A hundred? Two?"

"And my father's is one of them."

"You looking to follow in his footsteps?"

That glow grew brighter, showing him the lines of her scowl. "Since you ask, I'm hoping to kill the big bastard and leave his corpse for the crows."

Silence between them, and someone passed outside with a torch, orange flaring across the side of Thorn's face, the star-shaped scar on her cheek. Brand knelt, level with her. "We could just go."

"No, we can't."

"Father Yarvi, he twisted you into this. A trick, a gamble, like that poisoner in Yaletoft. This is all his plan—"

"What if it is? I'm not a child, Brand, my eyes were open. I swore an oath to him and another to the queen and I knew what they meant. I knew I might have to fight for her. I knew I might have to die for her."

"If we took horses we could be ten miles off by dawn."

She kicked angrily at the blanket and lay back, hands over her face. "We're not running, Brand. Neither one of us. I told Gorm his death comes. Be a bit of a let-down for everyone if I never even arrived, wouldn't it?"

"We could go south to Throvenland, join a crew and go down the Divine. On to the First of Cities. Vialine would give us a place. For the gods' sake, Thorn, he's the Breaker of Swords—"

"Brand, stop!" she snarled, so suddenly that he jerked back. "You think I don't know all this? You think my head isn't buzzing with it already like a nest of bloody wasps? You think I don't know everyone in our camp is working at the same sums and coming to the same answer?" She leaned farther forward, eyes gleaming. "I'll tell you what you could do for me, Brand. You could be the one man in fifty miles who thinks I can win. Or at least pretends I can. This isn't your choice, it's mine, and I've made it. Your choice is to be my shoulder-man or go."

He knelt there naked, blinking for a moment as if he'd been slapped. Then he took a long, shuddering breath, and blew it out. "I'll always be your shoulder-man. Always."

"I know you will. But I'm meant to be the one terrified."

"I'm sorry." He reached out, touched her face in the darkness and she pressed her cheek into his hand. "It's just ... It took us a long time getting here. I don't want to lose you."

"I don't want to be lost. But you know I was born to do this."

"If anyone can beat him, you can." He wished he believed it.

"I know. But I might not have much time left." She took his wrist, and dragged him into the bed. "I don't want to spend it talking."

BRAND SAT WITH THORN'S SWORD across his knees and polished it.

He'd polished it plain hilt to bright point a dozen times already. As the stars were snuffed out, and the sky brightened, and Mother Sun showed herself behind Amon's Tooth. The steel couldn't be any cleaner, the edge any keener. But still he scrubbed, muttering prayers to Mother War. Or the same prayer, over and over.

"... let her live, let her live, let her live ..."

You want a thing when you can't have it. When you get it you suddenly sprout doubts. Then when you think you might lose it you find you need it worse than ever.

Father Yarvi was muttering some prayers of his own while he tended to a pot over the fire, from time to time tossing a few dried leaves from one pouch or another into a brew that smelled like feet.

"You could probably stop polishing," he said.

"I can't stand in the square with her." Brand flipped the sword over and set furiously to work on the other side. "All I can do is polish and pray. I plan to do both the best I can."

Brand knew Thorn would show no fear. But she even had the hint of a smile as she sat, elbows on her knees and her hands calmly dangling, the elf-bangle on her wrist glowing bright. She had a steel guard on her left arm but otherwise no armor, just leather stitched in places with steel rings, bound tight with straps and belts so there was nothing left loose to catch a hold of. Queen Laithlin stood at her side, binding her tangled hair tight against her skull, fingers moving sure and steady as if it was for a wedding feast rather than a duel. Two brave faces there, and no mistake. The bravest in the camp, for all they were the two with most to lose.

So when Thorn glanced over at him, Brand did his best to nod back with a brave face of his own. That much he could do. That, and polish, and pray.

“Is she ready?” murmured Father Yarvi.

“It’s Thorn. She’s always ready. Whatever these idiots might think.”

The warriors had been gathering since first light and now there was a whispering crowd looking on, pressed in about the tents, peering over one another’s shoulders. Master Hunnan was in the front rank, and couldn’t have frowned any harder without tearing the deep-creased skin on his forehead. Brand could see the dismay and disgust on their faces. That some girl should be fighting for Gettland’s honor while the sworn warriors stood idle. A girl who’d failed a test and been named a murderer. A girl who wore no mail and carried no shield.

Thorn showed no sign of giving a damn for their opinion as she stood, though. She looked as long and lean as a spider, the way Skifr used to but taller, and broader, and stronger, and she spread her arms wide and worked the fingers, her jaw set hard and her narrowed eyes fixed on the valley.

Queen Laithlin set a hand on her shoulder. “May Mother War stand with you, my Chosen Shield.”

“She always has, my queen,” said Thorn.

“It’s nearly time.” Father Yarvi poured some of his brew into a cup and held it out with his good hand. “Drink this.”

Thorn sniffed at it and jerked back. “Smells foul!”

“The best brews do. This will sharpen your senses, and quicken your hands and dull any pain.”

“Is that cheating?”

“Mother Isriun will be using every trick she can devise.” And Yarvi held out the steaming cup again. “A champion must win, the rest is dust.”

Thorn held her nose, swallowed it down, and spat with disgust.

Rulf stepped up, shield held like a tray with two knives laid on it, freshly sharpened. “Sure you don’t want mail?”

Thorn shook her head. “Speed will be my best armor and my best weapon. Speed, and surprise, and aggression. These might come in handy too, though.” She took the blades and slid them into sheaths at her chest and her side.

“One more for luck.” Brand held out the dagger that Rin made him, the one he’d carried up and down the Divine and the Denied. The one that saved his life out on the steppe.

“I’ll keep it safe.” Thorn slid it through her belt at the small of her back.

“I’d rather it kept you safe,” murmured Brand.

“A lot of blades,” said Father Yarvi.

“Got caught without any once and didn’t enjoy the experience,” said Thorn. “I won’t be dying for lack of stabbing back, at least.”

“You won’t be dying.” Brand made sure his voice held no doubts, even if his heart was bursting

with them. "You'll be killing the bastard."

"Aye." She leaned close. "I feel like my guts are going to drop out of my arse."

"I'd never know."

"Fear keeps you careful," she muttered, hands opening and closing. "Fear keeps you alive."

"No doubt."

"I wish Skifr was here."

"You've got nothing left to learn from her."

"A little of that elf-magic might not hurt, though. Just in case."

"And rob you of the glory? No." Brand showed her both sides of the sword, a frosty glint to the edges he'd been polishing since the first hint of light. "Don't hesitate."

"Never," she said, as she slid the blade through the clasp at her side and held her hand out for the ax. "Why did you? That day on the beach?"

Brand thought back, back down a long, strange year to the training square on the sand. "I was thinking about doing good." He spun the ax around, steel etched with letters in five tongues flashing. "Looking at both sides of the case, like the fool I am."

"You'd have beaten me if you hadn't."

"Maybe."

Thorn slid the ax through its loop. "I would've failed my test and Hunnan would never have given me another. I wouldn't have killed Edwal. I wouldn't have been called a murderer. I wouldn't have been trained by Skifr, or rowed down the Divine, or saved the empress, or had songs sung of my high deeds."

"I wouldn't have lost my place on the king's raid," said Brand. "I'd be a proud warrior of Gettland now, doing just as Master Hunnan told me."

"And my mother would have married me off to some old fool, and I'd be wearing his key all wrong and sewing very badly."

"You wouldn't be facing Grom-gil-Gorm."

"No. But we'd never have had ... whatever we've got."

He looked into her eyes for a moment. "I'm glad I hesitated."

"So am I." She kissed him, then. One last kiss before the storm. Her lips soft against his. Her breath hot in the dawn chill.

"Thorn?" Koll was standing beside them. "Gorm's in the square."

Brand wanted to scream, then, but he forced himself to smile instead. "The sooner you start, the sooner you kill him."

He drew Odda's sword and started beating on Rulf's shield with the hilt, and others did the same with their own weapons, their own armor, noise spreading out through the ranks, and men began to shout, to roar, to sing out their defiance. She was nowhere near the champion they'd have picked, but she was Gettland's champion even so.

And Thorn strode tall through a thunder of clashing metal, the warriors parting before her like the earth before the plow.

Striding to her meeting with the Breaker of Swords.

STEEL

"I have been waiting for you," said Grom-gil-Gorm in his sing-song voice.

He sat upon a stool with his white-haired blade- and shield-bearers kneeling to either side, one of them smiling at Thorn, the other scowling as if he might fight her himself. Behind them, along the eastern edge of the square, twenty of Gorm's closest warriors were ranged, Mother Isriun glaring from their midst, hair stirred about her gaunt face by a breath of wind, Sister Scaer sullen beside her. Behind them were hundreds more fighting men, black outlines along the top of the ridge, Mother Sun bright as she rose beyond Amon's Tooth.

"Thought I'd give you a little more time alive." Thorn put on her bravest face as she stepped between Queen Laithlin and Father Yarvi. Stepped out in front of Gettland's twenty best and into that little plot of close-cut grass. A square just like the many she'd trained in, eight strides on a side, a spear driven into the ground at each corner.

A square where either she or Grom-gil-Gorm would die.

"No gift to me." The Breaker of Swords shrugged his great shoulders and his heavy mail, forged with zigzag lines of gold, gave an iron whisper. "Time drags when the Last Door stands so near."

"Perhaps it stands nearer for you than for me."

"Perhaps." He toyed thoughtfully with one of the pommels on his chain. "You are Thorn Bathu, then?"

"Yes."

"This one they sing the songs of?"

"Yes."

"The one who saved the Empress of the South?"

"Yes."

"The one who won a priceless relic from her." Gorm glanced down at the elf-bangle, glowing red as a burning coal on Thorn's wrist, and raised his brows. "I had taken those songs for lies."

She shrugged. "Some of them."

"However grand the truth, it is never enough for the skalds, eh?" Gorm took his shield from the smiling boy, a mighty thing, painted black with a rim scored and dented by a hundred old blows. Gifts from the many men he had killed in squares like this one. "I think we met before."

"In Skekenhouse. Where you knelt before the High King."

His cheek gave the faintest twitch of displeasure. "We all must kneel to someone. I should have known you sooner, but you have changed."

"Yes."

"You are Storn Headland's daughter."

"Yes."

"That was a glorious duel." The frowning boy offered Gorm's sword and he curled his great

fingers about the grip and drew it. A monstrous blade, Thorn would have needed both hands to swing it but he carried it lightly as a willow switch. "Let us hope ours will make as jolly a song."

"Don't count on the same outcome," said Thorn, watching Mother Sun's reflection flash down his steel. He would have the reach, the strength, the armor but, weighed down by all that metal, she would have the speed. She would last the longer. Who would have the upper hand in the contest of wits, it remained to be seen.

"I have fought a score of duels, and put a score of brave men in their howes, and learned one thing. Never count on the outcome." Gorm's eyes moved over her clothes, her weapons, judging her as she was judging him. She wondered what strengths he saw. What weaknesses. "I never fought a woman before, though."

"Nor will you again. This is your last fight." She raised her chin at him. "Mother War's breath will not shield you from me."

She had hoped for anger, some sign he might be taunted into rashness, but all the King of Vansterland gave her was a sad little smile. "Ah, the confidence of the young. It was foreseen no man could kill me." And he stood, his great shadow stretching toward her across the stubbled grass, a giant stepped out from the songs. "Not that you could."

"MOTHER WAR, LET HER LIVE," mouthed Brand, both fists clenched aching tight. "Mother War, let her live ..."

An eerie silence fell across the valley as the fighters took their places. Only the stirring of the wind in the grass, a bird calling high and harsh in the iron sky, the faint jingle of war-gear as one man or another shifted nervously. Mother Isriun stepped out into the lonely space between the two champions.

"Are you ready to kill? Are you ready to die?" She held up her hand, a curl of white goose-down in her fingers. "Are you ready to face the One God's judgment?"

Gorm stood straight and tall, huge as a mountain, his broad shield held before him, his long sword out behind. "Mother War will be my judge," he growled.

Thorn crouched low, teeth bared in a vicious grin, tense as a full-bent bow. "Whichever." She turned her head and spat. "I'm ready."

"Then begin!" called Mother Isriun, and let the feather fall, and hurried back, out of the short grass and into the rank of warriors opposite.

Down that feather drifted, slow, slow, every eye on both sides fixed upon it. It was caught by an eddy, whirled and spun. Down it drifted, and down, every breath on both sides held.

"Mother War, let her live, Mother War, let her live ..."

THE INSTANT THAT SCRAP of down touched the close-cropped grass Thorn sprang. She had not forgotten Skifr's lessons. They were in her flesh. Always attack. Strike first. Strike last.

One stride and the wind rushed at her. Gorm stayed rigid, watching. Two strides and she crushed the feather into the dirt beneath her heel. Still he was frozen. Three strides and she was on him, screaming, swinging high with Skifr's ax, low with the sword forged from her father's bones. Now he moved, moved to meet her, and her blade crashed on his, and the ax chopped splinters from his shield.

In that instant she knew she had never fought anyone so strong. She was used to a shield giving when she hit it, used to staggering a man with the weight of her blows. But striking Gorm's shield was like striking a deep-rooted oak. Striking his sword jarred her from her palm to the tip of her nose and left her bared teeth rattling.

Thorn had never been one to get discouraged at the first reverse, though.

Gorm had thrust his heavy left boot recklessly forward and she dropped low, trying to hook it with her ax and bring him down. He stepped back nimbly for all his mountainous bulk and she heard him grunt, felt the great sword coming, whipping at her like a scorpion's tail. She only just lurched under as it ripped past at a vicious angle, a blow to split shields, to split helms, to split heads, the wind of it cold on her face.

She twisted, watching for the opening a swing like that must leave, but there was none. Gorm handled that monstrous blade as neatly as Thorn's mother might a needle, no rage or madness in it, all control. His eyes stayed calm. His door of a shield never drifted.

That first exchange she judged a draw, and she danced back into room to wait for another chance. To seek out a better opening.

Slowly, carefully, the Breaker of Swords took one step toward the center of the square, twisting his great left boot into the sod.

“YES!” HISSED RULF AS Thorn darted in, letting go a flurry of blows. “Yes!” Blades clattered as they scarred Gorm's shield, Brand clenching his fists so tight the nails bit at his palms.

He gasped as Thorn rolled under the shining arc of Gorm's sword, came up snarling to hack at his shield, pushed a great thrust scornfully away and danced back out of range, using the full width of the square. She went in a drunken swagger, weapons drifting, the way that Skifr used to, and Gorm studied her over the rim of his shield, trying to find some pattern in the chaos.

“He is cautious,” hissed Queen Laithlin.

“Stripped of the armor of his prophecy,” muttered Father Yarvi. “He fears her.”

The King of Vansterland took one more slow step, twisting his boot into the ground again as though he were laying the foundation stone of a hero's hall. He was all stillness, Thorn all movement.

“Like Mother Sea against Father Earth,” murmured Rulf.

“Mother Sea always wins that battle,” said Laithlin.

“Given time,” said Father Yarvi.

Brand winced, unable to look, unable to look away. “Mother War, let her live ...”

GORM'S SHIELD WAS SOLID as a citadel's gate. Thorn couldn't have broken it down with a ram and twenty strong men. And getting around it would hardly be easier. She'd never seen a shield handled so cleverly. Quick to move it, he was, and even quicker to move behind it, but he held it high. Each step he took that big left boot of his crept too far forward, more of his leg showing below the bottom rim than was prudent. Each time she saw it happen it seemed more a weakness.

Tempting. So tempting.

Too tempting, maybe?

Only a fool would think a warrior of his fame would have no tricks, and Thorn was no one's fool. Be quicker, tougher, cleverer, Skifr said. She had tricks of her own.

She let her eyes rest on that boot, licking her lips as if she watched the meat brought in, long enough to make sure he saw her watching, then she moved. His sword darted out but she was ready, slipped around it, Skifr's ax whipping across, but shoulder-high, not low where he expected it. She saw his eyes go wide. He lurched back, jerking up the shield, caught her ax with the rim, but the bearded blade still thudded into his shoulder, mail rings flying like dust from a beaten carpet.

She expected him to drop back, maybe even fall, but he shrugged her ax off as if it was a harsh word, pressed forward, too close for his sword or hers. The rim of his shield caught her in the mouth as she tumbled away and sent her staggering. No pain, no doubt, no dizziness. The shock of it only made her sharper. She heard Gorm roar, saw Mother Sun catch steel and dodged back as his blade whistled past.

That exchange she had to judge a draw as well, but they were both marked now.

Blood on his mail. Blood on his shield rim. Blood on her ax. Blood in her mouth. She bared her teeth at him in a fighting snarl and spat red onto the grass between them.

BLOOD

Like a pack of dogs, the sight of blood brought the gathered warriors suddenly to life, and the noise couldn't have been more deafening if they'd had the battle after all.

From the ridge in front the Vanstermen screeched prayers and bellowed curses, from the ridge behind the Gettlanders roared out futile encouragements, pointless advice. They rattled axes on shields, swords on helmets, sent up a din of lust and fury to wake the dead in their howes, to wake the gods from slumber.

Of all things, men most love to watch others face Death. It reminds them they yet live.

Across the square, among the snarling, snapping Vanstermen, Brand saw Mother Isriun, livid with fury, and Mother Scaer beside her, eyes calmly narrowed as she watched the contest.

Gorm swung a great overhead and Thorn twitched away, his sword missing her by a hand's breadth and opening a huge wound in the ground, grass and earth showering up. Brand bit his knuckle, painful hard. It would only take one of those to find her and that heavy steel could cut her clean in half. It felt as if it was a day since the fight began and he hadn't taken a breath the whole time.

"Mother War, let her live ..."

THORN STRUTTED ABOUT THE SQUARE. It was her grass. She owned it. Queen of this mud. She hardly heard the screaming warriors on the high ground, barely saw Laithlin, or Isriun, or Yarvi, or even Brand. The world had shrunk to her, and the Breaker of Swords, and the few short strides of short grass between them, and she was starting to like what she saw.

Gorm was breathing hard, sweat across his furrowed forehead. The weight of all that gear was bound to tell, but she hadn't hoped it would be so soon. His shield was beginning to droop. She almost laughed. She could have done this for hours. She had done it for hours, for days, for weeks, down the Divine and the Denied and back.

She sprang in, aiming high with her sword. Too high, so he could duck, and duck he did, but just as she had planned his shield tipped forward. It was an easy thing to step around it, hook the top rim with the bearded head of Skifr's ax, marked with letters in five tongues. She meant to drag it down, leave him open, maybe tear it from his arm altogether, but she misjudged him. He roared, ripping his shield upwards, tearing the ax from her grip and sending it spinning high into the air.

That left his body unguarded for a moment, though, and Thorn had never been one to hesitate. Her sword hissed in below his shield and struck him in the side. Hard enough to fold him slightly, to make him stumble. Hard enough to cut through mail and find the flesh beneath.

Not hard enough to stop him, though.

He snarled, swung once and made her stagger back, thrust and made her dance away, chopped again, even harder, steel hissing at the air, but she was already backing off, watchful, circling.

As he turned toward her she saw the ragged tear in his mail, links flapping free, blood glistening.

She saw how he favored that side as he took up his stance, and she began to smile as she filled her empty left hand with her longest dagger.

She might have lost her ax, but that round was hers.

NOW, THORN WAS ONE of them. Now she'd bloodied Grom-gil-Gorm and Master Hunnan thrust his fist in the air, roared his support. Now the warriors who'd sneered at her made a deafening din in admiration of her prowess.

No doubt those with the gift were already setting the song of her triumph in verse. They tasted victory, but all Brand could taste was fear. His heart thudded as loud as Rin's hammer. He twitched and gasped with every movement in the square. He'd never felt so helpless. He couldn't do good. He couldn't do bad. He couldn't do anything.

Thorn darted forward, going low with her sword, so fast Brand could hardly follow it. Gorm dropped his shield to block but she was already gone, slashing across the top of his shield with her dagger. Gorm jerked his head back, staggered a step, a red line across his cheek, across his nose, under his eye.

THE BATTLE JOY WAS on her now. Or maybe Father Yarvi's brew was.

The breath ripped at her chest, she danced on air. The blood sweet in her mouth, her skin on fire. She smiled, smiled so wide it seemed her scarred cheeks might split.

The cut below Gorm's eye was leaking, streaks of blood down his face, out of his slit nose, into his beard.

He was tiring, he was hurt, he was growing careless. She had his measure and he knew it. She could see the fear in his eyes. Could see the doubt, ever growing.

His shield had drifted up even higher to guard his wounded face. His stance had loosened, his heavy sword wilting in his grip. That left leg slipped still farther forward, all exposed, knee wobbling.

Perhaps it had been a trick, in the beginning, but what trick could stop her now? She breathed fire and spat lightning. She was the storm, always moving. She was Mother War made flesh.

"Your death comes!" she screamed at him, words even she could hardly hear over the noise.

She would kill the Breaker of Swords, and avenge her father, and prove herself the greatest warrior about the Shattered Sea. The greatest warrior in the world! The songs they would sing of this!

She led him in a circle, led him around until her back was to the Vanstermen, until her back was to the east. She saw Gorm narrow his eyes as Mother Sun stabbed at them, twisting away, leaving his leg unguarded. She fainted high, tightening her fingers about the grip, ducked under an ill-timed chop and screamed out as she swept her sword in a great, low circle.

The blade forged with her father's bones struck Gorm's leg above the ankle with all Thorn's strength, and anger, and training behind it. The moment of her victory. The moment of her vengeance.

But instead of slicing through flesh and bone the bitter edge clanged on metal, jarred in Thorn's hand so badly she stumbled forward, off-balance.

Hidden armor. Steel glinting beneath the slit leather of Gorm's boot.

He moved quick as a snake, not near so tired nor so hurt as he had made her think, chopping down, catching her blade with his and tearing it from her numbed fingers.

She lashed at him with her knife but he caught it on his shield and rammed the boss into her ribs. It was like being kicked by a horse and she tottered back, only just staying on her feet.

Gorm glared at her over his shield rim, and it was his turn to smile. “You are a worthy opponent,” he said. “As dangerous as any I have fought.” He stepped forward, planting that armored boot on her fallen sword and grinding it into the sod. “But your death comes.”

“OH, GODS,” CROAKED BRAND, cold right through to his bones.

Thorn was fighting with two knives now, no reach, and Gorm was herding her around the square with shining sweeps of his great sword, seeming stronger than ever.

The men of Gettland had fallen suddenly quiet, while the noise from across the valley redoubled.

Brand prayed Thorn would stay away but knew her only chance was to close with him. Sure enough, she ducked under a high cut and flung herself forward, stabbed with her right, a vicious, flashing overhand, but Gorm heaved his shield up, her blade thudding deep between two boards and lodging tight.

“Kill him!” hissed Queen Laithlin.

Thorn slashed at Gorm’s sword-arm with her left as he brought it back, dagger scraping down his mail and catching his hand, blood spattering as the great sword tumbled from his grip.

Or perhaps he let it fall. As she stabbed at him again he caught her arm, his fingers closing about her wrist with a smack that was like a punch in Brand’s stomach.

“Oh, gods,” he croaked.

BREATH

Thorn snatched for Brand's dagger but her elbow tangled with Gorm's loose shield and he stepped close, smothering her. He had her left wrist tight and he wrenched it up, the elf-bangle grinding into her flesh. He let go the handle of his shield and caught her right sleeve.

"I have you!" he snarled.

"No!" She twisted back as if she was trying to wriggle free and he dragged her closer. "I have you!"

She jerked forward, using his strength against him, butted him full in the jaw and snapped his head up. She set her knee against his ribs, screamed as she ripped her right arm free.

He kept his crushing grip on her left wrist, though. She had one chance. Just one. She tore Brand's dagger from the small of her back, stabbed at Gorm's neck as his eyes came back toward her.

He jerked his shield hand up to ward her off and the blade punched through the meat of it, snake-worked crosspiece smacking against his palm. She snarled as she drove his hand back, his shield flopping loose on the straps, but with a trembling effort he stopped the bright point just short of his throat, held it there, pink spit flecking from his bared teeth.

Then, even though his hand was stabbed right through, the great fingers closed about her right fist and trapped her tight.

Thorn strained with every fiber to push the red blade into his neck, but you will not beat a strong man with strength, and there was no man as strong as the Breaker of Swords. He had both her hands pinned and he set his shoulder, let go a growl, and pressed her trembling back, back toward the edge of the square, hot blood leaking from his punctured palm and down the hilt of the dagger, wetting her crushed fist.

BRAND GAVE A SICK GROAN as Gorm forced Thorn down onto her knees in front of the jeering warriors of Vansterland.

Her elf-bangle glowed red through the flesh of his clutching sword hand, bones showing black inside, squeezing, squeezing. She gasped through her gritted teeth as the knife toppled from the loose fingers of her left hand, bounced from her shoulder and away into the grass, and Gorm let go her wrist and caught her tight around the throat.

Brand tried to take a step into the square but Father Yarvi had him by one arm, Rulf by the other, wrestling him back.

"No," hissed the helmsman in his ear.

"Yes!" shrieked Mother Isriun, staring down in delight.

NO BREATH.

Thorn's every hard-trained muscle strained but Gorm was too strong, and back he twisted her, and back. His grip crushed her right hand around the handle of Brand's dagger, bones groaning. She fumbled in the grass with the other for her knife but couldn't find it, punched at his knee but there was no strength in it, tried to reach his face but could only tear weakly at his bloody beard.

"Kill her!" shouted Mother Isriun.

Gorm forced Thorn toward the ground, blood dripping from his snarl and pattering on her cheek. Her chest heaved, but all that happened was a dead squelching in her throat.

No breath. Her face was burning. She could hardly hear the storm of voices for the surging of blood in her head. She plucked at Gorm's hand with her numb fingertips, tore at it with her nails but it was forged from iron, carved from wood, ruthless as the roots of trees that over years will burst the very rock apart.

"Kill her!" Even though she could see Mother Isriun's face, twisted in triumph above her, she could only just hear her shriek. "The High King decrees it! The One God ordains it!"

Gorm's eyes flickered sideways to his minister, his cheek twitching. His grip seemed to loosen, but perhaps that was Thorn's grip on life, slipping, slipping.

No breath. It was growing dark. She faced the Last Door, no tricks left to play. Death slid the bolt, pushed it wide. She teetered on the threshold.

But Gorm did not push her over.

As if through a shadowy veil she saw his forehead crease.

"Kill her!" screeched Mother Isriun, her voice going higher and higher, wilder and wilder. "Grandmother Wexen demands it! Grandmother Wexen *commands* it!"

And Gorm's bloody face shuddered again, a spasm from his eye down to his jaw. His lips slipped back over his teeth and left his mouth a straight, flat line. His right hand relaxed, and Thorn heaved in a choking breath, the world tipping over as she flopped onto her side.

BRAND WATCHED IN DISBELIEF as Gorm let Thorn fall and turned slowly to stare at Isriun. The hungry snarls of his warriors began to fade, the crowds above fell silent, the noise all guttering out to leave a shocked quiet.

"I am the Breaker of Swords." Gorm put his right hand ever so gently on his chest. "What madness makes you speak to me in such a fashion?"

Isriun pointed down at Thorn, rolling onto her face, coughing puke into the grass. "Kill her!"

"No."

"Grandmother Wexen commands—"

"I tire of Grandmother Wexen's commands!" roared Gorm, eyes near-popping from his bloody face. "I tire of the High King's arrogance! But most of all, Mother Isriun ..." He bared his teeth in a horrible grimace as he twisted Brand's dagger from his shield hand. "I tire of your voice. Its constant bleating grates upon me."

Mother Isriun's face had turned deathly pale. She tried to shrink back but Scaer's tattooed arm snaked about her shoulders and held her tight. "You would break your oaths to them?" muttered Isriun, eyes wide.

"Break my oaths?" Gorm shook the scarred shield from his arm and let it clatter down. "There is less honor in keeping them. I shatter them. I spit on them. I shit on them." He loomed over Isriun, the knife glinting red in his hand. "The High King decrees, does he? Grandmother Wexen commands,

does she? Old goat and old sow, I renounce them! I defy them!"

Isriun's thin neck fluttered as she swallowed. "If you kill me there will be war."

"Oh, there will be war. The Mother of Crows spreads her wings, girl." Grom-gil-Gorm slowly raised the knife that Rin had forged, Isriun's eyes rooted to the bright point. "Her feathers are swords! Hear them rattle?" And a smile spread across his face. "But I do not need to kill you." He tossed the knife skittering through the grass to end beside Thorn where she hunched on hands and knees, retching. "After all, Mother Scaer, why kill what you can sell?"

Gorm's old minister, and now his new one, gave a smile chill as the winter sea. "Take this snake away and put a collar on her."

"You'll pay!" shrieked Isriun, eyes wild. "You'll pay for this!" But Gorm's warriors were already dragging her up the eastern slope.

The Breaker of Swords turned back, blood dripping from the dangling fingers of his wounded hand. "Does your offer of alliance still stand, Laithlin?"

"What could Vansterland and Gettland not achieve together?" called the Golden Queen.

"Then I accept."

A stunned sigh rippled around the square, as if the held breath of every man was suddenly let out.

Brand twisted free of Rulf's limp hands and ran.

"THORN?"

The voice seemed to echo from a long way away, down a dark tunnel. Brand's voice. Gods, she was glad to hear it.

"You all right?" Strong hands at her shoulder, lifting her.

"I got proud," she croaked, throat raw, mouth stinging. Tried to get to her knees, so weak and dizzy she nearly fell again, but he caught her.

"But you're alive."

"I reckon," she whispered, more than a little surprised as Brand's face drifted gradually out of the bright blur. Gods, she was glad to see it.

"That's enough." He stretched her arm over his shoulders and she groaned as he lifted her gently to her feet. She couldn't have taken a step on her own, but he was strong. He wouldn't let her fall. "You need me to carry you?"

"It's a fine thought." She winced as she looked toward the warriors of Gettland gathered on the crest ahead of them. "But I'd better walk. Why didn't he kill me?"

"Mother Isriun changed his mind."

Thorn took one look back as they shuffled up the slope toward the camp. Grom-gil-Gorm stood in the middle of the square, bloodied but unbeaten. Mother Scaer was already working at his wounded shield hand with needle and thread. His sword-hand was gripping Queen Laithlin's, sealing the alliance between Vansterland and Gettland. Bitter enemies made friends. At least for now.

Beside them, with arms folded, Yarvi smiled.

In spite of all the prayers to Mother War, it seemed Father Peace made the judgment that day.

IN THE LIGHT

Brand gave the billet a few more ringing blows with his hammer then shoved it back into the coals in a shower of sparks.

Rin gave a disgusted click of her tongue. "You've not got what they call a gentle touch, have you?"

"That's what you're here for." Brand grinned at her. "Got to make you feel special, don't I?"

But she was looking past him, toward the door. "You've a visitor."

"Father Yarvi, what an honor." Brand set down his hammer and wiped his forehead on his forearm. "Come to buy a blade?"

"A minister should stand for Father Peace," said Yarvi as he stepped into the forge.

"A good one stays friendly with Mother War too," said Rin.

"Wise words. And now more than ever."

Brand swallowed. "It's going to be war, then?"

"The High King will take time gathering his warriors. But I think it will be war. Still. War is a fine thing for a swordsmith's business."

Rin raised her brows at Brand. "We'd settle for a poorer peace, I reckon. I hear King Uthil's on the mend, at least."

"His strength rushes back," said Yarvi. "Soon he will be terrorizing his warriors once again at sword practice, and using your fine steel to do it."

"Father Peace be praised," said Rin.

"Father Peace and your skills," said Brand.

Yarvi humbly bowed. "I do what I can. And how do the gods treat you, Brand?"

"Well enough." He nodded at his sister. "If it wasn't for my tyrant of a master I'd be enjoying the job. Turns out I like working with metal a lot more than I remembered."

"Easier than working with people."

"Steel is honest," said Brand.

Father Yarvi looked sideways at him. "Is there somewhere we can speak alone?"

Brand looked over at Rin, already pounding at the bellows. She shrugged. "Steel is patient too."

"You're not, though."

"Go have your talk." She narrowed her eyes at him. "Before I change my mind."

Brand pulled his gloves off and led Yarvi out into the little yard, noisy with the sound of running water. He sat on the bench Koll had carved for them in the dappled shade of the tree, breeze cool on his sweat-sheened face, and offered Father Yarvi the place beside him.

"A pleasant spot." The minister smiled up at Mother Sun, flashing and flickering through the leaves. "It's a fine life you and your sister have made for yourselves."

“She made it. I just happened along.”

“You’ve always played your part. I remember you taking the weight of the *South Wind* across your shoulders.” Yarvi looked down at the scars snaking up Brand’s forearms. “There was a feat to sing of.”

“I find I care less for songs than I used to.”

“You are learning. How is Thorn?”

“Already back to training three-quarters of every day.”

“She is carved from wood, that one.”

“No woman firmer touched by Mother War.”

“And yet she has been the needle that stitched two great alliances together. Perhaps she was touched by Father Peace too.”

“Don’t tell her that.”

“The two of you are still ... together?”

“Aye.” Brand had a sense the minister knew these answers, but that every question had another hidden in it. “You could call it that.”

“Good. That’s good.”

“I suppose so,” he said, thinking of the screaming argument they’d had that morning.

“It’s not good?”

“It’s good,” he said, thinking of how they’d made up afterward. “It’s just ... I always thought of being together as the end of the work. Turns out it’s where the work starts.”

“No road worth traveling is easy,” said Father Yarvi. “Each of you has strengths the other lacks, weaknesses the other makes up for. It is a fine thing, a rare thing, to find someone who ...” He frowned up at the shifting branches, as though he thought of something far away, and the thought was painful. “Makes you whole.”

Took a little while for Brand to gather the courage to speak. “I’ve been thinking about melting down that coin Prince Varoslaf gave me.”

“To make a key?”

Brand pushed a couple of fallen leaves around with the side of his boot. “Probably she’d prefer a dagger but ... a key’s traditional. What do you think Queen Laithlin would think of it?”

“The queen has had three sons and no daughters. I think she is becoming very much attached to her Chosen Shield. But I’m sure she could be persuaded.”

Brand gave those leaves another push. “No doubt folk think I’m the one should wear the key. I’m none too popular in Thorlby.”

“The king’s warriors are not all admirers of yours, it is true. Master Hunnan in particular. But I have heard it said enemies are the price of success. Perhaps they are the price of conviction too.”

“The price of cowardice, maybe.”

“Only a fool would reckon you a coward, Brand. To stand up before the warriors of Gettland and speak as you did?” Father Yarvi put his lips together and gave a faint whistle. “People may sing no hero’s songs of it, but that was rare courage.”

“You think so?”

“I do, and courage is not your only admirable quality.”

Brand hardly knew what to say to that, so he said nothing.

“Did you know Rulf melted down his earnings from our voyage and made a key of his own?”

“For who?”

“Thorn’s mother. They are being married in the Godshall next week.”

Brand blinked. “Oh.”

“Rulf is getting old. He would never say so, but he is keen to step back.” Yarvi looked sideways. “I think you would do well in his place.”

Brand blinked again. “Me?”

“I told you once that I might need a man beside me who thinks of doing good. I think so more than ever.”

“Oh.” Brand couldn’t think of anything else to say.

“You could join Safrit, and Koll, and be part of my little family.” Every word Father Yarvi let drop was carefully weighed out and these did not fall by accident. He knew just what to offer. “You would be close to me. Close to the queen. Close to the queen’s Chosen Shield. The helmsman of a minister’s ship.” He remembered that day on the steering platform, the crew thumping at their oars, the sunlight bright on the water of the Denied. “You would stand at the right hand of the man who stands at the right hand of the king.”

Brand paused, rubbing at his fingertips with his thumbs. No doubt he should’ve leapt at the chance. A man like him couldn’t expect too many like it. Yet something held him back. “You’re a deep-cunning man, Father Yarvi, and I’m not known for my wits.”

“You could be, if you used them. But it’s your strong arm and your strong heart I want you for.”

“Can I ask you a question?”

“You can ask. But make sure you want the answer.”

“How long had you planned for Thorn to fight a duel with Grom-gil-Gorm?”

Yarvi narrowed his pale eyes a little. “A minister must deal in likelihoods, in chances, in possibilities. That one occurred to me long ago.”

“When I came to you in the Godshall?”

“I told you then the good thing is a different thing for every man. I considered the possibility that a woman who could use a sword might one day find a way to challenge Gorm. Great and storied warrior that he is, he would not be able to turn down a woman’s challenge. And yet he would fear one. More than any man.”

“You believe that prophecy?”

“I believe that he believes it.”

“That was why you had Skifr train her.”

“One reason. The Empress Theofora loved rare things, and also loved to watch blood spilled, and I thought a fighting girl from the far north might excite her curiosity long enough for me to speak to her, and present my gift. Death ushered Theofora through the Last Door before I got the chance.” Yarvi gave a sigh. “A good minister strives to look ahead, but the future is a land wrapped in fog. Events do not always flow down the channel you dig for them.”

“Like your deal with Mother Scaer.”

“Another hope. Another gamble.” Father Yarvi sat back against the trunk of the tree. “I needed an alliance with the Vanstermen, but Mother Isriun spoiled that notion. She gave the challenge, though, and a duel was better than a battle.” He spoke calmly, coldly, as though he spoke of pieces on a board rather than people he knew.

Brand’s mouth felt very dry. “If Thorn had died, what then?”

“Then we would have sung sad songs over her howe, and happy songs over her high deeds.” Yarvi’s were the eyes of a butcher who looks at livestock, judging where the profit is. “But we and the Vanstermen would not have wasted our strength fighting each other. Queen Laithlin and I would have prostrated ourselves at the feet of Grandmother Wexen and made golden apologies. King Uthil would have recovered, free of dishonor. In time we might have thrown the dice again.”

Something in Father Yarvi’s words niggled at Brand, like a hook in his head, tickling, tickling. “We all thought King Uthil was at the Last Door. How could you be sure he’d recover?”

Yarvi paused for a moment, his mouth half-open, then carefully shut it. He looked toward the doorway, the clanging of Rin’s hammer echoing from beyond, and back to Brand. “I think you are a more cunning man than you pretend.”

Brand had a feeling he stood on spring ice, cracks spreading beneath his boots, but there was no going back, only forward. “If I’m to stand at your shoulder I should know the truth.”

“I told you once that the truth is like the good thing, each man has his own. My truth is that King Uthil is a man of iron, and iron is strong, and holds a fine edge. But iron can be brittle. And sometimes we must bend.”

“He would never have made peace with the Vanstermen.”

“And we had to make peace with the Vanstermen. Without them we stand alone against half the world.”

Brand slowly nodded, seeing the pieces of it slide into place. “Uthil would have accepted Gorm’s duel.”

“He would have fought Gorm in the square, for he is proud, and he would have lost, for each year leaves him weaker. I must protect my king from harm. For his good, and the good of the land. We needed allies. We went seeking allies. I found allies.”

Brand thought of the minister bent over the fire, throwing dried leaves into the brew. “You poisoned him. Your own uncle.”

“I have no uncle, Brand. I gave my family up when I joined the Ministry.” Yarvi’s voice held no guilt. No doubt. No regret. “Sometimes great rights must be stitched from little wrongs. A minister does not have the luxury of doing what is simply good. A minister must weigh the greater good. A minister must choose the lesser evil.”

“Power means having one shoulder always in the shadows,” muttered Brand.

“It does. It must.”

“I understand. I don’t doubt you, but ...”

Father Yarvi blinked, and Brand wondered whether he’d ever seen him look surprised before. “You refuse me?”

“My mother told me to stand in the light.”

They sat there for a moment, looking at one another, then Father Yarvi slowly began to smile. “I admire you for it, I truly do.” He stood up, laying his good hand on Brand’s shoulder. “But when Mother War spreads her wings, she may cast the whole Shattered Sea into darkness.”

“I hope not,” said Brand.

“Well.” Father Yarvi turned away. “You know how it goes, with hopes.” And he walked into the house, and left Brand sitting in the shade of the tree, wondering, as ever, if he’d done a good thing or a bad.

“A little help here!” came his sister’s voice.

Brand started up. “On my way!”

A STORM COMING

Thorn strode across the sand with her stool on her shoulder. The tide was far out and the wind blew hard over the flats, tattered clouds chasing each other across a bruised sky.

They were packed in tight about the training square, the shouts turning to grunts as she pushed through the warriors, the grunts to silence as she set her stool next to the spear that marked one corner. Even the two lads who were meant to be sparring came to an uncertain halt, staring at her as she stepped over her stool and planted her arse on it.

Master Hunnan frowned over. "I see the queen's Chosen Shield is among us."

Thorn held up one hand. "Don't worry, you needn't all applaud."

"The training square is for warriors of Gettland, and for those who would be warriors."

"Aye, but there's probably some half-decent fighters down here even so. Don't let me stop you."

"You won't," snapped Hunnan. "Heirot, you're next." It was a great big lad that stood, pink blotches on his fat cheeks. "And you, Edni." She was maybe twelve years old, and a skinny scrap, but she sprang up bravely enough, her chin thrust out as she took her mark, even though the shield was way too big for her and wobbled in her hand.

"Begin!"

There was no art to it at all. The boy went charging in, puffing like a bull, shrugged Edni's sword off his thick shoulder, barrelled into her and sent her sprawling, the shield coming off her arm and rolling away on its edge.

The boy looked at Hunnan, waiting for him to call the bout, but the master-at-arms only stared back. Heirot swallowed, and stepped forward, and gave Edni a couple of reluctant kicks before Hunnan raised his hand for a halt.

Thorn watched the girl clamber up, wiping blood from under her nose, clinging tight to her brave face, and thought of all the beatings she'd taken in this square. Thought of all the kicks and the scorn and the sand she'd eaten. Thought of that last day, and Edwal with her wooden sword through his neck. No doubt nudging her memory had been what Master Hunnan had in mind.

He gave a rare, thin little smile. "What did you think of that?"

"I think the boy's a clumsy thug." She pressed her thumb on one side of her nose and blew snot onto the sand. "But it's not his fault. He learned from one, and so did she. The one who got shamed in that bout was their teacher."

A muttering went through the warriors, and Hunnan's smile sprang back into a frown. "If you think you know better, why don't you give a lesson?"

"That's why I'm here, Master Hunnan. I've nothing to learn from you, after all." She pointed to Edni. "I'll take her," Then she pointed out an older girl, big and solemn. "And her." And then another

with pale, pale eyes. “And her. I’ll give them a lesson. I’ll give them one a day, and in a month we’ll come back, and we’ll see what we’ll see.”

“You can’t just come here and take my pupils where you please!”

“Yet here I am, and with King Uthil’s blessing.”

Hunnan licked his lips, wrong-footed, but he soon rallied, and fixed on attack. “Hild Bathu,” his lip curled with disgust. “You failed your test in this square. You failed to become a warrior. You lost to the Breaker of Swords—”

“I lost to Gorm, true.” Thorn rubbed at one scarred cheek as she grinned up at him. “But he never broke my sword.” She stood, one hand slack on the pommel. “And you’re not Gorm.” She stepped across the sand toward him. “Reckon you’re better than me?” And she stepped so close she almost planted her boots on his. “Fight me.” She leaned in, so their noses were near touching, and hissed it over and over. “Fight me. Fight me. Fight me. Fight me. Fight me. Fight me. Fight me. Fight me.”

Hunnan flinched each time she said it, but he kept his silence.

“Good choice,” she said. “I’d snap you like an old twig.”

She shouldered past him, calling out to the rest of the warriors. “Maybe you’re thinking that wasn’t fair. The battlefield isn’t fair, but I’ll grant you old Hunnan’s a few years past his best. So anyone thinks he can fill Gorm’s boots, I’ll fight him. I’ll fight any of you.” She swaggered in a circle, taking in each side of the square, staring the warriors in their eyes one after another.

Silence. Only the wind sighing across the beach.

“No one?” She snorted. “Look at you, sulking because you didn’t get a battle. There’ll be more battle than you know what to do with soon enough. I hear the High King gathers his warriors. Lowlanders, and Islanders, and Ingling. Thousands of them. There’s a storm coming, and Gettland will need every man. Every man and every woman. You three, come with me. We’ll be back in a month.” She lifted her arm to point at Hunnan. “And your boys better be ready.”

Thorn swung the stool up onto her shoulder and stalked from the square, off across the sand toward Thorlby. She didn’t look back.

But she heard the footsteps of the girls behind her.

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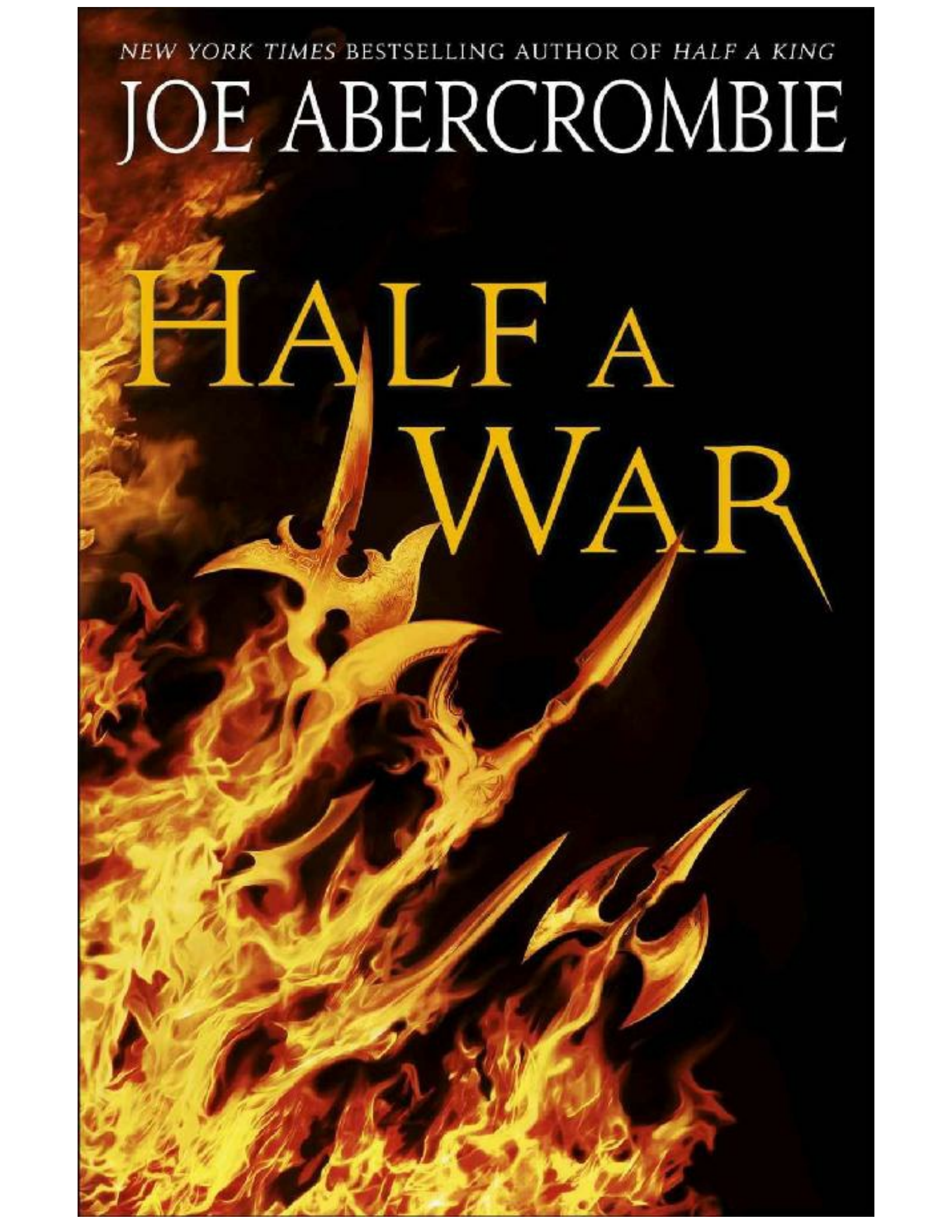
And to all the writers whose paths have crossed mine on the Internet, at the bar, or in some cases even on the printed page, and who've provided help, advice, laughs and plenty of ideas worth the stealing.

You know who you are ...

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *HALF A KING*

JOE ABERCROMBIE

HALF A WAR

The book cover for 'Half a War' by Joe Abercrombie features a dramatic, high-contrast image. The background is a dark, swirling mass of fire and smoke, with bright yellow and orange flames rising from the bottom. In the center, a large, ornate, golden sword hilt and blade emerge from the flames, angled upwards. The hilt is highly detailed with intricate carvings, and the blade is long and slender. The overall mood is one of intense action and conflict.

JOE
ABERCROMBIE

HALF
A WAR



DEL REY • NEW YORK

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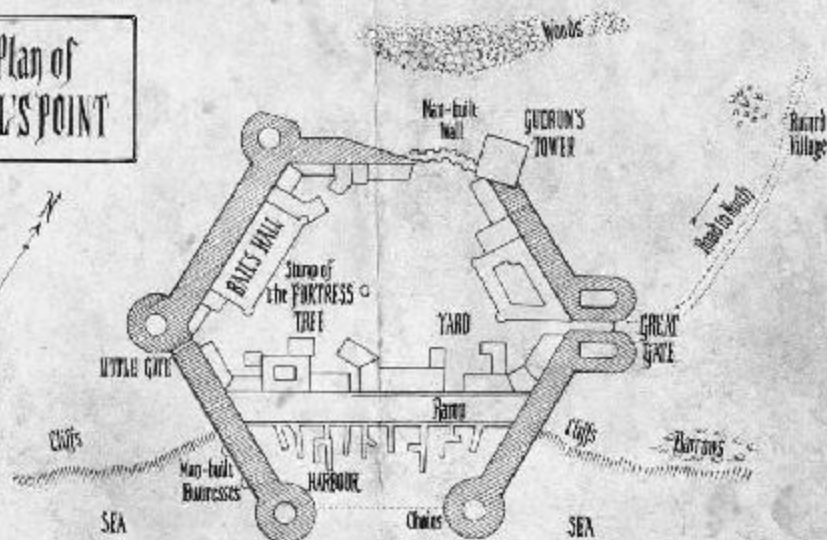
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THE MAN WHO STANDS AT A STRANGE THRESHOLD
SHOULD BE CAUTIOUS BEFORE HE CROSS IT,
GLANCE THIS WAY AND THAT:
WHO KNOWS BEFOREHAND WHAT FOES MAY SIT
AWAITING HIM IN THE HALL?

FROM *HÁVAMÁL*, THE SPEECH OF THE HIGH ONE



Plan of BAIL'S POINT



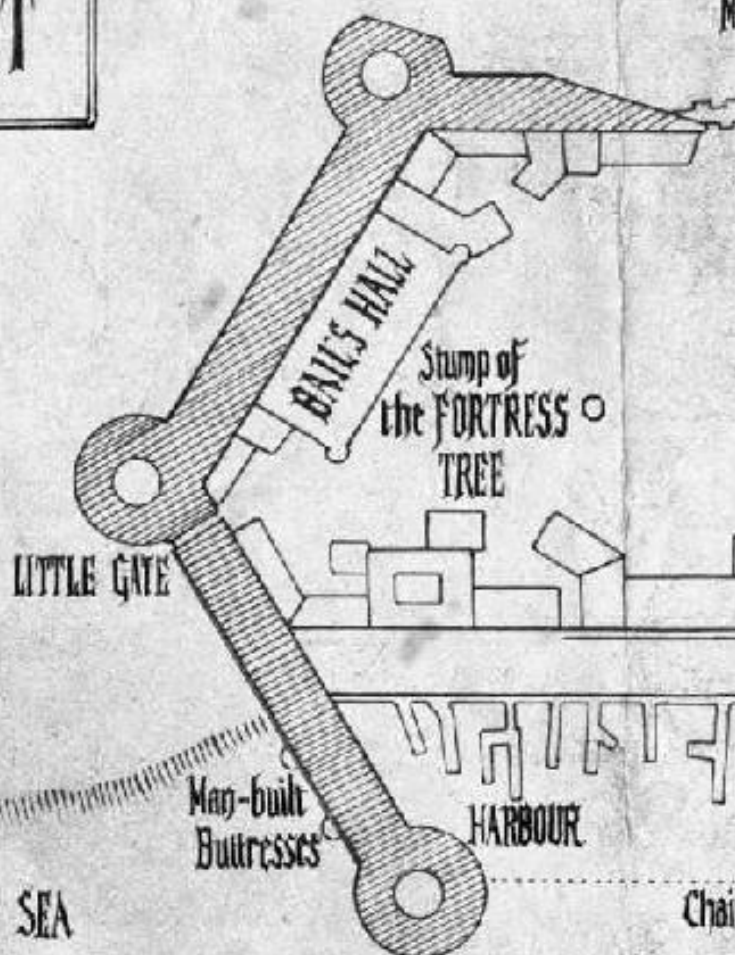
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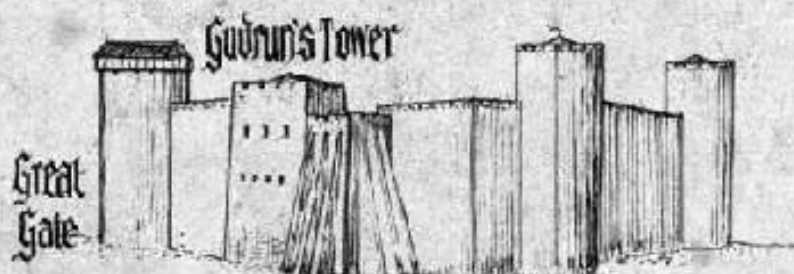
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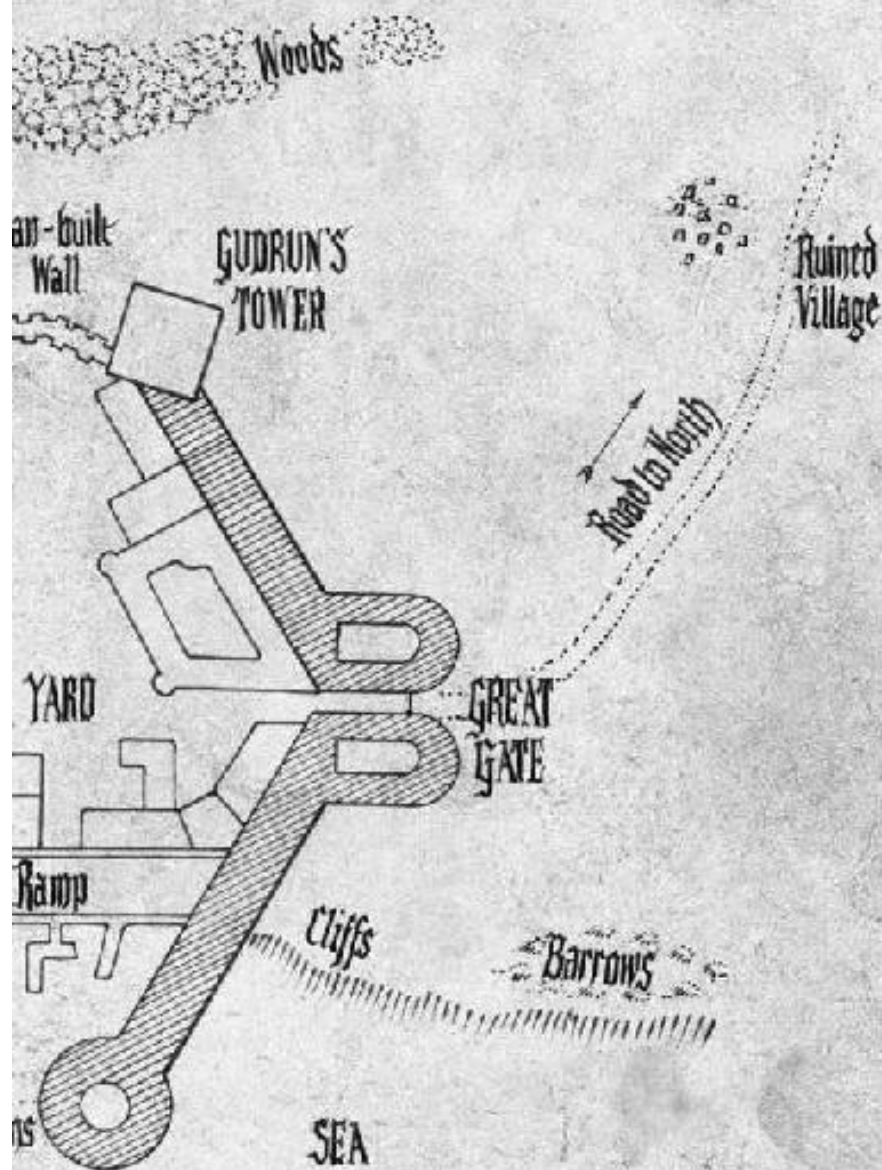


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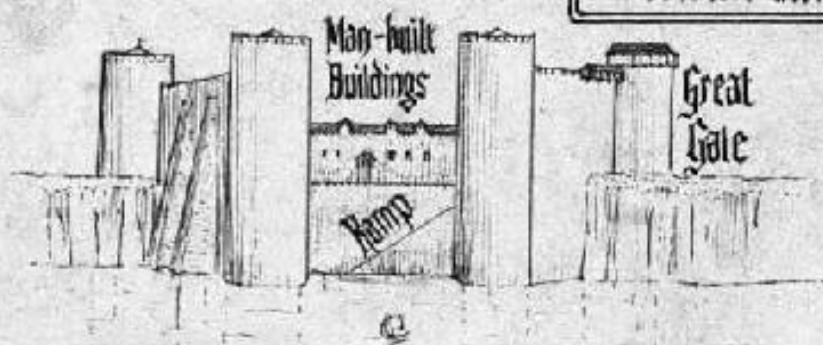


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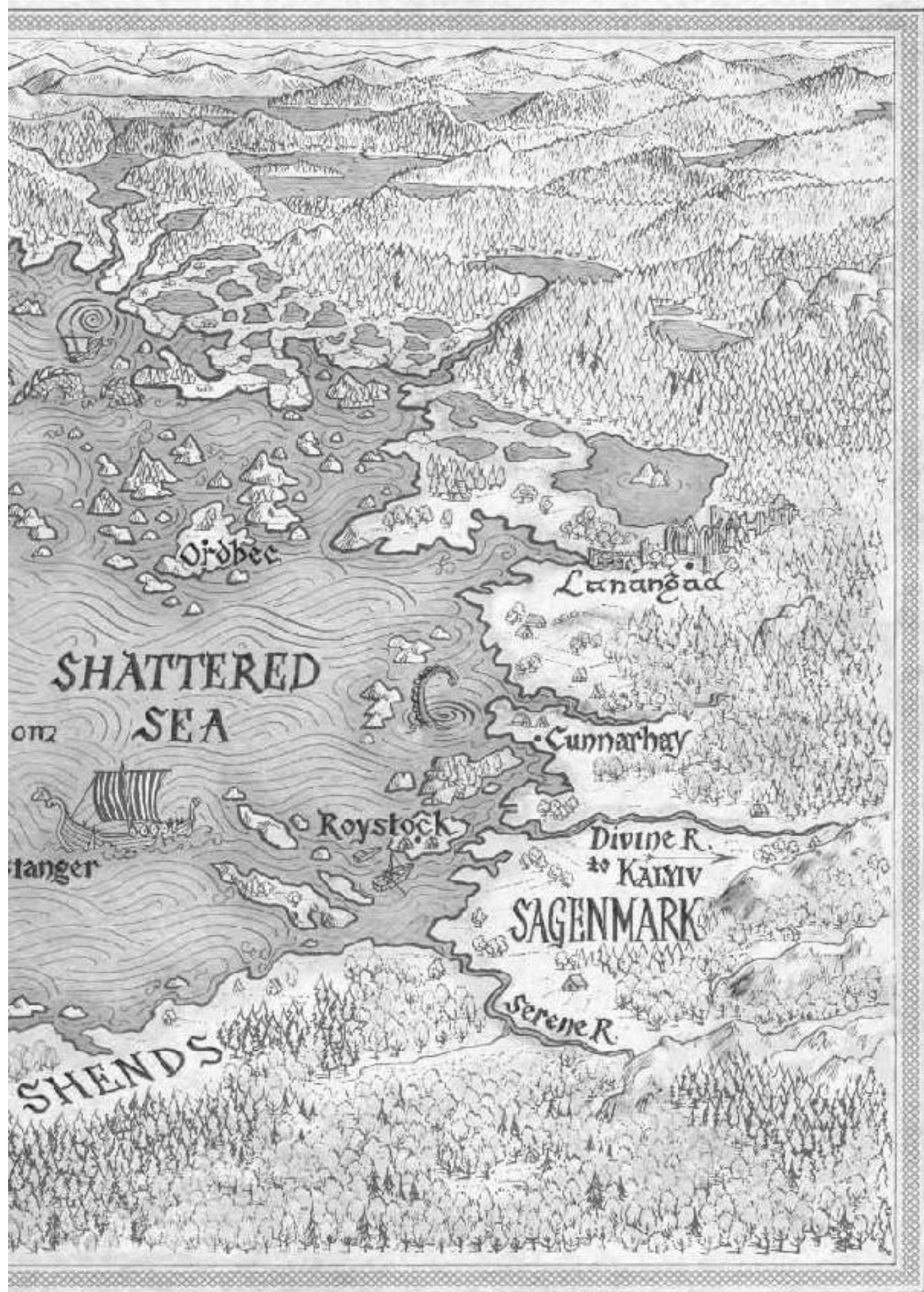


SOUTH Elevation









I.

WORDS ARE
WEAPONS

“We have lost,” said King Fynn, staring into his ale.

As she looked out at the empty hall, Skara knew there was no denying it. Last summer, the gathered heroes had threatened to lift the roof beams with their bloodthirsty boasting, their songs of glory, their promises of victory over the High King’s rabble.

As men so often do, they had proved fiercer talkers than fighters. After an idle, inglorious, and unprofitable few months they had slunk away one by one, leaving a handful of the luckless lurking about the great firepit, its flames guttering as low as the fortunes of Throvenland. Where once the many-columned Forest had thronged with warriors, now it was peopled with shadows. Crowded with disappointments.

They had lost. And they had not even fought a battle.

Mother Kyre, of course, saw it differently. “We have come to terms, my king,” she corrected, nibbling at her meat as primly as an old mare at a hay bale.

“Terms?” Skara stabbed furiously at her own uneaten food. “My father died to hold Bail’s Point, and you’ve given its key to Grandmother Wexen without a blow struck. You’ve promised the High King’s warriors free passage across our land! What do you think ‘lost’ would look like?”

Mother Kyre turned her gaze on Skara with the usual infuriating calmness. “Your grandfather dead in his howe, the women of Yaletoft weeping over the corpses of their sons, this hall made ashes and you, princess, wearing a slave’s collar shackled to the High King’s chair. *That* is what I think ‘lost’ would look like. Which is why I say *come to terms*.”

Stripped of his pride, King Fynn sagged like a sail without a mast. Skara had always thought her grandfather as unconquerable as Father Earth. She could not bear to see him like this. Or perhaps she could not bear to see how childish her belief in him had been.

She watched him swill down more ale, and belch, and toss his gilded cup aside to be refilled. “What do you say, Blue Jenner?”

“In such royal company as this, my king, as little as I can.”

Blue Jenner was a shifty old beggar, more raider than trader, his face as crudely chiseled, weathered and cracked as an old prow-beast. Had Skara been in charge he would not have been allowed on her docks, let alone at her high table.

Mother Kyre, of course, saw it differently. “A captain is like a king, but of a ship rather than a country. Your experience might benefit Princess Skara.”

The indignity of it. “A lesson in politics from a pirate,” Skara muttered to herself, “and not even a successful one.”

“Don’t mumble. How many hours have I spent teaching you the proper way for a princess to speak? For a queen to speak?” Mother Kyre raised her chin and made her voice echo effortlessly from the rafters. “If you judge your thoughts worth hearing, pronounce them proudly, push them to every corner

of the chamber, fill the hall with your hopes and desires and make every listener share them! If you are ashamed of your thoughts, better to leave a silence. A smile costs nothing. You were saying?"

"Well..." Blue Jenner scratched at the few gray hairs still clinging to his weather-spotted scalp, evidently a place unknown to combs. "Grandmother Wexen's crushed the rebellion in the Lowlands."

"With the help of this dog of hers, Bright Yilling, who worships no god but Death." Skara's grandfather snatched up his cup while the thrall was still pouring, ale spilling across the table. "They say he lined the road to Skekenhouse with hanged men."

"The High King's eyes turn north," Jenner went on. "He's keen to bring Uthil and Grom-gil-Gorm to heel and Throvenland..."

"Is in the way," finished Mother Kyre. "Don't slouch, Skara, it is unseemly."

Skara scowled, but she wriggled her shoulders up the chair a little anyway, closer to the board-stiff, neck-stretched, horribly unnatural pose the minister approved of. *Sit as if you have a knife to your throat*, she always said. *The role of a princess is not to be comfortable.*

"I'm a man used to living free, and I'm no lover of Grandmother Wexen, or her One God, or her taxes, or her rules." Blue Jenner rubbed mournfully at his lopsided jaw. "But when Mother Sea whips up the storm, a captain does what he must to save what he can. Freedom's worth nothing to the dead. Pride's worth little even to the living."

"Wise words." Mother Kyre wagged her finger at Skara. "The beaten can win tomorrow. The dead have lost forever."

"Wisdom and cowardice can be hard to tell apart," snapped Skara.

The minister clenched her jaw. "I swear I taught you wiser manners than to insult a guest. Nobility is shown not by the respect one is given by the highest, but the respect one gives to the lowly. Words are weapons. They should be handled with proper care."

Jenner waved any suggestion of offense gently away. "No doubt Princess Skara has the right of it. I've known many men far braver'n me." He gave a sad smile, displaying a crooked set of teeth with several gaps. "And seen most buried, one by one."

"Bravery and long life rarely make good bedfellows," said the king, draining his cup again.

"Kings and ale pair up no better," said Skara.

"I have nothing left but ale, granddaughter. My warriors have abandoned me. My allies have deserted me. They swore fair-weather oaths, oak-firm while Mother Sun shone, prone to wilt when the clouds gather."

That was no secret. Day after day Skara had watched the docks, eager to see how many ships the Iron King Uthil of Gettland would bring, how many warriors would accompany the famous Grom-gil-Gorm of Vansterland. Day after day, as the leaves budded, then the leaves cast dappled shade, then the leaves turned brown and fell. They never came.

"Loyalty is common in dogs but rare in men," observed Mother Kyre. "A plan that relies on loyalty is worse than none at all."

"What then?" asked Skara. "A plan that relies on cowardice?"

Old, her grandfather looked as he turned to her with misty eyes and brewer's breath. Old and beaten. "You have always been brave, Skara. Braver than I. No doubt the blood of Bail flows in your

veins.”

“Your blood too, my king! You always told me only half a war is fought with swords. The other half is fought here.” And Skara pressed one fingertip into the side of her head, so hard it hurt.

“You have always been clever, Skara. Cleverer than I. The gods know you can talk the birds down from the sky when it pleases you. Fight that half of the war, then. Give me the deep cunning that can turn back the High King’s armies and save our land and our people from Bright Yilling’s sword. That can spare me from the shame of Grandmother Wexen’s terms.”

Skara looked down at the straw-covered floor, face burning. “I wish I could.” But she was a girl seventeen winters old and, Bail’s blood or no, her head held no hero’s answers. “I’m sorry, Grandfather.”

“So am I, child.” King Fynn slumped back and beckoned for more ale. “So am I.”

—

“SKARA.”

She was snatched from troubled dreams and into darkness, Mother Kyre’s face ghostly in the light of one flickering candle.

“Skara, get up.”

She fumbled back the furs, clumsy with sleep. Strange sounds outside. Shouting and laughter.

She rubbed her eyes. “What is it?”

“You must go with Blue Jenner.”

Skara saw the trader then, lurking in the doorway of her bedchamber. A black figure, shaggy-headed, eyes turned to the floor.

“What?”

Mother Kyre pulled her up by her arm. “You must go *now*.”

Skara was about to argue. As she always argued. Then she saw the minister’s expression and it made her obey without a word spoken. She had never seen Mother Kyre afraid before.

It did not sound like laughter anymore, outside. Crying. Wild voices. “What’s happening?” she managed to croak.

“I made a terrible mistake.” Mother Kyre’s eyes darted to the door and back. “I trusted Grandmother Wexen.” She twisted the gold ring from Skara’s arm. The one Bail the Builder once wore into battle, its ruby glistening dark as new-spilled blood in the candlelight. “This is for you.” She held it out to Blue Jenner. “If you swear to see her safe to Thorlby.”

The raider’s eyes flickered guiltily up as he took it. “I swear it. A sun-oath and a moon-oath.”

Mother Kyre clutched painfully hard at both of Skara’s hands. “Whatever happens, you must live. That is your duty now. You must live and you must lead. You must fight for Throvenland. You must stand for her people if...if there is no one else.”

Skara’s throat was so tight with fear she could hardly speak. “Fight? But—”

“I have taught you how. I have tried to. Words are weapons.” The minister wiped tears from Skara’s face that she had not even realized she had cried. “Your grandfather was right, you are brave

and you are clever. But now you must be strong. You are a child no longer. Always remember, the blood of Bail flows in your veins. Now go.”

Skara padded barefoot through the darkness at Blue Jenner’s heels, shivering in her shift, Mother Kyre’s lessons so deep-rooted that even fearing for her life she worried over whether she was properly dressed. Flames beyond the narrow windows cast stabbing shadows across the straw-scattered floor. She heard panicked shouts. A dog barking, suddenly cut off. A heavy thudding as of a tree being felled.

As of axes at the door.

They stole into the guest room, where warriors had slept shoulder to shoulder a few months before. Now there was only Blue Jenner’s threadbare blanket.

“What’s happening?” she whispered, hardly recognizing her own voice it came so thin and cracked.

“Bright Yilling has come with his Companions,” said Jenner, “to settle Grandmother Wexen’s debts. Yaletoft is already burning. I’m sorry, princess.”

Skara flinched as he slid something around her neck. A collar of twisted silver wire, a fine chain clinking faintly. The kind the Ingling girl who used to bind her hair had worn.

“Am I a slave?” she whispered, as Jenner buckled the other end about his wrist.

“You must seem to be.”

Skara shrank back at a crash outside, the clash of metal, and Jenner pressed her against the wall. He blew his candle out and dropped them into darkness. She saw him draw a knife, Father Moon glinting on its edge.

Howls now, beyond the door, high and horrible, the bellows of beasts not the voices of men. Skara squeezed her eyes shut, tears stinging the lids, and prayed. Mumbling, stuttering, meaningless prayers. Prayers to every god and none.

It is easy to be brave when the Last Door seems tiny for its distance, a far-off thing for other folk to worry about. Now she felt Death’s chill breath on her neck and it froze the courage in her. How freely she had talked of cowardice the night before. Now she understood what it was.

A last long shriek, then silence almost worse than the noise had been. She felt herself drawn forward, Jenner’s breath stale on her cheek.

“We have to go.”

“I’m scared,” she breathed.

“So am I. But if we face ’em boldly we might talk our way free. If they find us hiding...”

You can only conquer your fears by facing them, her grandfather used to say. *Hide from them, and they conquer you.* Jenner eased the door creaking open and Skara forced herself through after him, her knees trembling so badly they were nearly knocking together.

Her bare foot slid in something wet. A dead man sat beside the door, the straw all about him black with blood.

Borid, his name. A warrior who had served her father. He had carried Skara on his shoulders when she was little, so she could reach the peaches in the orchard under the walls of Bail’s Point.

Her stinging eyes crept toward the sound of voices. Over broken weapons and cloven shields.

Over more corpses, hunched, sprawled, spread-eagled among the carved columns after which her grandfather's hall was called the Forest.

Figures were gathered in the light of the guttering firepit. Storied warriors, mail and weapons and ring-money gleaming with the colors of fire, their great shadows stretching out across the floor toward her.

Mother Kyre stood among them, and Skara's grandfather too, ill-fitting mail hastily dragged on, gray hair still wild from his bed. Smiling blandly upon his two prisoners was a slender warrior with a soft, handsome face, as careless as a child's, a space about him where even these other killers dared not tread.

Bright Yilling, who worshipped no god but Death.

His voice echoed jauntily in the vastness of the hall. "I was hoping to pay my respects to Princess Skara."

"She has gone to her cousin Laithlin," said Mother Kyre. The same voice that had calmly lectured, corrected, chastised Skara every day of her life, but with an unfamiliar warble of terror in it now. "Where you will never reach her."

"Oh, we will reach her there," said one of Yilling's warriors, a huge man with a neck like a bull's.

"Soon enough, Mother Kyre, soon enough," said another with a tall spear and a horn at his belt.

"King Uthil will come," she said. "He will burn your ships and drive you back into the sea."

"How will he burn my ships when they are safe behind the great chains at Bail's Point?" asked Yilling. "The chains you gave me the key to."

"Grom-gil-Gorm will come," she said, but her voice had faded almost to a whisper.

"I hope it will be so." Yilling reached out with both hands and ever so gently eased Mother Kyre's hair back over her shoulders. "But he will come too late for you." He drew a sword, a great diamond in a golden claw for a pommel, mirror-steel flashing so bright in the darkness it left a white smear across Skara's sight.

"Death waits for us all." King Fynn took a long breath through his nose, and proudly drew himself up. A glimpse of the man he used to be. He looked about the hall and, through the columns, caught Skara's eye, and it seemed to her he gave the slightest smile. Then he dropped to his knees. "Today you kill a king."

Yilling shrugged. "Kings and peasants. We all look the same to Death."

He stabbed Skara's grandfather where his neck met his shoulder, blade darting in to the hilt and back out, quick and deadly as lightning falls. King Fynn made only a dry squeak he died so fast, and toppled face forward into the firepit. Skara stood frozen, her breath held fast, her mind held fast.

Mother Kyre stared down at her master's corpse. "Grandmother Wexen gave me her promise," she stammered out.

Pit pat, pit pat, the blood dripped from the point of Yilling's sword. "Promises only bind the weak."

He spun, neat as a dancer, steel flickering in the shadows. There was a black gout and Mother Kyre's head clonked across the floor, her body dropping as though it had no bones in it at all.

Skara gave a shuddering gasp. It had to be a nightmare. A fever-trick. She wanted to lie down. Her

eyelids fluttered, her body sagged, but Blue Jenner's hand was around her arm, painfully tight.

"You're a slave," he hissed, giving her a stiff shake. "You say nothing. You understand nothing."

She tried to still her whimpering breath as light footsteps tapped across the floor toward them. Far away, someone had started screaming, and would not stop.

"Well, well," came Bright Yilling's soft voice. "This pair does not belong."

"No, lord. My name is Blue Jenner." Skara could not comprehend how he could sound so friendly, firm and reasonable. If she had opened her mouth all that would have come out were slobbering sobs. "I'm a trader carrying the High King's license, lately returned up the Divine River. We were heading for Skekenhouse, blown off course in a gale."

"You must have been fast friends with King Fynn, to be a guest in his hall."

"A wise trader is friendly with everyone, lord."

"You are sweating, Blue Jenner."

"Honestly, you terrify me."

"A wise trader indeed." Skara felt a gentle touch under her chin and her head was tipped back. She looked into the face of the man who had just murdered the two people who had raised her from a child, his bland smile still spotted with their blood, close enough that she could count the dusting of freckles across his nose.

Yilling pushed his plump lips out and made a high, clean whistle. "And a trader in fine goods too." He brushed one hand through her hair, wound a strand of it around his long fingers, pushed it out of her face so that his thumb tip brushed her cheek.

You must live. You must lead. She smothered her fear. Smothered her hate. Forced her face dead. A thrall's face, showing nothing.

"Would you trade this to me, trader?" asked Yilling. "For your life, maybe?"

"Happily, lord," said Blue Jenner. Skara had known Mother Kyre was a fool to trust this rogue. She took a breath to curse him and his gnarled fingers dug tighter into her arm. "But I cannot."

"In my experience, and I have much and very bloody..." Bright Yilling raised his red sword and let it rest against his cheek as a girl might her favorite doll, the diamond pommel on fire with sparks of red and orange and yellow. "One sharp blade severs a whole rope of cannots."

The lump on Jenner's grizzled throat bobbed as he swallowed. "She isn't mine to sell. She's a gift. From Prince Varoslaf of Kalyiv to the High King."

"Ack." Yilling slowly let his sword fall, leaving a long red smear down his face. "I hear Varoslaf is a man a wise man fears."

"He has precious little sense of humor, it's true."

"As a man's power swells, his good humor shrivels." Yilling frowned toward the trail of bloody footprints he had left between the columns. Between the corpses. "The High King is much the same. It would not be prudent to snaffle a gift between those two."

"My very thought all the way from Kalyiv," said Jenner.

Bright Yilling snapped his fingers as loudly as a whip crack, eyes suddenly bright with boyish enthusiasm. "Here is my thought! We will toss a coin. Heads, you can take this pretty thing on to Skekenhouse and let her wash the High King's feet. Tails, I kill you and make better use of her." He

slapped Jenner on the shoulder. “What do you say, my new friend?”

“I say Grandmother Wexen may take this ill,” said Jenner.

“She takes everything ill.” Yilling smiled wide, the smooth skin about his eyes crinkling with friendly creases. “But I bend to the will of one woman only. Not Grandmother Wexen, nor Mother Sea, nor Mother Sun, nor even Mother War.” He flicked a coin high in the hallowed spaces of the Forest, gold flashing. “Only Death.”

He snatched it from the shadows. “King or peasant, high or low, strong or weak, wise or foolish. Death waits for us all.” And he opened his hand, the coin glinting in his palm.

“Huh.” Blue Jenner peered down at it, eyebrows high. “Guess she can wait a little longer for me.”

THEY HURRIED AWAY THROUGH the wreckage of Yaletoft, flaming straw fluttering on the hot wind, the night boiling over with screaming and pleading and weeping. Skara kept her eyes on the ground like a good slave should, no one now to tell her not to slouch, her fear thawing slowly into guilt.

They sprang aboard Jenner’s ship and pushed off, the crew muttering prayers of thanks to Father Peace that they had been spared from the carnage, oars creaking out a steady rhythm as they slid between the boats of the raiders and out to sea. Skara slumped among the cargo, the guilt pooling slowly into sorrow as she watched the flames take King Fynn’s beautiful hall and her past life with it, the great carved gable showing black against the fire, then falling in a fountain of whirling sparks.

The burning of all she had known dwindled away, Yaletoft a speckling of flame in the dark distance, sailcloth snapping as Jenner ordered the ship turned north, toward Gettland. Skara stood and looked behind them, into the past, the tears drying on her face as her sorrow froze into a cold, hard, iron weight of fury.

“I’ll see Throvenland free,” she whispered, clenching her fists. “And my grandfather’s hall rebuilt, and Bright Yilling’s carcass left for the crows.”

“For now, let’s stick to seeing you alive, princess.” Jenner took the thrall collar from her neck, then wrapped his cloak around her shivering shoulders.

She looked up at him, rubbing gently at the marks the silver wire had left. “I misjudged you, Blue Jenner.”

“Your judgment’s shrewd. I’ve done far worse than you thought I might.”

“Why risk your life for mine, then?”

He seemed to think a moment, scratching at his jaw. Then he shrugged. “Because there’s no changing yesterday. Only tomorrow.” He pressed something into her hand. Bail’s armring, the ruby gleaming bloody in the moonlight. “Reckon this is yours.”

“When will they be here?”

Father Yarvi sat slumped against a tree with his legs crossed and an ancient-looking book propped on his knees. He might almost have seemed asleep had his eyes not been flickering over the writing beneath heavy lids. “I am a minister, Koll,” he murmured, “not a seer.”

Koll frowned up at the offerings about the glade. Headless birds and drained jars of ale and bundles of bones swinging on twine. A dog, a cow, four sheep, all dangling head-down from rune-carved branches, flies busy at their slit throats.

There was a man too. A thrall, by the chafe marks on his neck, a ring of runes written clumsily on his back, his knuckles brushing the bloody ground. A fine sacrifice to He Who Sprouts the Seed from some rich woman eager for a child.

Koll didn’t much care for holy places. They made him feel he was being watched. He liked to think he was an honest fellow, but everyone has their secrets. Everyone has their doubts.

“What’s the book?” he asked.

“A treatise on elf-relics written two hundred years ago by Sister Slodd of Reerskoft.”

“More forbidden knowledge, eh?”

“From a time when the Ministry was fixed on gathering wisdom, rather than suppressing it.”

“Only what is known can be controlled,” muttered Koll.

“And all knowledge, like all power, can be dangerous in the wrong hands. It is the use it is put to that counts.” And Father Yarvi licked the tip of the one twisted finger on his withered left hand and used it to turn the page.

Koll frowned off into the still forest. “Did we have to come so early?”

“The battle is usually won by the side that gets there first.”

“I thought we came to talk peace?”

“Talk of peace is the minister’s battlefield.”

Koll gave a sigh that made his lips flap. He perched himself on a stump at the edge of the clearing, a cautious distance from any of the offerings, slipped out his knife and the chunk of ash-wood he’d already roughly shaped. She Who Strikes the Anvil, hammer high. A gift for Rin, when he got back to Thorlby. If he got back, rather than ending up dangling from a tree in this glade himself. He flapped his lips again.

“The gods have given you many gifts,” murmured Father Yarvi, without looking up from his book. “Deft hands and sharp wits. A lovely shock of sandy hair. A slightly overready sense of humor. But do you wish to be a great minister, and stand at the shoulder of kings?”

Koll swallowed. “You know I do, Father Yarvi. More than anything.”

“Then you have many things to learn, and the first is patience. Focus your moth of a mind and one

day you could change the world, just as your mother wanted you to.”

Koll jerked at the thong around his neck, felt the weights strung on it click together under his shirt. The weights his mother Safrit used to wear as a storekeeper, trusted to measure fairly. *Be brave, Koll. Be the best man you can be.*

“Gods, I still miss her,” he muttered.

“So do I. Now still yourself, and attend to what I do.”

Koll let the weights drop. “My eyes are rooted to you, Father Yarvi.”

“Close them.” The minister snapped his book shut and stood, brushing the dead leaves from the back of his coat. “And listen.”

Footsteps, coming toward them through the forest. Koll slipped the carving away but kept the knife out, point up his sleeve. Well-chosen words will solve most problems but, in Koll’s experience, well-sharpened steel was a fine thing for tackling the others.

A woman stepped from the trees, dressed in minister’s black. Her fire-red hair was shaved at the sides, runes tattooed into the skin around her ears, the rest combed with fat into a spiky fin. Her face was hard, made harder yet by the muscles bunching as she chewed on dreamer’s bark, lips blotchy at the edges with the purple stain of it.

“You are early, Mother Adwyn.”

“Not as early as you, Father Yarvi.”

“Mother Gundring always told me it was poor manners to come second to a meeting.”

“I hope you will forgive my rudeness, then.”

“That depends on the words you bring from Grandmother Wexen.”

Mother Adwyn raised her chin. “Your master, King Uthil, and his ally, Grom-gil-Gorm, have broken their oaths to the High King. They have slapped aside his hand of friendship and drawn their swords against him.”

“His hand of friendship weighed heavily upon us,” said Yarvi. “Two years since we shook it off we find we all breathe easier. Two years, and the High King has taken no towns, has won no battles —”

“And what battles have Uthil and Gorm fought? Unless you count the ones they fight daily against each other?” Adwyn spat juice out of the corner of her mouth, and Koll fiddled uneasily at a loose thread on his sleeve. She struck close to the mark with that. “You have enjoyed good luck, Father Yarvi, for the High King’s eye has been on this rebellion in the Lowlands. A rebellion I hear you had a hand in raising.”

Yarvi blinked, all innocence. “Can I make men rise up hundreds of miles away? Am I a magician?”

“Some say you are, but magic, or luck, or deep cunning will change nothing now. The rebellion is crushed. Bright Yilling dueled Hokon’s three sons and one by one he cut them down. His swordwork is without equal.”

Father Yarvi peered at the one fingernail on his withered hand, as if to check it looked well. “King Uthil might disagree. He would have beaten these brothers all at once.”

Mother Adwyn ignored his bluster. “Bright Yilling is a new kind of man, with new ways. He put the oathbreakers to the sword and his Companions burned their halls with their families inside.”

“Burned families.” Koll swallowed. “There’s progress.”

“Perhaps you have not heard what Bright Yilling did next?”

“I hear he’s quite a dancer,” said Koll. “Did he dance?”

“Oh, yes. Across the straits to Yaletoft, where he paid the faithless King Fynn a visit.”

Silence then, and a breeze rustled the leaves, made the offerings creak and sent a twitchy shiver up Koll’s neck. Mother Adwyn’s chewing made a gentle squelch, squelch as she smiled.

“Ah. So your jester can spin no laughs from that. Yaletoft lies in ruins, and King Fynn’s hall in ashes, and his warriors are scattered to the winds.”

Yarvi gave the slightest frown. “What of the king himself?”

“On the other side of the Last Door, with his minister. Their deaths were written the moment you tricked them into your little alliance of the doomed.”

“On the battlefield,” murmured Father Yarvi, “there are no rules. New ways indeed.”

“Bright Yilling is already spreading fire across Throvenland, preparing the way for the High King’s army. An army more numerous than the grains of sand on the beach. The greatest army that has marched since the elves made war on God. Before midsummer they will be at the gates of Thorlby.”

“The future is a land wrapped in fog, Mother Adwyn. It may yet surprise us all.”

“One does not have to be a prophet to see what comes.” She drew out a scroll and dragged it open, the paper scrawled with densely-written runes. “Grandmother Wexen will name you and Queen Laithlin sorcerers and traitors. The Ministry will declare this paper money of hers elf-magic, and any who use it outcast and outlaw.”

Koll started as he heard a twig snap somewhere in the brush.

“You shall be cut from the world, and so shall Uthil and Gorm and any who stand with them.”

And now the men appeared. Men of Yutmark, from their square cloak-buckles and their long shields. Koll counted six, and heard two more at least behind him, and forced himself not to turn.

“Drawn swords?” asked Father Yarvi. “On the sacred ground of Father Peace?”

“We pray to the One God,” growled their captain, a warrior with a gold-chased helmet. “To us, this is just dirt.”

Koll looked across the sharp faces and the sharp blades pointed at him, palm slippery around the grip of his hidden knife.

“Here is a pretty fix,” he squeaked.

Mother Adwyn let the scroll fall. “But even now, even after your plotting and your treachery, Grandmother Wexen would offer peace.” Dappled shade slid across her face as she raised her eyes toward heaven. “The One God is truly a forgiving god.”

Father Yarvi snorted. Koll could hardly believe how fearless he seemed. “I daresay her forgiveness has a price, though?”

“The statues of the Tall Gods shall all be broken and the One God worshipped throughout the Shattered Sea,” said Adwyn. “Every Vansterman and Gettlander shall pay a yearly tithe to the Ministry. King Uthil and King Gorm will lay their swords at the feet of the High King in Skekenhouse, beg forgiveness and swear new oaths.”

“The old ones did not stick.”

“That is why you, Mother Scaer and the young Prince Druin will remain as hostages.”

“Hmmmmmm,” Father Yarvi lifted his withered finger to tap at his chin. “It’s a lovely offer, but summer in Skekenhouse can be a little sticky.”

An arrow flickered past Koll’s face, so close he felt the wind of it on his cheek. It took the leader of the warriors silently in the shoulder, just above the rim of his shield.

More shafts flitted from the woods. A man screamed. Another clutched at an arrow in his face. Koll sprang at Father Yarvi and dragged him down behind the thick bole of a sacred tree. He glimpsed a warrior charging toward them, sword high. Then Dosduvoi stepped out, huge as a house, and with a swing of his great ax snatched the man from his feet and sent him tumbling away in a shower of dead leaves.

Shadows writhed, stabbing, hacking, knocking at the offerings and setting them swinging. A few bloody moments and Mother Adwyn’s men had joined King Fynn on the other side of the Last Door. Their captain was on his knees, wheezing, six arrows lodged in his mail. He tried to stand using his sword as a crutch, but the red strength was leaking from him.

Fror slipped into the clearing. One hand gripped his heavy ax. With the other he gently undid the buckle on the captain’s gold-trimmed helmet. It was a fine one, and would fetch a fine price.

“You will be sorry for this,” breathed the captain, blood on his lips and his gray hair stuck to his sweating forehead.

Fror slowly nodded. “I am sorry already.” And he struck the captain on the crown and knocked him over with his arms spread wide.

“You can let me up now,” said Father Yarvi, patting Koll on the side. He realized he’d covered the minister with his body as a mother might her baby in a storm.

“You couldn’t tell me the plan?” he asked, scrambling up.

“You cannot give away what you do not know.”

“You don’t trust me to act a part?”

“Trust is like glass,” said Rulf, swinging his great horn bow over his shoulder and helping Yarvi up with one broad hand. “Lovely, but only a fool rests lots of weight on it.”

Hardened warriors of Gettland and Vansterland had surrounded the clearing on every side, and Mother Adwyn cut a lonely figure in their midst. Koll almost felt sorry for her, but he knew it would do neither of them the least good.

“It seems my treachery was better than yours,” said Yarvi. “Twice, now, your mistress has tried to cut me from the world, yet here I stand.”

“Treachery is what you are known for, spider.” Mother Adwyn spat purple bark-juice at his feet. “What of your sacred ground of Father Peace?”

Yarvi shrugged. “Oh, he is a forgiving god. But it may be wise to hang you from these trees and slit your throat as an offering, just in case.”

“Do it, then,” she hissed.

“Mercy shows more power than murder. Go back to Grandmother Wexen. Thank her for the information you have given me, it will be useful.” He gestured toward the dead men, already being

trussed by the feet to be hung from the branches of the sacred grove. “Thank her for these rich offerings to the Tall Gods, no doubt they will appreciate them.”

Father Yarvi jerked close to her, lips curled back, and Mother Adwyn’s mask slipped, and Koll saw her fear. “But tell the First of Ministers I piss on her offer! I swore an oath to be avenged on the killers of my father. A sun-oath and a moon-oath. Tell Grandmother Wexen that while she and I both live, there will be no peace.”

“I’ll kill you, you half-haired bitch!” snarled Raith, spraying spit as he went for her. Rakki caught his left arm and Soryorn his right and between them they managed to wrestle him back. They’d had plenty of practice at it, after all.

Thorn Bathu didn’t move. Unless you counted the jaw muscles clenching on the shaved side of her head.

“Let’s all just calm down,” said her husband, Brand, waving his open palms like a shepherd trying to still a nervous flock. “We’re meant to be allies, aren’t we?” He was a big, strong cow of a man, no edge to him at all. “Let’s just...just stand in the light a moment.”

Raith let everyone know how much he thought of that idea by twisting far enough free of his brother to spit in Brand’s face. He missed, sadly, but the point was made.

Thorn curled her lip. “Reckon this dog needs putting down.”

Everyone’s got their sore spots, and that tickled Raith’s. He went limp, let his head drop sideways, showing his teeth in a lazy grin as his eyes drifted across to Brand. “Maybe I’ll kill this coward wife of yours instead?”

He’d always had a trick for starting fights, and wasn’t half bad at finishing them either, but nothing could’ve made him ready for how fast Thorn came at him.

“You’re dead, you milk-haired bastard!”

Raith jerked away, near-dragging his brother and Soryorn down in a shocked tangle together on the dockside. Took three Gettlanders to drag her off—the sour old master-at-arms, Hunnan, the bald old helmsman, Rulf, and Brand with his scarred forearm wrapped around her neck. All strong men, straining at the effort, and even then her stray fist landed a good cuff on the top of Raith’s head.

“Peace!” snarled Brand as he struggled to wrestle his thrashing wife back. “For the gods’ sake, peace!”

But no one was in the mood. There were others growling insults now, Gettlanders and Vanstermen both. Raith saw knuckles white on sword hilts, heard the scrape as Soryorn eased his knife free of its sheath. He could smell the violence coming, far worse than he’d planned on. But there’s violence for you. It rarely keeps to the patch you mark out for it. Wouldn’t be violence if it did.

Raith bared his teeth—half-snarl, half-smile—the fire coming up in his chest, the breath ripping hot at his throat, every muscle tensing.

Could’ve been a battle for the songs right then on the rain-damp docks of Thorlby if Grom-gil-Gorm hadn’t come shoving through the angry press like a huge bull through a crowd of bleating goats.

“Enough!” roared the King of Vansterland. “What shameful pecking of little birds is this?”

The hubbub died. Raith shook off his brother, grinning his wolf’s grin, and Thorn tore free of her husband, growling curses. No doubt Brand had an uncomfortable night ahead, but it had all worked out well enough to Raith’s mind. He’d come to fight, after all, and wasn’t too bothered who with.

The glaring Gettlanders shifted to let King Uthil through, his drawn sword cradled in his arm. Raith hated him, of course. A good Vansterman had to hate the King of Gettland. But otherwise he seemed very much a man to admire, hard and gray as an iron bar and every bit as unbending, renowned for many victories and few words, a mad brightness to his sunken eyes that said he had only a cold space where the gods usually put a man's mercy.

"I am disappointed, Thorn Bathu," he grated out in a voice rough as millstones. "I expected better from you."

"I'm all regret, my king," she growled, glaring daggers at Raith, and then at Brand, who winced like daggers from his wife was far from a novelty.

"I expected no better." Grom-gil-Gorm raised one black brow at Raith. "But at least hoped for it."

"We should let 'em insult us, my king?" snapped Raith.

"A little insult must be suffered if one is to maintain an alliance," came Mother Scaer's dry voice.

"And our alliance is a ship on stormy seas," said Father Yarvi, with that honeyed smile of his that cried out for a head butt. "Sink it with squabbling and we surely all will drown alone."

Raith growled at that. He hated ministers and their two-tongued talk of Father Peace and greater good. To his mind there was no problem you couldn't best solve by putting your fist through it.

"A Vansterman never forgets an insult." Gorm wedged his thumbs among the knives bristling from his belt. "But I have a thirst upon me, and since we are the guests..." He drew himself up, the chain made from the pommels of his beaten enemies shifting as his great chest swelled. "I, Grom-gil-Gorm, Breaker of Swords and Maker of Orphans, King of Vansterland and favorite son of Mother War...will go second into the city."

His warriors grumbled bitterly. An hour they'd wasted arguing over who'd go first and now the battle was lost. Their king would take the place of less honor, so they'd have less honor and, gods, they were prickly over their honor.

"A wise choice," said Uthil, narrowing his eyes. "But expect no gifts for making it."

"The wolf needs no gifts from the sheep," said Gorm, glowering back. King Uthil's closest warriors swaggered past, gilded cloak-buckles and sword-hilts and ring-money gleaming, swollen to new heights of undeserved arrogance, and Raith showed his teeth and spat at their feet.

"A dog indeed," sneered Hunnan, and Raith would've sprung on the old bastard and knocked his brains out on the docks if Rakki hadn't hugged him tight and crooned, "Calm, brother, calm," in his ear.

"Blue Jenner! Here's a surprise!"

Raith frowned over his shoulder and saw Father Yarvi drawn aside by some old sailor with a brine-pickled face.

"A welcome one, I hope," said Jenner, clasping hands with Rulf like they were old oarmates.

"That depends," said the minister. "Have you come to take Queen Laithlin's gold?"

"I try to take any gold that's offered." Jenner glanced around like he was about to show off some secret treasure. "But I've a better reason for being here."

"Better than gold?" asked Rulf, grinning. "You've changed."

"Far better." Jenner guided someone forward who'd been hidden at his back, and it was like

someone stabbed Raith right through his skull and all the fight drained out.

She was small and slight, swamped by a weather-stained cloak. Her hair was a wild tangle, a cloud of dark curls that twitched and shifted in the salt breeze. Her skin was pale, and chapped pink round her nostrils, and the bones in her cheeks showed so fine and sharp it seemed they might snap at a harsh word.

She looked straight at Raith with big eyes dark and green as Mother Sea on a stormy day. She didn't smile. She didn't speak. Sad and solemn she seemed, and full of secrets, and every hair on Raith stood up. No ax-blow to the head could have knocked him quite so senseless as that one glimpse of her.

For a moment Father Yarvi's mouth hung foolishly open. Then he shut it with a snap. "Rulf, take Blue Jenner and his guest to Queen Laithlin. Now."

"You were ready to do murder over who went first, now you don't want to go at all?" Rakki was staring at him, and Raith realized Gorm's men were strutting in after the Gettlanders, all puffed up near to bursting to make up for going second.

"Who was that girl?" Raith croaked out, feeling giddy as a sleeper jerked from an ale dream.

"Since when were you interested in girls?"

"Since I saw this one." He blinked into the crowd, hoping to prove to both of them he hadn't imagined her, but she was gone.

"Must've been quite a beauty to draw your eye from a quarrel."

"Like nothing I ever saw."

"Forgive me, brother, but when it comes to women you haven't seen much. You're the fighter, remember?" Rakki grinned as he heaved up Grom-gil-Gorm's great black shield. "I'm the lover."

"As you never tire of telling me." Raith shouldered the king's heavy sword and made to follow his brother into Thorlby. Until he felt his master's weighty hand holding him back.

"You have disappointed me, Raith." The Breaker of Swords drew him close. "This place is full of bad enemies to have, but I fear in Queen Laithlin's Chosen Shield you have picked the very worst."

Raith scowled. "She doesn't scare me, my king."

Gorm slapped him sharply across the face. Well, a slap to Gorm. To Raith it was like being hit with an oar. He staggered but the king caught him and dragged him closer still. "What wounds me is not that you tried to hurt her, but that you failed." He cuffed him the other way and Raith's mouth turned salty with blood. "I do not want a dog that yaps. I want a dog that uses its teeth. I want a killer." And he slapped Raith a third time and left him dizzy. "I fear you have a grain of mercy left in you, Raith. Crush it, before it crushes you."

Gorm gave Raith's head a parting scratch. The sort a father gives a son. Or perhaps a huntsman gives his hound. "You can never be bloody enough for my taste, boy. You know that."

The comb of polished whalebone swish-swish-swished through Skara's hair.

Prince Druin's toy sword click-clack-scraped against a chest in the corner.

Queen Laithlin's voice spilled out blab-blab-blab. As though she sensed that if she left a silence Skara might start screaming, and screaming, and never stop.

"Outside that window, on the south side of the city, my husband's warriors are camped."

"Why didn't they help us?" Skara wanted to shriek as she stared numbly at the sprawling tents, but her mouth drooled out the proper thing, as always. "There must be very many."

"Two and a half thousand loyal Gettlanders, called in from every corner of the land."

Skara felt Queen Laithlin's strong fingers turn her head, gently but very firmly. Prince Druin gave a piping toddler's war cry and attacked a tapestry. The comb began to swish-swish-swish again, as though the solution to every problem was the right arrangement of hair.

"Outside this window, to the north, is Grom-gil-Gorm's camp." The fires glimmered in the gathering dusk, spread across the dark hills like stars across heaven's cloth. "Two thousand Vanstermen in sight of the walls of Thorlby. I never thought to see such a thing."

"Not with their swords sheathed, anyway," tossed out Thorn Bathu from the back of the room, as harshly as a warrior might toss an ax.

"I saw a quarrel on the docks..." mumbled Skara.

"I fear it will not be the last." Laithlin clicked her tongue as she teased out a knot. Skara's hair had always been unruly, but the Queen of Gettland was not a woman to be put off by a stubborn curl or two. "There is to be a great moot tomorrow. Five hours straight of quarreling, that will be. If we get through it with no one dead I will count it a victory for the songs. There."

And Laithlin turned Skara's head toward the mirror.

The queen's silent thralls had bathed her, and scrubbed her, and swapped her filthy shift for green silk brought on the long voyage from the First of Cities, nimbly altered to fit her. It was stitched with golden thread about the hem, as fine as anything she had ever worn, and Skara had worn some fine things. So many, and so carefully arranged by Mother Kyre, she had sometimes felt the clothes wore her.

She was surrounded by strong walls, strong warriors, slaves and luxury. She should have felt giddy with relief. But like a runner who stops to rest and finds they cannot stand again, the comfort made Skara feel dizzy-weak and aching-raw, battered outside and in as if she were one great bruise. She almost wished she was back aboard Blue Jenner's ship, the *Black Dog*, shivering, and staring into the rain, and thrice an hour crawling on grazed knees to puke over the side.

"This belonged to my mother, King Fynn's sister." Laithlin carefully arranged the earring, golden chains fine as cobweb that spilled red jewels almost to Skara's shoulder.

"It's beautiful," Skara croaked out, struggling not to spray sick all over the mirror. She scarcely

recognized the haunted, pink-eyed, brittle-looking girl she saw there. She looked like her own ghost. Perhaps she never escaped Yaletoft. Perhaps she was still trapped there, Bright Yilling's slave, and always would be.

At the back of the room she saw Thorn Bathu squat beside the prince, shift his tiny hands around the grip of his wooden sword, murmur instructions on how to swing it properly. She grinned as he whacked her across the leg, the star-shaped scar on her cheek puckering, and ruffled his pale blond hair. "Good boy!"

All Skara could think of was Bright Yilling's sword, that diamond pommel flashing in the darkness of the Forest, and in the mirror the pale girl's chest began to heave and her hands to tremble—

"Skara." Queen Laithlin took her firmly by the shoulders, fixed her with those hard, sharp, gray-blue eyes, jerking her back to the present. "Can you tell me what happened?"

"My grandfather waited for help from his allies." The words burbled out flat as a bee's droning. "We waited for Uthil's warriors, and Gorm's. They never came."

"Go on."

"He lost heart. Mother Kyre persuaded him to make peace. She sent a dove and Grandmother Wexen sent an eagle back. If Bail's Point was given up, and the warriors of Throvenland sent home, and the High King's army given free passage across our land, she would forgive."

"But Grandmother Wexen does not forgive," said Laithlin.

"She sent Bright Yilling to Yaletoft to settle the debt." Skara swallowed sour spit, and in the mirror the pale girl's stringy neck shifted. Prince Druin's little face was crumpled with warrior's determination as he hacked at Thorn with his toy sword and she pushed it away with her fingers. His little war cries sounded like the howls of pain and fury in the darkness, coming closer, always closer.

"Bright Yilling cut Mother Kyre's head off. He stabbed my grandfather right through and he fell in the firepit."

Queen Laithlin's eyes widened. "You...saw it happen?"

The dusting of sparks, the glow on the warriors' smiles, the thick blood dripping from the tip of Yilling's sword. Skara took a shuddering breath, and nodded. "I got away disguised as Blue Jenner's slave. Bright Yilling flipped a coin, to decide whether he would kill him too...but the coin..."

She could still see it spinning in the shadows, flashing with the colors of fire.

"The gods were with you that night," breathed Laithlin.

"Then why did they kill my family?" Skara wanted to shriek, but the girl in the mirror gave a queasy smile instead, and muttered a proper prayer of thanks to He Who Turns the Dice.

"They have sent you to me, cousin." The queen squeezed hard at Skara's shoulders. "You are safe here."

The Forest that had been about her all her life, certain as a mountain, was made ashes. The high gable that had stood for two hundred years fallen in ruin. Throvenland was torn apart like smoke on the wind. Nowhere would be safe, ever again.

Skara found she was scratching at her cheek. She could still feel Bright Yilling's cold fingertips upon it.

"You have all been so kind," she croaked out, and tried to smother an acrid burp. She had always

had a weak stomach, but since she clambered from the *Black Dog* her guts had felt as twisted as her thoughts.

“You are family, and family is all that matters.” With a parting squeeze, Queen Laithlin let go of her. “I must speak to my husband and my son...to Father Yarvi, that is.”

“Could I ask you...is Blue Jenner still here?”

The queen’s displeasure was palpable. “The man is little better than a pirate—”

“Could you send him to me? Please?”

Laithlin might have seemed hard as flint, but she must have heard the desperation in Skara’s voice. “I will send him. Thorn, the princess has been through an ordeal. Do not leave her alone. Come, Druin.”

The thigh-high prince looked solemnly at Skara. “Bye-bye.” And he dropped his wooden sword and ran after his mother.

Skara was left staring at Thorn Bathu. Staring up, since the Chosen Shield towered over her. Plainly she had no use for combs herself, the hair on one side clipped to dark stubble and on the other twisted into knots and braids and matted tangles bound up with a middle-sized fortune in gold and silver ring-money.

Here was a woman said to have fought seven men alone and won, the elf-bangle that had been her reward glowing fierce yellow on her wrist. A woman who wore blades instead of silks and scars instead of jewels. Who ground propriety under her boot heels and made no apologies for it, ever. A woman who would sooner break a door down with her face than knock.

“Am I a prisoner?” Skara meant it as a challenge, but it came out a mouse’s squeak.

Thorn’s expression was hard to read. “You’re a princess, princess.”

“In my experience there’s not much difference between the two.”

“I’m guessing you’ve never been a prisoner.”

Contempt, and who could blame her? Skara’s throat felt so closed up she could hardly speak. “You must be thinking what a soft, weak, pampered fool I am.”

Thorn took a sharp breath. “Actually I was thinking...of how it felt when I saw my father dead.” Her face might have had no softness in it, but her voice did. “I was thinking what I might have felt to see him killed. To see him killed in front of me, and nothing I could do but watch.”

Skara opened her mouth, but no words came. It was not contempt but pity, and it choked her worse than scorn.

“I know how it feels to wear a brave face,” said Thorn. “Few better.”

Skara felt as if her head were going to burst.

“I was thinking...standing where you’re standing...I’d be crying a sea.”

And Skara heaved up a great, stupid sob. Her eyes screwed shut, and burned, and leaked. Her ribs shuddered. Her breath whooped and gurgled. She stood with her hands dangling, her whole face hurting she was crying so violently. Some tiny part of her fussed that this was far from proper behavior, but the rest of her could not stop.

She heard quick footsteps and was gathered up like a child, held tight, held firm, the way her grandfather had held her when they watched her father burn on the pyre. She clung to Thorn,

blubbing into her shirt, howling half words not even she understood.

Thorn did not move, made no sound, only held Skara for a long time. Until her shuddering stopped. Until her sobs calmed to whimpers, and her whimpers to jagged breaths. Then, ever so gently, Thorn eased her away, pulled out a scrap of white cloth and, even though her own shirt was soaked with slobber, dabbed a tiny speck on the front of Skara's dress, and offered it to her. "It's for cleaning my weapons but I reckon your face is a good deal more valuable. Maybe more dangerous too."

"I'm sorry," whispered Skara.

"No need." Thorn flicked at the golden key around her neck. "I cry harder than that every morning when I wake up and remember who I married."

And Skara laughed and sobbed at once and blew a great snotty bubble out of her nose. For the first time since that night she felt something like herself again. Perhaps she had escaped from Yaletoft after all. As she wiped her face there was a hesitant knock at the door.

"It's Blue Jenner."

When he shuffled hunched into the room there was something reassuring in his shabbiness. At a ship's helm or in a queen's chambers he was the same man. Skara felt stronger at the sight of him. That was the man she needed.

"You remember me?" asked Thorn.

"You're a hard woman to forget." Jenner glanced down at the key around her neck. "Congratulations on your marriage."

She snorted. "Long as you don't congratulate my husband. He's still in mourning over it."

"You sent for me, princess?"

"I did." Skara sniffed back her tears and set her shoulders. "What are your plans?"

"Can't say I've ever been much of a planner. Queen Laithlin's offered me a fair price to fight for Gettland but, well, war's young man's work. Maybe I'll take the *Black Dog* back down the Divine..." He glanced up at Skara, and winced. "I promised Mother Kyre I'd see you to your cousin—"

"And you kept your promise, in spite of the dangers. I shouldn't ask you for more."

He winced harder. "You're going to, then?"

"I was hoping you might stay with me."

"Princess...I'm an old raider twenty years past my best and my best was none too pretty."

"Doubtless. When I first saw you I thought you were as worn as an old prow-beast."

Jenner scratched at the side of his grizzled jaw. "A fair judgment."

"A fool's judgment." Skara's voice cracked, but she cleared her throat, and took a breath, and carried on. "I see that now. The worn prow-beast is the one that's braved the worst weather and brought the ship home safe even so. I don't need pretty, I need loyal."

Jenner winced harder still. "All my life I've been free, princess. Looked to no one but the next horizon, bowed to no one but the wind—"

"Has the horizon thanked you? Has the wind rewarded you?"

"Not hugely, I'll confess."

"I will." She caught his calloused hand in both of hers. "To be free a man needs a purpose."

He stared down at his hand in hers, then over at Thorn.

She shrugged. “A warrior with nothing but themselves to fight for is no more than a thug.”

“I’ve seen you tested and I know I can trust you.” Skara brought the old raider’s gaze back to hers and held it. “Stay with me. Please.”

“Oh, gods.” The leathery skin around Jenner’s eyes creased as he smiled. “How do I say no to that?”

“You don’t. Say you’ll help me.”

“I’m your man, princess. I swear it. A sun-oath and a moon-oath.” He paused for a moment. “Help you do what, though?”

Skara took a ragged breath. “I said I would see Throvenland free, and my grandfather’s hall rebuilt, and Bright Yilling’s carcass left for the crows, remember?”

Blue Jenner raised his craggy brows very high. “Bright Yilling has all the High King’s strength behind him. Fifty thousand swords, they say.”

“Only half a war is fought with swords.” She pressed her fingertip into the side of her head, so hard it hurt. “The other half is fought here.”

“So...you’ve a plan?”

“I’ll think of something.” She let go of Blue Jenner’s hand and looked over at Thorn. “You sailed with Father Yarvi to the First of Cities.”

Thorn frowned at Skara down a nose twisted from many breakings, trying to work out what moved beneath the question. “Aye, I sailed with Father Yarvi.”

“You fought a duel against Grom-gil-Gorm.”

“That too.”

“You’re Queen Laithlin’s Chosen Shield.”

“You know I am.”

“And standing at her shoulder you must see a great deal of King Uthil too.”

“More than most.”

Skara wiped the last wetness from her lashes. She could not afford to cry. She had to be brave, and clever, and strong, however weak and terrified she felt. She had to fight for Throvenland now there was no one else, and words had to be her weapons.

“Tell me about them,” she said.

“What do you want to know?”

Knowledge is power, Mother Kyre used to say when Skara complained about her endless lessons. “I want to know everything.”

Raith woke with a mad jolt to find someone pawing at him.

He grabbed that bastard around the throat and slammed him against the wall, snarling as he whipped his knife out.

“Gods, Raith! It’s me! It’s me!”

Wasn’t until then Raith saw, in the flickering light of the torch just down the corridor, that he’d got his brother pinned and was about to cut his throat.

His heart was hammering. Took him a moment to work out he was in the citadel in Thorlby. In the corridor outside Gorm’s door, tangled with his blanket. Just where he was meant to be.

“Don’t wake me like that,” he snapped, forcing the fingers of his left hand open. They always ached worst just after he woke.

“Wake you?” whispered Rakki. “You would’ve woken the whole of Thorlby the way you were shouting out. You dreaming again?”

“No,” grunted Raith, sitting back against the wall and scrubbing at the sides of his head with his nails. “Maybe.” Dreams full of fire. The smoke pouring up and the stink of destruction. Mad light in the eyes of the warriors, the eyes of the dogs. Mad light on that woman’s face. Her voice, as she shrieked for her children.

Rakki offered him a flask and Raith snatched it from him, rinsed out his mouth, cut and sore inside and out from Gorm’s slaps, but that was nothing new. He sloshed water into his hand, rubbed it over his face. He was cold with sweat all over.

“I don’t like this, Raith. I’m worried for you.”

“You, worried for me?” Gorm’s sword must’ve been knocked clear in the scuffle, and Raith took it up, hugged it to his chest. If the king saw he’d let it lie in the cold he’d get another slap, and maybe worse. “That’s a new one.”

“No, it isn’t. I’ve been worried for you a long time.” Rakki glanced nervously toward the door of the king’s chamber, let his voice drop soft and eager as he leaned forward. “We could just go. We could find a ship to take us down the Divine and the Denied, like you always talk of. Like you used to talk of, anyway.”

Raith nodded toward the door. “You think he’d let us just go? You think Mother Scaer would wave us off smiling?” He snorted. “I thought you were supposed to be the clever one. It’s a pretty dream, but there’s no going back. You forgotten what things were like before? Being hungry, and cold, and afraid all the time?”

“You’re not afraid all the time?” Rakki’s voice was so small it brought Raith’s anger boiling up and chased the terror of his dreams away. Anger was the answer to most problems, when it came to it.

“No I’m not!” he snarled, shaking Gorm’s sword and making his brother flinch. “I’m a warrior, and I’m going to win a name for myself in this war, and enough ring-money we’ll never be hungry again.

This is my right place. Fought for it, haven't I?"

"Aye, you've fought for it."

"We serve a king!" Raith tried to feel the same pride he used to. "The greatest warrior in the Shattered Sea. Unbeaten in duel or battle. You like to pray. Give thanks to Mother War that we stand with the winners!"

Rakki stared at him across the hallway, his back against Gorm's war-scarred shield, his eyes wide and glistening with the torchlight. Strange, how his face could be so like Raith's but his expression so different. Sometimes seemed they were two prow-beasts carved alike, forever stuck to the same ship but always looking opposite ways.

"There's going to be killing," he muttered. "More than ever."

"Reckon so," said Raith, and he lay down, turning his back on his brother, hugging Gorm's sword against him and drawing the blanket over his shoulder. "It's a war, ain't it?"

"I just don't like killing."

Raith tried to sound like it was nothing, and couldn't quite get there. "I can kill for both of us."

A silence. "That's what scares me."

Koll tapped out the last rune and smiled as he blew a puff of wood dust away. The scabbard was finished, and he was good and proud of the outcome.

He'd always loved working with wood, which kept no secrets and told no lies and having been carved never came uncarved. Not like minister's work, all smoke and guesses. Words were trickier tools than chisels, and people changeable as Mother Sea.

His back prickled as Rin reached around his shoulder, tracing one of the lines of runes with a fingertip. "What does it mean?"

"Five names of Mother War."

"Gods, it's fine work." Her hand slid down the dark wood, lingering on the carved figures, and animals, and trees, all flowing one into another. "You've got clever hands, Koll. None cleverer."

She slipped the chape she'd made onto the scabbard's point, bright steel hammered to look like a serpent's head, fitting his work as perfectly as a key fits a lock. "Look at the beautiful things we can make together." Her iron-blackened fingers slid into the gaps between his wood-browned ones. "Meant to be, isn't it? My sword. Your sheath." He felt her other hand sliding across his thigh and gave a little shiver. "And the other way around..."

"Rin—"

"All right, more dagger than sword." He could hear the laughter in her voice, could feel it tickling his neck. He loved it when she laughed.

"Rin, I can't. Brand's like a brother to me—"

"Don't lie with Brand. Problem solved."

"I'm Father Yarvi's apprentice."

"Don't lie with Father Yarvi." He felt her lips brush his neck and send a sweaty shudder down his back.

"He saved my mother's life. Saved my life. He set us free."

Her lips were at his ear now, her whisper so loud it made him hunch his shoulders, the weights rattling on their thong around his neck. "How did he set you free if you can't make your own choices?"

"I owe him, Rin." He could feel her chest pressing against his back with each breath. Her fingers had curled round to grip his hand tight. She was as strong as he was. Stronger, probably. He had to shut his eyes to think straight. "When this war's done I'll take the Minister's Test, and swear the Minister's Oath, and I'll be Brother Koll, and have no family, no wife—ah."

Her hand slid down between his legs. "Till then what's stopping you?"

"Nothing." He twisted around, pushing his free hand into her short-chopped hair and dragging her close. They laughed and kissed at once, hungrily, sloppily, stumbling against a bench and knocking a

clutch of tools clattering across the floor.

It always ended up this way when he came here. That was why he kept coming.

Slick as a salmon she twisted free of him, darted to the clamp and snatched up her whetstone, peering down at the blade she was working on as if she'd done nothing else all morning.

Koll blinked. "What are—"

The door clattered open and Brand walked in, Koll marooned in the middle of the floor with a great tent in his trousers.

"Hey, Koll," said Brand. "What're you doing here?"

"Came to finish the scabbard," he croaked, face burning as he turned quickly back to his table and brushed some shavings onto the floor.

"Let's see it." Brand put an arm around Koll's shoulder. Gods, it was a big arm, heavy with muscle, rope scar coiling up the wrist. Koll remembered seeing Brand take the weight of a ship across his shoulders, a ship that had been on the point of crushing Koll dead, as it happened. Then he wondered what it'd be like getting punched by that arm if Brand found out everything his sister and Koll were up to. He swallowed with more than a little difficulty.

But Brand only pushed the stray hair out of his face and grinned. "Beautiful work. You're blessed, Koll. Same gods as blessed my sister."

"She's...a deeply spiritual girl." Koll shifted awkwardly to get his trousers settled while Rin stuck her lips out in a mad pout behind her brother's back.

Gods, Brand was oblivious. Strong and loyal and good-humored as a cart horse, but for obliviousness he set new standards. Probably you couldn't be married to Thorn Bathu without learning to let a lot of things drift past.

"How's Thorn?" asked Koll, aiming at a distraction.

Brand paused as if that was a puzzle that took considerable thought. "Thorn is Thorn. But I knew that when I married her." He gave Koll that helpless grin of his. "Wouldn't have it any other way."

"Can't be the easiest person to live with."

"I'll let you know if it happens. She's half her time with the queen and half the rest training harder than ever, so I tend to get her asleep or ready to argue." He scratched wearily at the back of his head. "Still, I knew that when I married her too."

"Can't be the easiest person not to live with."

"Huh." Brand stared off into space like a veteran still struggling to make sense of the horrors he'd seen. "She surely can cook a fight from the most peaceful ingredients. But nothing worth doing is easy. I love her in spite of it. I love her because of it. I love her." And his face broke out in that grin again. "Every day's a new adventure, that's for sure."

There was a harsh knocking at the door and Brand shook himself and went to answer. Rin mimed blowing a kiss and Koll mimed clutching it to his heart and Rin mimed puking all over her workbench. He loved it when she did that.

"Good to see you, Brand." Koll looked up, surprised to see his master in Rin's forge.

"Likewise, Father Yarvi."

You get a special kind of kinship when you take a long journey with a man, and though Brand and

Yarvi could hardly have been less alike they hugged each other, and the minister slapped the smith's broad back affectionately with his withered hand.

"How are things in the blade business?" he called to Rin.

"Men always need good blades, Father Yarvi," she said. "And the word business?"

"Men always need good words too." The minister traded his smile for the usual sternness when he looked at Koll. "I had a feeling you'd be here. It's past midday."

"Already?" Koll pulled his apron off, got caught in the straps, tore free and tossed it down, slapping the wood dust from his hands.

"Usually the apprentice comes to the master." The tip of the minister's elf metal staff rang against the floor as he walked over. "You are my apprentice, aren't you?"

"Of course, Father Yarvi," said Koll, shifting guiltily away from Rin.

Yarvi narrowed his eyes as he glanced from one of them to the other, plainly missing nothing. Few men were less oblivious than he. "Tell me you fed the doves."

"And cleaned out their cages, and sorted the new herbs, and read twenty more pages of Mother Gundring's history of Gettland, and learned fifty words in the tongue of Kalyiv." Koll's endless questions had always driven his mother mad, but studying for the Ministry he had so many answers he felt his head was going to burst.

"The food of fear is ignorance, Koll. The death of fear is knowledge. What about the movements of the stars? Did you copy the charts I gave you?"

Koll clutched at his head. "Gods, I'm sorry, Father Yarvi. I'll do it later."

"Not today. The great moot begins in an hour and there is a cargo that needs unloading first."

Koll looked hopefully at Brand. "I'm not much at shifting boxes—"

"Jars. And they need shifting very carefully. A gift from the Empress Vialine, brought all the way up the Denied and the Divine."

"A gift from Sumael, you mean?" said Brand.

"A gift from Sumael." Father Yarvi had a faraway grin at the name. "A weapon for us to use against the High King..." He trailed off as he stepped between Koll and Rin, balanced his staff in the crook of his arm and with his good hand lifted up the scabbard, turning it to the light to peer at the carvings.

"Mother War," he murmured. "Mother of Crows. She Whose Feathers Are Swords. She Who Gathers the Dead. She Who Makes the Open Hand a Fist. Did you carve this?"

"Who else is good enough?" asked Rin. "Scabbard's just as important as the blade. A good sword's rarely drawn. It's this folk'll see."

"When you finally swear your Minister's Oath, Koll, it will be a loss to wood carving." Yarvi gave a weighty sigh. "But you cannot change the world with a chisel."

"You can change it a little," said Rin, folding her arms as she looked up at the minister. "And for the better."

"His mother asked me to make him the best man he could be."

Koll shook his head frantically behind his master's back, but Rin was not to be shut up. "Some of us quite like the man he is," she said.

“And is that all you want Koll? To carve wood?” Father Yarvi tossed the scabbard rattling down on the bench and put his withered hand on Koll’s shoulder. “Or do you want to stand at the shoulder of kings, and guide the course of history?”

Koll blinked from one of them to the other. Gods, he didn’t want to let either of them down, but what could he do? Father Yarvi set him free. And what slave’s son wouldn’t want to stand at the shoulder of kings and be safe, and respected, and powerful?

“History,” he muttered, looking guiltily at the floor. “I reckon...”

Raith was bored out of his mind.

Wars were meant to be a matter of fighting. And a war against the High King surely the biggest fight a man could ever hope for. But now he learned the bigger the war, the more it was all made of talk. Talk, and waiting, and sitting on your arse.

The high folk sat around three long tables set in a horseshoe, status proclaimed by the value of their drinking cups—the Vanstermen on one side, the Gettlanders opposite, and in the middle a dozen chairs for the Throvenmen. Empty chairs, because the Throvenmen hadn't come, and Raith wished he'd followed their example.

Father Yarvi droned on. "Seven days ago I met with a representative of Grandmother Wexen."

"I should have been there!" Mother Scaer snapped back.

"I wish you could have been, but there was no time." Yarvi showed his one good palm as if you could never find a fairer man than he. "But you did not miss much. Mother Adwyn tried to kill me."

"I like her already," Raith whispered to his brother and made him snigger.

Raith would sooner have bedded a scorpion than traded ten words with that one-fisted bastard. Rakki had taken to calling him the Spider, and no doubt he was lean and subtle and poisonous. But unless you were a fly, spiders would let you be. Father Yarvi's webs were spun for men and there was no telling who'd be trapped in them.

His apprentice was little better. A lanky boy with scarecrow hair, a patchy prickling of beard no particular color and a twitchy, jumpy, blinky way about him. Grinning, always grinning like he was everyone's friend but Raith was nowhere near won over. A look of fury, a look of pain, a look of hatred you can trust. A smile can hide anything.

Raith let his head hang back while the voices burbled on, staring up at the great domed ceiling of the Godshall. Quite a building, but aside from setting them on fire he didn't have much use for buildings. The statues of the Tall Gods frowned down disapprovingly from on high and Raith sneered back. Aside from the odd halfhearted prayer to Mother War he didn't have much use for gods either.

"Grandmother Wexen has proclaimed us sorcerers and traitors, and issued a decree that we are all to be cut from the world." Father Yarvi tossed a scroll onto the table before him and Raith groaned. He'd even less use for scrolls than gods or buildings. "She is set on crushing us."

"No offer of peace?" asked Queen Laithlin.

Father Yarvi glanced sideways at his apprentice, then shook his head. "None."

The queen gave a bitter sigh. "I had hoped she might give us something we could bargain with. There is scant profit in bloodshed."

"That all depends on whose blood is shed and how." Gorm frowned darkly toward the empty chairs. "When will King Fynn lend us his wisdom?"

"Not in a thousand years," said Yarvi. "Fynn is dead."

The echoes of his words died in the high spaces of the Godshall to leave a shocked silence. Even Raith pricked up his ears.

“Mother Kyre gave up the key to Bail’s Point in return for peace, but Grandmother Wexen betrayed her. She sent Bright Yilling to Yaletoft to settle her debts, and he killed King Fynn and burned the city to the ground.”

“We can expect no help from Throvenland, then.” Sister Owd, Mother Scaer’s fat-faced apprentice, looked like she might burst into tears at the news, but Raith was grinning. Maybe now they’d get something done.

“There was one survivor.” Queen Laithlin snapped her fingers and the doors of the Godshall were swung open. “King Fynn’s granddaughter, Princess Skara.”

There were two black figures in the brightness of the doorway, their long shadows stretching out across the polished floor as they came on. One was Blue Jenner, looking every bit as shabby and weatherworn as he had on the docks. The other had made more effort.

She wore a dress of fine green cloth that shone in the torchlit dimness, shoulders back and shadows gathered in the hollows about her sharp collarbones. An earring spilled jewels down her long neck and, high on one thin arm, a blood-red gem gleamed on a ring of gold. The dark hair that had floated in a ghostly cloud was oiled and braided and bound into a shining coil.

Gods, she was changed, but Raith knew her right away. “That’s her,” he breathed. “The girl I saw on the docks.”

Rakki leaned close to whisper. “I love you, brother, but you might be reaching a bit high.”

“I must give thanks.” She looked pale and brittle as eggshell, but Skara’s voice rang out strong and clear as she turned those great green eyes up at the looming statues of the Tall Gods. “To the gods for delivering me from the hands of Bright Yilling, to my hosts for giving me shelter when I stood alone. To my cousin Queen Laithlin, whose deep cunning is well known but whose deep compassion I have only lately discovered. And to the Iron King Uthil, whose iron resolve and iron justice is whispered of all around the Shattered Sea.”

King Uthil raised one gray brow a fraction. A proper show of delight from that old bear-trap of a face. “You are welcome among us, princess.”

Skara gave a deep and graceful bow to the Vanstermen. “Grom-gil-Gorm, King of Vansterland, Breaker of Swords, I am honored to stand in your long shadow. I would tell you how tales of your great strength and high weaponluck were often told in Yaletoft, but your chain tells that story more eloquently than I ever could.”

“I thought it eloquent indeed.” Gorm fingered the chain of pommels cut from the blades of his dead enemies, looped four times around his trunk of a neck. “Until I heard you speak, princess. Now I begin to doubt.”

It was all just words. But even Raith, who could flatter no better than a dog, saw how carefully each compliment was fitted to the vanities of its target like a key to a lock. The mood in the Godshall was already brighter. Enough vinegar had been sprayed over this alliance. Skara offered honey, and they were eager to lap it up.

“Great kings,” she said, “wise queens, storied warriors and deep-cunning ministers are gathered here.” She pressed a thin hand to her stomach and Raith thought he saw it trembling, but she caught it

with the other and carried on. “I am young, and have no right to sit among you, but there is no one else to speak for Throvenland. Not for myself, but on behalf of my people, who are helpless before the High King’s warriors, I beg that you allow me to take my grandfather’s seat.”

Maybe it was that she stood on neither side. Maybe that she was young and humble and without friends. Maybe it was the music of her voice, but there was some magic when she spoke. No one could have rammed a word in on the end of a spear a moment before, now this room of bristling heroes sat in thoughtful silence.

When King Uthil spoke, it came harsh as a crow’s call after a nightingale’s song. “It would be churlish to refuse a request so gracefully made.”

The two kings had finally found one thing they could agree on. “We should be begging you for seats, Princess Skara,” said Gorm.

Raith watched the princess glide to the high chair King Fynn would have taken, walking so smoothly you could have balanced a jug of ale on her head. Blue Jenner somewhat spoiled the grace of it by dropping onto the seat beside her as if it was an oarsman’s sea chest.

Gorm frowned toward the old trader. “It is not fitting that the princess be so lightly attended.”

“I won’t disagree.” Blue Jenner flashed a gap-toothed grin. “Believe me when I say none o’ this was my idea.”

“A ruler should have a minister beside them,” said Mother Scaer. “To help pick out the lesser evil.”

Yarvi frowned across the hall at her. “And the greater good.”

“Precisely. My apprentice Sister Owd is well versed in the languages and laws of the Shattered Sea, and a deep-cunning healer besides.”

Raith almost laughed. Blinking gormlessly sideways at her mistress, Sister Owd looked about as deep-cunning as a turnip.

“That is good,” said Gorm, “but the princess must be as well guarded as she is advised.”

Laithlin’s voice was icy. “My cousin has my warriors to protect her.”

“And who will protect her from them? I offer you my own sword-bearer.” Gorm’s weighty hand slapped down on Raith’s shoulder, as shocking as a stroke of lightning, and struck his laughter dead. “My own cupfiller. I trust my life to him every time I drink and I drink often. Raith will sleep outside your door, princess, and guard it faithfully as any hound.”

“I’d sooner have a nest of snakes outside her bedchamber,” snarled Thorn Bathu, and Raith was no happier. He could’ve gazed at Skara all the long day, but being ripped from the place he’d fought for and made her slave was nowhere near so pleasing.

“My king—” he hissed, as angry voices were raised all about the room. For years Raith and his brother had served their king together. That he could be so easily tossed aside was like a knife in him. And who’d watch over Rakki? Raith was the strong one, they both knew that.

Gorm’s hand pressed heavier. “She is Laithlin’s cousin,” he murmured. “Almost a Gettlander. Stick close to her.”

“But I should fight beside you, not play nursemaid to some—”

The great fingers squeezed so crushing hard they made Raith gasp. “Never make me ask twice.”

“Friends! Please!” called Skara. “We have too many enemies to argue with each other! I gratefully accept your advice, Sister Owd. And your protection, Raith.”

Raith glanced around the hall, feeling all those cold eyes on him. His king had spoken. He’d no more say than a dog does in his master’s hunt.

The legs of his chair shrieked as he stood and numbly unslung Gorm’s great sword from his shoulder. The sword he’d been cleaning, polishing, carrying, sleeping with for three years. So long he felt lopsided without its weight. He wanted to fling it down, but couldn’t bring himself to do it. In the end he set it meekly beside his chair, gave his astonished brother a parting pat on the shoulder, and in one moment went from a king’s swordbearer to a princess’s lapdog.

His scraping footsteps echoed in the disapproving silence and Raith dropped numbly into a chair beside his new mistress, thoroughly beaten without even getting the chance to fight.

“Shall we return to the business of war?” grated out King Uthil, and the moot lurched on.

Skara didn’t so much as glance at her new pet. Why would she? They might as well have come from different worlds. She seemed to Raith as sharp and perfect as a relic made by elf-hands. As calm, and confident, and serene in this high company as a mountain lake under the stars.

A girl—or a woman—with no fear in her.

Skara had hardly been more scared when she faced Bright Yilling.

She had not slept an instant for the endless plowing over of what to say and how to say it, weighing Mother Kyre's lessons, remembering her grandfather's example, muttering prayers into the darkness to She Who Spoke the First Word.

She had not eaten a scrap of breakfast for the endless nervous churning of her guts. She felt as if her arse were about to drop right out, kept wondering what would happen if she let blast a great fart in the midst of this exalted company.

She clung white-knuckle-tight to the arms of her chair as though it were adrift on a stormy sea. Angry faces swam from the gloom of the Godshall and she struggled to study them as Mother Kyre had taught her. To read them, to riddle out the doubts and hopes and secrets behind them, to find what could be used.

She closed her eyes, repeating her grandfather's words over and over in her thoughts. *You were always a brave one, Skara. Always a brave one. Always a brave one.*

The young Vansterman, Raith, was hardly lending her confidence. He was striking, all right. Striking as an ax to the throat, his face pale and hard as chiseled silver, a deep nick cut from one battered ear, his forehead angrily furrowed, his short-clipped hair and his scarred brows and even his eyelashes all white, as if all sentiment had been wrung out of him and left only cold scorn.

They might as well have come from different worlds. He looked tough and savage as a fighting dog, calm and disdainful in this deadly company as a wolf at the head of his own pack. He would have seemed in his right place smirking among Bright Yilling's Companions, and Skara swallowed sour spit, and tried to pretend he was not there.

"Death waits for us all." King Uthil's grinding voice echoed at her as if he stood at the top of a well and she was drowning at the bottom. "The wise warrior favors the sword. He strikes for the heart, confounds and surprises his enemy. Steel is the answer, always. We must attack."

A predictable rattling of approval rose from Uthil's side of the hall, a predictable grunting of disgust from Gorm's.

"The wise warrior does not rush into Death's arms. He favors the shield." Gorm laid a loving hand on the great black shield Raith's twin carried. "He draws his enemy onto his own ground, and on his own terms crushes him."

King Uthil snorted. "What has favoring the shield won you? In this very hall I challenged you and from this very hall you skulked like a beaten dog."

Sister Owd worked her way forward. Her face reminded Skara of the peaches that used to grow outside the walls of Bail's Point: soft, round, blotched with pink and fuzzed with downy hair. "My kings, this is not helpful—"

But Grom-gil-Gorm boomed over her like thunder over birdsong. "The last time Gettlanders and

Vanstermen faced each other your famous sword went missing from the square, Iron King. You sent a woman to fight in your place and I defeated her, but chose to let her live—”

“We can try it again whenever you please, you giant turd,” snarled Thorn Bathu.

Skara saw Raith’s hand grip the arm of his chair. A big, pale hand, scarred across the thick knuckles. A hand whose natural shape was a fist. Skara caught his wrist and made sure she stood first.

“We must find some middle ground!” she called. More of a desperate shriek, in truth. She swallowed as every eye turned toward her, hostile as a rank of leveled spears. “Surely the wisest warrior uses shield and sword together, each at the proper time.”

It seemed hard to argue with, but the moot found a way. “Those who bring ships should speak on the strategy,” said King Uthil, blunt as a birch-club.

“You bring only one crew to our alliance,” said King Gorm, fondling his chain.

“It’s a good one,” observed Jenner. “But I can’t argue it’s more than one.”

Sister Owd made another effort. “The proper rules of a moot, laid down by Ashenleer in the depths of history, give equal voice to each party to an alliance, regardless of...regardless...” She caught sight of her erstwhile mistress, Mother Scaer, giving her the frostiest glare imaginable, and her voice died a slow death in the great spaces of the Godshall.

Skara had to struggle to keep her voice level. “I would have brought more ships if my grandfather were alive.”

“But he is dead,” answered Uthil, without bothering to soften it.

Gorm frowned across at his rival. “And had betrayed us to Grandmother Wexen.”

“What choice did you leave him?” barked Skara, her fury taking everyone by surprise, herself most of all. “His allies should have come to his aid, but they sat bickering over who sat where while he died alone!”

If words were weapons, those ones struck home. She seized the silence they gave her, leaned forward and, tiny though they looked, planted her fists on the table the way her grandfather used to.

“Bright Yilling is busy spreading fire across Throvenland! He puts down what resistance remains. He paves the road for the High King’s great army. He thinks himself invincible!” She let Yilling’s disdain chafe at all the tender pride gathered in the room, then added softly, “but he has left his ships behind him.”

Uthil’s gray eyes narrowed. “A warrior’s ship is his surest weapon, his means of supply, his route of escape.”

“His home and his heart.” Gorm combed his fingers carefully through his beard. “Where are these boats of Bright Yilling’s?”

Skara licked her lips. “In the harbor at Bail’s Point.”

“Ha!” The elf-bangles rattled on Mother Scaer’s tattooed wrist as she swatted the whole business away. “Safe behind the great chains.”

“The place is elf-built,” said Father Yarvi. “Impregnable.”

“No!” Skara’s voice echoed back from the dome above like a clap. “I was born there and I know its weaknesses.”

Uthil twitched with annoyance, but Laithlin set her hand ever so gently on the back of his clenched

fist. "Let her speak," she murmured, leaning close. As the king looked at his wife his frown softened for an instant, and Skara wondered if he truly was a man of iron, or only one of flesh like others, trapped in the iron cage of his own fame.

"Speak, princess," he said, turning his hand over to clasp Laithlin's as he sat back.

Skara craned forward, pushing her words to every corner of the chamber, striving to fill the hall with her hopes and her desires and make every listener share them, the way Mother Kyre had taught her. "The elf-walls cannot be breached, but parts of them were destroyed by the Breaking of God and the gaps closed by the work of men. Mother Sea chews endlessly at their foundations. To shore them up my grandfather built two great buttresses by the cliffs on the southwest corner. So great they nearly touch. A nimble man could climb up between, and bring others after."

"A nimble madman," murmured Gorm.

"Even if a few could get in," said Uthil, "Bright Yilling is a tested war-leader. He would not be fool enough to leave the great gates unguarded—"

"There is another gate, hidden, only wide enough for one man at a time, but it could let the rest of your warriors into the fortress." Skara's voice cracked with her desperate need to persuade them, but Blue Jenner was at her side, and a finer diplomat than he appeared.

"I may not know much," he said, "but I know the Shattered Sea, and Bail's Point is the lock on it and the key to it. The fortress controls the Straits of Skekenhouse. That's why Grandmother Wexen was so keen to take it. Long as Bright Yilling holds it he can strike anywhere, but if we can take it from him..." And he turned to Skara, and gave her a wink.

"We win a victory for the songs," she called, "and bring the High King's chair itself under threat."

There was a low muttering as men turned over the chances. Skara had caught their interest, but the two kings were restless bulls, hard indeed to yoke to one purpose.

"What if the ships have been moved?" grated out Uthil. "What if you misremember the weaknesses of Bail's Point? What if Yilling has learned of them and guards them already?"

"Then Death waits for us all, King Uthil." Skara would win no battles with meekness, not against such opponents as these. "I heard you say we must strike for the heart. Yilling's heart is his pride. His ships."

"This is a gamble," murmured Gorm. "There is much that could go wrong—"

"To win against a stronger opponent you must *risk*." Skara thumped the table with her fist. "I heard you say we must meet the enemy on our own ground. What better ground could there be than the strongest fortress in the Shattered Sea?"

"It is not my ground," grumbled Gorm.

"But it is mine!" Skara's voice cracked again but she forced herself on. "You forget! The blood of Bail himself flows in my veins!"

Skara felt them teeter. Their hatred for each other, and their fear of the High King, and their need to look fearless, and their lust for glory, all balanced on a sword's edge. She almost had them but at any moment, like doves flying to familiar cages, they might lurch back into their well-plowed feud and the chance would be lost.

Where reason fails, Mother Kyre once told her, madness may succeed.

“Perhaps you need to see it!” Skara reached down and snatched the dagger from Raith’s belt.

He made a desperate grab at her but too late. She pressed the bright point into the ball of her thumb and slit her palm open to the root of her little finger.

She had expected a few delicate crimson drops, but Raith clearly kept his knife well-sharpened. Blood spattered the table, flicked across Blue Jenner’s chest and into Sister Owd’s round face. There was a collective gasp, Skara the most shocked of anyone, but there could be no retreat now, only a mad charge forward.

“Well?” She held up her fist in the sight of the Tall Gods, blood streaking her arm and pattering from her elbow. “Will you proud warriors draw your swords and shed your blood with mine? Will you give yourselves to Mother War and trust to your weaponluck? Or will you skulk here in the shadows, pricking each other with words?”

Grom-gil-Gorm’s chair toppled over as he rose to his full great height. He gave a grimace, and his jaw muscles bulged, and Skara shrank back, waiting for his fury to crush her. Then she realized he was chewing his tongue. He spat red across the table.

“The men of Vansterland will sail in five days,” growled the Breaker of Swords, blood running into his beard.

King Uthil stood, the drawn sword he always carried sliding through the crook of his arm until its point rested before him. He took it under the crosspiece, knuckles whitening as he squeezed. A streak of blood gathered in the fuller, and worked its way down to the point, and spread out in a dark slick around the steel.

“The men of Gettland sail in four,” he said.

Warriors on both sides of the room thumped at the tables, and rattled their weapons, and sent up a cheer at seeing blood finally spilled, even if it was far from enough to win a battle, and most of it belonging to a girl of seventeen.

Skara sat back, suddenly dizzy, and felt the knife plucked from her hand. Sister Owd slit the stitching in her sleeve and ripped away a strip of cloth, then took Skara’s wrist and deftly began to bandage her palm.

“This will serve until I can stitch it.” She looked up from under her brows. “Please never do that again, princess.”

“Don’t worry—ah!” Gods, it was starting to hurt. “I think I’ve learned that lesson.”

“It is a little soon to celebrate our victory!” called out Father Yarvi, stilling the noise. “We have first to decide who will do the climbing.”

“When it comes to feats of strength and skill my standard-bearer Soryorn is unmatched.” Gorm put his hand through the garnet-studded collar of the tall Shend thrall beside him. “He ran the oars and back three times on our voyage from Vansterland, and in stormy seas too.”

“You will find no one as swift and subtle as my apprentice Koll,” said Father Yarvi. “As any man who has seen him swarm up the cliffs for eggs will gladly testify.” The Gettlanders all nodded along. All except the apprentice himself, who looked almost as queasy as Skara felt at the notion.

“A friendly contest, perhaps?” offered Queen Laithlin. “To see who is the better?”

Skara saw the cunning in that. A fine distraction, to keep these restless rams from butting each other

before they met their enemy.

Sister Owd set Skara's bandaged hand gently down on the table. "As an equal partner in the alliance," she called, "by ancient law and long precedent, Throvenland should also be represented in such a contest." This time she refused to meet Mother Scaer's chilling eye, and sat back well pleased with her contribution.

Skara was less delighted. She had no strong or subtle men, only Blue Jenner.

He raised his bushy brows as she glanced over at him, and muttered, "I find stairs a challenge."

"I'll climb for you," said Raith. Skara had not seen him smile until then, and it seemed to light a flame in that cold face, his eyes glinting bold and mischievous and making him seem more striking than ever. "Got to be better'n talking, hasn't it?"

“We haven’t had a chance to talk,” said Blue Jenner.

“I’m not much of a talker,” grunted Raith.

“Fighter, eh?”

Raith didn’t answer. If he had to he’d answer with his fists.

“It’s up to me to make sure the princess stays safe.”

Raith nodded toward the door. “That’s why I’m out here.”

“Aye.” Jenner narrowed his eyes. “But is she safe from you?”

“What if she’s not?” Raith stepped up to the old raider, teeth bared, right in his face so he was just about butting him. Had to show he was the bloodiest bastard going. Let them see weakness it’ll be the end of you. “How would you stop me, old man?”

Blue Jenner didn’t back off, just raised his lined hands. “I’d say ‘whoa, there, lad, old fool like me fight a young hero like you? I don’t think so!’ And I’d back right down soft as you like.”

“Damn right,” growled Raith.

“Then I’d nip to my crew and get six big fellows. Middle oars, you know, used to pulling but light on their feet. And when it got dark two of ’em would wrap you up real nice and warm in your blanket.” And he gave the blanket over Raith’s shoulder a little brush with the back of his hand. “Then the other four would bring out some stout timbers and beat that pretty package till it had nothing hard in it. Then I’d deliver the slop left over back to Grom-gil-Gorm, probably still in the blanket ’cause we wouldn’t want to get mess all over Princess Skara’s floor, and tell the Breaker of Swords that, sadly, the boy he lent us was a shade too prickly and it didn’t work out.” Jenner smiled, his weathered face creasing up like old boots. “But I’d rather not add to my regrets. The gods know I got a queue of the bastards. I’d sooner just give you the chance to prove you’re trustworthy.”

It was a good answer, Raith had to admit. Clever, but with iron in it. Made him look a clumsy thug, and he didn’t like to look that way. Subtle thug was better. He shifted back, gave Jenner a little more room and a lot more respect. “And what if I’m not trustworthy?”

“Give men the chance to be better, I find most of ’em want to take it.”

Raith hadn’t found that at all. “You sure, old man?”

“Guess we can find out together, boy. You want another blanket? Could get cold out here.”

“I’ve dealt with colder.” Raith would’ve loved another blanket but he had to seem like nothing could hurt him. So he drew the one he had tight around his shoulders and sat down, listened to the old man’s footsteps scrape away. He missed Gorm’s sword. He missed his brother. But the cold draft and the cold stones and the cold silence were much the same.

He wondered if the dreams would be too.

“When I ring the bell, you climb.”

“Yes, my queen,” croaked Koll. There were few people in the world he was as much in awe of as Queen Laithlin and most of them were here, now, watching. It felt like half the people of the Shattered Sea were rammed into the yard of the citadel in the shade of the great cedar, or crammed at the windows, or peering down from the roofs and the battlements.

King Uthil stood on the steps of the Godshall, Father Yarvi leaning on his staff at his right hand, Rulf beside him, scratching at the short gray hair above his ears, giving Koll what was no doubt meant to be a reassuring grin. Opposite, on a platform carefully built to just the same height, stood Grom-gil-Gorm, zigzag lines of gold forged into his mail glittering in the morning sun, his white-haired shield-bearer kneeling by him, Mother Scaer with her blue eyes fiercely narrowed.

Rin had found a way in, just as she always did, on a roof high up on Koll’s left. She waved like a mad woman as he looked up, flailing her open palm around for luck. Gods, Koll wished he was over there with her. Or better yet in her forge. Or better yet in her bed. He pushed the idea away. Brand was standing right beside her, after all, and might not stay oblivious forever.

Queen Laithlin raised one long white arm to point toward the top of the cedar, gold glinting on the highest branch. “The winner is the one who brings Princess Skara back her armring.”

Koll shivered from his toes to the roots of his hair, trying to shake free of the tingling nerves. He glanced up at the mast that stood rooted in the yard beside Thorn, carved from foot to head by his own hands on the long journey to the First of Cities and back.

Gods, he was proud of that mast. The carving he’d done on it, and his part in the story it told. There’d been brave deeds in plenty on that voyage, and he had to be brave now. He was sure he could win. What he wasn’t sure of was whether he wanted to. For a man reckoned clever, he got wedged in a lot of stupid corners.

He gave one of those sighs that made his lips flap. “The gods have a silly sense of humor.”

“They surely do.” Gorm’s ex-cupfiller, Raith, frowned about at the crowd. “When I got on the boat in Vulsgard I never thought I’d end up climbing trees.” He leaned close, as if he’d a secret to share, and Koll couldn’t help leaning in with him. “Nor playing nursemaid to some skinny girl.”

Princess Skara stood between a wide-eyed Sister Owd and an unkempt Blue Jenner, seeming as perfect and brittle as the pottery statues Koll had stared at in the First of Cities, long ago, trying to work out how they were made.

“Life is too easy for very pretty people,” he said. “They get all manner of advantages.”

“I assure you it’s as hard for us beauties as anyone,” said Raith.

Koll looked round at him. “You’re a good deal less of a bastard than I took you for.”

“Oh, you don’t know me that well yet. Taking this damned seriously, ain’t he?”

Grom-gil-Gorm’s Shend standard-bearer had stripped to the waist, a pattern of scars burned into

his broad back to look like a spreading tree. He was putting on quite the performance, lean muscles flexing as he stretched, twisted, touched his toes.

Raith just stood there, scratching at a nick out of his ear. “Thought we were climbing, not dancing.”

“So did I.” Koll grinned. “Might be we were misinformed.”

“MY NAME’S RAITH.” And Raith held out a friendly hand.

The minister’s boy smiled back. “Koll.” And he took it. Just like Raith had known he would, ’cause weak men are always eager for the friendship of strong ones. His smile faded quick enough when he found he couldn’t tug his hand free again. “What’re you—”

Queen Laithlin rang the bell.

Raith jerked the lad close and butted him in the face.

He could climb but Raith had no doubts these other two were better at it. If he wanted to win, and he always did, best make the contest about something else. At butting folk in the face he was a master, as Koll now discovered.

Raith punched him in the ribs three times, doubled him up gurgling with blood pattering from his smashed mouth, then caught his shirt and flung him upside down across a table where some of the Gettlanders were sitting.

He heard the chaos behind him, the crowd bellowing curses, but by that time the blood was roaring in his ears and his mind was on the tree. Soryorn was already dragging his great long body into the branches and if he got a good start Raith knew he’d never catch him.

He took a pounding run, sprang onto the lowest branch and swung himself up, jumped to a higher, twigs thrashing from his weight. At the next spring, full stretch, he caught Soryorn by the ankle and dragged him down, a broken stick scratching him all the way up his scar-marked back.

Soryorn kicked out and caught Raith in the mouth, but he’d never been put off by the taste of his own blood. He growled as he hauled himself on, no thought for the scraping branches, no thought for the aching through his left hand, caught Soryorn’s ankle again, then his belt, and finally his garnet studded thrall collar.

“What’re you doing?” snarled the standard-bearer, trying to elbow him away.

“Winning,” hissed Raith, hauling himself up level.

“Gorm wants me to win!”

“I serve Skara, remember?”

Raith punched Soryorn right between the legs and his eyes bulged. Raith punched him in the mouth and snapped his head back. Raith bit his clutching hand hard, and with a wheezing cry Soryorn lost his grip and went tumbling down through the branches, his head bouncing off one, another folding him in half, a third spinning him over and over till he crashed to the ground.

Which was a shame, but someone had to win, and someone had to fall.

Raith shinned up farther to where the branches grew sparse. He could see over the walls of the citadel from here. Mother Sea glittering, the forest of masts on the dozens of ships crowded into Thorlby’s harbor, the salt breeze kissing his sweating forehead.

He twitched the armring from the topmost branch. He'd have put it on his wrist, but it was sized for Skara's twig of an arm and there was no way it'd fit. So he stuffed it into the pouch at his belt and started slithering down.

The wind blew up and made the whole tree sway, branches creaking, needles brushing Raith all over as he clung on tight. He caught a flash of white out of the corner of his eye, but all he could see when he peered down was Soryorn, trying and failing to drag himself up into the lowest branches. No sign of the minister's boy. More'n likely crept off to cry over his broken face. Might be a fine climber but he'd no guts at all, and to climb into Bail's Point alone, a man would need guts.

Raith swung free and dropped to the ground.

"You little bastard!" snarled Soryorn, clinging to a low branch. He must have hurt his leg when he fell, he was holding it up gingerly, toes trailing.

Raith laughed as he passed. Then he sprang in and drove a shoulder into Soryorn's ribs, ramming him so hard into the tree his breath was all driven out in a flopping wheeze.

"You big bastard," he tossed out as he left Soryorn groaning in the dirt. The standard-bearer had always been a good friend to Raith.

So he really should've known better than to leave his side open like that.

—

"PRINCESS SKARA."

She gave Raith what she hoped was a disapproving look. "I would hardly call that a fair contest."

He shrugged, looking her straight in the eye. "You think Bright Yilling loses much sleep over what's fair?"

Skara felt herself blush. He had the manners of a stump, treated her with not the slightest deference. Mother Kyre would have been outraged. Maybe that was why Skara found it so hard to be. She was not used to bluntness and there was something refreshing in it. Something appealing in it, even. "So I should send a dog to catch a dog?" she asked.

Raith gave a harsh little chuckle at that. "Send a killer to kill a killer, anyway." He reached for his pouch, and his smile vanished.

That was when Koll came strolling around the side of the cedar, stopping a moment to help Soryorn up. His lip was split and his nose was swollen and bloody, but he was smiling.

"Lost something, friend?" he asked as Raith patted at his clothes. With a flourish of his spindly fingers he produced, apparently from nowhere, the armring Bail the Builder once wore into battle. He bowed in an entirely proper manner. "I think this is yours, princess."

Raith gaped. "You thieving—"

Koll showed his bloody teeth as he smiled wider. "You think Bright Yilling loses much sleep over thieving?"

Raith made a grab for the armring but Koll was too quick, flipped it glittering into the air. "You lost the game." He snatched the armring right out of Raith's clutching fingers, tossed it nimbly from left hand to right and left Raith grabbing at nothing. "Don't lose your sense of humor too!"

Skara saw Raith clenching his fists as Koll flicked the armring up one more time.

“Enough!” She stepped between the two of them before any more harm could be done and plucked the armring from the air. “Gettland is the winner!” she called, as she slipped it back over her wrist and up her arm.

The Gettlanders burst into cheering. The Vanstermen were a good deal quieter as they watched Soryorn hop away, leaning hard on Mother Scaer’s shoulder. As for Skara’s own little entourage, Raith looked as if he had swallowed an ax and Blue Jenner was in tears, but only because he was laughing so hard.

Thorn Bathu cupped her hands to shout over the noise. “I guess all that time spent up the mast wasn’t wasted after all!”

“A man can learn more up a mast than in any minister’s chamber!” called Koll, basking in the applause and blowing kisses to his friends.

Skara leaned close to him. “You realize you’ve won the chance to climb alone into an impregnable fortress full of enemies?”

His smile wilted as she took his wrist and raised his limp hand in triumph.

The walls of Bail's Point were frozen in another flash of lightning, the battlements black teeth against a brilliant sky. Gods, they looked a long way up.

"Is it too late to say I don't like this plan?" shrieked Koll over the howling of the wind, the hissing of the rain, the hammering of Mother Sea against their little boat.

"You can say it whenever you like," Rulf bellowed back at him, his bald pate running with wet. "Long as you climb up there afterward!"

The wind swept up and lashed spray into the faces of the struggling crew. Thunder crackled loud enough to make the world tremble, but Koll could hardly have been trembling more as they jerked and wobbled closer to the rocks.

"These skies don't strike me as a fine omen!" he called.

"Nor these seas neither!" shouted Dosduvoi, wrestling with his oar as if it were a horse that needed breaking. "Bad luck all round!"

"We all have luck, good and bad!" Thorn weighed the grapple in her hand. "It's how you meet it that matters."

"She's right," said Fror, his misshapen eye white in his tar-blackened face. "He Who Speaks the Thunder is on our side. His rain will keep their heads indoors. His grumbling will muffle the sounds of our coming."

"Provided his lightning doesn't fry you to a cinder." Thorn slapped Koll on the back and nearly knocked him out of the boat.

The base of the wall was made from ancient elf-stone but buckled and broken, rusted bars showing in the cracks, coated in limpet, weed and barnacle. Rulf leaned low, teeth bared as he dragged hard on the steering oar, hauling them side on.

"Easy! Easy!" Another wave caught them, brought Koll's stomach into his mouth and carried them hard against stone, wood grating and squealing. He clung to the rail, sure the boat would break her back and Mother Sea come surging in, ever hungry for warm bodies to drag into her cold embrace, but the seasoned timbers held and he muttered thanks to the tree that had given them.

Thorn tossed the grapple and it caught first time among those ancient rods. She braced her legs on the strakes beside Koll, teeth gritted as she hauled the boat close.

Koll saw the two buttresses Princess Skara had spoken of. Man-built from rough-hewn blocks, mortar crumbled from years of Mother Sea's chewing. Between them was a shadowy cleft, stone shining slick and wet.

"Just imagine it's another mast!" roared Rulf.

"Masts often have angry seas at the bottom," said Thorn, tar-blackened sinews flexing in her shoulders as she wrestled with the rope.

"But rarely angry enemies at the top," muttered Koll, staring up toward the battlements.

“You sure you don’t want tar?” asked Fror, offering out the jar. “They see you climbing up—”

“I’m no warrior. They catch me I’ve a better chance talking than fighting.”

“You ready?” snapped Rulf.

“No!”

“Best go unready, then, the waves’ll smash this boat to kindling soon enough!”

Koll clambered up onto the rail, one hand gripping the prow, the other jerking some slack into the rope he had tied across his chest and coiled up between the sea chests. Wet it was some weight, and it’d only get heavier the higher he climbed. The boat yawed, grinding against the foot of the buttress. Angry water clapped between rock and wood and fountained up, would’ve soaked Koll through if rain and sea hadn’t soaked him through already.

“Hold her steady!” shouted Rulf.

“I would!” called Dosduvoi, “but Mother Sea objects!”

The wise wait for their moment, as Father Yarvi was always telling him, *but never let it pass*. Another wave lifted the boat and Koll muttered one more prayer to Father Peace that he might live to see Rin again, then sprang.

He’d been sure he’d plunge scrabbling and wailing straight through the Last Door, but the chimney between the two buttresses was deeper than a man was tall and just the right width. He stuck there so easily it was almost a disappointment.

“Ha!” he shouted over his shoulder, delighted at his unexpected survival.

“Don’t laugh!” snarled Thorn, still struggling with the grapple. “Climb!”

The crumbling mortar offered foot and handholds in plenty and to begin with he made quick progress, humming away to himself as he went, imagining the song the skalds would sing of Koll the Clever, who swarmed up the impenetrable walls of Bail’s Point as swiftly as a gull in flight. The applause he’d won in the yard of Thorlby’s citadel had only given him a taste for more. To be loved, and admired, and celebrated seemed to him no bad thing. No bad thing at all.

The gods love to laugh at a happy man, however. Like a good mast the buttresses tapered toward their tops. The chimney between them grew shallower, wind and rain lashing into it and giving Koll such an icy buffeting he couldn’t hear himself hum any longer. Worse still it grew wider, so he was reaching further for handholds until there was no choice but to give up one buttress and climb in the angle between the other and the wall itself, the stone ice-cold and moss-slick so he had to keep stopping to scrape the wet hair from his face, wipe his battered hands and blow life back into his numb fingers.

The last few strides of sheer man-built stone took longer than all the rest combined. There was a deadly length of rain-heavy rope dragging at his shoulder now, weightier than a warrior’s armor, whipping and snapping about the chimney as the wind took it. It was as hard a test as he’d faced in his life, muscles twitching, trembling, aching past the point of endurance. Even his teeth were hurting, but to turn back would’ve been more dangerous than to go on.

Koll picked his holds as carefully as a shipbuilder his keel, knowing one mistake would see him smashed to fish food on the rocks below, squinting in the moonlight and the storm flashes, scraping mossy dirt from between the stones, crumbly here as old cheese. He tried not to think about the yawning drop below, or the angry men who might be waiting above, or the—

A stone burst apart in his numb fingers and he lost his grip, whimpering as he swung away, every stretched-out sinew in his arm on fire, clawing and scrabbling at old ivy until finally he found a firm purchase.

He pressed himself to the wall, watched the gravel tumble away, bouncing down around his rope, down to the jagged elf-boulders and the boat tossed on the angry brine.

He felt his mother's weights pressing into his breastbone, thought of her frowning up at him on the mast, finger wagging. *Get down from there before you break your head.*

"Can't stay wrapped in a blanket all my life, can I?" he whispered over the pounding of his heart.

It was with legendary relief he peered over the battlements and saw the rain-lashed walkway, wider than a road, deserted. He groaned as he dragged himself over, hauling the rope after him, rolled on to his back and lay, panting, trying to work the blood back into throbbing fingers.

"That was an adventure," he whispered, slithering up onto hands and knees and staring out over Bail's Point. "Gods..."

From up here it wasn't hard to believe that it was the strongest fortress in the world, the very key to the Shattered Sea.

There were seven vast towers with vast walls between, six elf-built, the perfect stone gleaming wet, one squat and ugly, built by men to plug a breach left by the Breaking of God. Five towers rose from Father Earth on Koll's left, but on his right two were thrust out beyond the cliffs into Mother Sea, chains strung between them feathering the waves, enclosing the harbor.

"Gods," he whispered again.

It was crammed with ships, just as Princess Skara had said it would be. Fifty at least, some small, some very great. Bright Yilling's fleet, safe as babes within the mighty elf-stone arms of the fortress, bare masts scarcely shifting despite Mother Sea's fury beyond.

A long ramp led from the wharves, up the cliffside to the great yard. Buildings of a dozen different ages and designs were piled up about it, their roofs a mismatched maze of mossy thatch, cracked tile, rain-slick slate, broken gutters spurting water to spatter on the flagstones below. A city, almost, clinging to the inside of the great elf-walls, firelight spilling from around the edges of a hundred windows shuttered against the storm.

Koll squirmed free of his rope, cursing his clumsy cold fingers as he looped it about the battlements, dragged hard at the wet knots to make sure they were fast, and finally allowed himself a weary smile. "That'll do it."

But the gods love to laugh at a happy man, and his smile vanished the moment he turned.

A warrior was trudging down the walkway toward him, spear in one hand, flickering lantern in the other, rain-heavy cloak flapping about his hunched shoulders.

Koll's every instinct was to run, but he forced himself to turn his back on the guard, wedged one boot carelessly on the battlements, stared out to sea as though this was the place he felt most at home in all the world and offered a silent prayer to She Who Spins Lies. One way or another, she got a lot of prayers from Koll.

When he heard boots scraping up he turned with a grin. "Hey, hey! Nice evening to be on the walls."

“Hardly.” The man squinted at him as he raised his lantern. “Do I know you?”

He sounded like a Yutmarker, so Koll took a guess and trusted to his luck. “No, no, I’m one of the Inglings.”

Serve a man one good lie, he might offer you the truth himself. “One of Lufta’s boys?”

“That’s right. Lufta sent me to check the walls.”

“He did?”

If you can’t fashion a good lie, the truth will have to serve. “Aye, there’s these two buttresses, see, and Lufta’s got this worry someone might climb up between them.”

“On a night like this?”

Koll gave a little chuckle. “I know, I know, it’s mad as a hatful of frogs, but you know how Lufta gets...”

“What’s that?” asked the man, frowning toward the rope.

“What’s what what?” asked Koll, stepping in front of it, run out of lies and now of truths as well. “What?”

“That, you—” His eyes bulged as a black hand clamped over his mouth and a black blade took him through the neck. Thorn’s face appeared beside his, hardly more than a shadow in the rain, only her eyes standing out white from the tar-smeared skin.

She lowered the warrior’s limp body gently onto the parapet.

“What do we do with the corpse?” muttered Koll, catching his lantern before it dropped, “we can’t just—”

Thorn took him by the boots and flipped him into space. Koll peered over, openmouthed, watching the body plummet down, hit the walls near the base and flop off broken into the surging waves.

“That’s what we do,” she said as Fror slipped over the wall behind her, dragged the ax from his back and tore away the rag he’d used to muffle the tar-smeared blade. “Let’s go.”

Koll swallowed as he followed them. He loved Thorn, but it scared him how easily she could kill a man.

The steps down to the yard were just where Skara had told them, puddled with rainwater in their worn centers. Koll was just letting himself dream again of the harvest of glory he’d reap if this mad plan worked when he heard a voice echo from below, and pressed himself into the shadows.

“Let’s go inside, Lufta. It’s windy as hell out here!”

A deeper voice answered. “Dunverk said guard the little gate. Now stop your bloody whining.”

Koll peered over the edge of the steps. A canvas awning flapped in the wind below them, firelight spilling from underneath.

“This little gate isn’t so secret as we hoped,” Thorn whispered in his ear.

“Like maggots from apples,” he whispered back, “secrets do have a habit of wriggling free.”

“Fight?” muttered Thorn. Always her first thought.

Koll smoothed the path for Father Peace, as a good minister should. “We might rouse everyone in the fortress.”

“I’m not climbing back down that chimney,” said Fror, “I can promise you that.”

“Lend me your cloak,” whispered Koll. “I’ve an idea.”

“Are you sure now is the best time for ideas?” Thorn hissed back.

Koll shrugged as he drew the hood up and tried to shake loose muscles still trembling from the climb. “They come when they come.”

He left them on the steps and trotted carelessly down, past a half-ruined stable, water dripping from its rotten thatch.

He saw the men now, seven warriors squatting around their fire, flames torn flickering by the wind that slipped in under their flapping awning. He noted how the firelight fell over the heavy door in the corner behind them, a thick bar lowered across it, the name of She Who Guards the Locks scored deep into the wood. He blew out a misty breath, gathered his courage and gave a jaunty wave as he walked up.

“Ach, but damn this weather!” Koll ducked under the dripping canvas, thrust his hood back and scrubbed his hands through his wet hair. “I couldn’t be wetter if I’d gone swimming!”

The men all frowned at him, and he grinned back. “Still, I suppose it’s no worse than summer in Inglefold, eh?” He slapped one on the shoulder as he worked his way toward the door and a couple of the others chuckled.

“Do I know you?” asked the big man near the fire. By his silver armrings and surly manner, Koll reckoned him the leader.

“No, no, I’m one of the Yutmarkers. Dunverk sent me. I’ve a message for you, Lufta.”

The big man spat, and Koll was pleased to find he’d reckoned right. “Give it, then, before I go deaf from age. It runs in my family.”

Now for the gamble. “Dunverk’s heard tell of an attack. Vanstermen and Gettlanders together, trying to take the fortress and burn our ships.”

“Attack this place?” One of the men snorted. “They must be fools.”

Koll nodded wearily. “That was my very thought when I heard the plan and I haven’t changed my mind.”

“Did it come from this spy?” asked Lufta.

Koll blinked. That was unexpected. “Aye, this spy. What’s their name now...?”

“Only Bright Yilling knows that. Why don’t you ask him for a name?”

“I’ve so great a respect for the man I couldn’t bring myself to bother him. They’re coming for the great gate.”

“Fools? They’re madmen!” Lufta licked his teeth in some annoyance. “You four, with me, we’ll go over to the gate and see. You two, stay here.”

“I’ll keep watch, don’t worry!” called Koll as the men trudged off, one holding his shield up over his head against the rain. “There’ll be no Gettlanders getting past me!”

The two left behind were a sorry pair. One young but going bald in clumps, the other with a red patch like spilled wine across his face. He had a fine dagger, silver crosspiece all aglitter, shown off in his belt like a thing to be most proud of though he’d no doubt stolen it from some murdered Throvenman.

Soon as Lufta was out of earshot, that one set to complaining. “Most of Yilling’s boys are dragging

in plunder all over Throvenland and here we are stuck with this.”

“Without doubt it’s a great injustice. Still.” Koll pulled Fror’s cloak off and made great show of shaking the rain from it. “Reckon there’s no safer place about the Shattered Sea for a man to sit.”

“Careful with that!” grunted Red Face, so busy slapping the cloak away as water flicked in his eyes Koll had no difficulty easing the dagger from his belt with his other hand. It’s amazing what a man won’t notice while he’s distracted.

“So sorry, my king!” said Koll, backing away. He nudged Bald Patches in the ribs. “Got some airs on him, your companion, don’t he?” And under his flapping cloak, he slipped the dagger into this man’s belt. “Let me show you a wonderful thing!” He held his hand up before either of them could get a word in, flipping a copper coin back and forth over his knuckles, fingers wriggling, both men fixed on it.

“Copper,” murmured Koll, “copper, copper, and...silver!”

He flipped his hand over, palming the copper in a twinkling and holding a silver coin up between finger and thumb, Queen Laithlin’s face stamped on it glinting in the firelight.

Bald Patches frowned, sitting forward. “How d’you do that?”

“Ha! I’ll show you the trick to it. Lend me your dagger a moment.”

“What dagger?”

“Your dagger.” Koll pointed at his belt. “That one.”

Red Face sprang up. “What’re you doing with my damn knife?”

“What?” Bald Patches gaped at his belt. “How—”

“The One God frowns upon stealing.” Koll held up his hands in a display of piety. “That’s a fact well known.”

Thorn’s black hand clamped down on Red Face’s mouth and her black knife stabbed through his neck. At almost the same moment Bald Patches’s head jerked as Fror hacked his ax into the back of it, and his eyes went crossed, and he muttered something, drooling, then toppled sideways.

“Let’s move,” hissed Thorn, lowering her man to the ground, “’fore those others join me in realizing what a double-tongued little weasel you are.”

“By all means, my Chosen Shield,” said Koll, and he slid the rune-marked bar from its brackets, and heaved the gate open.

The faintest dot of light glimmered in the storm and like a blood drunk hound let off the leash, Raith was away.

He sped across the wet grass, shield on one arm and his ax gripped so tight below the blade his knuckles ached.

Swords were no doubt prettier but pretty weapons, like pretty people, are prone to sulk. Swords need subtlety and when the battle joy was on him Raith could be less than careful. He'd once beaten a man's head with the flat of a sword until both sword and head were bent far past any further use. Axes weren't so sensitive.

Lightning lit the sky again, Bail's Point a brooding blackness above the sea, wind-driven raindrops frozen before the night closed in. He Who Speaks the Thunder bellowed his upset at the world, so close it made Raith's heart leap.

He could still taste his bite of the last loaf, bread baked with blood salty across his tongue. The Vanstermen thought that good weaponluck, but Raith had always reckoned luck less use than fury. He bit down hard on the old builder's peg between his teeth. Near chewed the end of his tongue off in a rage once and ever since he'd made sure to wedge his jaws when there was a fight coming.

There was no feeling like charging into battle. Gambling everything on your cunning, your will, your strength. Dancing at the threshold of the Last Door. Spitting in Death's face.

He'd left Grom-gil-Gorm, and Soryorn, and even his brother Rakki far behind in his eagerness, the rain-slick elf-walls and the one flickering light at their foot rushing up to meet him.

"In here!"

Father Yarvi's boy held up a lantern, shadows in the hollows of his gawping face, pointing through a doorway hidden in the angle of the tower beside him.

Raith tore through, bouncing off the walls, bounding up the steps three at a time, growling breath echoing in the narrow tunnel, legs on fire, chest on fire, thoughts on fire, the din of metal, swearing, screaming building in his head as he burst out into the yard above.

He caught a mad glimpse of bodies straining, weapons flashing, spit and splinters, saw Thorn Bathu's tarred snarl and went crashing past her at full tilt, into the midst of the fight.

His shield crunched into a warrior's teeth and flung him over, sword skittering from his hand. Another staggered back, the spear poised to stab at Thorn wobbling wide.

Raith hacked at someone and made him scream, raw and broken and sounding like metal. Shoved with his shield and it grated against another, hissing and slobbering around the peg in his jaws as he pushed, wild, savage, driving a man back, his bloody spit spraying in Raith's face, close enough to kiss. Raith heaved him back again, kneed at him, made him stumble. A hollow thud as Thorn's sword chopped deep into his neck, stuck there as he fell and she let it go, kicking him away pouring blood.

Someone went down all tangled with a flapping canvas awning. Someone shouted in Raith's ear.

Something pinged off his helmet and everything was bright, too bright to see, but he lashed blindly over his shield, growling, coughing.

A man grabbed at him and Raith smashed the butt of his ax into his head, smashed him again as he fell and stomped on his clutching hand, slipped and almost went down, the cobbles slick with blood and rain.

Wasn't sure which way he was facing all of a sudden. The yard pitched and tossed like a ship in a storm. He saw Rakki, blood in his white hair as he stabbed with his sword, anger burned up again and Raith pushed in beside him, locking shields with his brother, shoving, butting, hacking. Something smashed him sideways and he went stumbling through a fire, kicking sparks.

Metal flashed and he jerked away, felt a burning on his face, something scraping against his helmet and knocking it skewed. He pressed past the spear, tried to ram his shield into a snarling face, got all tangled and realized it was a broken wreck, two of the planks dangling from the bent rim.

"Die, you bastard!" he snarled, the words just meaningless spit around the peg, flailing away at a helmet until it was dented all out of shape. Came to him he was hitting a wall, carving gray gashes in the stone, arm buzzing from the blows.

Someone was dragging him. Thorn with her black face a mess of spatter. She pointed with a red knife and her red mouth made words, but Raith couldn't hear them.

A great sword tore at the wet air, split a shield, flung the man who held it against the wall in a shower of blood. Raith knew it. He'd carried that blade for three years, held it close as a lover in the darkness, made it sing with his whetstone.

Grom-gil-Gorm stepped forward, huge as a mountain, the dozens of jeweled and gilded pommels on his long chain glittering, his shield black as the night and his sword bright as Father Moon.

"Your death comes!" he roared, so loud the deep-rooted bones of Bail's Point seemed to shake.

Courage can be a brittle thing. Once panic clutches one man it spreads faster than plague, faster than fire. The High King's warriors had been warm and happy behind strong walls, expecting nothing worse from the night than a stiff wind. Now the Breaker of Swords rose from the storm in his full battle glory, and all at once they broke and fled.

Thorn cut one down with her ax, Gorm caught another by the scruff of his neck and smashed his face into the wall. Raith ripped his knife out, sprang onto a warrior's back as he ran, stabbing, stabbing. He leapt after another but his foot went out from under him and he tottered a wobbling step or two, bounced off the wall and fell.

Everything was blurry. He tried to stand but his knees wouldn't have it so he sat down. The peg had fallen out and his mouth ached, tasting of wood and metal. Feet stamped past. A man lay laughing at him. He was caught by a flying boot and rolled flopping over. A dead man, laughing at nothing. Laughing at everything.

Raith squeezed his eyes shut, opened them.

Soryorn was stabbing the wounded with a spear, calmly as if he was planting seeds. Men were still clattering through the small gate, drawing weapons, stepping over bodies.

"Always have to be first in the fight, eh, brother?" Rakki. He undid the buckle and pulled Raith's helmet off, tilted his face to look at the new cut. "Doing your best to make sure I stay the pretty one, eh?"

Words felt strange on Raith's sore tongue. "You need all the help you can get." He shrugged his brother off and fought his way to standing, trying to shake his wrecked shield from his arm, trying to shake the dizziness from his head.

Bail's Point was vast, a jumble of thatched and slated buildings grown up all around the towering elf-walls. There was crashing and shouting everywhere, Gettlanders and Vanstermen rooting through the fortress like ferrets down a warren, dragging the High King's men from their hiding places, pouring down the long ramp that led to the harbor, gathering in a crescent about a pair of carved double doors, King Gorm and King Uthil among them.

"We will smoke you out if we must!" Father Yarvi shouted at the wood. Like the crows, ministers always arrived as the fighting was done, eager to pick over the results. "You had your chance to fight!"

A voice came muffled from beyond the door. "I was putting on my armor. It has fiddly buckles."

"The little ones can trick a big man's fingers," Gorm admitted.

"I have it on now, though!" came the voice. "Are there storied warriors among you?"

Father Yarvi gave a sigh. "Thorn Bathu is here, and the Iron King Uthil, and Grom-gil-Gorm, the Breaker of Swords."

A satisfied grunt from behind the door. "I feel less sour about defeat against such famous names. Will any of them consent to fight me?"

Thorn sat on some steps nearby, wincing as Mother Scaer squeezed at a cut on her shoulder and made the blood run. "I've fought enough for one evening."

"I too." Gorm handed his shield to Rakki. "Let the flames take this unready fool and his small-buckled armor."

Raith's feet stepped forward. His finger lifted. His mouth said, "I'll fight the—"

Rakki caught hold of his arm and dragged it down. "No you won't, brother."

"Death is life's only certainty." King Uthil shrugged. "I will fight you!"

Father Yarvi looked horrified. "My king—"

Uthil silenced him with one bright-eyed look. "Faster runners have stolen the glory, and I will have my share."

"Good!" came the voice. "I am coming out!"

Raith heard a bar rattle back and the doors were swung wide, shields clattering as the half-circle of warriors set themselves to meet a charge. But only one man stepped into the yard.

He was huge, with a swirling tattoo on one side of his muscle-heavy neck. He wore thick mail with etched plates at the shoulders, and many gold rings upon his bulging forearms, and Raith grunted his approval for this looked a man well worth fighting. He hooked his thumbs carelessly into his gold-buckled sword-belt and sneered at the crescent of shields facing him with a hero's contempt.

"You are King Uthil?" The man snorted mist into the drizzle from his broad, flat nose. "You are older than the songs say."

"The songs were composed some time ago," grated the Iron King. "I was younger then."

Some laughter at that, but not from this man. "I am Dunverk," he growled, "that men call the Bull, faithful to the One God, loyal to the High King, Companion to Bright Yilling."

“That only proves your choice is equally poor in friends, kings and gods,” said Father Yarvi. The laughter was louder this time, and even Raith had to admit it was a decent jest.

But defeat surely dampens a sense of humor, and Dunverk stayed stony. “We will see when Yilling returns, and brings Death to you oath-breakers.”

“*We* will see,” tossed out Thorn, grinning even as Mother Scaer was pushing the needle through the meat of her shoulder. “You’ll be dead, and will see nothing.”

Dunverk slowly drew his sword, runes etched into the fuller, the hilt worked in gold like a stag’s head with its antlers making the crosspiece. “If I win, will you spare the rest of my men?”

Uthil looked scrawny as an old chicken against Dunverk’s brawn, but he showed no fear at all. “You will not win.”

“You are too confident.”

“If my hundred and more dead opponents could speak they would say I am as confident as I deserve to be.”

“I should warn you, old man, I fought all across the Lowlands and there was no one who could stand against me.”

A twitch of a smile passed across Uthil’s scarred face. “You should have stayed in the Lowlands.”

Dunverk charged, swinging hard and high but Uthil dodged away, nimble as the wind, his sword still cradled in the crook of his arm. Dunverk made a mighty thrust and the king stepped contemptuously away, letting his steel drop down by his side.

“The Bull,” scoffed Thorn. “He fights like a mad cow, all right.”

Dunverk roared as he chopped right and left, sweat on his forehead from wielding that heavy blade, men shuffling back behind their shields in case a stray backswing took them through the Last Door. But the Iron King of Gettland weaved away from the first blow and ducked under the second so Dunverk’s sword whipped at his gray hair, steel flashing as he reeled away into space again.

“Fight me!” bellowed Dunverk, turning.

“I have,” said Uthil, and he caught the corner of his cloak, wiped the edge of his sword, and tucked it carefully back into the crook of his arm.

Dunverk snarled as he stepped forward but his leg buckled and he fell to one knee, blood welling over the top of his boot and spreading across the flagstones. That was when Raith realized Uthil had slit the great vein on the inside of Dunverk’s leg.

There was a murmuring of awe from the gathered warriors, and from Raith as much as anyone.

“The Iron King’s fame is well deserved,” murmured Rakki.

“I hope Bright Yilling’s swordwork is better than yours, Dunverk the Bull,” said Uthil. “You have scarcely given this old man exercise.”

Dunverk smiled then, a far-off look in his glassy eyes. “You all will see Bright Yilling’s swordwork,” he whispered, his face turned waxy pale. “You all will see.” And he toppled sideways into the widening slick of his own blood.

All agreed it had been an excellent death.

Mother Sun was a smudge on the eastern horizon, hiding her children the stars behind the iron-gray curtain of the dawn sky. The fortress loomed ahead, somber as a funeral howe in the colorless dawn, hopeful crows circling above.

“At least the rain has stopped,” muttered Skara, pushing back her hood.

“He Who Speaks the Thunder has taken his tantrums off inland,” said Queen Laithlin. “Like all boys, he makes a great fuss but it’s soon over.” And she reached out and chucked Prince Druin under the chin. “Shall I take him?”

“No.” Skara squeezed him tighter. “I can hold him.” Having his little arms around her neck made her feel strong. And the gods knew, she had need of strength then.

Bail’s Point, shining symbol of Throvenland united, was not what she remembered. The village in the shadow of the fortress, where she had once danced at the summer festival, lay in ruins, houses burned or abandoned. The orchard before the crumbling man-built stretch of wall was throttled with ivy, last year’s fruit rotting in the weeds. The great gateway between two soaring elf-built towers had once been decorated with bright banners. Now a hanged man swung on a creaking rope from the battlements, his bare feet dangling.

His fine gold armrings, his shining mail, his gilded weapons had been stripped away, but Skara knew his face at once.

“One of Bright Yilling’s Companions.” She gave a shiver in spite of the fur about her shoulders. “One of those who burned Yaletoft.”

“Yet here he swings,” said Laithlin. “It seems praying to Death does not put off a meeting with her.”

“Nothing puts off that meeting,” whispered Skara. Probably she should have reveled in his death, spat on his corpse, given thanks to Mother War that this splinter of Throvenland at least was freed, but all she felt was a sick echo of her fear when she last saw him, and a dread that she would never be free of it.

Someone had chopped down the great oak that once grew in the yard of the fortress, the buildings crowding within the ancient elf-walls bare and ugly without its shade. Warriors lounged on the buckled cobbles around the stump, most drunk and getting more drunk, comparing wounds and trophies, cleaning weapons, trading stories.

A would-be skald was composing a verse, shouting the same line over and over while others offered choices for the next word to gales of laughter. A prayer-weaver droned out an elaborate thanks to the gods for their victory. Somewhere, someone was howling in pain.

Skara wrinkled her nose. “What is that smell?”

“Everything men contain,” murmured Sister Owd, watching a pair of thralls haul something past between them.

Skara realized with a cold shock that it was a corpse, and then to her horror that they were

dragging it onto a whole heap of others. A pale tangle of bare limbs, stained and spattered, mouths lolling silent, eyes unseeing. A pile of meat which last night had been men. Men who had taken years of work to birth, and nurse, and teach to walk, speak, fight. Skara held Prince Druin close, trying to shield his eyes.

“Should he see this?” she murmured, wishing she had not seen it herself.

“He will be king of Gettland. This is his destiny.” Laithlin glanced dispassionately at the bodies, and Skara wondered if she had ever met so formidable a woman. “He should learn to rejoice in it. So should you. This is your victory, after all.”

Skara swallowed. “Mine?”

“The men will argue over whose was the hairiest chest and the loudest roar. The bards will sing of the flashing steel and the blood spilled. But yours was the plan. Yours was the will. Yours were the words that set these men to your purpose.”

Words are weapons, Mother Kyre had told her. Skara stared at the dead men in the yard of Bail’s Point, and thought of the dead men in her grandfather’s hall, and rather than a crime avenged she saw two crimes, and felt the guilt of one piled on the pain of the other.

“It does not feel like victory,” she whispered.

“You have seen defeat. Which do you prefer?” Skara remembered standing at the *Black Dog’s* stern, watching the gable of her grandfather’s hall sag into the towering flames, and found she could not argue.

“I was very impressed with you at the moot,” said Laithlin.

“Truly? I thought...you might be angry with me.”

“That you spoke for yourself and your country? I might as well be angry at the snow for falling. You are eighteen winters old, yes?”

“I will be, this year...”

Laithlin slowly shook her head. “Seventeen. You have a gift.”

“Mother Kyre and my grandfather...all my life they tried to teach me how to lead. How to speak and what to say. How to make arguments, read faces, sway hearts...I always thought myself a poor pupil.”

“I very much doubt that, but war can force strengths from us we never expected. King Fynn and his minister prepared you well, but one cannot teach what you have. You are touched by She Who Spoke the First Word. You have that light in you that makes people listen.” The queen frowned at Druin, who was staring at the carnage in wide-eyed silence. “I have a feeling my son’s future may hang on that gift.”

Skara blinked. “My gifts beside yours are like a candle beside Mother Sun. You are the Golden Queen—”

“Of Gettland.” Her eyes flicked to Skara’s, bright and sharp. “The gods know I have tried to steer this alliance, first to counsel peace and then to urge action, but to King Uthil I am a wife and to King Gorm I am an enemy.” She pushed a strand of hair from Skara’s face. “You are neither. Fate has made you the balance between them. The pin on which the scales of this alliance hang.”

Skara stared at her. “I do not have the strength for that.”

“Then you must find it.” Laithlin leaned close and took Prince Druin from her arms. “Power is a weight. You are young, cousin, I know, but you must learn to carry it, or it will crush you.”

Sister Owd puffed out her cheeks, making her round face look even rounder as she watched the queen glide away, her thralls and servants and guards trailing after her. “Queen Laithlin has always been a well of good humor.”

“Good humor I can live without, Sister Owd. What I need is good advice.”

It surprised her how glad she was to see Raith alive, but then as things stood he was one whole third of her household, and by far the best-looking third. He and his brother sat laughing beside a fire, and Skara felt a strange pang of jealousy, they seemed so utterly at ease with each other. For two men sprung at once from the same womb they were easily told apart. Raith was the one with the wrinkle to his lip and the fresh cut down his face. The one with a challenge in his eye, even when he met Skara’s, that she could not seem to look away from. Rakki was the one who hardly met her eye at all, and scrambled to rise with the proper respect as she drew close.

“You’ve earned your rest,” she said, waving him down. “I hardly deserve to be among such bloodletters.”

“You spilled a little blood yourself in that moot,” said Raith, glancing down at Skara’s bandaged hand.

She found herself hiding it with the other. “Only my own.”

“It’s spilling your own takes the courage.” Raith winced as he prodded at the long scratch down his white-stubbed jaw. He looked no worse for the mark. Better, if anything.

“I hear you fought well,” she said.

“He always does, princess.” Rakki grinned as he punched his brother on the arm. “First through the gate! Without him we might still be squatting outside.”

Raith shrugged. “Fighting’s no hardship when you love to fight.”

“Even so. My grandfather always told me those who fight well should be rewarded by those they fight for.” And Skara twisted one of the silver rings Laithlin had given her from her wrist and held it out.

Rakki and Raith both stared. The armring had been much pecked with a knife to test its purity some time in the past, but Skara had been taught well the value of things. She saw that neither brother wore ring-money and knew this was no light matter to them. Raith swallowed as he reached to take it, but Skara kept her grip. “You fight for me, don’t you?”

She felt a nervous tingle as their eyes met, their fingers almost touching. Then he nodded. “I fight for you.” He was rough and he was rude, and for some reason she found herself wondering what it might be like to kiss him. She heard Sister Owd clear her throat, felt her face burning and quickly let go.

Raith squeezed the ring closed, his wrist so thick the ends barely met around it. A reward for good service. But also a sign that he served, and a mark of whom he served. “I should have come to find you after the battle, but...”

“I needed you to fight.” Skara pushed thoughts of kissing away and put a little iron into her voice. “Now I need you to come with me.”

She watched Raith give his brother a parting hug, then stand, her silver glinting on his wrist, and follow her. He might not truly be her man, but she began to understand why queens had Chosen Shields. There is nothing for your confidence like a proven killer at your shoulder.

When Skara played in the great hall of Bail's Point as a child it had seemed grand beyond reckoning. Now it was narrow, and dim, and smelled of rot, the roof leaking and the walls streaked with damp, three dusty shafts of light falling across the cold floor from windows looking over gray Mother Sea. The great painting of Ashenleer as warrior-queen that covered one wall was peeled and blistered, a bloom of mold across her mail and the adoring expressions of her hundred guards faded to smudges. A fitting image for the fallen fortunes of Throvenland.

Bail's Chair still stood upon the dais, though, made of pale oak-wood cut from a ship's keel, the twisted grain polished to a sheen by years of use. Kings had once sat there. Until Skara's grandfather's great-grandfather decided the chair was too narrow to hold all his arse, and the hall too narrow to hold all his boasting, and had a new chair made in Yaletoft, and began to build a fine new hall around it that would be the wonder of the world. It took twenty-eight years to finish the Forest, by which time he was dead and his son was an old man.

Then Bright Yilling burned it in a night.

"Seems the fighting's not quite done," grunted Raith.

Gorm and Uthil glowered at each other over Bail's Chair, their ministers and warriors bristling about them. The brotherhood of battle had lasted no longer than the life of their last enemy.

"We could draw lots—" King Uthil grated out.

"You had the satisfaction of killing Dunverk," said Gorm, "I should have the chair."

Father Yarvi rubbed at one temple with the knuckles of his shriveled hand. "For the gods' sake, it is a chair. My apprentice can carve you another."

"It is not just any chair." Skara swallowed her nerves as she stepped up onto the dais. "Bail the Builder once sat here." King Uthil and his minister stood frowning on her left, Gorm and his minister on her right. She was the balance between them. She had to be. "How many ships did we take?"

"Sixty-six," said Mother Scaer. "Among them a gilded beast of thirty oars a side which we hear is Bright Yilling's own."

Father Yarvi gave Skara an appreciative nod. "It was a deep cunning plan, princess."

"I only sowed the seed," said Skara, bowing low to the two kings. "Your bravery reaped the harvest."

"Mother War was with us and our weaponluck held good." Gorm turned one of the pommels on his chain around and around. "But this fortress is far from safe. Grandmother Wexen knows well its importance, in strategy and as a symbol."

"It is a splinter pushed into her flesh," said Uthil, "and it will not be long before she tries to pluck it out. You should return to Thorlby with my wife, princess. You will be far from danger there."

"My respect for you is boundless, King Uthil, but you are wrong. My father knew well the importance of this fortress too. So much so he died to defend it, and is buried in the barrows outside the walls, beside my mother." Skara lowered herself into the chair where her forefathers had once sat, painfully upright, the way Mother Kyre had taught her. Her guts were churning, but she had to be strong. Had to lead. There was no one else. "This is Throvenland. This is my land. This is the very

place I should be.”

Father Yarvi gave a tired smile. “Princess—”

“In fact, I am a queen.”

There was a silence. Then Sister Owd began to climb the steps. “Queen Skara is quite right. She sits in Bail’s Chair as King Fynn’s only living descendent. There is precedent for an unmarried woman to take the chair alone.” Her voice quavered under Mother Scaer’s deadly glare but she went on, nodding up toward the faded painting that loomed over them. “Queen Ashenleer herself, after all, was unmarried when she won victory against the Ingling.”

“Is there another Ashenleer among us, then?” sneered Mother Scaer.

Sister Owd stood at Skara’s left hand where a minister belongs, and resolutely folded her arms. “That remains to be seen.”

“Whether you are princess or queen will mean nothing to Bright Yilling,” rumbled Gorm, and Skara felt a surge of that familiar fear at the name. “He kneels to no woman but Death.”

“He will already be on his way,” said Uthil, “and with vengeance in mind.”

You can only conquer your fears by facing them. Hide from them, and they conquer you. Skara let them wait, taking a moment to settle her thumping heart before she answered. “Oh, I am counting on it.”

II.

WE ARE THE
SWORD

She pushed her hand into his hair, pulled him down so their foreheads were pressed hard together, quick breath hot on his face. For a long while they lay tangled with each other, the furs kicked down around their ankles, in silence.

Not one word spoken since Koll said his goodbyes to Thorn on the docks and strode up like a thief after a promising purse through the darkened city. In silence Rin had opened her door, taken him into her house, into her arms, into her bed.

Koll had always loved words, but to be a Minister's apprentice was to drown in them. True words, false words, words in many tongues. Right words, wrong words, written and spoken and unspoken. For now silence suited him. To forget for a moment what he owed Father Yarvi, and what he owed Rin, and how there was no way he could settle both debts. Whatever words he said, he felt like a liar.

Rin put one rough hand on his cheek, gave him a parting kiss and slithered out from under him. He loved to watch her move, so strong and sure, shadows shifting between her ribs as she fished his shirt from the floor and pulled it on. He loved it when she wore his clothes, not asking, not needing to ask. It made them feel so close together, somehow. That and he loved the way the hem came only halfway down her bare backside.

She squatted, the key she wore to her own locks swinging free on its chain, tossed a log on the fire, sparks drifting up and the light flaring on her face. Not one word spoken all that time but, like everything good, the silence couldn't last.

"You're back, then," she said.

"Only for tonight." Koll probed gently at the bridge of his nose, still not quite healed from its sharp meeting with Raith's head. "The Prince of Kalyiv has come to Roystock. Queen Laithlin is sailing to an audience and needs a minister beside her. Father Yarvi's busy trying to bail out our foundering alliances, so..."

"She calls on the mighty Koll! Changing the world, just like you always wanted." Rin drew his shirt tight about her, the flames reflected in the corners of her eyes. "Minister to the Golden Queen and you never even took the Minister's Test."

"No, but...I will have to. And swear the Minister's Oath too."

That fell between them like gull's droppings from a great height. But if Rin was hurt she didn't show it. That wouldn't have been her way at all. He loved that about her.

"What was Bail's Point like?"

"It reminded me very much of a big elf-stone fortress by the sea."

"You're almost as funny as you think you are. I mean, what was it like climbing into it?"

"Heroes never think about the danger."

She grinned. "So you pissed yourself?"

"I tried, but I was so scared my bladder clenched up tight as King Uthil's fist. Couldn't get a drip

out for days afterward.”

“Koll the warrior, eh?”

“I thought it best to leave the fighting to others.” Koll tapped at his head. “Half a war is fought up here, Queen Skara is always saying.”

“*Queen* Skara, now.” Rin snorted. “I’ve yet to meet a man who isn’t much taken with that girl’s wisdom.”

“I expect a lot of it’s in the, you know...” Koll waved a hand about. “Jewelry and so on.”

Rin raised one brow at him. “Oh, you expect that, do you?”

“No doubt she looks like something from the songs.” He put his arms over his head, quivering as he stretched out. “But I reckon a stiff breeze could blow her away. I like a woman with both feet on Father Earth.”

“That’s your notion of a compliment? Earthy?” She made a tube of her tongue and spat hissing into the fire. “Some honeyed minister’s mouth you have.”

His mother’s weights clicked around his neck as Koll rolled onto one elbow. “What makes a woman beautiful to me isn’t her blood or her clothes but what she can do. I like a woman with strong hands who isn’t afraid of sweat or hard work or anything else. I like a woman with pride, and ambition, and quick wit, and high skill.” Just words, maybe, but he meant them. Or half-meant them, anyway. “That’s why I never saw a woman anywhere so beautiful as you, Rin. And that’s before I even get to your arse, which I can’t imagine has an equal anywhere around the Shattered Sea.”

She looked back to the fire, lips curling at the corner. “That’s better, I’ll admit. Even if it is all a hatful of winds.”

Koll was much pleased with himself. He loved it when he made her smile. “Sweet smelling breezes at least, I hope?”

“Better than your usual farts. Will you be charming Prince Varoslaf’s nose with your flattery?”

That dented his smugness considerably. By all accounts the Prince of Kalyiv’s taste ran less to funny men and more to skinned ones. “I doubt I’ll comment on his arse, at least. I may keep my mouth shut altogether and leave the talking to Queen Laithlin. Silent men rarely cause offense.”

“You can probably find a way. What does Varoslaf want?”

“What the powerful always want. More power. Or so Thorn says. This trip to Roystock isn’t to her taste at all. She wanted to fight.”

Rin stood up. “She usually does.”

“She’s in a bastard of a mood now. Wouldn’t want to be Brand tonight.”

“He’ll manage.” She slid back into the bed beside him, propping herself on one elbow, his shirt rumpled across her chest. “They love each other.”

Rin’s eyes, fixed on him so close, were making Koll quite uncomfortable. He felt cornered in that narrow bed. Trapped by the heat of her. “Maybe.” He kicked over onto his back, frowning at the ceiling. He had great things to do. Stand at the shoulder of kings and so on. How could he change the world with Rin smothering him? “Love’s hardly the answer to every question, though, is it?”

She turned away, drawing the furs up to her waist. “Certainly seems not.”

WITH SO MANY MEN AWAY there were more women working on the docks of Thorlby than usual, busy at nets and sorting through the morning's squirming catches. Fewer guards about too—older men, and boys Koll's age yet to take their warrior's tests, and some of the girls that Thorn had been training—but otherwise you might never have known there was any war at all.

Six battered ships had landed the night before from the long journey up the Divine, and their sunburned crews were bringing ashore silks, and wine, and all manner of fine curiosities from the south. Queen Laithlin's men were loading her four ships for the voyage to Roystock and the air rang with their cries, and the barking of a stray being beaten away from the fish, and the laughter of children ducking among the wagons, and the calls of the scavenging gulls as they drifted in lazy circles, watching for spilled grain.

Mother Sun was bright as ever in the east, and Koll shaded his eyes as he gazed off toward Roystock, and sucked in a long, salty breath through his nostrils.

"Smells like good luck!"

"That and fish." Rin wrinkled her nose. "Four ships? To carry one woman?"

"And her minister!" Koll puffed up his chest and jabbed at it with his thumb. "A man of that stature must be properly attended."

"They're going to lash two ships together just to carry his swollen head, are they?"

"That and the Chosen Shield's temper," he muttered, as Thorn's angry orders came chopping through the hubbub. "You can tell a woman's importance by the gifts she gives and the company she keeps. Queen Laithlin means to make a deep impression on Varoslaf by taking plenty of both."

Rin glanced sideways. "What does it say about me that I keep company with you?"

Koll slipped his arm about her waist, grinning at how well it seemed to fit there. "That you're a woman of high taste and refinement, not to mention excellent luck, and—Gods!" As the crowd shifted Koll caught a glimpse of Brand, hefting a great crate as if it had nothing in it at all. He ducked behind a rack where fish big as boys had been hung glittering in the sunlight. One that still had a little life in it twitched about, seeming to give him a rather disapproving stare.

So did Rin, looking down with hands on hips. "The conqueror of Bail's Point." And she stuck her tongue between her lips and blew a long fart at him.

"Strong men are many, wise men are few. Did he see us?"

"If you climbed *inside* one of those fish I think you could make sure."

"You're almost as funny as you think you are." He pushed a fish aside with a fingertip to peer past. "We'd best part now."

"There's always a reason to rush the parting, isn't there? Young love. Not quite the joy they sing of." She caught him by the collar and half dragged him up, gave him the quickest of kisses and left him frozen with lips puckered and eyes closed. When he opened them he was disappointed to see her already walking away, an unexpected twinge of guilt and longing making him suddenly, stupidly desperate to stretch the parting out.

"See you in a week or two, then!"

"If you're luckier than you deserve!" she called, without turning.

Koll stuck his thumbs carelessly in his belt and strolled down through the crowds, slipping around a wagon loaded with fleeces, old Brinyolf the Prayer-Weaver droning out a blessing over the voyage in the background.

He froze as a heavy arm fell across his shoulders. "I need a word." For a big man, Brand could sneak up well enough when he wanted to.

Koll sent up a quick prayer to She Who Judges for mercy he knew he didn't deserve. "To me? Whatever about?"

"The Prince of Kalyiv."

"Ah!" It said something that a man famous for skinning people alive was the preferable topic. "Him!"

"Varoslaf is a bad man to cross," said Brand, "and Thorn's got a habit of crossing those kind of people."

"True, though she's a pretty bad woman to cross herself."

Brand stared back at him. "Well, there's a recipe for a famous bloodbath, then."

Koll cleared his throat. "I see your meaning."

"Just keep her out of trouble."

"She's a hard woman to keep out of anything, especially trouble."

"Believe me when I say you're telling me nothing I don't know. Steer her away from trouble, then."

Steering a ship through a tempest sounded lighter work, but all Koll could do was puff out his cheeks. "I'll do my best."

"Steer yourself away from trouble too."

Koll grinned. "That I've always had a knack for." He looked hopefully toward Brand's scarred and muscled arm. It did not move.

"I'm not the sharpest man in Thorlby, Koll, I know that. But how thick do you think I am exactly?"

Koll winced so hard he closed one eye and peered at Brand out of the other. "Not my nose. It's still not right after that white-haired bastard butted it."

"I'm not going to hit you, Koll. Rin can make her own choices. I reckon she made a fine one with you."

"You do?"

Brand looked at him calm and level. "Except you're due to swear a Minister's Oath, and give up all your family."

"Ah. The Oath." As though he'd hardly spared it a thought till now, when in fact he'd spent hours practicing the words, thinking just how to say them, dreaming of what he'd do afterward, the high folk who'd nod at his wisdom, the grand choices he'd make, the greater good and the lesser evil he'd choose—

"Yes, the Oath," said Brand. "Seems to me you're stuck between Rin and Father Yarvi."

"Believe me when I say you're telling me nothing I don't know," mumbled Koll. "I've been praying to He Who Steers the Arrow for a point in the right direction."

"Finding him slow to reply?"

“Father Yarvi says the gods love those who solve their own problems.” Koll brightened. “You don’t have an answer, do you?”

“Only the one you’ve already got.”

“Ah.”

“To pick one or the other.”

“Ah. I don’t much like that one.”

“No, but you’re a man now, Koll. You can’t just wait for someone else to put things right.”

“I’m a man.” Koll’s shoulders sagged. “When did that happen?”

“It just happens.”

“I wish I knew what it meant, being a man.”

“Guess it means something different for each one of us. The gods know I’m no sage, but if I’ve realized anything, it’s that life isn’t about making something perfect.” Brand looked over at Thorn, busy shaking her fist in the face of one of the queen’s warriors. “Death waits for us all. Nothing’s forever. Life’s about making the best of what you find along the way. A man who’s not content with what he’s got, well, more than likely he won’t be content with what he hasn’t.”

Koll blinked. “You’re sure you’re not a sage?”

“Just be honest with her. She deserves that.”

“I know she does,” muttered Koll, looking guiltily down at the planks of the wharf.

“You’ll do the right thing. If not, well...” Brand drew him close. “I can hit you then.”

Koll sighed. “It’s good to have something to look forward to.”

“I’ll see you when you get back.” Brand saw him off with a slap on the shoulder. “Till then, stand in the light, Koll.”

“You too, Brand.”

As he hopped aboard the queen’s ship Koll thought to himself, and not for the first time, that he was nowhere near as clever as he’d supposed. Something to remember, next time he got to thinking how clever he was.

He grinned at that. So much like something his mother would’ve said he almost thought it in her voice, and he gripped those old weights about his neck and looked up at the masthead, thinking of her screaming at him as he teetered there. He’d always hated his mother’s fussing. Now he’d have given everything he had to be fussed over again.

He turned to watch Queen Laithlin fussing over her son, the heir to the throne seeming tiny surrounded by slaves and servants, two hulking Ingling bodyguards with silver thrall-collars looming over him.

She adjusted his tiny cloak-buckle, and smoothed his blond hair, and kissed him on the head, then turned toward the ship, one of her slaves kneeling on the wharf to make a step of his back for her.

“All will be well here, my queen,” called Brinyolf the prayer weaver, one hand on Drui’s shoulder and the other raised in an elaborate blessing. “And may She Who Finds the Course steer you safely home!”

“Bye-bye!” called the prince, and while his mother was raising her arm to wave he slipped from

under Brinyolf's hand and scurried off giggling toward the city, his attendants hurrying to catch him.

Laithlin dropped her hand and gripped tight to the rail. "I wish I could take him, but I trust Varoslaf only a little less than a snake. I have lost one son to the sword and another to the Ministry. I cannot lose a third."

"Prince Druin could not be safer, my queen," said Koll, doing his best to say what Father Yarvi would have. "Thorlby is far from the fighting and still well guarded, her walls never conquered and the citadel impregnable."

"Bail's Point was impregnable. You climbed in."

Koll dared a grin. "How fortunate that men of my talents are rare, my queen."

Laithlin snorted. "You have a minister's humility, already."

Thorn was the last aboard. "Be safe," Brand called to her as she stomped past him down the wharf.

"Aye," she grunted, swinging one leg over the rail. She froze as Queen Laithlin's shadow fell across her, stuck with one foot off the ship and one foot on.

"Young love is a treasure truly wasted on the young," mused the queen, frowning up toward the city with her hands clasped behind her. "It is my place to know the value of things, so take it from me you will have nothing in your life more precious. Soon enough the green leaves turn brown." She peered down sternly at her Chosen Shield. "I think you can do better than that."

Thorn winced. "You think I can, my queen, or you're ordering me to?"

"To a Chosen Shield, a queen's every whim is a decree."

Thorn took a deep breath, swung her leg onto the wharf and stomped back to Brand.

"Since my queen commands it," she muttered, using her fingers like a comb to push the stray hair out of his face. She caught him behind the head and dragged him close, kissed him long and greedily, squeezing him so hard she lifted his toes off the wharf while the oarsmen sent up a cheer, and laughed, and thumped their oars.

"I hadn't marked you for a romantic, my queen," murmured Koll.

"It seems I have surprised us both," said Laithlin.

Thorn broke away, wiping her mouth, the elf-bangle at her wrist glowing golden. "I love you," Koll heard her grunt over the noise of the crew. "And I'm sorry. For the way I am."

Brand grinned back, brushing the star-shaped scar on her cheek with his fingertips. "I love the way you are. Be safe."

"Aye." Thorn thumped him on the shoulder with her fist, then stalked back down the wharf and vaulted over the ship's rail. "Better?" she asked.

"I am warmed all over," murmured Laithlin, with just the hint of a smile. She took one last glance toward the citadel, then nodded to the helmsman. "Cast off."

They filed into the hall, maybe three dozen, lean as beggars, dirty as thieves. A couple had swords. Others wood-axes, hunting bows, butcher's knives. One girl with half a hedge in her matted hair clutched a spear made from a hoeing pole and an old scythe blade.

Raith puffed out his cheeks, making the cut on his face burn. "Here come the heroes."

"Some fighters have a sword put into their hand in the training square." Blue Jenner leaned close to mutter in his ear. "Bred to it all their lives, like you. Some have an ax fall into their hand when Mother War spreads her wings." He watched the ragged company kneel awkwardly in a half circle before the dais. "Takes courage to fight when you didn't choose it, weren't trained for it, weren't ready for it."

"Wasn't no sword put in my hand, old man," said Raith. "I had to rip it from a hundred others by the sharp end. And it ain't lack of courage bothers me, it's lack of skill."

"Good thing you've a thousand picked warriors waiting. You can send them in next."

Raith scowled sideways, but had naught to say. Rakki was the talker.

"It ain't the courageous or the skillful Mother War rewards." Jenner nodded toward the beggars. "It's those who make the best of what they've got."

Skara had a fine art at that. She smiled on her ragged recruits as gratefully as if it were the Prince of Kalyiv, the Empress of the South and a dozen dukes of Catalia pledging their aid.

"Thank you for coming, my friends." She sat forward earnestly in Bail's Chair. Small though she was, she had a way of filling it. "My countrymen."

They couldn't have looked more grateful if it were Ashenleer herself they were kneeling to. Their leader, an old warrior with a face scarred as a butcher's block, cleared his throat. "Princess Skara —"

"Queen Skara," corrected Sister Owd, with a prissy little pout. Plainly she was getting to like being out from Mother Scaer's shadow. Raith rolled his eyes, but he hardly blamed her. Mother Scaer's shadow could be dreadful chilly.

"I'm sorry, my queen—" mumbled the warrior.

But Skara hardly cast a shadow at all. "I am the one who should be sorry. That you have had to fight alone. I am the one who should be grateful. That you have come to fight for me."

"I fought for your father," said the man in a broken voice. "Fought for your grandfather. I'll fight to the death for you." And the others all nodded along, heads bobbing.

It's one thing to offer to die, quite another to fling yourself on the sharpened steel, especially if the only metal you're used to wielding is a milking bucket. Not long ago Raith would've been sniggering with his brother over their fool's loyalty. But Rakki was elsewhere, and Raith was finding it hard to laugh.

He'd always been sure of the best thing to do before, and it mostly had an ax on the end. That was

the way things got done in Vansterland. But Skara had her own way of doing things, and he found he liked watching her do it. He liked watching her a lot.

“Where have you come from?” she was asking.

“Most of us from Ockenby, my queen, or the farms outside.”

“Oh, I know it! There are wonderful oak trees there—”

“Till Bright Yilling burned ’em,” spat out a woman whose face was hard as the hatchet at her belt. “Burned everything.”

“Aye, but we showed him some fire.” The warrior set his dirty hand on the shoulder of a young lad beside him. “Burned some of his forage. Burned a tent with some of his men inside.”

“Should’ve seen ’em dance,” growled the woman.

“I got one of ’em when he went to piss!” shouted the boy in a voice cracking between high and low, then his face went bright red and he stared at the floor. “My queen, that is...”

“You’ve all done brave work.” Raith saw the tendons stark on Skara’s thin hands as she gripped at the arms of Bail’s Chair. “Where is Yilling now?”

“Gone,” said the boy. “He had a camp on the beach at Harentoft, but they up and left overnight.”

“When?” asked Jenner.

“Twelve days ago.”

The old raider tugged unhappily at his straggling beard. “That worries me.”

“We’ve got his ships,” said Raith.

“But the High King’s got more. Yilling could be working mischief on any coast of the Shattered Sea by now.”

“You’re a crowd of worries, old man,” grunted Raith. “Would you be happier if he was still burning farms?”

“No, I’d be worried then too. That’s what it is to be old.”

Skara held her hand up for quiet. “You need food, and a place to sleep. If you still wish to fight, we have arms taken from the High King’s men. Ships too.”

“We’ll fight, my queen,” said the old warrior, and the rest of the Throvenlanders, however wretched, all showed their most warlike faces. No doubt they’d got courage, but as Sister Owd herded them out to be fed Raith pictured them facing the High King’s countless warriors. The next picture wasn’t a pretty one.

As the doors were shut Skara slumped back in her chair with a groan, one hand to her stomach. Plainly all that smiling took a toll. “Is that six crews, now?”

“And all willing to die for you, my queen,” said Jenner.

Raith took a heavy breath. “If the High King’s army comes, dying’s just what they’ll be doing.”

Jenner opened his mouth but Skara held up her hand again. “He’s right. I may have a queen’s chair, but without Gorm and Uthil camped outside my walls I’m queen of nothing.” She stood, the dangling jewels on her earring flashing. “And Gorm and Uthil, not to mention their idle warriors, are back at one another’s throats. I should see if they’ve made any progress.”

Raith wasn’t hopeful. On Jenner’s advice, Skara had finally talked the two kings into working on

the defenses: felling trees grown too close, shoring up the man-built stretch of wall and digging out the ditch. Getting them to agree to that much had been a whole day of minister's wrangling. Skara gathered her skirts and with a lazy wave let Raith know he should follow.

Still made him bristle to take orders from a girl, and Jenner must've seen it. The old raider caught his arm. "Listen, boy. You're a fighter, and the gods know, we need some. But the man who finds fights everywhere, well...soon enough he'll find one fight too many."

Raith curled his lip. "Everything I've got, I had to beat from the world with my fists."

"Aye. And what have you got?"

Might be the old man had some ghost of a point.

"Just keep her safe, eh?"

Raith shook him off. "Keep worrying, old man."

Outside in the sunlight Skara was shaking her head at the big stump in the yard. "I remember when a great Fortress Tree grew here. Sister Owd thinks it a bad omen that it was cut down."

"Some folk see omens everywhere." Most likely Raith should've been sticking *my queen* on the end of everything, but the words felt wrong in his mouth. He was no courtier.

"And you?"

"Always seemed to me the gods send luck to the man with the most fight and the least mercy. That's what I saw, growing up."

"Where did you grow up? A wolf pack?"

Raith raised his brows. "Aye, more or less."

"How old are you?"

"Not sure." Skara blinked at him, and he shrugged. "Wolves don't count too well."

She set off toward the gates, her thrall following them with her eyes on the ground. "Then how did you come to be swordbearer to a king?"

"Mother Scaer picked us out. Me and my brother."

"So you owe her."

Raith thought of the minister's hard eyes and hard lessons, hunched his shoulders at the memory of more than one whipping too. "Aye, I reckon."

"And you admire the Breaker of Swords."

Raith thought of the slaps, and the orders, and the bloody work he'd done on the frontier. "He's the greatest warrior about the Shattered Sea."

Skara's sharp eyes darted sideways. "So did he send you to guard me or spy on me?"

Raith was caught off-balance. Being honest, he hadn't been on-balance since he was sent to serve her. "I daresay some of both. But I'm far better at guarding than spying."

"Or lying either, it would seem."

"My brother's the clever one."

"So the Breaker of Swords doesn't trust me?"

"Mother Scaer says only your enemies can never betray you."

Skara snorted as they stepped into the gloom of the elf-cut entrance tunnel. "Ministers."

“Aye, ministers. But here’s how I see it. Far as the guarding goes, I’ll die for you.”

She blinked at that, and the muscles in her neck fluttered as she swallowed, and he thought that quite a wonderful thing.

“Far as the spying goes, I’m too blunt to cut too deep into your business.”

“Ah.” Her eyes flickered over his face. “You’re just a beautiful fool.”

Raith didn’t blush often, but he felt the blood hot in his cheeks then. He could dive into a shield-wall bristling with steel but a glance from this twig of a girl had his courage crumbling. “Er...beauty I’ll leave to you, I reckon. The fool part I won’t deny.”

“Mother Kyre always said only stupid men proclaim themselves clever.”

Raith’s turn to snort. “Ministers.”

Skara’s laugh echoed in the darkness. For a small woman she had a big laugh, wild and dirty as some old warrior’s at an ale-hall story, and Raith thought that quite a wonderful thing as well. “Aye,” she said, “ministers. So why did the Breaker of Swords pick you?”

He felt like a poor swimmer being lured into deep water. “Eh?”

“Why send an honest idiot to do a clever liar’s job?”

He frowned at that as they stepped out into daylight. Luckily, he was spared from giving an answer.

A crowd had gathered just outside the gates but there was no work being done. Unless you counted bristling, glaring and shouting insults, which to be fair Raith always had. Vanstermen facing Gettlanders, as usual, such a wearisome pattern even he was tiring of it. Rakki and the old Gettlander with the face like a slapped arse, Hunnan, were facing each other in the midst, both puffed up like tomcats. Rakki had a pick in his hands, Hunnan a shovel, and from the looks of things they’d both set to swinging soon and not at the ground.

“Whoa!” roared Raith, charging over, and their heads snapped round. He slipped in between the two, saw Hunnan’s jaw clenching, the shovel twitching back. Gods, the burning urge to butt him, punch him, seize hold of him and bite his face. Raith found he’d bared his teeth to do it. It was against his every hard-learned instinct, but he darted out a hand and grabbed the shovel instead. Then, before the old Gettlander had time to think, Raith hopped down into the ditch.

“Thought we were allies?” And he set to digging, showering Hunnan and Rakki with clods of soil and making them break apart. “Am I the only one ain’t scared of work?” Raith might be no thinker but he could see what was put in front of him, and if he’d learned one thing from Skara it was that you’ll get more from warriors by shaming them than biting them.

So it proved. First Rakki jumped down into the ditch beside him with his pick. Then a few more Vanstermen followed. Not to be outdone, Hunnan spat into his palms, tore a shovel from the man beside him, clambered down and set to some furious work of his own. Wasn’t long before the whole length of the ditch was busy with warriors competing to give Father Earth the sternest beating.

“When’s the last time you broke a fight up?” muttered Rakki.

Raith grinned. “I’ve broken a few up with my fist.”

“Don’t forget who you are, brother.”

“I’m forgetting nothing,” grunted Raith, stepping back to let Rakki swing the pick at a clump of stubborn roots. He glanced toward the gate and saw Skara smiling, couldn’t help smiling back. “But

every day finds you a new man, eh?"

Rakki shook his head. "She's got you on a short leash, that girl."

"Maybe," said Raith. "But I can think of worse leashes to be on."

Sister Owd frowned into the night pot. “This seems auspicious.”

“How is one turd more auspicious than another?” asked Skara.

“People lucky enough to produce auspicious turds always ask that, my queen. Is your blood coming regularly?”

“I understand once a month is traditional.”

“And is your womb minded to break with tradition?”

Skara gave Sister Owd the frostiest glare she could manage. “My womb has always behaved entirely properly. You can rest easy. I’ve never so much as kissed a man. Mother Kyre made very sure of that.”

Owd delicately cleared her throat. “I am sorry to pry, but your well-being is my responsibility now. Your blood is worth more to Throvenland than gold.”

“Then Throvenland rejoice!” shouted Skara as she stepped from the bath. “I’m bleeding regularly!”

Queen Laithlin’s thrall gently rubbed her dry, took a bundle of twigs and flicked her with scented water blessed in the name of He Who Sprouts the Seed. He might stand among the small gods, but he loomed large indeed over girls of royal blood.

The minister frowned. Skara’s minister, she supposed. Her servant, though it was hard not to think of her as a disapproving mistress. “Are you eating, my queen?”

“What else would I do at mealtimes?” Skara did not add that what little she forced down she felt endlessly on the point of spewing back up. “I’ve always been slight.” She snapped her fingers at the thrall to bring her hurrying with her dressing-gown. “And I don’t enjoy being examined like a slave at the flesh-dealer’s.”

“Who does, my queen?” Sister Owd carefully averted her eyes. “But I fear privacy is a luxury the powerful cannot afford.” Her mildness was, for some reason, more infuriating even than Mother Kyre’s bullying used to be.

“No doubt you eat for both of us,” snapped Skara.

Sister Owd only smiled, soft face dimpling. “I’ve always been solid, but the future of no nation rests upon my health. Luckily for all concerned. Bring the queen something.” She gestured to the thrall, and the girl shrugged back her long braid and took up the tray with the morning food.

“No!” snarled Skara, stomach clenching at the slightest smell of it, snatching back her hand as if to dash the lot on the floor, “take it away!”

The thrall flinched as if her anger were a raised whip and Skara felt an instant pang of guilt. Then she remembered Mother Kyre’s words, after her grandfather sold Skara’s nurse and she had cried for days. *Feelings for a slave are feelings wasted.* So she waved the girl impatiently away, just as she imagined Queen Laithlin might have. She was a queen now, after all.

Gods. She was a queen. Her stomach cramped again, sick tickled at the back of her raw throat and Skara gave a strangled cough, half burp, half growl of frustration. She bunched her fist as if to punch her own rebellious guts. How could she hope to bend kings to her will when her own stomach would not obey?

“Well, there is much to do before today’s moot,” said Sister Owd, turning for the door. “May I leave you for now, my queen?”

“You can’t do so soon enough.”

The minister paused, and Skara saw her shoulders shift as she took a hard breath. Then she turned back, firmly folding her arms. “You may speak to me here however you wish.” Sister Owd might have seemed soft as a peach at a first meeting, but Skara was beginning to remember that a peach holds a stubborn stone on which the unwary will break their teeth. “But behaving in this manner ill befits a queen. Do it before Uthil and Gorm and you will undo all the progress you have made. Your position is not strong enough to show such weakness.”

Skara was clenching every muscle, fully prepared to explode with fury, when it came to her that Owd was right. She was acting the way she used to with Mother Kyre. She was acting like a petulant child. Her grandfather, generous to all in wealth and in word, would have been less than impressed.

Skara closed her eyes and felt tears prickling at the lids, took a breath and let it sigh shuddering away. “You’re right,” she said. “That was unworthy of a beggar, let alone a queen. I am sorry.”

Sister Owd slowly unfolded her arms. “A queen need never be sorry, especially to her minister.”

“Let me at least be grateful, then. I know you did not ask for this, but you have been a staunch support so far. I always supposed that I would one day be a queen, and speak in halls with the great, and strike wise deals on behalf of my people...I just never dreamed it would be so soon, and with the stakes so high, and without my grandfather to help me.” She wiped her eyes on the back of her hand. “Mother Kyre tried to prepare me for the burden of power but...I am finding it a weight one is never quite ready for.”

The minister blinked. “Considering the circumstances, I think you bear it admirably.”

“I will try to bear it better.” Skara forced out a smile. “If you promise to keep correcting me when I fall short.”

Sister Owd smiled back. “It will be an honor, my queen. Truly.” Then she gave a stiff bow, and shut the door softly behind her. Skara glanced over at the thrall, and realized she did not even know the girl’s name.

“I am sorry to you too,” she found she had muttered.

The thrall looked horrified, and Skara soon guessed why. If a slave is but a useful thing to her mistress, she is safe. If a slave becomes a person she can be favored. She can even be loved, as Skara had once loved her nurse. But a person can also be blamed, envied, hated.

Safer to be a thing.

Skara snapped her fingers. “Bring the comb.”

There was a thudding knock at the door, followed by Raith’s rude growl. “Father Yarvi’s here. He wants to speak with you.”

“Urgently, Queen Skara,” came the minister’s voice. “On business that benefits us both.”

Skara set a hand on her belly in a futile effort to calm her frothing stomach. Father Yarvi had been kind enough, but there was something unnerving in his eye, as though he always knew just what she would say and already had the answer.

“The blood of Bail is in my veins,” she murmured to herself. “The blood of Bail, the blood of Bail.” And she closed her bandaged fist until the cut burned. “Show him in!”

Not even Mother Kyre could have found fault with Father Yarvi’s behavior. He came with his head respectfully bowed, his staff of slotted and twisted elf metal in his good hand and his withered one behind him in case the sight of it offended her. Raith slunk in after him with his forehead creased in that constant frown of his, white hair flattened against one side of his skull from sleeping in her doorway and his scarred hand propped on his ax-handle.

Skara had stopped wondering about kissing him. Now she found herself often occupied thinking about what they might do after the kissing...She jerked her eyes away, but they kept creeping back. After all, there was no harm in wondering, was there?

The Minister of Gettland gave a stately bow. “My queen, I am honored to be admitted to your presence.”

“We have a moot later. Can’t we speak when I am dressed?” And she drew her gown tighter about herself.

Now he looked up. Cool as spring rain, his gray-blue eyes. “You need not concern yourself there. I have sworn a Minister’s Oath. I am not a man, in that sense.” And he glanced sideways at Raith.

His meaning was clear. Raith was, without doubt, a man in every sense. Skara felt his eyes on her from under his pale lashes, not caring in the least for what was proper. Barely even knowing the meaning of the word. The fitting thing for her to do was to order him out at once.

“You can both stay,” she said. With Raith and his ax lurking at Father Yarvi’s shoulder her power was greater. Propriety was all-important to a princess, but to a queen power was more important still. And, perhaps, hidden deep down, there was some part of her that liked the way Raith looked at her. Liked that it was far from proper. “Tell me what could be so urgent.”

If Gettland’s young minister was surprised his smiling mask did not show a twitch of it. “Battles are most often won by the side that comes first to the field, my queen,” he said.

Skara beckoned to her thrall and brought her hurrying forward with the comb and oil, letting Father Yarvi know he was not important enough to disrupt her morning routine. “Am I a battlefield?”

“You are a valued and a vital ally on one. An ally whose support I sorely need.”

“As you needed my murdered grandfather’s?” she snapped. Too harsh, too harsh, that showed weakness. She filed the edge from her voice. “Mother Kyre thought you tricked King Fynn into an alliance.”

“I say I persuaded him, my queen.”

She raised an eyebrow at Yarvi in the mirror. “Persuade me, then, if you can.”

His staff tapped gently against the floor as he came forward, so slowly and subtly he hardly seemed to move. “Soon enough, the High King’s army will be coming.”

“That is no deep cunning, Father Yarvi.”

“But I know when and where.”

Skara caught her thrall's wrist before the comb reached her head and pushed it away, turning with her eyes narrowed.

"In six nights' time, he will try to bring his army across the straits from Yutmark at the narrowest point, just west of Yaletoft...of the ruins of Yaletoft, that is."

Her breath caught at that. She remembered the city in flames. The fire lighting the night sky. The stink of smoke as her past life burned. No doubt he meant to put a spark to her fear, a spark to her anger. He succeeded.

Her voice had a keener edge than ever. "How do you know?"

"It is a minister's place to know. Our alliance may be far outnumbered on land, but we have fine crews and fine ships and the best of the High King's sit captured in your harbor below. At sea we have the advantage. We must attack while they try to cross the straits."

"With my six ships?" Skara turned back to the mirror, waved to the thrall to carry on, and the girl slipped her silver thrall-chain over one shoulder and stepped silently back with the comb.

"With your six ships, my queen..." Yarvi drifted a little closer. "And your one vote."

"I see." Though in fact Skara had seen something of the kind the moment he was announced. Her title was smoke, her warriors six boats' worth of bandits, her lands no bigger than the walls of Bail's Point. Everything she had was borrowed—her thrall, her guard, her minister, her mirror, the very clothes she wore. And yet the vote was hers.

Father Yarvi let his voice drop to a warm whisper. The kind of whisper that urges you to lean closer, to be part of the secret. But Skara made sure she did not move, made sure she kept her thoughts close, made sure he had to come to her.

"Mother Scaer opposes everything I say because I say it. I fear Grom-gil-Gorm will be too cautious to seize this chance and we may not get another. But if *you* were to come forward with the strategy..."

"Huh," grunted Skara. *Never make a hasty choice*, Mother Kyre used to tell her. *Even if you know your answer, to delay your answer shows your strength*. So she delayed, while Queen Laithlin's lent slave stepped carefully up onto a stool to gather Skara's hair, coil it and pin it with practiced fingers.

"Circumstances have made you powerful, my queen." Father Yarvi stepped closer still, and as his collar shifted Skara saw a scattering of faint scars up his neck. "And you have taken to it like a hawk to flying. Can I count on your support?"

She looked at herself in the mirror. Father Peace, who was that woman with the sharp eyes, so gaunt, and proud, and flinty hard? A hawk indeed. Surely it could not be her, whose stomach boiled over with doubts?

Seem powerful and you are powerful, Mother Kyre used to say.

She pushed her shoulders back as the thrall fixed her earring, flaring her nostrils as she took a hard breath. She gave the briefest nod. "This time."

Yarvi smiled as he bowed. "You are as wise as you are beautiful, my queen."

Raith turned back into the room after he pushed the door shut. "I don't trust that bastard." It was so improper Skara could not help a snort of laughter. She had never known anyone who let as little slip as Father Yarvi, nor anyone who kept as little hidden as Raith. His every thought was plainly written

on that blunt, scarred, handsome face.

“Why?” she asked. “Because he judges me wise and beautiful?”

Raith’s eyes were still on her. “Just ’cause a man tells two truths doesn’t mean he’s got no lies in him.”

So Raith found her wise and beautiful too. That pleased her a great deal, but it would not do to show it. “Father Yarvi gives us a chance to strike at the High King,” she said. “I do not mean to miss it.”

“You do trust him, then?”

“You do not have to trust a man to make use of him. My doorkeeper, after all, used to fill cups for Grom-gil-Gorm.”

Raith frowned harder than ever as he fiddled at that notch in his ear. “You might be best not trusting anyone.”

“Good advice.” Skara met his eye in the mirror. “You can leave now.” And she snapped her fingers at the thrall to bring her clothes.

THE OPINIONS OF THE PIGS

It was two years since Koll visited Roystock, and the place had sprouted upward and outward from its boggy island like a tumor.

Wooden tentacles had shot across the water on rickety stilts, crooked piers with houses clinging to their sides like stubborn barnacles, sheds built on shacks at every angle but straight, a rotting forest of warped supports below and a hundred chimneys puffing a pall of smoke above. Little clumps of hovels had been flung out like spatters from spew, catching on every hump dry enough to hold a pile among the marshes at the wide mouth of the Divine.

Never in his life had Koll seen so much appalling carpentry gathered in one place.

“It’s grown,” he said, wrinkling his nose. “I guess that’s progress.”

Thorn pinched hers closed entirely. “The smell’s progressed some, that’s for sure.” The heady mix of ancient dung and salt decay with an acrid edge of fish smoking, cloth dying and leather tanning made the breath snag at the back of Koll’s throat.

Queen Laithlin was not a woman to be put off business by an odor, however. “The headmen of Roystock have grown fat on the trade coming up the Divine,” she said. “Their city has bloated up with them.”

“Varoslaf has come for his mouthful of the meat.” Koll frowned toward the wharves as they grew closer. “And he’s brought a lot of ships.”

Thorn’s eyes were narrowed to slits as she scanned across those long, lean vessels. “I count thirteen.”

“More than just a show of strength,” murmured Queen Laithlin. “I think the Prince of Kalyiv means to stay.”

—

MOTHER SUN WAS WARM OUTSIDE, but in the hall there was a chill.

Prince Varoslaf sat at the head of a long table, so polished one could see another, blurry Prince Varoslaf reflected in its top. One was more than enough to worry Koll.

He was not a large man, wore no weapon, had not a hair on his head, his jaw, even his brows. There was no wrath, no scorn, no brooding threat on his face, only a stony blankness somehow more troubling than any snarl. Behind him was gathered a crescent of fierce warriors, another of kneeling slaves with heavy thrall chains dangling. Beside him stood a spear-thin servant, coins twinkling from a scarf across her forehead.

The nine headmen of Roystock sat on one side of the table between Varoslaf and Laithlin, boasting their best silks and richest jewels but with their nervousness written plainly on their faces. Like the crew of a rudderless ship, drifting in the northern ice, hoping they wouldn’t be crushed between two mighty bergs. Koll had a feeling hope would get them nowhere in this company.

“Queen Laithlin, Jewel of the North.” Varoslaf’s voice was as dry and whispery as the rustling of autumn leaves. “I feel favored by the gods to once again bask in the radiance of your presence.”

“Great prince,” answered Laithlin, her own entourage crowding with heads bowed into the hall behind her, “the whole Shattered Sea trembles at your coming. I congratulate you on your famous victory over the Horse People.”

“If one can call it a victory over the flies every time the horse swishes his tail. The flies always return.”

“I have brought gifts for you.” Two of Laithlin’s thralls, twins with braids so long they wore them wound around one arm, shuffled forward with boxes of inlaid wood, imported at daunting expense from far-off Catalia.

But the prince held up his hand, and Koll saw the deep groove across his calloused fingers left by constant practice with a bow. “As I have gifts for you. There will be time for gifts later. Let us first discuss the matter.”

The Golden Queen raised one golden brow. “Which is?”

“The great Divine, and the money that flows along it, and how we should share it between us.”

Laithlin sent her thralls scuttling back with a waft of her finger. “Do we not already have agreements that have profited us both?”

“Put plainly, I would like them to profit me more,” said Varoslaf. “My minister has devised many ways of doing so.”

There was a pause. “You have a minister, great prince?” asked Koll.

Varoslaf turned his chill gaze upon Koll and he could almost feel his balls retreating into the warmth of his stomach. “The rulers of the Shattered Sea seem to find them indispensable. I thought I would buy one of my own.”

He made the slightest jerk of his bald head and one of the slaves stood, and pushed back her hood, and Koll heard Thorn give a low growl.

Apart from a thin braid above one ear the woman’s hair had been clipped to yellow fuzz. She wore a thrall ring of silver wire around her long, lean neck and another around her wrist, a fine chain between them not quite long enough for comfort. She had been tattooed on one cheek with a prancing horse, the prince’s mark of ownership, but it seemed her hatred was still at liberty. Her pink-rimmed eyes, sunken in bruised sockets, blazed with it as she glared across the hall.

“Gods,” Koll murmured under his breath, “this is ill luck.” He knew that face. Isriun, daughter to King Uthil’s treacherous brother Odem, who once had been Father Yarvi’s betrothed, then Minister of Vansterland, but had taken too high a hand with the Breaker of Swords and been sold as a slave.

“Odem’s brat dogs me once again,” hissed Queen Laithlin.

The foremost of the headmen, a sharp-eyed old merchant festooned with silver chains, cleared his throat. “Most feared great prince.” His voice wobbled only a little as Varoslaf’s eyes slid toward him. “And most admired Queen Laithlin, these matters concern us all. If I may—”

“It is traditional for the farmer and the butcher to divide the meat without seeking the opinions of the pigs,” said Varoslaf.

For a moment the silence was absolute, then the Prince of Kalyiv’s slender servant leaned slowly

toward the headmen and gave a thunderous pig's oink. The nearest recoiled. Several flinched. All paled. They must have closed many fine deals at that finely polished table, but it was awfully plain they would be turning no profits today.

“What is it you want, great prince?” asked Laithlin.

Isriun leaned down to whisper in Varoslaf's ear, her braid brushing gently against his shoulder, her bright eyes flickering to Laithlin and back.

Her master's face remained an unknowable mask. “Only what is fair.”

“There is always a way,” said the queen, dryly. “We could perhaps offer you an extra tenth part of a tenth part of every cargo...”

Isriun leaned down again, whispering, whispering, chewed-short fingernails fussing at the tattoo on her cheek.

“Four tenths of a tenth part,” droned Varoslaf.

“Four parts is as far from fair as Roystock is from Kalyiv.”

This time Isriun didn't bother to speak through her master, but simply snapped the rejoinder to Laithlin's face. “The battlefield is not fair.”

The queen narrowed her eyes. “So you came for a battle?”

“We are ready for one,” said Isriun, lip wrinkled with contempt.

As long as she was whispering poison in the prince's ear they would travel a stony path indeed. Koll remembered the skinned men swinging on the docks of Kalyiv, and swallowed. Varoslaf was not a man to be intimidated, nor tricked into a rage, nor swayed by flattery or bluster or jokes. Here was a man no man dared challenge. A man whose power was built on fear.

Laithlin and Isriun had fallen into a duel as savage and skillful as any in the training square. They slashed mercilessly at each other with portions and prices, stabbed with tithes and parried with fractions while Varoslaf sat back in his chair, his hairless face a mask.

Koll saw only one chance, and he put his fingers to the weights under his shirt. He thought of his mother, screaming at him to come down from the mast. No doubt you will be safer on the deck. But if you wish to change the world, you must take a risk or two.

“Oh, great prince!” He was surprised to find his voice as bright and easy as it might have been in Rin's forge. “Perhaps you should retire to bed and leave your minister to make the arrangements.”

Maybe cowards handle great terrors better than heroes, for they face fear every day. Koll forced his feet forward, forced his face into a smile, flapped his hands about with carefree disrespect.

“I see your decisions are all made by King Uthil's niece. A snake that turned against her own family. A snake that still drips poison even collared and chained. Why waste all our time pretending otherwise? After all,” and Koll put one hand on his chest, “it is traditional for the farmer,” and he held that hand out toward Isriun, “and the butcher...to divide the meat without seeking the opinions...” And now he held both hands out toward Queen Laithlin and Prince Varoslaf. “Of the pigs.”

There was a disbelieving silence. Then Varoslaf's guards bristled. One muttered a curse in the tongue of the Horse People. Another stepped forward, reaching for his curved sword. Then there was a sharp smack as Thorn hit Koll backhanded across the face.

He would've liked to say he went down on purpose, but in truth it was like being hit with a hammer. He struggled up onto one elbow, his face burning and his head reeling, to see Queen Laithlin glaring down.

"I will have you flogged for that."

Varoslaf's grooved hand was held up lazily to hold his warriors back, his gaze so cold Koll thought he could feel the piss freezing in his bladder. It was only a few days ago he'd been telling himself he was nowhere near as clever as he supposed. Some men never learn.

Isriun leaned toward Varoslaf's ear. "You must demand his skin for that—"

It was cut off in a squawk as he dragged her down by her chain. "Never tell me what I must do." And he flung Isriun stumbling toward the door, while Thorn caught Koll under the arm with fearsome strength and dragged him cringing after.

"Nicely done," she whispered. "Didn't hurt you, did I?"

"You hit like a girl," he squeaked, as she flung him bodily out into the anteroom and slammed the doors closed.

"You must be pleased," snarled Isriun.

Koll slowly sat up, touched his fingertips to his lip and brought them away red. "I'd be more pleased without the bloody mouth."

"You can laugh!" Isriun bared her teeth, closer to a grimace of agony than a smile. "The gods know I'd laugh, in your place. I was daughter to a king! I was a minister, at the side of Grandmother Wexen! Now..." She jerked her wrist so her chain snapped taut and the collar bit into her neck, but however she squirmed she couldn't quite get her arm straight. "I'd laugh myself, in your place!"

Koll shook his head as he clambered up. "Not me. I know what it is to be a slave." He remembered the cellar where he and his mother had been kept. The darkness of it. The smell of it. He remembered the feeling of the collar, the feeling when Father Yarvi ordered it struck off. Not things easily forgotten. "I'm sorry. It's worth nothing, but I'm sorry."

The tattooed horse on Isriun's face shifted as she ground her teeth. "I only did what I had to. Stood with those who stood with me. I tried to do my duty. I tried to keep my word."

"I know." Koll winced at the floor, feeling a long way from the best man he could be. "But I have to do the same."

It was some time later the doors opened and Queen Laithlin swept into the anteroom.

"Did you reach an agreement, my queen?" asked Koll.

"Once the poison was drawn from the wound. That was subtle thinking on your part. You will make a fine minister, I think."

Koll felt such a warm glow at that he could hardly hide his smile. The praise of the powerful was an intoxicating draft indeed. He bowed low. "You are too kind."

"Needless to say, if you ever do such a thing again, I really will have you flogged."

Koll bowed lower yet. "You are far too kind."

"There was only one point on which I and the prince could not agree."

Thorn grinned over at Isriun. "Your price."

"Mine?" she muttered, eyes going wide.

“I offered a fine red jewel for you, and the girl who oils my hair.” Laithlin shrugged. “But Varoslaf wanted a hundred pieces of silver too.”

Isriun’s face twitched, caught between fear and defiance. “Did you pay?”

“I could buy a good ship with that money, sail and all. Why pay it just to see some thrall drowned in the sewer? Your master is waiting, and not in the best of moods.”

“I’ll be revenged on you!” snarled Isriun. “On you and your crippled son! I’ve sworn it!”

Laithlin smiled then, a smile as cold as the utmost north where the snows never melt, and Koll wondered whether she or Varoslaf was the more ruthless. “Enemies are the price of success, slave. I have heard a thousand such empty oaths. I still sleep soundly.” She snapped her fingers. “Come, Koll.”

He took one last look back at Isriun, staring at the open door, winding the chain about her hand so tight the links dug into her fingers and turned them white. But Father Yarvi always said a good minister faces the facts, and saves what he can. Koll hurried after Laithlin.

“What did you give him, my queen?” he asked, as they walked down a curving hallway, Mother Sea stirring beyond the narrow windows.

“Varoslaf is no fool and that snake Isriun had counseled him well. He knows we are weak. He wants to extend his power north, up the Divine to the shores of the Shattered Sea.” She let her voice fall soft. “I had to give him Roystock.”

Koll swallowed. None of this felt very much like Brand’s idea of standing in the light. “A princely gift. But is it ours to give?”

“It is Varoslaf’s to take,” said Laithlin, “if neither we nor the High King stop him.”

“We and the High King are a little busy with each other,” growled Thorn.

“The wise man fights no wars at all, but only a fool fights more than one at once.”

Thorn nodded to the warriors standing guard at the queen’s chambers and pushed the door wide. “I have a feeling Varoslaf will not stop at Roystock.”

As he stepped over the threshold Koll thought of the prince’s dead stare and gave a shudder. “I have a feeling Varoslaf would not stop at the edge of the world.”

“Get back!” snapped Thorn, barging the queen against the wall and whipping out her ax so quickly it nearly took off one of Koll’s eyebrows.

In the shadows at the far end of the room, cross-legged upon a table, a figure sat, swathed in a cloak of rags with the hood drawn down. Koll nearly dropped his dagger on his foot his heart was beating so hard. Nimble fingers tend to fail you when Death’s breath chills your neck.

Thorn, fortunately, was harder to rattle. “Speak now,” she snarled, already in a fighting crouch between the queen and their visitor. “Or I kill you.”

“Would you strike me with my own ax, Thorn Bathu?” The hood shifted, the gleam of an eye inside. “You have grown, Koll. I remember you dangling from the masthead of the *South Wind* while your mother screamed for you to come down. I remember you begging me to show you magic.”

Thorn’s ax slowly drifted down. “Skifr?”

“You could simply have knocked,” said Laithlin, guiding Thorn away and smoothing her dress back to its usual perfection.

“Knocking does not guarantee an audience, Golden Queen. And I have come a long road from the land of the Alyuks, up the Denied and Divine in the company of Prince Varoslaf. Not that he knew it.” Skifr eased her hood back and Koll gave a ragged gasp. Even in the shadows he could see the left side of her face was streaked with mottled burns, half her eyebrow was missing and her cropped gray hair scattered with bald spots.

“What happened?” said Thorn.

Skifr smiled. Or one half of her face did. The other creased and twisted like old leather. “Grandmother Wexen sent men south, my dove. To punish me for stealing relics from the forbidden ruin of Strokomb.” She glanced toward the elf-bangle on Thorn’s wrist as it pulsed a bright blue-white. “They burned my house. They killed my son and his wife. They killed my son’s sons. But they found I am not easily killed.”

“Grandmother Wexen has a long memory for scores,” murmured Laithlin.

“She will discover she is not the only one.” Skifr tipped back her face, mottled burns seeming to glisten. “Grandmother Wexen brought Death to me. It is only good manners that I return the favor. I have read the portents. I have watched the birds across the sky. I have deciphered the ripples in the water and you will take me back across the Shattered Sea to Thorlby. Do you still wish to see magic, Koll?”

“No?” But it often seemed people loved to ask him questions but hadn’t much interest in his answers.

“I must speak to Father Yarvi.” Skifr curled back her lips to show her teeth and barked the words. “Then I will go to *war*!”

Uthil's fleet made ready to spit in the High King's face.

A red-haired Throvenlander stood tall on a rock, bellowing verses from the Lay of Ashenleer with little tune but lots of vigor, that old fighter's favorite where the queen's closest prepare to die gloriously in battle. All around men mouthed along with the often-mouthed words as they gave blades final licks with the whetstone, plucked at bowstrings and hauled buckles tight.

You'd think fighting men would prefer songs about warriors who lived gloriously through a battle to die old and fat and rich, but there's fighting men for you, not much they do makes sense, once you think on it. One reason Raith tried never to think if he could avoid it.

They'd stripped any useless weight from the ships, supplies left heaped on the shore to make space for more fighters. Some men had chosen to wear mail, for fear of blade or arrow. Some to leave it, for fear of being dragged down into Mother Sea's cold embrace. A bleak choice that, a madman's gamble with everything you'll ever have. But war's made of such choices.

Every man dug up his own courage his own way. They forced out under-funny jokes and overready laughter, or made bets on who'd make the most corpses, or set out how their goods should be shared if they went through the Last Door before nightfall. Some clutched at holy signs and women's favors, hugged each other, slapped each other, roared defiance and brotherhood in one another's faces. Others stood silent, staring out at glimmering Mother Sea where their dooms would soon be written.

Raith was ready. He'd been ready for hours. For days. Ever since they held the moot and Skara voted along with Uthil to fight.

So he turned his back on the men, frowning toward the charred ruins of the town above the beach and drawing in deep the smell of salt and smoke. Funny, how you never enjoy your breaths until you feel your last one coming.

"It was called Valso."

"Eh?" asked Raith, looking round.

"The town." Blue Jenner combed his beard over to the left with his fingers, then the right, then back. "There was a good market here. Lambs in the spring. Slaves in the autumn. Sleepy most of the time, but it got rowdy when the men came back from raiding. Spent a few wild nights at a hall here." He nodded toward a teetering chimney stack still standing among a mess of scorched beams. "Think that might've been it. Sung some songs there with men mostly dead now."

"Got a fine voice, do you?"

Jenner snorted. "When I'm drunk I think I do."

"Reckon there'll be no songs sung there now." Raith wondered how many families had made their homes in those burned-out houses. In the ones he'd seen all down the coast of Throvenland as they'd sailed west. Farm after farm, village after village, town after town, turned to ghosts and ashes.

Raith worked the fingers of his left hand, feeling that old ache through the knuckles. The gods knew,

he'd set some fires himself. He'd stared in awed joy as the flames leapt up into the night and made him feel powerful as a god. He'd boasted of it, puffed himself up with Gorm's approval. The ashes were one of the many things he chose not to think about. The ashes, and the folk who'd lost everything, and the folk dead and burned. You can't choose your dreams, though. They say the gods send you the ones you deserve.

"Bright Yilling surely loves to burn," said Jenner.

"What can you expect?" grunted Raith. "Worships Death, doesn't he?"

"It'd be a good thing to send him to meet her."

"This is a war. Best leave good out of it."

"You usually do."

He grinned at the voice, so like his own, and turned to see his brother swaggering through the *Black Dog's* crew. "If it ain't the great Rakki, shield-bearer to Grom-gil-Gorm. Who's the king got carrying his sword now?"

Rakki had that crooked little grin Raith could never quite make, however much alike their faces might be. "He finally found a man won't trip over his own feet in the charge."

"Not you, then?"

Rakki snorted. "You should leave the jokes to funnier men."

"You should leave the fighting to harder ones." Raith caught him, half-hug, half-grapple, and pulled him close. He'd always been the stronger. "Don't let Gorm trample you, eh, brother? All my hopes have got you in 'em."

"Don't let Uthil drown you," said Rakki, twisting free. "I brought you something." And he held out a heel of reddish bread. "Since these godless Throvenlanders don't eat the last loaf."

"You know I don't believe too much in luck," said Raith, taking a chew and tasting the blood in it.

"But I do," said Rakki, starting to back off. "I'll see you after we're done, and you can marvel at my plunder!"

"I'll marvel if you get any, skulking in last!" And Raith flung the rest of the bread at him, scattering crumbs.

"It's the skulkers who do best, brother!" called Rakki as he dodged it. "Folk love to sing about heroes but they hate standing next to 'em!" And he was away among the crews, off to fight in battle beside the Breaker of Swords. To fight with Soryorn and the rest of Gorm's closest, men Raith had looked up to half his life and that the better half, and he clenched his fists, wishing he could follow his brother. Wishing he could watch over him. He'd always been the strong one, after all.

"Do you miss him?"

You'd have thought time would've made him more comfortable around her, but the sight of Skara's sharp-boned face still knocked all thought from Raith's head. She watched Rakki thread his way back through the warriors. "You must have spent your whole lives together."

"Aye. I'm sick of the sight of him."

Skara looked less than convinced. She'd a knack for guessing what was going on in his head. Maybe his head wasn't much of a puzzle. "If we win today, perhaps Father Peace can have his time."

"Aye." Though Mother War usually had other ideas.

“Then you can join your brother, and fill Gorm’s cup again.”

“Aye.” Though the prospect gave Raith less joy than it used to. Being Queen Skara’s dog might be slim on honor, but she was an awful lot prettier than the Breaker of Swords. And there was something to be said for not having to prove himself the hardest bastard going every moment. And for not being cuffed around the head when he didn’t manage it.

The jewels in Skara’s earring twinkled with the evening sun as she turned to Blue Jenner. “How much longer do we wait?”

“Not long now, my queen. The High King has too many men and too few ships.” He nodded toward the headland, a black outline with the shifting water glimmering around its foot. “They’re dropping them bit by bit on the beach beyond that spur. When Gorm judges the time right, he’ll give a blast on his horn and crush the ones who’ve landed. We’ll already be rowing out, hoping to catch the ships fully loaded in the straits. That’s Uthil’s plan, anyway.”

“Or Father Yarvi’s,” muttered Skara, frowning out to sea. “It sounds simple enough.”

“Saying it’s always simpler than doing it, sadly.”

“Father Yarvi has a new weapon,” said Sister Owd. “A gift from the Empress of the South.”

“Father Yarvi always has something—” Skara flinched, touched one hand to her cheek and her fingers came away red.

A prayer weaver was threading among the warriors with the blood of a sacrifice to Mother War, wailing out blessings in a broken voice, dipping his red fingers in the bowl and flicking weaponluck over the men.

“That’s good fortune for the battle,” said Raith.

“I won’t be there.” Skara stared out at the ruins of Valso, her mouth a flat, angry line. “I wish I could swing a sword.”

“I’ll swing your sword.” And before he really knew what he was doing Raith had knelt on the rocks and offered his ax up across both palms, like Hordru the Chosen Shield did in the song.

Skara looked down with one brow lifted. “That’s an ax.”

“Swords are for clever men and pretty men.”

“One of two isn’t bad.” She had her hair bound in a thick, dark braid and she flicked it back over her shoulder and, like Ashenleer did in the song, leaned down with her eyes on his and kissed the blade. Raith couldn’t have got a warmer tingle if she’d kissed him on the mouth. All foolishness, but men can be forgiven a little foolishness when the Last Door yawns wide before them.

“If you see Death on the water,” she said, “try to give her room.”

“A warrior’s place is at Death’s side,” said Raith as he stood. “So he can introduce her to his enemies.”

Down, then, toward Mother Sea, the coming sunset glittering on the waves. Down toward the hundred ships shifting with the swell, their pack of prow-beasts silently snarling, hissing, screeching. Down, among a host of jostling brothers, only their skill and courage and fury standing between them and the Last Door, a tide of men washing out to meet the tide of water washing in.

Raith felt that heady brew of fear and excitement as he found his place near the prow, always among the first into the fight, the battle-joy already niggling at his throat.

“Wish you were beside the Breaker of Swords?” asked Jenner.

“No,” said Raith, and he meant it. “A wise man once told me war’s a matter of making the best of what you’re given. No warrior more fearsome than the Breaker of Swords with his feet on Father Earth.” He grinned at Jenner. “But you’re an old bastard who knows his way around a boat, I reckon.”

“I can tell one end from the other.” Blue Jenner slapped him on the shoulder. “Glad to have you on the crew, boy.”

“I’ll try not to disappoint you, old man.” Raith had meant it to drip scorn, the sort of manly jibe he’d have jabbed his brother with, but the words came out plain. Even a little cracked.

Jenner smiled, leathery face all creasing up. “You won’t. The king speaks.”

Uthil had climbed onto the steering platform of his ship, one arm cradling his sword, one boot on the curving top rail, one hand gripping the stern below its iron-forged prow-beast of a snarling wolf. He had no mail, no shield, no helm, the King’s Circle glinting in his gray hair. He trusted in his skill and his weaponluck, and his scorn for Death made him feared by his enemies, and admired by his followers, and that was worth more than armor to a leader.

“Good friends!” he called out in a grinding voice, stilling the nervous muttering on the boats. “Bold brothers! Warriors of Gettland and Throvenland! You have waited long enough. Today we give Mother War her due. Today will be a red day, a blood day, a day for the crows. Today we fight!”

Raith gave a growl in his throat, and all about him other men did the same.

“This is a day the ministers will write of in their high books,” called Uthil, “and the skalds will sing of about the firepits. A day you will tell your grandchildren’s children of and swell with pride at your part in it. We are the sword that will cut away Bright Yilling’s smile, the hand that will slap Grandmother Wexen’s face. Grom-gil-Gorm and his Vanstermen will crush the High King’s men against unyielding Father Earth. We will drive them into the cold arms of Mother Sea.”

The king stood taller, the gray hair flicking about his scarred face, his fever-bright eyes. “Death waits for us all, my brothers. Will you skulk past her through the Last Door? Or will you face her with your heads high and your swords drawn?”

“Swords drawn! Swords drawn!” And all across the water blades hissed eagerly from their scabbards.

Uthil grimly nodded. “I am no minister. I have no more words.” He took the sword from the crook of his arm and thrust it toward the sky. “My blade shall speak for me! Steel is the answer!”

A cheer went up, men hammering their oars with their fists, blunting carefully sharpened weapons on their shield-rims, holding blades high to make a glittering forest over every ship, and Raith shouted louder than anyone.

“Didn’t think to hear you cheering for the King of Gettland,” murmured Jenner.

Raith cleared his sore throat. “Aye, well. The worst enemies make the best allies.”

“Ha. You’re learning, boy.”

A long quiet stretched out. The small sounds came thunderous. The gentle creaking of wood under Raith’s boots and the slow breakers washing up the beach. The hissing of skin as Blue Jenner rubbed his calloused palms together and the mutter of a final prayer to Mother War. The rattling of oars in their sockets and the croaking of a single gull as it curved low over the ships and away to the south.

“A good omen,” said King Uthil, then brought his sword chopping down.

“Heave!” roared Jenner.

And the men set to their oars, blood hot with fear and hate and the hunger for plunder, the thirst for glory. Like a hound off the leash the *Black Dog* sped out to sea, ahead of Uthil’s gray-sailed ship, spray flying from the high prow and the salt wind rushing in Raith’s hair. Wood groaned and water thundered against the ship’s flanks, and over the noise he heard the bellowing of other helmsmen as they urged their crews to be the first into battle.

This was what he was made for. And Raith tipped back his head and gave a wolf’s howl at the joy of it.

Skara's heart was thudding in her mouth as she caught a tree-root and dragged herself up toward the crest. Hardly the most regal of behavior, as Sister Owd had been keen to point out, but Skara would not simply sit on the beach chewing her nails while the future of Throvenland was decided.

She might not be able to fight in the battle. She could at least watch it.

The ground was leveling out now and she crept upward, bent low. The ragged coast of Yutmark came into view to the south. The faint hills, then the gray beaches, then the sparkling water of the straits themselves and, finally, halfway across, ships.

"The High King's fleet," whispered Sister Owd, her face even more than usually peach-like from the climb.

Dozens of ships, oars dipping. Some low and sleek and built for battle, some fat-bellied traders, no doubt crammed with warriors sent north by Grandmother Wexen. Warriors fixed on sweeping their alliance aside and crushing Skara's little pocket of Throvenland as a callous boy might crush a beetle.

The anger surged up hot and she clenched her fists, took the last few steps to the summit of the headland and stood between Father Yarvi and Mother Scaer, gazing westward, a long beach stretching away toward sinking Mother Sun.

"Gods," she breathed.

The shingle crawled with men like ants seething from a broken nest, their shields painted dots, steel flashing and winking, colored banners flapping in the wind to mark where crews should gather. Those of the High King's warriors who had already landed. Two full loads of those transports, maybe three. Hundreds of them. Thousands. It hardly seemed real.

"So many," she whispered.

"The more we allow across," said Mother Scaer, "the more Grom-gil-Gorm will catch on the beach, the more we *kill*."

The last word came harsh as a stabbing dagger and Skara felt a surge of nerves, clutching at one hand with the other. "Do you think..." Her voice faded to a croak as she made herself speak the name. "Bright Yilling is down there?" She saw that calm, soft face again, heard that high, soft voice, felt an echo of the terror of that night and was furious at her own cowardice. She was a queen, damn it. A queen cannot fear.

Father Yarvi looked across at her. "Any true hero leads from the front."

"He's no hero."

"Every hero is someone's villain."

"Hero or villain," said Mother Scaer, her blue, blue eyes fixed on those men below, "he has not made his warriors ready."

She was right. They had formed a shield-wall in the dunes above the beach, facing inland toward the sullen forest, a high pole topped with the seven-rayed sun of the One God in their center, but even

Skara, whose experience of battle went little further than watching the boys in the training square behind her grandfather's hall, could tell it was an ill-made line, crooked and full of gaps.

"Grandmother Wexen has gathered men from many places," said Father Yarvi. "They are not used to fighting together. They do not even speak one tongue."

King Uthil's fleet had rounded the headland, an arrow-shaped mass of ships, seabirds circling above the white-frothed wake curving back toward the blackened ruins of Valso. The High King's fleet must have sighted them, some turning toward the threat, others away, others plowing on toward the beach, oars tangling and boats clashing in the confusion.

"Surprise is on our side," said Sister Owd, having finally got her breath back. "Surprise is half the battle."

Skara frowned sideways. "How many battles have you fought in?"

"I have faith in our alliance, my queen," said the minister, folding her arms. "I have faith in the Breaker of Swords, and in King Uthil, and in Blue Jenner."

"And Raith," Skara found she had added. She had not even realized she had faith in him, let alone that she would ever say so.

Sister Owd raised one brow. "Him somewhat less."

A long, low horn blast throbbed out, so deep it seemed to make Skara's guts tremble.

Mother Scaer stretched up tall. "The Breaker of Swords comes to the feast!"

All at once men spilled from the trees, surging onto the dunes above the beach. Skara supposed they were running at full tilt but they seemed to move slowly as honey in winter.

She found she had reached out to clutch at Sister Owd's shoulder with her bandaged hand. She had not felt so scared since the night the Forest burned, but now with the fear there was an almost unbearable thrill. Her fate, the fate of Throvenland, the fate of the alliance, the fate of the Shattered Sea itself all balanced on a sword's edge. She could hardly stand to watch, could not bear to look away.

A warrior had rushed out from the High King's men, was waving his arms frantically, trying to ready the shield-wall to meet the charge. Skara could hear his cracked screams, faint, faint on the wind, but it was too late.

The Breaker of Swords was upon them. She saw his black banner flying, steel glittering beneath it like the spray at the head of a wave.

"Your death comes," she whispered.

Her face hurt she was grimacing so hard, her chest burned she was gasping in the air so fast. She sent up a prayer to Mother War, a cold and vicious prayer that these invaders might be driven from her land and into the sea. That she might spit on Bright Yilling's carcass before Mother Sun set, and so win her courage back from him.

It seemed her prayers were answered before her eyes.

In a black tide the Vanstermen swept down the grassy dunes, their war cries echoing high and strange on the wind, and like a wall of sand before a great wave the center of the High King's crooked shield wall crumbled. She felt Sister Owd's hand on top of hers and gripped it tight.

Gorm's men crashed into the faltering line, and Mother War spread her wings over the coast of

Throvenland and smiled upon the slaughter. Her voice was a storm of metal. A clamor like a thousand smithies and a hundred slaughter yards. Sometimes by some unknown chance the wind would waft some word, or phrase, or cry full formed to Skara's ear, of fury or pain or begging fear, and make her startle as if it was spoken at her shoulder.

Father Yarvi stepped forward, knuckles white about his elf-metal staff and his eager eyes fixed on the beach. "Yes," he hissed. "Yes!"

Now the right wing of the High King's men slowly buckled and in an instant gave, men fleeing down the shingle, flinging their weapons away. But there was nowhere to run but into the arms of Mother Sea, and that was a comfortless embrace indeed.

On the higher dunes a few knots of the High King's warriors still held, striving to make a stand worth singing of, but they were islands in a flood. And Skara saw the ruin panic can work on a great army, and learned how a battle can turn on a single moment, and watched the gilded symbol of the One God topple and be crushed beneath the heels of Mother War's faithful.

In the wake of Gorm's charge the beach was left dotted with black shapes, like driftwood after a tempest. Broken shields, broken weapons. Broken men. Skara's wide eyes darted over the wreckage, trying to reckon the number of the dead, and she could hardly swallow for the sudden tightness in her throat.

"I did this," she whispered. "My words. My vote."

Sister Owd gave her hand a reassuring squeeze. "And you did right, my queen. Lives spared here would have cost lives later. This was the greater good."

"The lesser evil," muttered Skara, remembering Mother Kyre's lessons, but her borrowed minister had misunderstood. It was not guilt she felt, but awe at her own power. She felt like a queen at last.

"The pyre builders will be busy tonight," said Father Yarvi.

"And, in due course, the slave-markets of Vulsgard too." For once Mother Scaer had a tone of grudging approval. "So far, all proceeds according to your design."

Father Yarvi stared out to sea, gaunt face squirming as he worked his jaw. "So far."

The battle on Father Earth was well won, but in the straits the spearhead of King Uthil's fleet was only now reaching the blunt tangle of the High King's ships. At the very front Skara saw a blue sail straining with the wind, and she tasted blood as she bit into the quick beneath her thumbnail.

“Don’t do nothing foolish, eh?” said Blue Jenner.

Raith was thinking of the training square in Vulsgard. Dropping a lad twice his size he’d hit him so hard and so fast. Looking at him huddled on the ground. The shadow of his boot across the lad’s bloody face. He remembered Grom-gil-Gorm’s great hand falling on his shoulder.

What are you waiting for?

He fixed his eyes on the High King’s fleet, a muddle of stretched rope and heaved oar, wind-whipped sailcloth and straining men. “The only foolish thing in a fight is holding back,” he growled, and wedged that battle-scarred joiner’s peg in his mouth, his teeth fitting the dents as neatly as the two halves of a broken bowl fit together.

The *Black Dog*’s swift-hauled keel plunged through a wave and sent spray fountaining to spatter down on the grimacing oarsmen and the crouching warriors between them.

Raith glanced back toward land, coast bobbing as Mother Sea lifted the *Black Dog* and dropped her, wondered if Skara was watching, thought of her eyes, those big green eyes that seemed to swallow him. Then he thought of Rakki, alone in the fight with no one to watch his back and he gripped the handle of his shield so tight his battered knuckles burned.

The High King’s ships were rushing up fast, he could see the painted shields: gray gate, boar’s head, four swords in a square. He could see the straining faces of the oarsmen at the rails. He could see bows full-drawn as a boat tipped, and arrows came flickering across the water.

Raith dropped behind his shield, felt a shaft click against its face and spin away over his shoulder. Another lodged in the rail beside him. The breath was getting hot in his throat and he shifted the peg with his tongue and bit down harder.

He heard bowstrings behind him, saw shafts looping the other way, caught by the wind, flitting down among the High King’s ships. He heard helmsmen of King Uthil’s fleet roaring for more speed. He heard the clashing of weapons on shields and rails and oars as men gathered their courage, making ready to kill, to die, and Raith heaved in another breath and did the same, knocking his ax tap, tap, tap against the rail in time to his pounding heart.

“Pull to the left!” roared Blue Jenner, picking out his target. Had to be a Lowlander ship—no prow-beast, just a carved whirl. Its crew were struggling to come about to meet the *Black Dog* prow to prow, helmsman straining desperate at his steering oar, but the wind was against him.

“Heart of iron!” came a roar. “Head of iron! Hand of iron!”

“Your death comes!” someone screamed, and others took up the shout, and Raith snarled it too but with the peg in his mouth it was only a slobbering growl. He felt his breath burning, burning, and hacked at the rail with his ax, woodchips flying.

More arrows whipped angry over the water, and a clamor of prayers and war cries, the *Black Dog* plowing on toward the Lowlander’s ship, the men at her rail bulge-eyed as they scrambled back, and

Raith could smell their fear, smell their blood, and he stood tall and gave a great howl.

Keel struck timber with a shattering, shuddering crash, oars ripped up, snapping, splintering, sliding about the *Black Dog's* prow like spears. The timbers trembled, warriors tottered and clutched, the Lowlander ship was tipped by the impact, men tumbling from their sea-chests and an archer fell and shot his arrow high, high toward sinking Mother Sun.

Grapples snaked out across the churning gap, iron fingers clutching. One hooked a Lowlander under the arm and dragged him whooping into the water.

“Heave!” roared Jenner and the ships were dragged together, a skein of rope and tangled oar between them, and Raith bared his teeth and planted one boot on the rail.

A rock tumbled from the air, bonked onto the head of the man beside Raith and knocked him flat, mouth yawning, a great dent in his helmet and the bloody rim jammed down over his nose.

What are you waiting for?

He sprang, cleared the frothing water and fell in the midst of men, a spear raking his shield, near twisting it from his hand.

Raith chopped with his ax, snarling, chopped again, slaving, shoved a man over backward, saw another with a red beard just raising an ax of his own. He'd a jackdaw wing on a thong around his neck, a charm to make him fast. Didn't make him fast enough. An arrow stuck under his eye and he fumbled at the shaft.

Raith hit him in the head and ripped him off his feet. A wave struck the side of the ship, soaking friend and enemy. Sea spray, blood spray, men pushing, crushing, shoving, screaming. A stew of maddened faces. The swell lifted the back of the ship and Raith went with it, driving men back with his shield, snorting and howling, wolf voice, wolf heart.

All was a storm of splintering wood and clattering metal and broken voices that echoed in Raith's head until his skull rang with it, split with it, burst with it. The deck was sea-slippery, blood-slippery. Men staggered as the boat heeled and clashed grating against another, its prow-beast so prickled with arrows it looked like a hedgehog.

A man thrust at him with a spear but panic had the Lowlanders and there was no heart in it. Raith was too fast, too eager, reeled around the stabbing point, his ax reeling after him in a shining circle and thudding into the man's shoulder so hard it sent him tumbling over the rail and into the heaving sea.

Mercy is weakness, Mother Scaer used to make them say before she'd give them their bread. Mercy is failure.

Raith rammed his left arm up and over and the edge of his shield caught an oarsman in the mouth and knocked him staggering, coughing, choking on his own teeth.

He saw Blue Jenner clinging to the prow, boot up on the rail, pointing with his weathered sword. He shouted words but Raith was the great dog now, and if he'd ever known the tongue of men it was long ago in another place.

The ship clashed into another. A man in the water gave a bubbling scream as he was crushed between the hulls. Fire flared, glinting on the blades, fearful faces jerking toward it.

Father Yarvi's southern weapon. A flaming pot tumbled in the air and smashed, fire blooming across a fat-bellied transport. Men toppled from the deck, burning, squealing, rigging turned to

flaming lines, Mother Sea herself pooled with fire.

Raith felt Gorm's hand on his shoulder. *What are you waiting for?*

He chopped a man down, stomped on him as he fell, hacked another across the back as he turned to run. He'd fought his way down the ship, a tall warrior ahead of him with gold glinting on his face-guard, bright ring-money on his arms catching the sinking sun.

Raith slunk up growling in a crouch, his slobber spattering the deck, men and the shadows of men dancing about them, lit by gaudy flames.

They sprang together, ax shrieking against sword, sword clattering from shield, a kick and a stumble and a blow gouging the deck as Raith rolled away.

He circled, wet lips quivering, feeling out his balance, weighing his ax, until he saw his shadow stretch across the deck toward the captain. Knew Mother Sun was low, knew she'd take his eyes, and when she did he darted forward.

He hooked the captain's shield and ripped it down. He had the longer reach but Raith pressed close, butted him in the mouth just under his gilded face guard.

He fell clutching at the rail, Raith's ax thudded into wood and the captain's fingers jumped spinning, sword tumbling over the side into the sea. Raith snarled, spraying pink drool, chopped low and caught the captain just below his flapping mail as he tried to stand. A crack as his knee snapped back the wrong way and he fell moaning onto his hands.

Raith felt Gorm's slap sting his face. *You are a killer!*

He gnawed at the peg as he hacked, and hacked, and hacked, snorting and slavering until he could swing no more and he lurched against the ship's rail, blood on his face, blood in his mouth.

Smoke rolled across the water, made Raith's eyes leak and his throat burn.

Here, at least, the battle was done. Men dead. Men screaming. The water bobbed with floating bodies, nudging gently against the keel as the ship drifted. Raith's knees wobbled and he slumped down on his arse in the shadow of the whirl-carved prow.

More of Uthil's ships were cutting through the waves. Arrows flitting, grapples tumbling, men springing from one boat to another, men roaring and fighting and dying, black shadows in the fading light. Flames spread among the big trading ships and roared up into the dusk, oars a flaming tangle, giant torches on the water.

"That was some fighting, lad." Someone set the captain's gilded helm on Raith's lap and gave it a pat. "You got no fear in you at all, do you?"

Took an effort for Raith to unlock his aching jaw, to push the spit-slick peg out of his mouth with his sore tongue.

Sometimes felt like all he had in him was fear. Of losing his place. Of being alone. Of the things he'd done. Of the things he might do.

Fighting was the one thing that didn't scare him.

The land was a black mystery when the ships began to plow ashore, the sky a dark blue cloth slashed with cloud and stabbed with stars. Out on the dark water, the scattered remnants of Grandmother Wexen's fleet were still burning.

The crews began to jump down, to flounder laughing through the surf, eyes shining with triumph in the light of a hundred bonfires set upon the beach.

Skara watched them, desperate to know who was living, who was wounded, who was dead, burning to run into the sea herself to find out sooner.

"There!" said Sister Owd, pointing, and Skara saw the prow-beast of the *Black Dog*, her crew trotting up the shingle. She felt a heady rush of relief when she saw Blue Jenner's smiling face, then the warrior beside him pulled off a gilded helmet and Raith grinned up toward her. Whether Mother Kyre would have considered it proper or not, Skara took off down the beach to meet them.

"Victory, my queen!" called Jenner, and Skara caught him, hugged him, seized his ears and pulled his head down so she could kiss him on his wispy pate.

"I knew you wouldn't let me down!"

Jenner was blushing red as he nodded sideways. "Thank this one. He killed a captain, man against man. Never saw braver fighting."

Raith's eyes were bright and wild and before Skara knew it she was hugging him too, her nose full of the sour-sweat smell of him, somehow anything but unpleasant. He jerked her into the air with easy strength, spun her about lightly as if she was made of straw, both of them laughing, drunk on victory.

"We've got prizes for you," he said, upending a canvas bag, and a clinking mass of ring money spilled onto the sand.

Sister Owd squatted to root through the gold and silver, round face dimpling as she grinned. "This will do Throvenland's treasury no harm, my queen."

Skara put her hand on her minister's shoulder. "Now Throvenland has a treasury." With this she could start to feed her people, maybe even begin to rebuild what Bright Yilling had burned, and be a queen rather than a girl with a title made of smoke. She raised one brow at Raith.

"I must confess I had no high hopes of you when you first sat beside me."

"I'd no high hopes of myself," he said.

Jenner grabbed him, scrubbing at his white hair. "Who could blame you? He's an unhopeful-looking bastard!"

"You're one to talk, old man," said Raith, slapping Blue Jenner's hand away.

"You both have proved yourselves great fighters." Skara picked out two golden armrings and handed one to Jenner, thinking how proud her grandfather would have been to see her giving gifts to her warriors. "And loyal friends." She took Raith's thick wrist and slipped the other around it then, hidden in the darkness between them, let her fingers trail onto the back of his hand. He turned it over

so she touched his palm, her thumb brushing across it one way, then the other.

She looked up and his eyes were fixed on hers. As if there was nothing else to look at in the world. Mother Kyre would certainly not have considered that proper. No one would. Perhaps that was why it gave Skara such a breathless thrill to do it.

“Steel was our answer!” came a roar and she jerked her hand free, turned to see King Uthil striding up the beach, Father Yarvi smiling at his shoulder. All about men held their swords, their axes, their spears high in salute, blades notched from the day’s work catching the light of the bonfires and burning the colors of flame, so it seemed the Iron King and his companions stalked through a sea of fire.

“Mother War stood with us!” Grom-gil-Gorm loomed from the darkness in the dunes, a fresh wound added to his faceful of scars, his beard tangled with clotted blood. Rakki strode beside him with the king’s great shield, scored with new marks of its own, Soryorn on the other side with an armful of captured swords. Mother Scaer stalked after him, thin lips ever-moving as she crooned a prayer of thanks to the Mother of Crows.

The two great kings, the two famed warriors, the two old enemies met, and eyed each other over a guttering fire. All across the crowded beach the laughter and the cheering faded, and She Who Sings the Wind sang a keening tune and tore bright sparks swirling down the shingle and out to sea.

Then the Breaker of Swords puffed out his great chest, that chain made from the pommels of his fallen enemies flashing, and spoke in a voice of thunder.

“I looked out to sea and I saw a ship speeding, fleet as a gray gull over the water, scattering the ships of the High King like starlings. Iron on the mast, in the hands of her warriors. Iron the eye of her merciless captain. Iron the slaughter she spread on the water. Corpses to sate even Mother Sea’s hunger.”

An iron whisper went through the warriors. Pride at their strength and the strength of their leaders. Pride at the songs they would pass to their sons, more precious to them than gold. Uthil let his mad eyes widen, let the sword slide through the crook of his arm until it rested on its point. His voice came as harsh as the grinding of a whetstone.

“I looked back to land and I saw a host gather. Black was the banner the wind snapped above them. Black was the fury that fell on their foemen. Into the sea were the High King’s men driven. Thunder of steel as helms split and shields riven. Red was the tide that washed over their ruin. Corpses to sate even Mother War’s hunger.”

The two kings clasped hands over the fire and a mighty cheer went up, a din of metal as men smashed their notched weapons against their gouged shields, and thumped fists on the mailed shoulders of their comrades, and Skara clapped her hands and laughed along with them.

Blue Jenner raised his brows. “Acceptable verses, at short notice.”

“No doubt the skalds can sharpen them later!” Skara knew what it was to win a great victory, and it was a feeling to sing of. The High King was driven from the land of her forefathers, and her heart felt light for the first time since she fled the burning Forest...

Then she remembered that bland smile, speckled with her grandfather’s blood and shivered. “Was Bright Yilling among the dead?” she called.

Grom-gil-Gorm turned his dark eyes upon her. “I saw no sign of that Death-worshipping dog, nor

his Companions. It was a rabble we butchered on the beach, weak-armed and weak-led.”

“Father Yarvi.” A boy slipped past Skara, catching the minister by his coat. “A dove’s come.”

For some reason she felt a weight of cold worry in her stomach as Father Yarvi tucked his elf-metal staff into the crook of his arm and turned the scrap of paper toward the firelight. “Come from where?”

“Down the coast, beyond Yaletoft.”

“I had men watching the water...” He trailed off as his eyes scanned the scrawled letters.

“You have news?” asked King Uthil.

Yarvi swallowed, a sudden gust fluttering the paper in his fingers. “The High King’s army has crossed the straits to the west,” he muttered. “Ten thousand of his warriors stand on the soil of Throvenland and are already marching.”

“What?” asked Raith, mouth still smiling but his forehead wrinkled with confusion.

Not far away men were still dancing clumsily to the music of a pipe, laughing, drinking, celebrating, but around the two kings the faces had turned suddenly grim.

“Are you sure?” Skara’s voice had the pleading note of a pardoned prisoner who finds they are to die for some other crime.

“I am sure.” And Yarvi crumpled the paper in his hand and flung it in the fire.

Mother Scaer gave a bark of joyless laughter. “This was all a ruse! A flourish of Grandmother Wexen’s fingers to draw our eyes while she struck the true blow with her other hand.”

“A trick,” breathed Blue Jenner.

“She sacrificed all those men?” said Skara. “As a *trick*?”

“For the greater good, my queen,” whispered Sister Owd. Farther down the beach a few fires spluttered out as a cold wave surged up the shingle.

“She tossed away her leakiest ships. Her weakest fighters. Men she need no longer arm, or feed, or worry over.” King Uthil gave an approving nod. “One must admire her ruthlessness.”

“I thought Mother War had smiled on us.” Gorm frowned toward the night sky. “It seems her favor fell elsewhere.”

As the news spread the music stuttered to a halt and the celebrations with it. Mother Scaer was scowling toward Yarvi. “You thought to outwit Grandmother Wexen, but she has outwitted you and all of us with you. Arrogant fool!”

“I heard none of your wisdom!” Father Yarvi snarled back, shadows black in the angry hollows of his face.

“Stop!” pleaded Skara, stepping between them. “We must be united, now more than ever!”

But a babble of voices had broken out. A clamor like the one she had heard outside her door the night the High King’s warriors came to Yaletoft.

“Ten thousand men? That could be three times what we fought here!”

“Twice as many as we have!”

“There could be more flooding across the straits!”

“Plainly the High King has found more ships.”

“We must strike them now,” snapped Uthil.

“We must fall back,” growled Gorm. “Draw them onto our ground.”

“Stop,” croaked Skara, but she could not seem to take a proper breath. Her heart was surging in her ears. Something clattered from the black sky and she gasped. Raith caught her by the arm and dragged her behind him, whipping free his dagger.

A bird, swooping from the night and onto Mother Scaer’s shoulder. A crow, folding its wings and staring unblinking with yellow eyes.

“Bright Yilling has come!” it shrieked. And suddenly Skara was back in the darkness, the mad light of fires outside the windows, the white hand reaching out to touch her face. She felt her guts churn and her knees tremble, had to clutch at Raith’s arm to stop herself from falling.

In silence Mother Scaer unpeeled the scrap of paper from her crow’s leg. In silence she read the markings, her stony face growing stonier yet. In silence Skara felt the fear settling ever deeper on her like drifting snow, like a great stone crushing out her breath, acid tickling the back of her throat.

She remembered what her grandfather used to tell her. *Victory is a fine feeling. But always a fleeting one.*

Her voice was tiny in the night. “What is it?”

“More dark news,” said Mother Scaer. “I know where Bright Yilling has been.”

Rulf always said there was no place to forget your troubles like the prow of a ship under full sail, where your worst enemy was the wind and your biggest worry the next wave but one. It surely seemed like wisdom to Koll as he clung grinning to the prow-beast, relishing the spray on his face and the salt on his lips.

But the gods love to laugh at a happy man.

A quick arm snaked around his shoulders. It might not have been as big an arm as Brand's but the strength in it was just as frightening, the dangling knuckles scabbed and scarred, the elf-bangle won from fighting seven men alone glowing a faint orange.

"Nearly back home." Thorn took a long breath through her bent nose, and nodded toward the ragged line of Gettland's hills just showing on the horizon. "You'll be seeing Rin again, I reckon?"

Koll sighed. "You can sheathe the threats. Brand already gave me the talk—"

"Brand doesn't talk loud enough. He's an easygoing man. The gods know he has to be, to put up with me. But I married Brand." Thorn flicked at the red-gold key around her neck and set it swinging by its chain. "So Rin's my sister too. And I'm not so easygoing. I've always liked you and I don't like anyone, but you see where I'm headed with this?"

"It hardly takes a farsighted fellow." Koll hung his head. "Feel like I'm trapped in a shrinking room. Can't see how to do right by Rin and Father Yarvi both."

"Can't see how to get what you want from both, do you mean?"

He glanced guiltily up at her. "I want to be loved *while* I change the world. That so wrong?"

"Only if you end up doing neither and make a heap of wreckage getting there." Thorn sighed, and gave his shoulder a sympathetic pat. "If it's any consolation I know just how you feel. I swore an oath to Queen Laithlin to be her Chosen Shield and I made a promise to Brand to be his wife and...turns out they both deserve better."

Koll raised his brows. It was an odd reassurance to know Thorn, who always seemed so certain, might have her own doubts. "Not sure they'd agree."

She snorted. "Not sure they'd disagree. Feels like there's not enough of me to go around and what there is no one in their right mind would want. I never aimed to become...well..." She made a fist of her right hand and winced down at it. "Some angry bastard."

"You didn't?"

"No, Koll. I didn't."

"What're you going to do, then?" he asked.

She puffed out her scarred cheeks. "Try harder, I guess. What're you going to do?"

Koll puffed out his as he looked toward home. "I've no bloody idea." He frowned as he saw gray smudges against the sky. "Is that smoke?" He slipped from under Thorn's arm, hopped onto a barrel

and from there to the mast. The queen had come to stand at the rail, frowning off toward the west with her golden hair snatched and tossed in the wind.

“Dark omens,” Skifr murmured from inside her hood as she watched the birds circle in their wake. “Bloody omens.”

Koll dragged himself onto the yard and hooked his legs over, one hand on the masthead, the other shading his eyes as he stared off toward Thorlby. At first he couldn’t see much for the swaying of the ship, then Mother Sea calmed a moment and Koll caught a good glimpse. The docks, the walls, the citadel...

“Gods,” he croaked. There was a blackened scar down the hillside, right through the heart of the city.

“What do you see?” snapped out Queen Laithlin.

“Fire,” said Koll, the hairs on his neck prickling. “Fire in Thorlby.”

FLAMES HAD SWEEPED THROUGH the docks. Where crowds had bustled and fishermen toiled and merchants called prices ghosts of dust whirled among scorched ruins. Scarcely a wharf was left standing, all fallen twisted into the water. The blackened mast of a sunken boat poked from the slapping waves, the forlorn prow-beast of another.

“What happened?” someone croaked against the stink of burned wood.

“Land us at the beach!” snarled Thorn, clinging so hard to the rail her knuckles were white.

In brooding silence they rowed, staring up toward the city, gaps torn from the familiar buildings on the steep hillside like teeth from a lover’s smile, each an aching absence. Houses burned to shells, windows blank as corpse’s eyes, charred skeletons of roof beams stripped obscenely bare. Houses still coughing up a roiling of dark smoke, and above the crows circling, circling, cawing out gratefully to their iron mother.

“Oh, gods,” croaked Koll. Sixth Street, where Rin’s forge had been, where they’d worked together, and laughed together, and lain together, was a streak of blackened wreckage in the shadow of the citadel. He went cold to the very tips of his fingers, the fear so savage a beast in his chest he could barely take a proper breath for its clawing.

The moment the keel ground on shingle Thorn sprang from the prow and Koll followed, hardly noticing the cold, nearly floundering into her on the sand she pulled up so quickly.

“No,” Koll heard her whisper, and she put the back of one hand to her mouth and it was trembling.

He looked up the slope of the beach toward the howes of kings long dead. There was a gathering there on the dunes, among the thin grass lashed by the sea wind, a gathering of dozens, shoulders hunched and heads bowed.

A funeral gathering, and Koll felt the fear grip him tighter.

He tried to set a hand on Thorn’s shoulder, for her comfort or his he couldn’t have said, but she twisted away and ran on, sand kicking from her boot heels, and Koll followed.

He could hear a low voice droning out. Brinyolf the Prayer-Weaver, singing songs for Father Peace, for She Who Writes and She Who Judges, for Death who guards the Last Door.

“No,” he heard Thorn mutter as she struggled on up the dunes toward them.

Brinyolf’s words stuttered out. Silence except for the wind fumbling through the grass, the faraway joy of a crow on the high breeze. The white faces turned toward them, gaunt with shock, glistening with tears, tight with anger.

Koll saw Rin and gave a gasp of relief, but his little prayer of thanks died as he saw her lips curl back and her face crush up and the tears wet on her cheeks. He followed Thorn toward her, his knees wobbly, at once desperate to see and desperate not to.

He saw the great pyre, wood stacked up waist high.

He saw the bodies on it. Gods, how many? Two dozen? Three?

“No, no, no,” whispered Thorn, edging toward the nearest one.

Koll saw the dark hair stirred by the wind, saw the pale hands folded on the broad chest, old scars snaking up the wrists. Hero’s marks. Marks of a great deed. A deed that had saved Koll’s life. He crept up beside Rin to look down at the face. Brand’s face, pale and cold, with a dark little bloodless slit under one eye.

“Gods,” he croaked, not able to believe it.

Brand had always seemed so calm and strong, solid as the rock Thorlby was built on. He couldn’t be dead. Couldn’t be.

Koll squeezed his stinging eyes shut, and opened them, and there he lay still.

Brand was gone through the Last Door and that was all there was of his story. All there would ever be.

And Koll gave a silly snort, and felt the pain in his nose and the tears tickling his cheeks.

Thorn leaned down over Brand, the elf-bangle on her wrist gone dark and dead, and gently, so gently, brushed the strands of hair out of his face. Then she pulled off her chain, cradled Brand’s head and slipped it over, tucked the golden key down inside his shirt. A best shirt he’d never worn because the time was never right, and she patted the front, smoothed it softly with trembling fingers, over and over.

Rin clung tight to him and Koll put his arm about her, limp, and weak, and useless. He felt her shuddering with silent sobs and he opened his mouth to speak but nothing came. He was supposed to be a minister’s apprentice. He was supposed to have the words. But what could words do now?

He stood just as helpless as when his own mother died, and lay stretched out on the pyre, and Father Yarvi had spoken because Koll couldn’t. Could only stand staring down, and think of what he’d lost.

The silent crowd parted to let Queen Laithlin through, her hair whipping about her face and her brine-soaked dress clinging to her. “Where is Prince Druin?” she growled. “Where is my son?”

“Safe in your chambers, my queen,” said Brinyolf the Prayer-Weaver, chin vanishing into his fat neck as he looked down sadly at the pyre, “thanks to Brand. He set a bell ringing as a warning. Druin’s guards took no chances. They dropped the Screaming Gate and sealed off the citadel.”

Laithlin’s narrowed eyes swept across the corpses. “Who did this?”

Edni, one of the girls Thorn had been training, a stained bandage around her head, spat on the ground. “Bright Yilling and his Companions.”

“Bright Yilling,” murmured Laithlin. “I have heard that name too often of late.”

Thorn slowly straightened. There were no tears on her face but Koll could hear her make a strangled moan with every breath. Rin plucked at her shoulder with one hand but Thorn didn’t turn, didn’t move, as though she stood in a dream.

“He came with two ships,” Edni was saying. “Maybe three. In the night. Not enough to take the city, but enough to burn it. Some Throvenlanders had come the day before. Said they were merchants. We think they’re the ones let him in. Then him and his Companions spread out and started setting fires.”

“Brand heard them,” mumbled Rin. “Went to set a bell ringing. Said he had to warn folk. Said he had to do good.”

“Would’ve been worse without that,” said an old warrior with his arm in a sling, and when he blinked a long streak of tears was squeezed from his swimming eyes. “First I knew of it was the bell. Then there were fires everywhere. All chaos, and Bright Yilling laughing in the midst.”

“Laughing and killing,” said Edni. “Men, women, children.”

Brinyolf shook his head in disgust. “What can one expect from a man who prays to no god but Death?”

“They knew just where the guards would be.” Edni bunched her fists. “Which roads to take. Which buildings to burn. Knew where we were strong and where we were weak. They knew everything!”

“We fought, though, my queen.” The prayer-weaver put his fat hand on Edni’s thin shoulder. “You would have been proud of the way your people fought! Thanks to the favor of the gods we drove them off, but...the Mother of Crows ever takes a heavy toll...”

“This is Grandmother Wexen’s debt,” muttered Koll, wiping his nose. “And no one else’s.”

“Thorn.” Queen Laithlin stepped forward. “Thorn.” She took her by the shoulders and squeezed hard. “Thorn!”

Thorn blinked at her as if waking from a dream.

“I have to stay,” said the queen, “and try to heal Thorlby’s wounds, and see to those who remain.”

Thorn’s moaning breath had deepened to a jagged growling, the jaw muscles bunched hard on the sides of her scarred face. “I have to fight.”

“Yes. And I would not stop you even if I could.” The queen lifted her chin. “I release you from your oath, Thorn Bathu. You are my Chosen Shield no longer.” She leaned closer, voice sharp as a blade. “You must be our sword instead. The sword that cuts vengeance from Bright Yilling!”

Thorn gave a slow nod, her hands clenched to quivering fists. “I swear it.”

“My queen,” said Edni, “we caught one of them.”

Laithlin narrowed her eyes. “Where is he?”

“Chained and guarded in the citadel. He hasn’t spoken a word. But from his armor and his ring money we reckon him one of Bright Yilling’s Companions.”

Thorn bared her teeth. The elf-bangle had started to glow again, but hot as a coal now, putting a red flush on the stark hollows of her face, sparking a bloody gleam in the corners of her eyes.

“He will speak to me,” she whispered.

III.

WE ARE THE
SHIELD

“My allies,” Skara began. “My friends.” As if by calling them friends she might make them feel less like her enemies. “I thought it wise to call only the six of us together so we can discuss our situation without too many...interruptions.” Meaning the onslaught of petty arguments, insults and threats that strangled their full-scale moots.

King Uthil and King Gorm frowned at each other. Father Yarvi and Mother Scaer frowned at each other. Sister Owd sat back with arms grimly folded. A breeze sighed off the sea and stirred the long grass on the barrows, making Skara shiver even though the day was warm.

An intimate meeting out of doors, butterflies fluttering among the flowers that grew on the graves of the parents Skara had hardly known. An intimate meeting of two kings, three ministers, and her. And with the wrath of Grandmother Wexen about to crash upon them.

“Our situation, then.” Mother Scaer turned one of her elf-bangles around and around on her thin wrist. “Here is a pretty pickle.”

“Ten thousand of the High King’s warriors descend upon us,” said Uthil. “And with the banners of many storied heroes among them.”

“More swarm across the straits from Yutmark every day,” said Gorm. “We must fall back. We must abandon Throvenland.”

Skara flinched. Abandon Bail’s Point. Abandon her land and her people. Abandon her grandfather’s memory. The thought made her sick. Or even sicker.

Uthil let his naked sword slide through his hand until its point was in the grass. “I do not see victory that way.”

“Where do you see it?” pleaded Skara, struggling to sit straight and plaster a queen’s dignity onto her face, even if she would far rather have curled up crying under her chair. But Uthil only twisted his sword gently, face as hard as the cliffs below them.

“I stand always ready to trust to my weaponluck, but I am not alone. I must think of my wife and my son. I must think of what I might leave them.”

Skara felt her gorge rising and fought it down. When even the Iron King could not say steel was the answer, things were truly desperate.

Mother Scaer turned her shaved head and spat over her shoulder. “Perhaps the time has come to send a bird to Grandmother Wexen.”

Father Yarvi snorted. “Mother Adwyn made it very clear she will never make peace with me.”

“So you say.”

Yarvi narrowed his eyes. “Do you think I lie?”

Scaer glared back. “Usually.”

“King Fynn made peace with Grandmother Wexen,” said Skara, her voice cracking. “Some good it

did him!”

But the two kings sat in brooding silence as Mother Scaer leaned in, tattooed forearms resting on her knees. “Every war is only a prelude to peace. A negotiation with swords instead of words. Let us go to Grandmother Wexen while we still have something to bargain with—”

“There’ll be no bargains!” came a barking voice. “There’ll be no peace.”

Thorn Bathu stalked around the nearest howe. At first, Skara felt a rush of gladness at the sight of her. The very woman you needed when you faced impossible odds. Then Thorn jerked a chain and brought a prisoner staggering after her, hands bound behind him and a bloodstained bag over his face. Then Skara saw a figure following in a cloak of rags, hood drawn up. Finally she met Thorn’s eyes, smoldering in blackened sockets with a fury almost painful to look upon.

“Bright Yilling attacked Thorlby,” she snarled, kicking her prisoner onto his knees before the three rulers and their three ministers. “He burned half the city. Queen Laithlin is still there with her son, caring for the wounded. He killed men, women, children. He killed—” She gave a strangled cough, and bared her teeth, and she mastered herself again and raised her sharp chin, eyes glistening. “He killed Brand.”

Gorm frowned sideways at his minister. Uthil’s fist whitened about the grip of his sword. Father Yarvi’s eyes went wide, and he seemed to slump on his stool.

“Gods,” he whispered, all the color drained from his face.

“I am...so sorry...” stammered Skara. She remembered how Thorn had held her when she was first brought to Thorlby. Wished she could do the same for her now. But her face was so twisted with anger Skara hardly dared look at her, let alone touch her.

The newcomer pushed back her ragged hood. A dark-skinned southerner, lean as a whip and with burns scattered across the left side of her face. They would have made Skara wince to look upon once, but she was growing used to scars.

“Greetings, great kings, great queens, great ministers,” she bowed, and showed burned bald patches in her cropped gray hair. “In the Land of the Alyuks they call me Sun-nara-Skun. In Kalyiv they call me Scarayoi, the Walker in the Ruins.”

“What do they call you here?” snapped Mother Scaer.

“She is Skifr,” murmured Yarvi.

“The witch Skifr?” Scaer’s lip twisted with disgust. “The thief of elf-relics? The one denounced by Grandmother Wexen?”

“The very same, my dove.” Skifr smiled. “Grandmother Wexen burned my house and killed my kin, and so I am your bitter enemy’s bitter enemy.”

“The best kind of ally.” The Breaker of Swords frowned at the chained man. “And must we play a guessing game over this visitor?”

Thorn snorted, and ripped the bag from his head.

Skara was sickened at first to see his face. Battered shapeless, bloated with bruises, one eye swollen shut and the white of the other stained red. Then she realized she knew him. He was one of those who had stood in the Forest the night it burned. One of those who had laughed as King Fynn toppled into the firepit. She knew she should hate him, but all she felt at the sight of his ruined face

was pity. Pity, and disgust at what had been done to him.

Be as generous to your enemies as your friends, her grandfather had always said. *Not for their sake, but for your own.*

Thorn's mood was anything but generous, however. "This is Asborn the Fearless, Companion to Bright Yilling." She dug her fingers into his blood-crust hair and wrenched his face up toward her. "He was caught in the raid on Thorlby, and he proves to have fear in him after all. Tell them what you told me, worm!"

Asborn's mouth lolled slack and toothless, and broken words croaked out. "A message...came to Bright Yilling. To attack Thorlby. When...and where...and how to attack." Skara winced as his wet breath clicked and crackled. "You have...a traitor among you."

Father Yarvi sat forward, his withered hand clenched in a mockery of fist. "Who is it?"

"Only Yilling knows." His one bloodshot eye was fixed on Skara's. "Perhaps they sit here now... among you." His mouth curled into a red smile. "Perhaps—"

Thorn struck him across his broken face, knocked him sideways, lifted her arm to hit him again.

"Thorn!" shouted Skara, clutching at her chest. "No!" Thorn stared at her, face twisted with grief and fury at once. "Please, if you keep hurting him, you hurt yourself. You hurt us all. I beg you, show some mercy!"

"Mercy?" Thorn spat, tears streaking her scarred cheek. "Did they show Brand mercy?"

"No more than they showed my grandfather." Skara felt her own eyes stinging as she leaned desperately forward. "But we have to be better than them!"

"No. We have to be worse." Thorn hauled Asborn savagely up by his chain, lifting her clenched fist, but he only smiled the wider.

"Bright Yilling comes!" he gurgled out. "Bright Yilling comes and he brings Death with him!"

"Oh, Death is here already." Skifr turned, raising her arm, a thing of dark metal gripped in her fist. There was a deafening crack that made Skara jolt in her chair, a red mist blew from the back of Asborn's head and he was flung twisted onto his side with his hair on fire.

Skara stared, wide-eyed, cold with horror.

"Mother War protect us," whispered Gorm.

"What have you done?" shrieked Mother Scaer, springing up and sending her stool tumbling over in the grass.

"Rejoice, my doves, for I have brought you the means of your victory." Skifr held the deadly thing high, a wisp of smoke curling from a hole in its end. "I know where more of these can be found. Relics beside which the power of this one would seem puny. Elf-weapons forged before the Breaking of God!"

"Where?" asked Yarvi, and Skara was shocked to see his eyes shining with eagerness.

Skifr let her head drop on one side. "In Strokum."

"Madness!" screeched Mother Scaer. "Strokum is forbidden by the Ministry. Anyone who goes there sickens and dies!"

"I have been there." Skifr raised a long arm to point at the elf-bangle burning orange on Thorn's wrist. "I brought that bauble from within, and I still cast a shadow. No ground is forbidden to me. I

am the Walker in the Ruins, and I know all the ways. Even those that can keep us safe from the sickness in Strokom. Say the word, and I will put weapons in your hands against which no man, no hero, no army can stand.”

“And curse us all?” snarled Mother Scaer. “Have you lost your minds?”

“I yet have mine.” King Uthil had calmly risen, calmly walked to Asborn’s corpse, calmly squatted beside it. “The great warrior is the one who still breathes when the crows feast. The great king is the one who watches the carcasses of his enemies burn.” He pushed his little finger into the neat hole in Asborn’s forehead, and the mad fire that had seemed burned out was bright again in his eyes. “Steel must be the answer.” He pulled his finger free, red, and raised one brow at it. “This is but another kind of steel.”

Skara closed her eyes, gripping tight to the arms of her chair. Tried to still her heaving breath and her churning stomach and smother her horror. Horror at seeing magic. Horror at seeing a prisoner murdered before her eyes. Horror that she was the only one who seemed to care. She had to be brave. Had to be clever. Had to be strong.

“I say it should stay sheathed lest it cut us all,” Gorm was saying.

“I say it should be sheathed in Bright Yilling’s heart!” snarled Thorn.

“We can all see you are grief-mad,” snapped Mother Scaer. “Elf-magic? Think what you are saying! We risk another Breaking of God! And with a traitor among us!”

“A traitor who made Thorlby burn,” barked Thorn, “as you’ve dreamed of doing for years! A traitor working for the High King, who you’d make peace with!”

“Think carefully before you accuse me, you unnatural—”

Skara forced her eyes open. “We all have made sacrifices!” she shouted. “We all have lost friends, homes, families. We must stand united or Grandmother Wexen will crush us each alone!”

“We have challenged the High King’s authority,” said Father Yarvi, “and that is all he has. All he is. He cannot turn back and neither can we. We have chosen our path.”

“You have chosen it for us,” snapped Mother Scaer. “One bloody step at a time! And it leads straight to our destruction.”

Skifr barked out a laugh. “You were fumbling your way there well enough without me, my doves. Always there are risks. Always there are costs. But I have shown you forbidden magic and Mother Sun still rises.”

“We rule because men trust us,” said Gorm. “What will this do to their trust?”

“You rule because men fear you,” said Father Yarvi. “With weapons such as these their fear will be all the greater.”

Scaer gave a hiss. “This is evil, Father Yarvi.”

“I fear it is the lesser evil, Mother Scaer. Glorious victories make fine songs, but inglorious ones are no worse once the bards are done with them. Glorious defeats, meanwhile, are just defeats.”

“We need time to consider,” said Skara, holding out her palms as if to calm a pack of fighting dogs.

“Not too long.” Skifr darted out one hand, catching a dried-up leaf as it whirled past. “The sands slip through the glass and Bright Yilling marches ever closer. Will you do what you must to beat him? Or will you let him beat you?” She crushed the leaf as she turned away and, holding her hand high, let

the dust blow on the breeze. "If you ask me, my doves, that is no choice at all!"

"There'll be no peace," growled Thorn Bathu, hauling the chain over her shoulder. "Not while Bright Yilling and I both live. That I promise you!" And she turned to follow Skifr, the heels of Asborn's corpse leaving two grooves in the grass as she dragged the murdered man after her.

Gorm slowly stood, a heavy frown on his battle-worn face. "Let us have a great moot at sunrise tomorrow, then, where we will decide the future of our alliance. The future of the whole Shattered Sea, perhaps."

King Uthil was the next to rise. "We have much to discuss, Father Yarvi."

"We do, my king, but I must speak to Queen Skara first."

"Very well." Uthil twitched his naked sword up into the crook of his arm. "While I try to stop Thorn Bathu killing every Vansterman in the world searching for traitors. Send a bird to Queen Laithlin. Tell her to kiss my son from me." He turned away toward Bail's Point. "Tell her I fear I will be late to dinner."

Skara waited until King Uthil was gone and Mother Scaer had stalked away bitterly shaking her shaved head before she spoke. "You knew this moment would come." She carefully turned the pieces about until they fitted together in her mind. "That is why you wanted me to summon only the six of us here. So that this business of elf-relics could not leak out."

"Not everyone is as...considered as you, my queen." Flattery, flattery. She tried not to let it sway her. "It is wise to keep the circle tight. Especially if there truly is a traitor among us."

It all made fine sense, but Skara frowned even so. "I could tire of finding myself dancing to your tune, Father Yarvi."

"It is Grandmother Wexen's music we all dance to, and I have sworn to stop the piper. You have a great decision to make, my queen."

"One follows hard upon another."

"That is the cost of power." Yarvi stared down at the bloodstained grass, and for a moment he seemed to be struggling with some sickness of his own. "Forgive me. I just learned as good a man as I ever knew is dead. Sometimes it is hard...to pick the right thing."

"Sometimes there is no right thing." Skara tried to imagine what her grandfather would have done in her place. What advice Mother Kyre would have given her. But she had been taught no lessons for this. She was far out on uncharted seas, with a storm coming and no stars to steer by. "What should I do, Father Yarvi?"

"A wise man once told me that a king must win, the rest is dust. It is no different for a queen. Take Skifr's offer. Without something to tip the scales, the High King will sweep us all aside. Grandmother Wexen will take no pity on you. The people of Throvenland will not be spared. Bright Yilling will not thank you for your forbearance. Ask yourself what he would do in your place."

Skara could not stop herself from shuddering at that. "So I must become Bright Yilling?"

"Let Father Peace shed tears over the methods. Mother War smiles upon results."

"And when the war is over?" she whispered. "What kind of peace will we have won?"

"You want to be merciful. To stand in the light. I understand it. I admire it. But, my queen..." Father Yarvi stepped close, and held her eye, and spoke softly. "Only the victors can be merciful."

There was no choice at all. She had known it since Skifr worked her magic. Looking into Father Yarvi's face she knew that he had known it too. He had seen it from far off, and twitched their course toward it so gently she had thought she held the steering oar. But she knew also that as the High King's army drew closer, her borrowed power was slipping away. This might be her last vote. She had to win something for her grandfather, for her people, for Throvenland. For herself.

"I have a price." She looked toward the battlements of Bail's Point, black against the white sky. "You must convince King Uthil to fight Bright Yilling here."

Father Yarvi gave Skara a searching stare. As though he could dig out her intentions with his eyes. Perhaps he could. "He will be reluctant to fight so far from home. Gorm even more so."

"Then I will speak to Mother Scaer, and see what she can offer for a vote against you." Skara waved one hand toward the elf walls looming over her mother's howe. "There is no stronger fortress anywhere. If we hold it, Bright Yilling will have to come to us. Because of his pride. Because he cannot march past and leave us free behind him. We will fix the High King's men here, all in one place. We will be the shield on which Grandmother Wexen's strength will break. You will be free to find your weapons..." She tried not to let her revulsion show as she glanced toward the bloodied grass where Asborn had fallen. "When you return we can crush Bright Yilling's army in one throw."

Yarvi considered her. "There is wisdom in it, but warriors are rarely interested in wisdom."

"Warriors like polished metal and tales of glory and songs in which steel is the answer. I daresay you can sing the two kings one of those. Do you have a fine singing voice, Father Yarvi?"

He raised one brow. "As it happens."

"I will not abandon the fortress my father died for. I will not abandon the land my grandfather died for."

"Then I will fight for it alongside you, my queen." Yarvi glanced at Sister Owd. "Have you anything to add?"

"I speak when Queen Skara needs my advice." She gave the mildest of smiles. "I feel she handled you perfectly well without me."

Father Yarvi snorted, and strode off between the barrows toward King Uthil's camp.

"That is a deep-cunning man," murmured Sister Owd, coming to stand beside Skara. "A man who could make any course seem wise."

Skara looked sideways. "I need read no omens to sense the 'but' coming."

"His plan is desperate. He would step onto forbidden ground with this witch Skifr to guide the way." Sister Owd let her voice drop softer. "He would step into hell with a devil to point out his path, and he would have us follow. If they cannot find these elf-relics? We will be left penned up in Bail's Point surrounded by ten thousand warriors. If they can?" A whisper now, and a fearful one. "Will we risk another Breaking of the World?"

Skara thought of the burned farms, the burned villages, her grandfather's hall in ruins. "The world is already broken. Without these weapons the High King will win. Grandmother Wexen will win." She felt the sickness at the back of her throat, and swallowed it. "Bright Yilling will win."

Sister Owd's shoulders slumped. "I do not envy you your choice, my queen." She frowned off after Father Yarvi. "But I fear in destroying one monster you may make another."

Skara took one last look at her father's howe. "I used to think the world had heroes in it. But the world is full of monsters, Sister Owd." She turned away from the dead, back toward Bail's Point. "Perhaps the best we can hope for is to have the most terrible of them on our side."

Rin never did things by halves. Koll had always loved that about her.

The moment they arrived in Bail's Point she'd sought out the forge, found a space in the warren of cellars, laid out her tools in orderly rows and set to work. No shortage of work for a smith at a time like that, she told him.

She'd been down in the hot, coal-smelling darkness ever since, hammering, and sharpening, and riveting. He was starting to worry about her. Even more than he was worried about himself, and that didn't happen often.

He gently put his hand on hers to still it. "No one'll blame you if you stop."

She shook him off and carried on polishing. "If I stop I'll have to think. I don't want to think."

He reached for her again. "I know, but Rin—"

She shook him off again. "Stop fussing."

"I'm sorry."

"Stop saying sorry."

"All right, I'm not sorry."

She stopped to frown up. "Definitely stop joking."

He risked a grin. "I'm sorry."

She gave the faintest flicker of a smile, then it was gone. He loved making her smile, but he doubted he'd coax another from her today. She propped her fists on the bench, shoulders hunched around her ears, staring down at the scarred wood.

"I keep thinking of things I want to tell him. I open my mouth to talk. I turn to call him over." She bared her teeth as if she was about to cry, but she didn't. "He's gone. He's gone and he's never coming back. Every time I remember it, I can't believe it." She shook her head bitterly. "He always had a kind word and a kind deed for everyone. What good did it do him?"

"It did them good," said Koll. "They won't forget it. I won't forget it." Brand had saved his life, and asked one thing of him. That he do right by Rin. "I've stood where you stand now..." His cracked voice almost vanished altogether. "Losing someone."

"And I've stood where you stand now. Trying to comfort someone. When your mother died."

That was how things had started between them. Not in a great flash like lightning, but grown up slowly like a deep-rooted tree. Rin's arm around his shoulders when Father Yarvi said the words at his mother's funeral. Rin's hand in his when they howed her up. Rin's laughter when he came to sit in the forge, just to be near someone. She'd been there. The least he could do was the same for her. Even if he felt as if he were suffocating.

"What can I do?" he asked.

Rin set her face, took up her stone again. Gods, she was tough. She might only have been a year

older than he was but sometimes she seemed a dozen.

“Just be here.” She set to polishing again, sweat glistening on her face. “Just say you’ll be here.”

“I’ll be here,” he forced out, even though he was desperate to leave and breathe the free air and disgusted with himself because of it. “I promise...”

He heard a heavy tread on the stairs and was pitifully glad of the distraction. Until he saw who ducked under the low doorway. None other than Grom-gil-Gorm’s white-haired cupfiller, Raith, whose forehead had greeted Koll’s nose so rudely beneath the cedar in Thorlby.

“You,” he said, bunching his fists.

Raith winced. “Aye. Me. Sorry. How’s your nose?” Maybe that was meant to be an apology, but all Koll saw in it was his own hurt.

“Bit dented,” he snapped. “But less than your pride, I reckon.”

Raith shrugged. “That was a ruin already. Knew you were twice the climber I was or I’d never have had to butt you. Climbed right in here, didn’t you? Hell of a climb, that.”

The compliment gave Koll nothing to be angry about, and that made him angrier than ever. “What the hell do you want with me?” His voice broke at the end and went piping high, made him seem even more like a puppy picking a fight with a full-grown wolf.

“Nothing.” Raith glanced over at Rin, eyes lingering on the sweat beading her bare shoulders, and Koll didn’t like the way he looked at her at all. “Are you the blademaker from Sixth Street?”

Rin wiped her forehead on her apron and gave him a long stare of her own. Koll didn’t like the way she looked at him either, if it came to that. “Bright Yilling burned my forge and most of Sixth Street too. Guess I’m the blademaker downstairs at Bail’s Point now.”

“Bail’s Point is the better for it.” A far lighter tread on the steps and Queen Skara glided into the smithy. She looked even thinner than the last time Koll saw her, collarbones standing painfully stark, as out of place in the grime and sweat of the forge as a swan in a pigsty.

Koll raised his brows and Rin did the same. “My queen,” he murmured.

Skara’s big green eyes were fixed on Rin. “I am so sorry for the death of your brother. Every word I hear is that he was a good man.”

“Aye, well.” Rin frowned down at her bench. “It’s them Mother War takes first.”

“We can all pray Father Peace gets his turn soon,” said Koll.

Queen Skara glanced sideways, every bit as scornful of that pious effort as Thorn Bathu might have been. “As long as Bright Yilling is dead and rotting first.”

“I’m not much for prayers but I’ll pray for that,” said Rin.

“I hear you make swords. The best in the Shattered Sea.”

“I made King Uthil’s. I made Thorn Bathu’s.” Rin unwrapped the bundle on her bench to show the last one she’d worked on. The one she and Koll had worked on together. “Made this for a man died last week in Thorlby.”

“Did you carve the scabbard too?” Raith ran his thick fingertips down the wood. “It’s beautiful.”

“I work the metal,” said Rin. “Koll works the wood.”

Raith looked round at him. “You’ve a gift to be proud of, then. Wish I could make things.” He

winned as he made a fist. As if it hurt him to do it. “Always been better at breaking.”

“That takes less effort,” muttered Koll.

“I need a sword,” said Skara. “And mail that fits me.”

Rin gave the young queen a doubtful look up and down. She hardly looked strong enough to stand in armor, let alone fight in it. “Are you going into battle?”

Skara smiled. “Gods, no. But I want to look like I might.”

“Mother Scaer, what a pleasure.”

One glance at Gorm’s minister told Skara her visit would not be much of a pleasure for anyone. She was always a woman of edges and angles, but now her face was as sharp as a chisel, and just as humorless.

“I am sorry for the state of my chambers, we have had to start rather from scratch.” The furniture had been scrounged up from anywhere, the hangings were captured battle-flags, and Blue Jenner would not say where the goose-feather mattress had come from. But these were the rooms Skara had been born in, the three great arched windows looking out over the yard of her own fortress. She was going nowhere.

“Will you have some wine?” She turned to beckon her thrall, but Mother Scaer stopped her dead.

“I have not come for wine, my queen. I have come to discuss your vote for Father Yarvi.”

“I vote in the interests of Throvenland.”

“Will Throvenland benefit from a second Breaking of God?” Scaer’s voice was sharp with anger. “What if Father Yarvi cannot control this magic? Or if he can control it, what then? Do you think he will give it up?”

“Would it benefit Throvenland more to have the High King’s army ranging unchecked?” Skara felt herself getting shrill, struggled to keep calm and failed. “To have Bright Yilling burn what little is left unburned?”

Mother Scaer’s eyes were narrowed to deadly slits. “You do not want to do this, my queen.”

“It seems everyone but me knows what I want to do.” Skara raised a brow at Sister Owd. “Has one queen ever been blessed with the advice of so many ministers?”

“There at least I can lighten your burden,” said Scaer. “If you mean to join in Father Yarvi’s madness I must keep a close eye upon him. My king must have a minister at his side in the meantime.” She held out one long, tattooed arm, and beckoned with her crooked forefinger. “Playtime is over, Sister Owd. Get back to your place and look to my crows.”

Owd’s round face fell, and Skara had to make an effort to stop hers doing the same. She had not realized until that moment how much she had come to rely on her minister. How much she had come to trust her. To like her. “I am not minded to give her up—”

“Not minded?” Scaer snorted. “She is my apprentice, lent, not given, and in case you were too foolish to realize it, *my queen*, she has been telling me everything. Who you speak to and what you say. Your every request and desire. The size of each morning turd, for that matter. I understand that, like she that produces them, they are a little...*thin*.”

Owd was staring stricken at her feet, face turned redder than ever. Skara should have known. Perhaps she had. But it still cut her deep. She was speechless for a moment. But only a moment. Then she thought of how her grandfather might have answered, had he been treated with such scorn in his

own land, his own fortress, his own chambers.

As Sister Owd took a reluctant step toward the door Skara put out an arm to stop her.

“You misunderstand me! I am not minded to give her up because only this morning she swore her oath to me as Mother Kyre’s successor. Mother Owd is the new Minister of Throvenland, and her only place is beside me.”

She was pleased to see Scaer look suitably astonished at the news. The only person who looked more so was Owd herself.

She stared from her old mistress to her new, then back, eyes round as cups. But she was too sharp to stay off-balance long. “It is true.” Owd pushed her shoulders back and stretched out her neck. A posture Mother Kyre would have thoroughly approved of. “I have sworn to serve Queen Skara as her minister. I was going to tell you—”

“But you spoiled our surprise,” said Skara, smiling sweetly. A smile costs nothing, after all.

“Oh, there will be a price for this,” said Mother Scaer, nodding slowly. “Of that I assure you.”

Skara was out of patience. “Wake me when it’s time to pay. Now, are you walking from my chambers or shall I have Raith toss you from the window?”

Gorm’s minister gave one final hiss of disgust then stalked from the room, slamming the door behind her.

“Well.” Skara took a ragged breath and put one hand on her chest, trying to calm her hammering heart. “That was bracing.”

“My queen,” whispered Sister Owd, eyes turned mortified to the floor. “I know I do not deserve your forgiveness—”

“You cannot have it.” Skara put a calming hand on her shoulder. “Because you have done nothing wrong. I have always known you are loyal. But I have always known your loyalties were divided. Mother Scaer was your mistress. Now you have chosen me. For that I am grateful. Very grateful.” And Skara squeezed her shoulder firmly, stepping closer. “But your loyalties must be divided no longer.”

Sister Owd stared back, and dashed a little wetness from her lashes. “I swear a sun-oath and a moon-oath, my queen. I shall be a loyal minister to you and to Throvenland. I shall have a greater care for your body than for my own. I shall have a greater care for your interests than for my own. I shall tell your secrets to no one and keep no secret from you. I am yours. I swear it.”

“Thank you, Mother Owd.” Skara let go of her with a parting pat. “The gods know I have never been in sorer need of good advice.”

Raith wove between the campfires, around the tents, among the gathered warriors of Vansterland. He'd done the same a hundred times, before duels, before raids, before battles. This was where he was happiest. This was home to him. Or it should've been. Things weren't quite what they used to be.

The men were tired, and far from their fields and their families, and knew the odds they faced. Raith could see the doubt in their firelit faces. Could hear it in their voices, their laughter, their songs. Could smell their fear.

He wasn't the only one wandering through the camp. Death walked here too, marking out the doomed, and every man felt the chill of her passing.

He struck away toward a low hill with a single fire on top, strode up toward the summit, the chatter fading behind him. Rakki knelt on a blanket by the fire, Gorm's shield between his knees, frowning as he polished the bright rim with a rag. Gods, it was good to see him. Like a sight of home for a man a long time gone.

"Hey, hey, brother," said Raith.

"Hey, hey." When Rakki looked around it was like staring in a mirror. The magic mirror Horalld brought back from his voyages, that showed a man the better part of himself.

Sitting down beside him was as comfortable as slipping on a favorite pair of boots. Raith watched his brother work in silence for a moment, then looked down at his own empty hands. "Something's missing."

"If it's your brains, your looks or your sense of humor, I've got 'em all."

Raith snorted. "I was thinking of a sword for me to work on."

"Queen Skara's scabbard doesn't need a polish?"

Raith glanced across and saw that crooked little smile on Rakki's mouth. He snorted again. "I'm standing ready, but no royal invitation yet."

"I wouldn't hold your breath, brother. While you're waiting you could always eat." And Rakki nodded toward the old grease-blackened pot over the fire.

"Rabbit?" Raith closed his eyes and dragged in a long sniff. Took him back to happier times, sharing the same meals, and the same hopes, and the same master. "I do love rabbit."

"'Course. Know each other better'n anyone, don't we?"

"We do." Raith gave Rakki a sideways glance. "So what do you want?"

"I can't just cook for my brother?"

"'Course you can, but you never do. What do you want?"

Rakki put Gorm's great shield aside and fixed him with his eye. "I see you with the young Queen of Throvenland, and that broken-down pirate of hers, and that chubby excuse for a minister, and you look happy. You never look happy."

“They’re not so bad,” said Raith, frowning. “And we’re all on the same side, aren’t we?”

“Are we? Folk are starting to wonder whether you even want to come back.”

Rakki had always known just how to sting him. “I never chose a bit of this! All I’ve done is make the best of where I was put. I’d do anything to come back!”

The answer came from behind him. “That is good to hear.”

He was no helpless child any more but that voice still made him cringe like a puppy expecting a slap. He forced himself to turn, forced himself to look straight into Mother Scaer’s blue, blue eyes.

“I have missed you, Raith.” She squatted in front of him, bony wrists on her knees and her long hands dangling. “I think it high time you returned to your rightful place.”

Raith swallowed, his mouth suddenly dry. To fill his king’s cup, carry his king’s sword, fight at his brother’s side? To go back to being the fiercest, the hardest, the bloodiest? To go back to burning, and killing, and to one day be weighed down with a chain of pommels of his own? “That’s all I want,” he croaked out. “All I’ve ever wanted.”

“I know,” said the minister, that soothing tone that scared him more even than the harsh one. “I know.” And she reached out, and scrubbed at his hair like you might scrub a puppy between the ears. “There is just one service your king needs you to perform.”

Raith felt a cold shiver between his shoulders at her touch. “Name it.”

“I fear Father Yarvi has a ring through the young Queen Skara’s pretty nose. I fear he leads her where he pleases. I fear he will lead her to her doom, and drag all of us along in a stumbling procession behind.”

Raith glanced at his brother, but there was no help there. There rarely was. “She’s got her own mind, I reckon,” he muttered.

Mother Scaer gave a scornful snort. “Father Yarvi plans to break the most sacred laws of the Ministry, and bring elf-weapons out of Strokوم.”

“Elf-weapons?”

She leaned hissing toward him and Raith flinched back. “I have seen it! Blinded by his own arrogance, he plans to unleash the magic that broke God. I know you are not the clever one, Raith, but do you see what is at stake?”

“I thought no one can enter Strokوم and live—”

“The witch Skifr is here, and she can, and she will. If that little bitch gives Yarvi her vote.”

Raith licked his lips. “I could talk to her...”

Scaer darted out a hand and he couldn’t help cringing, but she only placed her cool palm ever so gently on his cheek. “Do you think I would be so cruel as to pit you in a battle of words against Father Yarvi? No, Raith, I think not. You are no talker.”

“Then...”

“You are a killer.” Her brow creased, like she was disappointed he hadn’t seen it right off. “I want you to kill her.”

Raith stared. What else could he do? He stared into Mother Scaer’s eyes, and felt cold all over. “No...” he whispered, but no word had ever been spoken so feebly. “Please...”

Pleading had never won anything from Mother Scaer. It only showed her his weakness.

“No?” Her hand clamped painful tight about his face. “Please?” He tried to pull away but there was no strength in him, and she dragged him so close their noses almost touched. “This is no request, boy,” she hissed, “this is your king’s command.”

“They’ll know I did it,” he whined, scrabbling for excuses like a dog for a buried bone.

“I have done the thinking for you.” Mother Scaer slid out a little vial between two long fingers, what looked like water in the bottom. “You were a king’s cupfiller. Slipping this into a queen’s cup can be no harder. One drop is all it will take. She will not suffer. She will fall asleep and never wake. Then there can be an end to this elf-madness. Perhaps even peace with the High King.”

“King Fynn thought he could make peace—”

“King Fynn did not know what to offer.”

Raith swallowed. “And you do?”

“I would start with Father Yarvi, in a box.” Mother Scaer let her head drop on one side. “Along with, perhaps, the southern half of Gettland? Everything north of Thorlby should be ours, though, don’t you agree? I feel confident Grandmother Wexen could be persuaded to listen to that argument...”

Mother Scaer took Raith’s limp wrist, and turned his hand over, and dropped the vial into his palm. Such a little thing. He thought of Skara’s words, then. *Why send an honest fool to do a clever liar’s job?*

“You sent me to her because I’m a killer,” he muttered.

“No, Raith.” Mother Scaer caught his face again, tilted it toward her. “I sent you because you are *loyal*. Now claim your reward.” She stood, seeming to tower over him. “This time tomorrow, you will be back where you belong. At the king’s side.” She turned away. “At your brother’s side.” And she was gone into the night.

Raith felt Rakki’s hand on his shoulder. “How many people have you killed, brother?”

“You know I’m not much at counting.”

“What’s one more, then?”

“There’s a difference between killing a man who’d just as soon kill you first and killing someone...” Someone who’s done you no harm. Someone who’s been kind to you. Someone you—

Rakki dragged him close by his shirt. “The only difference is there’s far more to gain now, and far more to lose! If you don’t do it...you’ll be on your own. We’ll both be on our own.”

“What happened to sailing off together down the wide Divine?”

“You told me to thank Mother War that we stand with the winners, and you were right! Let’s not pretend you’ve only killed warriors. How much have I gone along with for your sake? What about that woman at that farm, eh? What about her children—”

“I know what I’ve done!” The fury boiled up and Raith closed his aching fist tight around the vial and shook it in his brother’s face. “Did it for us, didn’t I?” He caught Rakki by the collar, made him stumble, knocking the pot off the fire and spilling stew across the grass.

“Please, brother.” Rakki held him by the shoulders, more hug than clinch. The more Raith hardened, the more he softened. Knew him better than anyone, didn’t he? “If we don’t look out for each other who will? Do this. For me. For us.”

Raith looked into his brother's eyes. Didn't seem to him they looked much alike, right then. He sucked in air, and slowly breathed it out, and all the fight went with it.

"I'll do it." He hung his head, staring at the little vial in his palm. How many people had he killed, after all? "I was trying to think of a good reason not to, but...you're the clever one." He closed his fist tight. "I'm the killer."

RIN WAS MOSTLY SILENT, lengths of wire held in her mouth as she frowned down at her work. Maybe it was having a girl her age around, or the excitement of the coming moot, but Skara talked for both of them. About her youth at Bail's Point and her few memories of her parents. About the Forest in Yaletoft, and how it burned, and how she hoped to rebuild it better. About Throvenland and her people, and how with the gods' help she'd deliver them from the tyranny of the High King, claim vengeance on Bright Yilling and protect the legacy of her murdered grandfather. Sister Owd, now Mother Owd and with a frown to match her station, nodded along approvingly.

Raith didn't. He would've loved to be part of that fine future, but he'd seen what life was. He hadn't been brought up in a fortress or a king's hall with slaves hanging on his every whim. He'd clawed himself up with no one but his brother beside him.

He put one hand to his shirt, felt the lump of the little vial under the cloth. He knew what he was. Knew what he had to do.

Then Skara smiled at him, that smile that made him feel like Mother Sun had picked him alone to shine upon. "How do you fight in this?" she said, shaking herself and making the mail rattle. "The weight of it!"

Raith's resolve melted like butter on a hearthstone. "You get used to it, my queen," he croaked.

She frowned at him. "Are you ill?"

"Me?" he stammered. "Why?"

"When did you learn manners? Gods, it's hot." She tugged at the collar of the mailshirt and the padded jacket underneath. She'd never looked more alive—flushed, eyes bright and the faintest sheen on her face. She snapped her fingers at her thrall. "Bring me some wine, would you?"

"I'll do it," said Raith, stepping quickly over to the jug.

"Might as well be served by the best." Skara nodded toward him, grinning at Rin. "He was a king's cupbearer."

"Was," muttered Raith. And would be again. If he could do this one thing.

He could hardly make out Skara's words over the thudding of his heart. Slowly, carefully, trying to make sure his shaking hands didn't give him away, he poured the wine. It looked like blood in the cup.

He'd wanted to be a warrior. A man who stood by his king and won glory on the battlefield. And what had he become? A man who burned farms. Who betrayed trust. Who poisoned women.

He told himself it had to be done. For his king. For his brother.

He could feel Mother Owd's eyes on his back as he took the sip the cupfiller takes to make sure the wine's safe for better lips than his. He heard her take a step toward him, then Skara said, "Mother

Owd! You knew Father Yarvi before he was a minister, didn't you?"

"I did, my queen, briefly. He could be ruthless even then..."

Raith heard the minister turn away, and without daring even to breathe he slipped Mother Scaer's vial from his shirt, eased the stopper out and let one drop fall into the cup. One drop was all it would take. He watched the ripples spread, and vanish, and tucked the vial away. His knees felt weak all of a sudden. He leaned on his fists.

He told himself there was no other way.

He took the cup in both hands and turned.

Skara was shaking her head as she watched Rin tucking the mail at her waist, folding it with quick fingers to fit her, fixing it with twisted wire.

"I swear, you're as nimble with steel as my old dressmaker was with silk."

"Blessed by She Who Strikes the Anvil, my queen," muttered Rin, stepping back to consider the results of her work. "Don't feel too blessed lately, though."

"Things will change. I know they will."

"You sound like my brother." Rin gave a sad little smile as she walked around behind Skara. "Reckon we're done. I'll unlace it and make the adjustments."

Skara drew herself up as Raith came close with the wine, setting one hand on the dagger at her belt, mail gleaming in the lamplight. "Well? Would I pass for a warrior?"

Gods, he could hardly speak. His knees were trembling as he knelt before her, the way he used to before Gorm, after every duel and battle. The way he would again. "If every shield-wall looked like that," he managed by some great effort to say, "you'd have no problem getting men to charge at the bastards." And he lifted the cup in both hands toward her.

He told himself he had no choice.

"I could get used to handsome men kneeling at my feet." She gave that laugh. That big, wild laugh she had. And she reached for the cup.

“Where is she?” muttered Father Yarvi, glancing toward the door again.

Koll wasn’t used to seeing his master nervous and it was making him nervous too. As if he wasn’t nervous enough already, what with the fate of the world to be decided and all.

“Maybe she’s dressing,” he whispered back. “Strikes me as the sort of person who’d take a long time dressing for this sort of thing.”

Father Yarvi turned to glare at him and Koll found himself wilting into his chair. “She strikes me also as the sort of person who would account for the time it takes to dress for this sort of thing.” He leaned closer. “Don’t you think?”

Koll cleared his throat, glancing toward the door again. “Where is she?”

Over on the other side of Bail’s Hall at Grom-gil-Gorm’s shoulder, Mother Scaer was beginning to look distinctly pleased with herself. It was as if she and Yarvi sat on a giant set of scales—one couldn’t fall without hoisting the other up.

“There is a war to be fought!” she called, and around her the warriors of Vansterland grumbled their annoyance. “Bright Yilling will not wait for the young queen, on that we can depend. We must choose our course soon or we will drift to disaster.”

“We are well aware of that, Mother Scaer,” grated out King Uthil, then leaned close to Father Yarvi. “Where is she?”

One half of the double doors creaked open a crack and Mother Owd slipped through, froze as all eyes turned to her, flustered as a duck who’d lost her ducklings.

“Well?” snapped Yarvi.

“Queen Skara...”

Gorm narrowed his eyes. “Yes?”

“Queen Skara...” Mother Owd leaned to the door to peer through, and stepped back with evident relief. “Is here.”

The doors were flung wide and Mother Sun burst into the gloom, every man left blinking stupidly as the Throvenlanders marched into the hall.

Queen Skara strode at the front, head high and with her hair loose like a dark cloud. The dawn struck fire from the red stone on her armring, from the jewels in her earring, from her glittering coat of mail, for she came in full battle-gear, a dagger at her side and a gilded helm under her arm. Raith walked behind her, white head bowed, the sword Rin had forged cradled in the scabbard Koll had carved, which looked quite a marvelous piece of work, it had to be said.

Rin had surpassed herself. Skara surely looked a warrior-queen, even if she was absurdly slight for the job and all that hair would’ve been a fatal encumbrance in a fight. With harness jingling she marched between the delegations of Vansterland and Gettland, deigning to look neither right nor left and with her warriors tramping after.

Mother Scaer's smile had vanished. Father Yarvi had pilfered it from her. Grom-gil-Gorm was staring at the young queen, scarred face slack. King Uthil raised his iron brows a fraction. Koll had never seen him look so astonished.

Mother Owd and Blue Jenner sat to either side of Queen Skara, but she ignored Bail's Chair, tossing her gilded helmet on the table and planting her iron-knuckled fists beside it, her warriors forming a crescent behind her. Raith went down on one knee, sliding the sword up his arm so he offered her the hilt.

They all knew Skara would never draw that sword. It was pure theater, almost ridiculous. Almost, but not quite. For looming over them on the wall was the painted image of Ashenleer victorious, dressed in mail with hair unbound and her sword-bearer kneeling at her side, and Koll looked from the queen of legend to the queen of now and found them uncannily alike.

Father Yarvi's smile grew wider. "Oh, that's nice."

Mother Scaer was less impressed. "You certainly like to make an entrance," she sneered.

"Forgive me," said Skara. "I was getting ready to *fight*!" She might have been a small woman but she had the voice of a hero. She barked the last word with as much violence as Thorn might have and even Mother Scaer flinched at it.

Koll leaned close to Father Yarvi. "I think she's arrived."

"MY ALLIES!" CALLED SKARA, voice ringing out in the silence, bright and confident as if she was born to be there. "My guests. Kings, ministers and warriors of Gettland and Vansterland!"

Raith risked a glance at those he'd always counted his friends. The Breaker of Swords himself had his eyes fixed on Skara, but Mother Scaer was staring straight at Raith with the most murderous look he'd ever seen on her, and he'd seen some deadly ones. Soryorn had a bitter twist of hatred to his lip. But it was Rakki's eye he could hardly bear to meet. No anger, just disappointment. The look of a man betrayed by the one he trusted most. Raith looked down at the floor, the breath crawling in his throat.

"We have a great decision to make today!" Skara was saying. "Whether to use forbidden weapons against the High King's army or to fall back before him."

Raith was hardly listening. He was thinking about last night. He'd knelt before her, ready to do it. Then he'd heard her laugh, and his fingers had betrayed him. The cup had dropped, and the poisoned wine had spattered across the floor, and Skara had passed it off with a joke about the quality of king's cup-fillers, and he'd lain outside her door staring into the darkness all night like the faithful hound he was.

Lain awake, thinking on how he'd doomed himself.

"I am the Queen of Throvenland!" called Skara. "The blood of Bail flows in my veins. Others might like to run from the High King, but I never will again. I have sworn vengeance against Bright Yilling and I mean to rip it from his carcass. I mean to scream defiance with my last breath! I mean to fight with every weapon." She glared across at Mother Scaer. "*Every* weapon. And I mean to fight here. I will not abandon Throvenland. I will not abandon Bail's Point."

All Raith ever wanted was to serve his king, to fight beside his brother, and he'd thrown it away,

and could never have it back. He was on his own, like Rakki said. Sword-bearer to a girl without the strength to even draw a sword.

“What say you, King Uthil?” she called.

“I say there cannot be a warrior here not humbled by your resolve, Queen Skara.” The Iron King smiled, a sight Raith had never thought to see. “Death waits for us all. I will be honored to face her at your side.”

Raith saw Skara swallow as she turned to the Vanstermen.

“What say you, King Gorm?”

—

THE WEIGHT OF THE mail was crushing her. The heat of it was baking her. Skara had to force herself to stand straight, stand proud, clamp the haughty challenge to her face. She was a queen, damn it. She was a queen, she was a queen, she was a queen...

“Humbled by your resolve?” snarled Mother Scaer. “There cannot be a warrior here not disgusted by your play-acting. As if you ever drew a sword, let alone swung one in anger! And now you would have us give our lives for your empty kingdom, your empty pride, your—”

“Enough,” said Gorm, softly. His dark eyes did not seem to have left Skara since she first entered the hall.

“But, my king—”

“Sit,” said the Breaker of Swords. Mother Scaer ground her teeth with fury, but she dropped down on her stool.

“You wish me to fight for your fortress,” said Gorm mildly, in his singsong voice. “To gamble with my life and the lives of my warriors far from home. To face the High King’s numberless army on the promise of elf-magic from a bald witch and a one-handed liar.” He gave an open, friendly smile. “Very well.”

“My king—” hissed Mother Scaer, but he raised his hand to quiet her, eyes still on Skara.

“I will fight for you. Every man of Vansterland will kill for you and die for you. I will be your shield, today, tomorrow and every day of my life. But I want something in return.”

It was silent as death in the hall. Skara swallowed. “Name your price, great king.”

“You.”

She felt sweat prickle under her borrowed mail. She felt her gorge rising, wanted nothing more than to spray the table with sick, but she doubted Mother Kyre would have considered that the proper response to a king’s proposal of marriage.

“For a long time I have been searching for a queen,” said the Breaker of Swords. “A woman my equal in cunning and courage. A woman who can make the coins in my treasury breed. A woman who can give me many children to be proud of.”

Skara found herself glancing at Raith, and he stared back, mouth hanging open, but had no more to offer than a sword she could barely lift.

Father Yarvi had turned pale. Plainly this was one development he had not foreseen. “Someone who can give you Throvenland,” he snapped.

Gorm's chain of dead men's pommels rattled faintly as he shrugged his great shoulders. "Someone who can join Throvenland to Vansterland and help guide both to glory. I want your hand, your blood and your wits, Queen Skara, and in return I offer you mine. I think it a fair trade."

"My queen—" hissed Mother Owd.

"You can't—" said Blue Jenner.

But it was Skara's turn to still her advisors with a gesture.

It was a shock, but a queen cannot allow a shock to last long. She was not a child any more.

With the Breaker of Swords beside her she might hold Bail's Point. She might claim vengeance for her grandfather. She might see Bright Yilling dead. With the key of Vansterland around her neck she might win security for her people, might rebuild Yaletoft, might forge a future for Throvenland.

She was sick of coaxing, wheedling, playing one rival off against another. She was tired of her title dangling by a thread. Skara was far from eager to share Grom-gil-Gorm's bed. But sharing his power, that was something else.

He might be more than twice her size. He might be more than twice her age. He might be scarred, fearsome, ruthless, and as far as it was possible to be from the husband she had dreamed of as a girl. But dreamers must wake. She reckoned it a match Mother Kyre would have approved of. The world is full of monsters, after all. Perhaps the best one can hope for is to have the most terrible on your side.

And it was hardly as if she had a choice. She made herself smile.

"I accept."

“Are you ready?” asked Father Yarvi, stacking books in a chest. Those favorite books of his, forbidden writings on elf-ruins and elf-relics. “We must leave on the next tide.”

“Entirely ready,” said Koll. Meaning he was packed. This was a voyage he’d never be ready for.

“Talk to Rulf. Make sure we have plenty of ale to shore up the crew’s courage. Even with a favorable wind it will be five days down the coast to Furfinge.”

“One cannot count on a favorable wind,” murmured Koll.

“No, indeed. Especially when we cross the straits to Strokom.”

Koll swallowed. He would have liked to put it off until the end of the world, but it would only make things worse, and he did that enough. “Father Yarvi...” Gods, he was a coward. “Perhaps...I should stay behind.”

The minister looked up. “What?”

“While you’re gone King Uthil might need—”

“He will not be negotiating a trade deal, spinning a coin trick or carving a chair. He will be fighting. Do you think King Uthil needs your advice on how to fight?”

“Well—”

“Mother War rules here.” Yarvi shook his head as he went back to his books. “Those of us who speak for Father Peace must find other ways to serve.”

Koll made another effort. “Honestly, I’m afraid.” A good liar weaves as much truth into the cloth as he can, after all, and there had never been a truer word spoken than that.

Father Yarvi frowned at him. “Like a warrior, a minister must master their fear. They must use it to sharpen their judgment, rather than let it become a fog that blinds them. Do you think I am not afraid? I am terrified. Always. But I do what must be done.”

“Who decides what must be done, though—”

“I do.” Father Yarvi slammed the lid of his chest and stepped close. “We have a great opportunity! A minister is a seeker of knowledge, and you more than most. I have never known a more curious mind. We have the chance to learn from the past!”

“To repeat the mistakes of the past?” Koll muttered, and instantly regretted it as Father Yarvi caught him by the shoulders.

“I thought you wanted to change the world? To stand at the shoulder of kings and guide the course of history? I’m offering you that chance!”

Gods, he did want that. Father Koll, feared and admired, never talked down to, never taken lightly, and certainly never butted in the face by some white-haired thug. He forced it away. “I’m grateful, Father Yarvi, but—”

“You made a promise to Rin.”

Koll blinked. “I...”

“You are not too hard a book to read, Koll.”

“I made a promise to Brand!” he blurted out. “She needs me!”

“I need you!” snapped Father Yarvi, gripping at his shoulders. His hand might have been withered, but it could still squeeze hard enough to make Koll squirm. “Gettland needs you!” He mastered himself, let his hands fall. “I understand, Koll, believe me, no one better. You want to do good, and stand in the light. But you are a man now. You know there are no easy answers.” Yarvi winced down at the floor, as if in pain. “When I brought you and your mother out of slavery I never expected anything in return—”

“Why bring it up so often, then?” snapped Koll.

Father Yarvi looked up. Surprised. Even a little hurt. Enough to give Koll a familiar surge of guilt. “Because I made Safrit a promise. To see you become the best man you could be. A man she could be proud of.”

A man who does good. A man who stands in the light. Koll hung his head. “I keep thinking about all the things I could have done differently. I keep thinking...about the offer Mother Adwyn made—”

Yarvi’s eyes went wide. “Tell me you did not speak of it to my mother!”

“I’ve told no one. But...if we had, perhaps she might have found a way to peace...”

Father Yarvi’s shoulders seemed to sag. “The price was too high,” he muttered. “You know that.”

“I know.”

“I could not risk fracturing our alliance. We had to have unity. You know that.”

“I know.”

“Grandmother Wexen cannot be trusted. You know that.”

“I know, but...”

“But Brand might be alive.” Father Yarvi looked far older than his years, all of a sudden. Old, and sick, and bent under a weight of guilt. “Do you suppose I do not have a thousand such thoughts every day? It is a minister’s place always to doubt, but always to seem certain. You cannot let yourself be paralyzed by what might be. Even less by what might have been.” He made a fist of his shriveled hand, mouth twisting as though he might hit himself with it. Then he let it fall. “You must try to pick the greater good. You must try to find the lesser evil. Then you must shoulder your regrets, and look forward.”

“I know.” Koll knew when he was beaten. He had known he was beaten before he opened his mouth. In the end, he had wanted to be beaten.

“I’ll come,” he said.

—

HE DIDN’T NEED TO tell her, which was just as well. He doubted he’d have had the courage.

Rin looked up at him, and that was all it took. She turned back to her work, jaw set tight.

“You’ve made your choice, then.”

“I wish I didn’t have to choose,” he muttered, guilty as a thief.

“But you do and you have.”

He would’ve preferred her to break down in tears, or come at him in a rage, or beg him to think again. He’d worked out a cowardly little plan to twist any of those back on her. But this chilly indifference he had no answer to.

Dribbling out “I’m sorry” was the feeble best he could manage. He wondered if his mother would’ve been proud of this, and didn’t much care for the answer.

“Don’t be. We’ve wasted enough time on each other. And I’ve only myself to blame. Brand warned me this would happen. He always said you were too full of your own hopes to hold anyone else’s.”

Gods, that hit like a punch in the balls. He opened his mouth to blurt it wasn’t fair, but how could he defend himself against a dead man’s judgment? Especially when he was busy proving it true.

“I always knew best.” Rin gave a hiss through gritted teeth. “Guess Brand gets the last laugh, eh?”

Koll took a shuffling step toward her. Maybe he couldn’t give her what she wanted, couldn’t be what she needed, but he could see her safe at least. He owed her that much. Owed Brand that much.

“Bright Yilling might be here in a few days,” he muttered. “And thousands of the High King’s warriors with him.”

Rin snorted. “You always did like to frame common knowledge as deep cunning. Used to find that endearing but, I have to say, it’s wearing thin.”

“You should go back to Thorlby—”

“For what? My brother’s dead and my home’s a burned-out shell.”

“It’s not safe here...”

“If we lose here how safe do you think Thorlby will be? I’d rather stay, do what I can to help. That’s what Brand would’ve done. That’s what he did do.” Gods, she had courage. So much more than he did. He loved that about her.

He found himself reaching for her shoulder. “Rin—”

She slapped his hand away, fist clenched as if she was about to hit him. He knew he deserved it. But she was in no mood to make things easy. She turned away in disgust. “Just go. You’ve made your choice, Brother Koll. Get on and live with it.”

What could he say to that? He needn’t have worried she’d cry. He was the one sniffing back tears as he skulked from the forge, feeling as far from the best man he could be as he ever had in his life.

—

THERE WAS A THIN rain falling on the elf-built quay of Bail’s Point. A spitting rain that drew a gloomy curtain across the world to match Koll’s mood, that clung like dew to the fur on Rulf’s shoulders where he stood frowning on the steering platform, that stuck the oarsmen’s hair to their hard-set faces as they loaded the stores. He wished Fror was with them, or Dosduvoi, but the crew Koll sailed with down the wide Divine were scattered to the winds. These were mostly men he hardly knew.

“Why the funeral face, my dove?” asked Skifr, worming one long finger out of her cloak to pick carefully at her nose. “You once asked me if you could see magic, did you not?”

“I did, and you told me I was young and rash, and that magic has terrible risks and terrible costs, and that I should pray to every god I knew of that I never saw it.”

“Huh.” She raised her brows at the result of her rummaging, then flicked it toward Gorm’s ships, and Uthil’s ships, and the captured ships of Bright Yilling rocking on the tide. “That was dour of me. Did you pray?”

“Not hard enough, it seems.” He glanced sideways at her. “You told me you knew enough magic to do much harm, but not enough to do much good.”

“This is a war. I came to do harm.”

“That isn’t very reassuring.”

“No.”

“Where did you learn magic?”

“I cannot say.”

“Cannot or will not?”

“Cannot and will not.”

Koll sighed. Every answer she gave seemed to leave him knowing less. “Can you really take us safely into Strokomp?”

“Take you into Strokomp? Yes. Safely?” She shrugged her shoulders.

“That isn’t very reassuring either.”

“No.”

“Will we find weapons there?”

“More than Mother War herself could make use of.”

“And if we use them...do we risk another Breaking of God?”

“As long as we break Grandmother Wexen, I will be satisfied.”

“That’s less reassuring than ever.”

Skifr stared out toward the gray sea. “If you suppose I came here to reassure you, you are very much mistaken.”

“Why is nothing ever easy?” Father Yarvi was frowning at the long ramp of pitted elf stone that led to the yard of the fortress. A lean figure was coming down it. A tall, shaven-headed figure with elf-bangles stacked up her tattooed arm. “Mother Scaer, what a surprise! I thought you wanted no part of this madness?”

The Minister of Vansterland turned her head and spat. “I want no one to have any part of this madness, but my king has chosen his path. My place is to make sure he walks it to victory. That is why I am coming with you.”

“Your company will be a delight.” Yarvi stepped close to her. “As long as you mean to help me. Stand in my way, you will regret it.”

“We understand each other, then,” said Mother Scaer, curling her lip.

“We always have.”

Koll sighed to himself. What better foundation for an alliance than mutual hatred and suspicion?

“To your oars, then!” called Rulf. “I’m getting no younger!”

It was a beautiful morning in late summer, Mother Sun making last night's rain glitter like jewels in the grass.

"This is our weakest point," said Raith.

It took no great warrior to see that. The northeastern corner of the fortress had been sliced away by the Breaking of God as if by a giant knife, and kings of the distant past had built a tower to plug the gap. It was an ill-made and neglected thing, its roof fallen in and birds swarming on the dropping-caked rafters, the man-built stretch of wall beside it bowing outward, shored up with crumbling bastions.

"Gudrun's Tower," murmured Skara.

"How did it get the name?" asked Mother Owd.

Skara had been greatly annoyed when Mother Kyre taught her the story but, like most of the minister's lessons, she found she remembered it well enough. "Princess Gudrun was the granddaughter of a king of Throvenland."

"A poor start," grunted Mother Owd. She tended to be grumpy in the mornings. "Still, I know a few of those who turned out well."

"Not this one. She fell in love with a stableboy."

"That was rash."

"I suppose love falls where it falls."

Mother Owd raised one brow. "Generally one can see it toppling from afar, and make an effort to get out of the way."

"Well, Gudrun didn't. Throvenland had three kings in those days, and her grandfather promised her to one of the others. She tried to run away, so he hung her lover from that tower and locked her in the top of it until she learned her duty."

Mother Owd scratched at the loose bun her hair was gathered into. "I'm having trouble seeing where the happy ending will come from."

"It won't. Gudrun flung herself from the battlements and died in the ditch."

"Let's hope we don't all end up following her example," said Raith.

"Killing ourselves for love?" asked Skara.

"Dying in the ditch."

Raith had seemed grim lately, even for him, and though she hardly needed to look further than the approach of ten thousand armed enemies to explain anyone's bad mood, Skara wondered if her deal with Gorm could be behind it. She was far from all delight at that herself, but there was nothing to be done. She gave a weary sigh. There were bigger things to worry about than anyone's feelings, even her own.

The sound of hoofbeats drew her eyes and she saw riders spilling from the gate. Two hundred or more horses in a fast-moving column, earth showering as they thundered past the men still digging the ditch deeper and across the muddied ground where Gorm and Uthil's camps had been pitched.

Blue Jenner was striding up the gentle rise toward them and Skara called out to him. "Whoever doesn't want to stay for what's coming?"

"Thorn Bathu," said Jenner, turning to watch the riders pass. "But only because Bright Yilling isn't getting here fast enough for her taste. She's taking two hundred of Gettland's bloodiest to hurt him however she can."

"That could be quite a lot of hurt," murmured Skara, watching the riders stream out of the long shadow of Bail's Point, through the deserted village and away to the north.

"We've no fodder for the horses in any case, my queen." Jenner stopped beside them, hands planted on his hips. "There isn't too much fodder for the men. Bright Yilling burned most of the farms within a hundred miles and picked clean most of the rest. Uthil and Gorm reckon only a thousand men can stay. Those with families to worry over and harvests to bring in will be taking ships north to Thorlby and beyond."

Skara blinked at that. "We'll be outnumbered ten to one."

"The longer the odds the greater the glory," muttered Raith. "Or so I've heard..."

"It'll be picked warriors who remain." Jenner tried as usual to plot an optimistic course. "And plenty to man the walls until Father Yarvi comes back. Four hundred Vanstermen, four hundred Gettlanders, a hundred smiths, cooks, servants. A hundred of ours."

"We have that many willing to stay?"

"There's five times that many willing to die for you, my queen, and I can pick a hundred who'll kill a few of the High King's men doing it."

"I'm humbled," said Skara, "truly. But you shouldn't be one of them. You've already done far more than—"

Blue Jenner snorted. "Oh, I'm staying and that deal's done. I've promised my crew a hell of a payoff when you beat the High King. If I don't deliver I'll look quite the fool. You should go, though."

Her turn to snort. "How can I expect others to risk their lives if I won't?"

"My queen," said Mother Owd, "your blood is worth more to Throvenland than—"

"I am a queen in my own fortress. The only person who can give me orders is the High King, and since I am in open rebellion against him, you are out of luck. I stay, and that is all."

"Then I stay too." Mother Owd sighed. "A healer's place is among the wounded. A minister's place is beside her queen."

Skara felt a rush of gratitude that almost brought tears to her eyes. They were hardly the advisors she would have picked but she would not have traded them for anyone now. "The gods may have taken my grandfather." Skara put one arm around Mother Owd, and one around Blue Jenner, and hugged them tight. "But they sent me two pillars to lean upon."

Mother Owd frowned down at herself. "I am a little squat for a pillar."

"You hold me up admirably even so. Now go." Skara pushed them off toward the fortress. "Pick me the hundred warriors who'll kick Bright Yilling hardest in his balls."

“We’ll pick ’em, my queen,” said Blue Jenner, grinning back. “And find ’em the heaviest boots we can.”

Skara was left standing on the sward with Raith. The birds continued to twitter. The calls of the laborers in the ditch floated toward them. The breeze fumbled across the grass. Skara did not look sideways. But she liked knowing he was there, at her shoulder.

“You can go,” she said. “If you want to.”

“I said I’d die for you. I meant it.”

He had some of that old swagger as she looked around, daring and dangerous and making no apologies, and she smiled to see it. “No need quite yet. I still need someone to threaten my visitors with.”

“I can do that too.” He smiled back. That hard and hungry smile that showed all his teeth. Long enough for it to be no accident. Long enough for that warm nervousness to set her skin tingling.

There was a part of her that would have liked to follow Gudrun’s example. To piss on the proper thing and go rolling in the hay with her stableboy. At least to know what it felt like.

But there was a much larger part of her that laughed at the notion. She was no romantic. She could not afford to be. She was a queen, and promised to Grom-gil-Gorm, the Breaker of Swords. A nation relied on her. However she had railed at and complained to and rebelled against Mother Kyre, after all, in the end she had always done her duty.

So instead of clutching hold of Raith like a drowning girl to a log and kissing him as if the secret of life were in his mouth, she swallowed, and frowned back at Gudrun’s Tower.

“It means a lot,” she said. “That you’d fight for me.”

“Not that much.” The sun had been covered by cloud for a moment and the jewels in the grass were turned to cold water. “Every good killer needs someone to kill for.”

Soryorn was a grand archer and cut a hero's figure against the bloody sunset, one foot up on the battlements at the top of Gudrun's Tower, back curved as he bent his great bow, the light from the flaming arrow shifting on his hard-set face.

"Burn it," said Gorm.

The eyes of the thousand picked warriors of Throvenland, Vansterland and Gettland followed the streak of fire as the shaft curved through the still evening and thudded into the deck of Bright Yilling's ship. Blue flame shot from it as the southern oil caught with a gentle *whomp*. In a moment the whole boat was alight in a blaze Raith could almost feel the heat of, even up here on the wall.

He glanced sideways and saw the warm glow light up Skara's smile. It had been her idea. A warrior's ship is his heart and his home, after all.

It had been a bastard of a job hauling it out of the harbor and on rollers up the long ramp to the yard. Raith's back was aching and his hands raw from his part in it. Queen Skara had given the gilded weathervane to Blue Jenner, King Gorm had torn out the silver fittings to melt down and make cups, King Uthil had taken the red-dyed sail to spare the women of Gettland some weaving. They'd pulled the mast down to fit it through the entrance passage and they'd gouged the fine carvings when it got wedged in the gateway, but they'd got it outside in the end.

Raith hoped Bright Yilling would appreciate the effort they'd made to welcome him to Bail's Point. But either way the defenders enjoyed the sight of his ship in flames. There was cheering, there was laughter, there were insults spat at Yilling's scouts, sitting calmly on horseback far out of bowshot. The high spirits were short-lived, though.

Grandmother Wexen's army was beginning to arrive.

They tramped down the road from the north in an orderly column, an iron snake of men with the High King's great standard at their head, the seven-rayed sun of the One God bobbing here and there above the crowd, and the marks of a hundred heroes and more hanging limp in the evening stillness. On they came, through the ruins of the village, more, and more, stretching away into the haze of distance.

"When do they stop coming?" Raith heard Skara whisper, one arm across her chest to nervously twist her armring.

"I'd been hoping the scouts got their numbers wrong," muttered Blue Jenner.

"Looks like they did," grunted Raith. "They guessed too few."

Up on the walls mocking laughs became grim smiles, then even grimmer frowns as that mighty snake of men split, flowed about the fortress like flooding water about an island, and the warriors of the Lowlands, and Inglefold, and Yutmark encircled Bail's Point from the cliffs in the east to the cliffs in the west.

No need for shows of defiance on their side. Their numbers spoke in thunder.

“Mother War spreads her wings over Bail’s Point,” murmured Owd.

A fleet of wagons came now, groaning with forage, and after them an endless crowd of families and thralls, servants and merchants, priests and profiteers, diggers and drovers with a lowing and bleating herd of sheep and cows that put any market Raith had ever seen to shame.

“A whole city on the move,” he muttered.

Darkness was closing in and the rearguard were only just arriving in a river of twinkling torches. Wild-looking men, their bone standards lit by flame, their bare chests marked with scars and smeared with war paint.

“Shends,” said Raith.

“Aren’t they sworn enemies of the High King?” asked Skara, her voice more shrill than usual.

Mother Owd’s mouth was a hard line. “Grandmother Wexen must have prevailed upon them to be our enemies instead.”

“I hear they eat their captives alive,” someone muttered.

Blue Jenner gave the man a glare. “Best not get captured.”

Raith worked his sweaty palm around the handle of his shield and glanced toward the harbor, where plenty of ships were still gathered behind the safety of the chains to carry the thousand defenders away...

He bit his tongue until he tasted blood and forced his eyes back to the host gathering outside their walls. He’d never felt scared of a fight before. Maybe it was that the odds had always been stacked on his side. Or maybe it was that he’d lost his place, and his family, and any hope of getting them back.

They say it’s men with nothing to lose you should fear. But it’s them who fear most.

“There,” said Skara, pointing out at the High King’s ranks.

Someone was walking toward the fortress. Swaggering the way you might to a friend’s hall rather than an enemy’s stronghold. A warrior in bright mail that caught the light of the burning ship and seemed to burn itself. A warrior with long hair breeze-stirred and an oddly soft, young, handsome face, who carried no shield and propped his left hand loose on his sword’s hilt.

“Bright Yilling,” growled Jenner, baring all the teeth he still had.

Yilling stopped well within bowshot, grinning up toward the crowded battlements, and called out high and clear. “I don’t suppose King Uthil’s up there?”

It was some comfort to hear Uthil’s voice just as harsh and careless whether he faced one enemy or ten thousand. “Are you this man they call Bright Yilling?”

Yilling gave an extravagant shrug. “Someone has to be.”

“The one who killed fifty men in the battle at Fornholt?” called Gorm, from the roof of Gudrun’s Tower.

“Couldn’t say. I was killing, not counting.”

“The one who cut the prow-beast from Prince Conmer’s ship with a single blow?” asked Uthil.

“It’s all in the wrist,” said Yilling.

“The one who murdered King Fynn and his defenseless minister?” barked Skara.

Yilling kept smiling. “Aye, that one. And you should have seen what I did to my dinner just now.” He happily patted his belly. “There was a slaughter!”

“You are smaller than I expected,” said Gorm.

“And you are larger than I dared hope.” Yilling wound a strand of his long hair around one finger. “Big men make a fine loud crash when I knock them down. I am dismayed to find the Iron King and the Breaker of Swords penned up like hogs in a sty. I felt sure you would be keen to test your swordwork against mine, steel to steel.”

“Patience, patience.” Gorm leaned on the battlements, his hands dangling. “Perhaps when we are better acquainted I can kill you.”

Uthil gave a stiff nod. “A good enmity, like a good friendship, takes time to mature. One does not start at the end of a story.”

Yilling smirked the wider. “Then I will bide my time and earnestly hope to kill you both in due course. It would be a shame to deny the skalds as fine a song as that would make.”

Gorm sighed. “The skalds will find something to sing about, either way.”

“Where is Thorn Bathu?” asked Yilling, glancing about as though she might be hiding in the ditch. “I’ve killed some women but never one of her fame.”

“No doubt she will introduce herself presently,” said Uthil.

“No doubt. It is the fate of every strong warrior to one day cross the path of a stronger. That is our great blessing and our great curse.”

Uthil nodded again. “Death waits for us all.”

“She does!” Yilling spread his arms wide, fingers working. “Long have I yearned to embrace my mistress, but I have yet to find a warrior skillful enough to introduce us.” He turned to the blazing ship. “You burned my boat?”

“A gracious host gives guests a place at the fire,” called Gorm, and a gale of mocking laughter ran along the battlements. Raith forced up a jagged chuckle of his own, even though it took a hero’s effort.

Yilling only shrugged, though. “Bit of a waste. It was a fine ship.”

“We have more ships than we know what to do with since we captured all of yours,” growled Gorm.

“And you have so few men to put in them, after all,” said Yilling, dampening the laughter again. He sighed at the flames. “I carved the prow-beast myself. Still, what’s burned is burned, say I, and cannot be unburned.”

Skara clutched at the battlements. “You’ve burned half of Throvenland to no purpose!”

“Ah! You must be the young Skara queen of the few unburned bits.” Yilling pushed out his plump lips and squinted up. “Make me your villain if you please, my queen, blame me for all your woes, but I have broken no oaths, and have a noble purpose in my burning. To make you kneel before the High King. That...and fire is pretty.”

“It takes a moment to burn what takes a lifetime to build!”

“That’s what makes it pretty. You’ll be kneeling to the High King soon enough, either way.”

“Never,” she snarled.

Yilling wagged a finger. “Everyone says that till the tendons in their legs are cut. Then, believe me,

they go down quick enough.”

“Just words, my queen,” said Blue Jenner, easing Skara back from the parapet. But if words were weapons, Raith felt Yilling had the best of that bout.

“Are you just going to stand and blather?” Gorm stretched his arms wide and gave a showy yawn. “Or have a go at our walls? Even little men make a fine loud crash when I knock them down from this height, and I fancy some exercise.”

“Ooh, that’s a worthy question!” Yilling peered up at the bruising sky, and then back toward his men, busy surrounding Bail’s Point in an ever-thickening ring of sharpened steel. “I find myself in two minds...let’s toss for it and let Death decide, eh, Queen Skara?”

Skara’s pale face twitched, and she gripped tight to Jenner’s arm.

“Heads we come for you, tails we stay!” And Yilling flicked a coin high into the air, flickering orange with the light of his burning ship, and let it fall in the grass, hands on hips as he peered down.

“Well?” called Gorm. “Heads or tails?”

Yilling gave a burst of high laughter. “I’m not sure, it rolled away! So it goes sometimes, eh, Breaker of Swords?”

“Aye,” grunted Gorm, somewhat annoyed. “So it goes.”

“Let’s leave it till tomorrow. I’ve a feeling you’ll still be here!”

The High King’s champion turned, the smile still on his soft, smooth face, and sauntered back toward his lines. At twice bowshot from the walls they’d started hammering stakes into the ground.

A circle of thorns, facing in.

THE FORBIDDEN CITY

No fevered imagining, no nighttime foreboding, no madman's nightmare could have come close to the reality of Strokom.

The *South Wind* crawled across a vast circle of still water. A secret sea miles across, ringed by islands, some mere splinters of rock, some stretching out of sight, all sprouting with buildings. With torn cubes and broken towers and twisted fingers of crumbling elf-stone and still-shining elf-glass. More jugged half-drowned from the dark waters. Thousands upon thousands upon thousands of empty windows glowered down and Koll tried to reckon up how many elves might have lived and died in this colossal wreck, but could not find the numbers to begin.

"Quite a sight," murmured Father Yarvi in the greatest understatement ever uttered.

All was silent. No birds circled overhead. No fish flickered in their wake. Only the creaking of the rowlocks and the muttered prayers of the crew. Long-tested oarsmen missed their strokes and tangled their oars with each other for gazing about in awestruck horror, and Koll didn't doubt he was the most awestruck and horrified of the whole crowd.

The gods knew, he'd never laid claim to being a brave man. But it seemed cowardice could land you in more trouble than courage.

"She Who Sings the Wind is angry," murmured Mother Scaer as she peered up at the tortured sky, a giant spiral of bruised purples and wounded reds and midnight blacks where no star would ever show. A weight of cloud to crush the world.

"Here the wind is just the wind." Skifr took off the tangle of holy signs, talismans, blessed medallions and lucky teeth she always wore and tossed them aside. "Here there are no gods."

Koll far preferred the notion of angry gods to the notion of none at all. "What do you mean?"

Skifr stood tall by the prow and spread her arms, her ragged cloak flapping as if she were some huge, unnatural bird, some madman's prow-beast pointing the way to doom.

"This is Strokom!" she shrieked. "Greatest ruin of the elves! You can cease your prayers, for here even the gods fear to tread!"

"I'm not sure you're helping," growled Father Yarvi.

The crew gazed up at her, some hunching as though they could vanish into their own shoulders. Tough and desperate warriors, every one, but there was no battle, no hardship, no loss that could prepare a man for this.

"We shouldn't be here," grunted one old oarsman with a squinting eye.

"This place is cursed," said another. "Folk who tread here sicken and die."

Father Yarvi stepped in front of Skifr, as calm as a man at his own firepit. "One stroke at a time, my friends! I understand your fears but they are empty! The money-boxes Queen Laithlin will give you when you return, on the other hand, will be brimming full. The elves are thousands of years gone, and we have the Walker in the Ruins to show us the safe path. There is no danger. Trust me. Have I ever

steered you wrong?" The warnings withered to grumbles, but even the promise of riches couldn't coax out a single smile.

"There!" called Skifr, pointing toward a set of slanted steps rising from the water, big enough to have been made for the feet of giants. "Put us ashore."

Rulf called for slow strokes, and leaned upon the steering oar, and brought them smoothly in, gravel grating against the keel. "How can the waters be so calm?" Koll heard him mutter.

"Because all things here are dead," said Skifr. "Even the waters." And she sprang across to the steps.

As Father Yarvi put one hand on the rail, Mother Scaer caught his withered wrist. "It is not too late to give up on this madness. One foot on this cursed ground and we break the most sacred law of the Ministry."

Yarvi twisted free. "Any law that cannot bend in a storm is destined to be broken." And he leapt down.

Koll took a deep breath and held it as he vaulted over the side. He was much relieved not to be instantly struck down when his boots hit the stone. It seemed, in fact, just ground like any other. Ahead, in the shadowy valleys between the mountainous buildings nothing moved, except maybe some loose panel or dangling cable shifting in the ceaseless wind.

"No moss," he said, squatting at the water's edge. "No weed, no barnacle."

"Nothing grows in these seas but dreams," said Skifr. She fished something from inside her cloak of rags. A strange little bottle, and when she tipped it out five things lay on her pink palm. They looked like grubby beans, one half white, the other red, and peering closely Koll could see a faded inscription written upon each in tiny letters. Elf-letters, it hardly needed to be said, and Koll was about to make a holy sign over his chest when he remembered the gods were elsewhere, and settled for pressing gently at the weights under his shirt. That was some small comfort.

"Each of us must eat a bean," said Skifr, and tossing her head back flicked one into her mouth and swallowed it.

Mother Scaer frowned down at them with even more than her usual scorn. "What if I do not?"

Skifr shrugged. "I have never been foolish enough to refuse my teachers' solemn instruction always to eat one when I pass through elf-ruins."

"This could be poison."

Skifr leaned close. "If I wanted to kill you I would simply cut your throat and give your corpse to Mother Sea. Believe me when I say I have often considered it. Perhaps there is poison all around us, and this is the cure?"

Father Yarvi snatched his from Skifr's palm and swallowed it. "Stop moaning and eat the bean," he said, frowning off inland. "We have chosen our path and it winds long ahead of us. Keep the men calm while we are gone, Rulf."

The old helmsman finished tying off the prow-rope to a great boulder and swallowed his bean. "Calm might be too much to ask."

"Then just keep them *here*," said Skifr, thrusting her palm and the thing upon it toward Koll. "We will hope to be back within five days."

“Five days out there?” asked Koll, the bean frozen halfway to his mouth.

“If we are lucky. These ruins go on for miles and the ways are not easy to find.”

“How do you know them?” asked Scaer.

Skifr let her head drop on one side. “How does anyone know anything? By listening to those who went before. By following in their footsteps. Then, in time, by walking your own path.”

Scaer’s lip wrinkled. “Is there more to you than smoke and riddles, witch?”

“Perhaps, when the time is right, I will show you more. There is nothing to fear. Nothing but Death, anyway.” She leaned close to Mother Scaer, and whispered. “And is she not always at your shoulder?”

The bean was uncomfortable sliding down Koll’s throat, but it tasted of nothing and left him feeling no different. Plainly it was no cure for soreness, guilt, and a crushing sense of doom.

“What about the rest of the crew?” he whispered, frowning back toward the ship.

Skifr shrugged. “I have only five beans,” and she turned toward the ruins with the ministers of Gettland and Vansterland at her heels.

Gods, Koll wished now he’d stayed with Rin. All the things he loved about her came up in a needy surge. He felt then he’d rather have faced ten of the High King’s armies by her side than walked into the cursed silence of Strokom.

But, as Brand always used to say, you’ll buy nothing with wishes.

Koll shouldered his pack, and followed the others.

Men lay on the floor, spitting and writhing. They begged for help and muttered for their mothers. They swore through gritted teeth, and snarled, and screamed, and bled.

Gods, a man held a lot of blood. Skara could hardly believe how much.

A prayer-weaver stood in the corner, droning out entreaties to He Who Knits the Wound and wafting about the sweet-smelling smoke from a cup of smoldering bark. Even so there was a suffocating stink, of sweat and piss and all the secrets that a body holds and Skara had to press one hand over her mouth, over her nose, over her eyes almost, staring between her fingers.

Mother Owd was not a tall woman but she seemed a towering presence now, less like a peach than the deep-rooted tree that bore them. Her forehead was furrowed, stray hairs stuck with sweat to her clenched jaw, sleeves rolled up to show strong muscles working in her red-stained forearms. The man she was tending to arched his back as she probed at the wound in his thigh, then started to thrash and squeal.

“Someone hold him!” she growled. Rin brushed past Skara, caught the man’s wrist and pressed him roughly down while Mother Owd plucked a bone needle from her loose bun, stuck it in her teeth so she could thread it, and began to sew, the man snorting and bellowing and spraying spit.

Skara remembered Mother Kyre naming the organs, describing their purpose and their patron god. *A princess should know how people work*, she had said. But you can know a man is full of guts and still find the sight of them a most profound shock.

“They came with ladders,” Blue Jenner was saying. “And bravely enough. Not a task I’d fancy. Reckon Bright Yilling promised good ring-money to any man could scale the walls.”

“Not many did,” said Raith.

Skara watched flies flit about a heap of bloody bandages. “Enough to cause this.”

“This?” She hardly knew how Jenner could chuckle now. “You should see what we did to them! If this is the worst we suffer before Father Yarvi gets back I’ll count us lucky indeed.” Skara must have looked horrified, because he faltered as he caught her eye. “Well...not these boys, maybe...”

“He was testing us.” Raith’s face was pale and his cheek scraped with grazes. Skara did not want to know how he got them. “Feeling out where we’re weak.”

“Well it’s a test we passed,” said Jenner. “This time, anyway. We’d best get back to the walls, my queen. Bright Yilling ain’t a fellow to give up at the first stumble.”

By then they were hauling another man up onto Mother Owd’s table while the minister rubbed her hands clean in a bowl of thrice-blessed water already pink with blood. He was a big Gettlander not much older than Skara, the only sign of a wound a dark patch on his mail.

Owd had a rattling set of little knives strung on a cord around her neck, and she used one now to slit the thongs that held his armor, then Rin dragged it and the padding underneath up to show a little slit in his belly. Mother Owd bent over it, pressed at it, watched blood leak out. He squirmed and his

mouth opened but he made only a breathy gasp, his soft face shuddering. Mother Owd sniffed at the wound, muttered a curse, and stood.

“There’s nothing I can do. Someone sing him a prayer.”

Skara stared. That easily, a man condemned to death. But those are the choices a healer must make. Who can be saved. Who is already meat. Mother Owd had moved on and Skara forced herself up beside the dying man on trembling legs, her stomach in her mouth. Forced herself to take his hand.

“What is your name?” she asked him.

His whisper was hardly more than a breath. “Sordaf.”

She tried to sing a prayer to Father Peace to guide him to an easy rest. A prayer she remembered Mother Kyre singing when she was small, after her father died, but her throat would hardly make the words. She had heard of men dying well in battle. She could no longer imagine what that meant.

The wounded man’s bulging eyes were fixed on her. Or fixed beyond her. On his family, maybe. On things left undone and unsaid. On the darkness beyond the Last Door.

“What can I do?” she whispered, clutching at his hand as hard as he clutched at hers.

He tried to make words but they came out only squelches, blood speckling his lips.

“Someone get some water!” she shrieked.

“No need, my queen.” Rin gently pried Skara’s gripping fingers from his. “He’s gone.” And Skara realized his hand was slack.

She stood.

She felt dizzy. Hot and prickly all over.

Someone was screaming. Hoarse, strange, bubbling screams, and in between she heard the burbling of the prayer-weaver, burbling, burbling, begging for help, begging for mercy.

She tottered to the doorway, nearly fell, burst into the yard, was sick, nearly fell in her sick, clawed her dress out of the way as she was sick again, wiped the long string of bile from her mouth and leaned against the wall, shaking.

“Are you all right, my queen?” Mother Owd stood wiping her hands on a cloth.

“I’ve always had a weak stomach—” Skara coughed, retched again, but all that came up was bitter spit.

“We all have to keep our fears somewhere. Especially if we cannot afford to let them show. I think you hide yours in your stomach, my queen.” Owd put a gentle hand on Skara’s shoulder. “As good a place as any.”

Skara looked toward the doorway, the moans of the wounded coming faint from beyond. “Did I make this happen?” she whispered.

“A queen must make hard choices. But also bear the results with dignity. The faster you run from the past, the faster it catches you. All you can do is turn to face it. Embrace it. Try and meet the future wiser for it.” And the minister unscrewed the cap from a flask and offered it to Skara. “Your warriors look to you for an example. You don’t have to fight to show them courage.”

“I don’t feel like a queen,” muttered Skara. She took a sip and winced as she felt the spirits burn all the way down her sore throat. “I feel like a coward.”

“Then act as if you’re brave. No one ever feels ready. No one ever feels grown up. Do the things a

great queen would do. Then you are one, however you feel.”

Skara stood tall, and pushed her shoulders back. “You are a wise woman and a great minister, Mother Owd.”

“I am neither one.” The minister leaned close, rolling her sleeves up a little further. “But I have become quite good at pretending to be both. Do you need to be sick again?”

Skara shook her head, took another burning sip from the flask and handed it back, watched Owd take a lengthy swig of her own. “I hear I have the blood of Bail in my veins—”

“Forget the blood of Bail.” Owd gripped Skara’s arm. “Your own is good enough for anyone.”

Skara took a shuddering breath. Then she followed her minister back into the darkness.

SPROUTED A CONSCIENCE

Raith stood on the man-built stretch of wall near Gudrun's Tower, staring across the scarred, trampled, arrow-prickled turf toward the stakes that marked the High King's lines.

He'd hardly slept. Dozed outside Skara's door. Dreamed again of that woman and her children, and started up in a chill sweat with his hand on his dagger. Nothing but silence.

Five days since the siege began and every day they'd come at the walls. Come with ladders, and wicker screens to guard them from the shower of arrows, the hail of stones. Come bravely, with their fiercest faces and their fiercest prayers, and bravely been beaten back. They hadn't killed many of the thousand defenders but they'd made their mark even so. Every warrior in Bail's Point was pink-eyed from sleeplessness, gray-faced from fear. Facing Death for a wild moment is one thing. Her cold breath on your neck day in and day out is more than men were made to bear.

Great humps of fresh-turned earth had been thrown up just out of bowshot. Barrows for the High King's dead. They were still digging now. Raith could hear the scraping of distant shovels, some priest's song warbled in the southerner's tongue to the southerner's One God. He lifted his chin, winced as he scratched at his neck with the backs of his fingernails. A warrior should rejoice in the corpses of his enemies, but Raith had no rejoicing left in him.

"Beard bothering you?" Blue Jenner strolled up yawning, smoothing down his few wild strands of hair and leaving them wilder than before.

"Itchy. Strange, how little things still find a way to niggle at you, even in the midst of all this."

"Life's a queue of small irritations with the Last Door at the end. You could just shave."

Raith kept scratching. "Always pictured myself dying with a beard. Like most things long anticipated, turns out rather a disappointment."

"A beard's just a beard," said Jenner, scratching at his own. "Keeps your face warm in a snowstorm and catches food from time to time, but I knew a man grew his long and got it caught in his horse's bridle. Dragged through a hedge and broke his neck."

"Killed by his own beard? That's embarrassing."

"The dead feel no shame."

"The dead feel no anything," said Raith. "No coming back through the Last Door, is there?"

"Maybe not. But we always leave a bit of ourselves on this side."

"Eh?" muttered Raith, not caring much for that notion.

"Our ghosts stick in the memories of those that knew us. Those that loved us, hated us."

Raith thought of that woman's face, lit by flames, tears glistening, still so clear after all this time, and he worked his fingers and felt the old ache there. "Those that killed us."

"Aye." Blue Jenner's eyes were fixed far off. On his own tally of dead folk, maybe. "Them most of all. You all right?"

“Broke my hand once. Never quite healed.”

“Nothing ever quite heals.” Blue Jenner sniffed, hawked noisily, worked his mouth and sent spittle spinning over the walls. “Seems Thorn Bathu introduced herself in the night.”

“Aye,” said Raith. There was a charred scar through one side of Bright Yilling’s camp, and by the faint smell of burning straw it seemed she’d done for a good deal of his fodder. “Reckon it was an even more painful experience than my first meeting with her.”

“A good friend to have, that girl, and a bad, bad enemy.” Jenner chuckled. “Liked her since I first ran into her out on the Denied.”

“You’ve been down the Denied?” asked Raith.

“Three times.”

“What’s it like?”

“It’s very much like a big river.”

Raith was looking past Blue Jenner toward the crumbling doorway in the side of Gudrun’s Tower. Rakki had just stepped out of it, his white hair ruffled by the breeze as he frowned toward Yilling’s great gravedigging.

Jenner raised one gray brow. “Anything I can do?”

“Some things you have to do alone.” And Raith patted the old raider on the shoulder as he walked past.

“Brother.”

Rakki didn’t look at him, but a muscle at his temple twitched. “Am I?”

“If you’re not you look surprisingly like me.”

Rakki didn’t smile. “You should go.”

“Why?” But even as he said it Raith felt the great presence, and turned reluctantly to find the Breaker of Swords stooping through the doorway and into the dawn, Soryorn at his shoulder.

“Look who comes strolling,” sang Gorm.

Soryorn carefully adjusted his garnet-studded thrall-collar. “It is Raith.” He’d always been a man of few words and those the obvious.

Gorm stood with eyes closed, listening to the distant songs of the One God priests. “Can there be more soothing music of a morning than an enemy’s prayers for his dead?”

“A harp?” said Raith. “I like a harp.”

Gorm opened his eyes. “Do you truly think jokes will mend what you have broken?”

“Can’t hurt, my king. I wanted to congratulate you on your betrothal.” Though few betrothals could’ve delighted him less. “Skara will be the envy of the world as a queen, and she brings all of Throvenland for a dowry—”

“Great prizes indeed.” Gorm raised an arm and swept it toward the warriors that encircled them on every side. “But there is the small matter of defeating the High King before I claim them. Your disloyalty has forced me to gamble everything on Father Yarvi’s cunning, rather than bartering a peace with Grandmother Wexen, as I and Mother Scaer had planned.”

Raith glanced at Rakki, but his eyes were on the ground. “I didn’t think—”

“I do not keep dogs to think. I keep them to obey. I have no use for a cur who does not come when he is whistled for. Who does not bite who I tell him to bite. There is no place in my household for such a wretched thing as that. I warned you that I saw a grain of mercy in you. I warned you it might crush you. Now it has.” Gorm shook his head as he turned away. “All those eager boys who would have killed a hundred times for your place, and I chose you.”

“Disappointing,” said Soryorn, then with a parting sneer he followed his master down the walkway.

Raith stood there in silence. There’d been a time he admired Grom-gil-Gorm beyond all other men. His strength. His ruthlessness. He used to dream of being like him. “Hard to believe I ever looked up to that bastard.”

“There’s one difference between us,” muttered Rakki. “I’ve always hated him. Here’s another, though. I know I still need him. What’s your plan now?”

“Can’t say I’ve been working to a plan.” Raith frowned at his brother. “Ain’t easy, killing someone who’s done you no harm.”

“No one said it was easy.”

“Well, it’s easier if you’re not the one has to do it. Seems it’s always you that wants the hard thing done,” snapped Raith, trying to keep his voice down, and his fists down too, “but it’s me has to do it!”

“Well, you can’t help me now, can you?” Rakki stabbed toward Bail’s Hall with one finger. “Since you chose that little bitch over your own—”

“Don’t talk about her that way!” snarled Raith, bunching his fists. “All I chose was not to kill her!”

“And now look where we are. Some time to sprout a conscience.” Rakki looked back to the graves. “I’ll pray for you, brother.”

Raith snorted. “Those folk on the border, I reckon they prayed when we came in the night. I reckon they prayed hard as anyone can.”

“So?”

“Their prayers didn’t save them from me, did it? Why would yours save me from some other bastard?” And Raith stalked off down the walls, back to Blue Jenner.

“Problem?” asked the old raider.

“Hatful of ’em.”

“Well, family’s family. Daresay your brother will come around.”

“He might. I doubt the Breaker of Swords will be so giving.”

“He doesn’t strike me as a giver.”

“I’m done with him.” Raith spat over the walls. “I’m done with me too, the way I was.”

“Did you like what you were?”

“Plenty at the time. Now it seems I was more than a bit of a bastard.” That woman’s face wouldn’t leave him alone, and he swallowed and looked down at the old stones under his feet. “How does a man know what’s right to do?”

Jenner puffed out his cheeks. “I’ve spent half my life doing the wrong thing. Most of the rest trying to work out the least wrong thing. The few times I’ve done the right thing it’s mostly been by accident.”

“And you’re about the best man I know.”

Blue Jenner’s eyebrows shot up. “I thank you for the compliment. And I pity you.”

“So do I, old man. So do I.” Raith watched the little figures moving in Bright Yilling’s camp. Men crawling from their beds, gathered about their fires, picking at their breakfasts, maybe somewhere an old man and a young, looking up to where they stood on the walls and talking about nothing. “Reckon they’ll come again today?”

“Aye, and that concerns me somewhat.”

“They’ll never get over these walls with ladders. Not ever.”

“No, and Yilling must know it. So why waste his strength trying?”

“Keep us nervous. Keep us worried. It’s a siege, isn’t it? He wants to get in somehow.”

“And in such a way as will burnish his fame.” Jenner nodded out toward the graves. “After a battle, do you dig big howes for every man?”

“Most of ’em we’d burn in a heap, but these One God–worshippers got odd ways with their dead.”

“Why so close to our walls, though? You hide your hurts from an enemy. You don’t shove your losses under his nose, even if you can afford them.”

Raith reached up and rubbed at that old notch out of his ear. “I’m taking it you’ve got some clever explanation?”

“You’re getting to know and admire me, I see.” Jenner pushed his chin forward to scratch at his neck. “It had occurred to me Yilling might be ordering these mad attacks just so he’s got bodies to bury.”

“He’s what?”

“Worships Death, don’t he? And he’s got men to spare.”

“Why kill men just to bury them?”

“So we’d think that’s all he’s doing. But I don’t reckon Bright Yilling’s digging graves all night, just out of bowshot from where we’re weakest.”

Raith stared at him a moment, and then out toward those brown humps, and felt a cold shiver up his back. “They’re digging under the walls.”

For a boy who was reluctantly starting to consider himself a man, Koll had seen a few cities. Stern Vulsgard in spring and sprawling Kalyiv in summer, majestic Skekenhouse in its elf-walls and beautiful Yaletoft before they burned it. He'd made the long journey down the winding Divine, over the tall hauls and across the open steppe, finally to gape in wonder at the First of Cities, greatest settlement of men.

Beside the elf-ruins of Strokomm they were all pinpricks.

He followed Skifr and the two ministers down black roads as wide as the market square in Thorlby, bored into the ground in echoing tunnels or stacked one upon the other on mighty pillars of stone, tangled up into giant madman's knots while broken eyes of glass peered sadly down on the ruin. In silence they walked, each of them alone with their own worries. For the world, for those they knew, for themselves. Nothing lived. No plant, no bird, no crawling insect. There was only silence and slow decay. All around them, for mile upon mile, the impossible achievements of the past crumbled into dust.

"What was this place like when the elves lived?" whispered Koll.

"Unimaginable in its scale and its light and its noise," said Skifr, leading the way with her head high, "in its planned confusion and its frenzied competition. All thousands of years silent."

She let her fingertips trail along a crooked rail then lifted them, peered at the gray dust that coated them, tasted it, rubbed it against her thumb, frowned off down the cracked and buckled roadway.

"What do you see?" asked Koll.

Skifr raised one burned brow at him. "Only dust. There are no other omens here, for there is no future to look into but dust."

From a high perch between two buildings a great snake of metal had fallen to lie twisted across the road.

"The elves thought themselves all-powerful," said Skifr, as they picked their way over it. "They thought themselves greater than God. They thought they could remake all things according to a grand design. Look now upon their folly! No matter how great and glorious the making, time will unmake it. No matter how strong the word, strong the thought, strong the law, all must return to chaos."

Skifr jerked her head back and sent spit spinning high into the air, arcing neatly down and spattering on rusted metal. "King Uthil says steel is the answer. I say his sight is short. Dust is the last answer to every question, now and always."

Koll gave a sigh. "You're a tower of laughs, aren't you?"

Skifr's jagged laughter split the silence, bouncing back from the dead faces of the buildings and making Koll jump. A strange sound here. It made him absurdly worried she'd somehow cause offense, though there'd been no one to offend for a hundred hundred years.

The old woman clapped him on the shoulder as she walked after Father Yarvi and Mother Scaer.

“That all depends on what you find funny, boy.”

AS THE LIGHT FADED they crept between buildings so high the street was made a shaded canyon between them. Spires that pierced the heavens even in their ruin, endless planes of elf-glass still winking pink and orange and purple with the darkly reflected sunset, twisted beams of metal sprouting from their shattered tops like thorns from a thistle.

That brought Thorn to Koll’s thoughts and he muttered a prayer for her, even if the gods weren’t here to listen. When Brand died, it seemed as if something had died in her. Maybe no one comes through a war quite as alive as they were.

The road was gouged and slumping, choked with things of crumpled metal, their blistered paint flaking. There were masts as tall as ten men, festooned with skeins of wires that hung between the buildings like the cobwebs of colossal spiders. There were elf-letters everywhere, signs daubed on the roads, twisted about poles, banners proudly unfurled over every broken window and doorway.

Koll stared up at one set blazoned wide across a building, the last man-high letter fallen down to swing sadly from its corner.

“All this writing,” he murmured, neck stiff from staring up at it.

“The elves did not limit the word to the few,” said Skifr. “They let knowledge spread to all, like fire. Eagerly they fanned the flames.”

“And were all burned by them,” murmured Mother Scaer. “Burned to ashes.”

Koll blinked up at the great sign. “Do you understand it?”

“I might know the characters,” said Skifr. “I might even know the words. But the world they spoke of is utterly gone. Who could plumb their meaning now?”

They passed by a shattered window, shards of glass still clinging to its edge, and Koll saw a woman grinning at him from inside.

He was so shocked he couldn’t even scream, just stumbled back into Skifr’s arms, pointing wildly at that ghostly figure. But the old woman only chuckled.

“She cannot hurt you now, boy.”

And Koll saw it was a painting of amazing detail, stained and faded. A woman, holding up her wrist to show a golden elf-bangle, smiling wildly as though it gave her impossible joy to wear such a thing. A woman, long and thin and strangely dressed, but a woman still.

“The elves,” he muttered. “Were they...like us?”

“Terribly like and terribly unlike,” said Skifr, Yarvi and Scaer coming to stand beside her, all gazing at that faded face from beyond the long fog of the past. “They were far wiser, more numerous, more powerful than us. But, just like us, the more powerful they became, the more powerful they wished to become. Like men, the elves had holes in them that could never be filled. All of *this*...” And Skifr spread her arms wide to the mighty ruins, her cloak of rags billowing in the restless breeze. “All of this could not satisfy them. They were just as envious, ruthless and ambitious as us. Just as greedy.” She raised one long arm, one long hand, one long finger to point at the woman’s radiant smile. “It is their greed that destroyed them. Do you hear me, Father Yarvi?”

“I do,” he said, shouldering his pack and, as always, pressing onward, “and could live with fewer elf-lessons and more elf-weapons.”

Mother Scaer frowned after him, fingering her own collection of ancient bangles. “I say he could use the opposite.”

“What happens after?” called Koll.

There was a pause before Father Yarvi looked back. “We use the elf-weapons against Bright Yilling. We carry them across the straits to Skekenhouse. We find Grandmother Wexen and the High King.” His voice took on a deadly edge. “And I keep my sun-oath and my moon-oath to be revenged upon the killers of my father.”

Koll swallowed. “I meant after that.”

Master frowned at apprentice. “We can ford that river when we reach it.” And he turned and carried on.

Quite as if he hadn’t spared it a thought until now. But Koll knew Father Yarvi was not a man to leave the field of the future unsown with plans.

Gods, was Skifr right? Were they the same as the elves? Their little feet in mighty footprints, but on the same path? He thought of Thorlby made an empty ruin, a giant tomb, the people of Gettland burned away to leave only silence and dust, perhaps some fragment of his carved mast left, a ghostly echo for those who came long after to puzzle over.

Koll took one last glance back at that gloriously happy face thousands of years dead, and saw something glint among the shattered glass. A golden bangle, just like the one in the painting, and Koll darted out a hand and slipped it into his pocket.

He doubted the elf-woman would miss it.

"It will be dangerous," said Skara, grimly.

An apt moment for Raith to puff himself up with some hero's bluster. There'd been a time he was an ever-gushing fountain of it, after all. *That's what I'm counting on, or danger's my breakfast, or for our enemies, maybe!* But all he could manage was a strangled, "Aye. But we have to stop that mine before it gets under the walls..."

No need to say more. They all knew what was at stake.

Everything.

Raith glanced about at the volunteers, their faces, their shield-rims, their weapons all smeared with ashes to keep them hidden in the night. Two dozen of the fastest Gettlanders, two dozen of the fiercest Vanstermen, and him.

The Breaker of Swords had drawn lots with King Uthil for the honor of leading them, and won. Now he stood smiling as they waited for their moment, savoring each breath as if the night smelled of flowers. The man showed no fear, not ever, Raith had to give him that. But where it used to feel like bravery, now it looked like madness.

"No one will think less of you if you stay," said Skara.

"I'll think less of me." If that was even possible. Raith met his brother's eye for an instant before Rakki looked away, ash-dark face fixed hard. Desperate to prove he could be the tough one, even if they both knew he couldn't. "Got to watch my brother's back."

"Even if he doesn't want your help?"

"Specially then."

Rakki had one of the big clay jars over his shoulder that held Father Yarvi's southern fire, Soryorn another. Raith thought of how that stuff had burst blazing over the High King's ships, burning men toppling into the sea, then he thought of smearing it on timbers deep under the ground and setting a torch to it, and his courage took another hard knock. He wondered how many more it'd stand. Time was nothing scared him. Or had he always been pretending?

Gods, he wished they could go. "It's the waiting hurts worst," he muttered.

"Worse than being stabbed, or burned, or buried in that mine?"

Raith swallowed. "No. Not worse than those."

"You need not fear for me, my queen." Gorm had strode over with his thumbs wedged into his great belt, keen to make it all about him. There's kings for you. Their towering opinions of themselves are generally both their making and their downfall. "Mother War breathed on me in my crib," he said, a tiresome refrain if ever there was one. "It has been foreseen no man can kill me."

Skara raised a brow. "What about a vasty weight of dirt falling on your head?"

"Oh, Father Earth fashioned me too large to squeeze into Yilling's mine. Others will go delving

while I guard the entrance. But you must learn to rejoice at the risks.”

Skara looked more likely to be sick at them. “Why?”

“Without Death, war would be a dull business.” Gorm slipped his great chain over his head and offered it to her. “Would you honor me by keeping this safe until the task is done? I would hate for its rattling to catch Death’s ear.”

As their owner swaggered away Skara blinked down at the pommels draped over her hands, silver and gold and precious stones shining with the torchlight.

“Each of these is a dead man, then,” she murmured, pale as if she stared into their faces. “Dozens of them.”

“And that’s not counting all those he’s killed that didn’t have swords. Or all those that had no weapons at all.”

Time was Raith had looked at that chain and swelled with pride that he followed so great a warrior. Time was he’d dreamed of forging his own. Now he wondered how long a chain he might’ve forged already, and the thought made him feel almost as queasy as Skara seemed when she looked up.

“I didn’t choose this.”

Gods, she was beautiful. It was like there was a light in her, and the darker things got the brighter she seemed to shine. He wondered, and not for the first time, what might’ve happened if they were different people, in a different place, at a different time. If she wasn’t a queen and he wasn’t a killer. But you can’t choose who you are.

“Who’d choose this?” he croaked out.

“It’s time.” Gorm took a prim little nibble from the last loaf, passed it on and stooped to fit his great frame into the narrow passageway.

Each man took his own bite as he followed, each no doubt wondering if it truly would be his last. Raith came at the back, took his mouthful and crumbled the rest in his fist, tossed it behind him as a gift for Mother War’s children, the crows. He might be no great believer in luck, but he knew they’d need every bit they could get.

Down the passage through the elf walls, echoing with their quick breath. The same one Raith had come charging up a few weeks before with no doubts and no fears, burning with battle-joy. Blue Jenner stood beside the hand-thick door, ready to triple bolt it after them, slapping each man on the back as they slipped past.

“Come back alive,” hissed the old raider. “That’s all that matters.” And he pushed Raith through the archway and out into the chill night.

A shroud of fog had drifted in from Mother Sea and Raith muttered his thanks to her. He reckoned it a gift that tripled his chances of living out the night. The fires of Bright Yilling’s men were gloomy smears in the murk on their left. The walls of Bail’s Point a black mass on their right.

They wore no mail so they’d run the swifter, all bent double and black as coal, ghosts in the darkness, quick and silent. Raith’s every sense was sharpened double keen by the whetstone of danger, every grunt and footfall seeming loud as a drumbeat, his nose full of the damp night and the distant campfires.

One after another they slid into the ditch, picking their way along the boggy bottom. Raith’s boot hit

something hard and he realized it was a corpse. They were everywhere, unclaimed, unburned, unburied, tangled with the shattered remains of ladders, rocks flung from above, dead men's fallen shields.

He saw Gorm's smiling teeth in the darkness, leaning toward Soryorn, heard him whisper, "Here was Mother War's good work done."

The last loaf had left Raith's mouth sour and he spat as they struggled up from the ditch, men silently offering their hands to help each other climb, hissing curses as they slipped and slid, boots mashing the earth to sticky mud.

On they went, over ground prickled everywhere with arrows, the harvest of Bright Yilling's failed attacks, dense as the wind-slanted sedge on the high moors of Vansterland. Raith heard shouting in the distance as they left the fortress behind, the clashing of steel. King Uthil was sallying from the main gate, hoping to draw Bright Yilling's attention from his mine.

Shapes shifted in the mist, whipped into tricking shadows by the hurrying men. Snakes, twisting together and breaking apart. Wolf faces. Man faces. The faces of those he'd killed, shrieking silently for vengeance. Raith wafted them away with his shield but they formed anew. He tried to tell himself the dead are dead, but he knew Jenner had been right. Their ghosts stick in the minds of those that knew them, loved them, hated them. Those that killed them most of all.

The sharpened stakes loomed from the murk and Raith slipped sideways between them and crouched in the darkness beyond, straining into the night.

He saw the humps of the fresh barrows, or at any rate the spoil of Yilling's mines, firelight at their edges. Gorm pointed with his sword and the men split, scuttling silently around the nearest hillock. Not a word spoken. Not a word needed to be spoken. They all knew their work.

Two men sat beside a campfire. The way Raith and Rakki used to sit. One working on a belt with a needle, the other with a blanket around his shoulders, frowning off toward the faint sounds of Uthil's diversion. He turned as Raith rushed up.

"What are—"

Soryorn's arrow took him silently through the mouth. The other man started to scramble up, tangled with his belt. Gorm's ash-black blade hissed and the warrior's head spun away into the darkness.

Raith sprang over his body as it toppled, slithered down into a trench between heaps of spoil, squatting beside a dark entrance flanked by torches.

"Go!" whispered Gorm, as his warriors spread out to form a crescent. Rakki muttered a quick prayer to She Who Lights the Way, then he was down into Father Earth's guts with the jar of southern fire over his shoulder, Soryorn and Raith just behind him.

Darkness, and the flickering shadows of the crooked logs that held up the earth above, roots brushing at Raith's hair. He was no miner but he could tell it had been dug hastily, trickles of soil falling as they worked their way down the passage, his eyes fixed on Soryorn's bent back.

"Gods," he whispered, "this is apt to fall without our help."

Hot, and growing hotter, sweat trickling from Raith's brows, sticky under his clothes as he labored on. He slid his ax through the loop at his belt and drew his dagger. If it came to a fight down here there was no room to swing. They'd settle it close enough to smell your enemy's breath.

They scrambled into a chamber lit by one guttering lamp. The earthen floor was scattered with

picks and shovels and barrows, roof held up with a clumsy tangle of timbers, others stacked in heaps. Two more shadowy tunnels went deeper, toward the roots of Gudrun's Tower, no doubt, and Raith hurried over to one, peering into the darkness.

Could he hear scraping somewhere in there? Digging? Rakki was already fumbling the stopper from his jar, starting to slosh what was inside over anything made of wood.

"Careful o' that flame!" snapped Raith at Soryorn, who'd brushed the flickering lamp and set it swinging on its hook. "One slip and we're all buried."

"Fair point," croaked out the standard-bearer, tipping up his own deadly jar in the crook of one long arm, other hand across his face. Gods, the stuff stank in the stillness, a burning stink that set them all to coughing. Raith stumbled to the other tunnel, rubbing the tears from his stinging eyes on his forearm, looked up to see two men staring at him. One held a pick, the other a shovel, both stripped to the waist and smeared with grime.

"Are you the new diggers?" said one, frowning at Raith's shield.

The best fighters don't think too much. Not much before the fight, not much after, and not at all during. Tends to be the one strikes first that still stands in the end. So Raith knocked the man's pick away with his shield and stabbed him in the neck, blood spraying across the passageway.

The other miner swung his shovel but Raith was carried forward, stumbling into him, shrugging the blow off his shield, shoving the man against the wall so they were left snarling in one another's faces, so close Raith could have stuck his tongue out and licked him. He stabbed under the rim of his shield, wild, vicious, punches with steel on the end, and the digger gurgled and snorted with each one until Raith stepped back and let him drop, left him sitting with his hands clutched to his ripped-up belly and his blood black on Raith's shield, on his fist, on his dagger.

Rakki was staring, mouth hanging open, the way he always did when Raith set to killing, but there'd be time to pile the regrets up later.

"Finish it!" Raith scuttled to the passage they came in by to snatch a breath of clean air. His head was spinning from the reek. He could hear the sounds of fighting coming faint from outside. "Now!"

Rakki tipped up the jar, coughing, soaking the props, the walls, the ground. Soryorn tossed his jar down, oil still gurgling from it across the floor, pushed past Raith and into the passageway, the shouts coming louder from above.

"Gods!" he heard Rakki croak, and spun around.

One of the miners was staggering across the room, mad eyes bulging, still clutching at his torn guts with one red hand. He caught Rakki with the other, growling through his clenched teeth, spraying red spit.

By every rule he should've been gone through the Last Door. But Death is a fickle mistress and has her own rules. Only she could say why it pleased her to give him a few more moments.

Rakki's jar tumbled down as he wrestled with the wounded miner, shattered against a timber, oil spattering the pair of them as they stumbled back.

Raith took a step, jaw dropping, but he was too far away.

They blundered into one of the props, and Rakki pulled his arm back for a punch, and his elbow clipped the lamp and knocked it from its hook.

It fell so slow, leaving a bright smear across Raith's sight, and not a thing he could do. He heard his own breath whoop in. He saw the light from that little flame bright across the oily floor. He saw Rakki turn, caught one glimpse of his face, eyes wide.

Raith dropped down huddled behind his shield. What else could he do?

Then the narrow chamber was brighter than day.

No doubt a woman should be tearful with relief when her betrothed comes back alive from battle, but Skara found herself dry-eyed when the Breaker of Swords was the first through the little gate.

His great shield had a broken shaft stuck in it near the rim, but otherwise he was unhurt. He slapped the arrow out, looked around as if for someone to hand the shield to, then frowned.

“Huh.” And he set it down against the wall.

Skara forced a smile onto her face. “I am glad to see you returned, my king.” Though there were others she would rather have greeted.

“In truth I am glad to be back, Queen Skara. Fighting at night is little fun. We brought down their mine, however.”

“Thank the gods. What happens now?”

He smiled, teeth white in his ash-blackened face. “Now they dig another.”

Men were straggling back into the fortress. All exhausted. Several hurt. Mother Owd started forward to help, Rin squatting beside her with some heavy pincers, already cutting a man’s bloody jerkin open around a wound.

“Where is Raith?”

“He was with his brother in the tunnel when the oil caught fire.” A thrall had brought Gorm water and he was wiping the ash from his face.

Skara could hardly speak her throat was suddenly so closed up. “He’s dead?”

Gorm gave a grim nod. “I taught him to fight, and kill, and die, and now he has done all three.”

“Only two,” she said, with a surge of relief that made her head spin.

Raith came shuffling from the shadows, his hair caked with dirt and his bloody teeth gritted, one arm over Blue Jenner’s shoulder.

“Huh.” Gorm raised his brows. “He always was the tough one.”

Skara darted forward, caught Raith by his elbow. His sleeve was ripped, scorched, strangely blistered. Then she realized to her horror it was not his sleeve, but his skin. “Gods, your arm! Mother Owd!”

Raith hardly seemed to notice. “Rakki’s dead,” he whispered.

A slave had brought Gorm a bowl of meat fresh off the spit. The similarity between it and Raith’s arm as Mother Owd peeled the burned cloth away made Skara’s gorge rise.

But if the Breaker of Swords had any fears at all, he did not keep them in his stomach. “Fighting always gives me quite an appetite,” he said around a mouthful of meat, spraying grease. “All in all, Mother War favored us tonight.”

“What about Rakki?” snarled Raith, Owd hissing with annoyance as he jerked his half-bandaged arm from her hands.

“I shall remember him fondly. Unlike others, he proved his loyalty.”

Skara saw the tendons starting from Raith’s fist as it clenched around his ax-haft, and she slipped quickly in front of him.

“Your chain, my king.” Lifting that rattling mass of dead men’s pommels up was such an effort her arms trembled.

Gorm stooped to duck his head inside and it brought them closer than they had ever been, her hands behind his neck, almost an awkward embrace. He had a damp-fur smell like the hounds her grandfather had kept.

“It has grown long over the years,” he said as he straightened.

This close he seemed bigger than ever. The top of her head could scarcely have reached his neck. Would she need to carry a step with her to kiss her husband? She might have laughed at the thought another time. She did not feel much like laughing then.

“It was an honor to hold it.” She wanted very much to back away but knew she could not, dropped her hands to arrange the gaudy, ghastly mementos on his chest.

“When we are married, I will cut off a length for you to wear.”

She blinked up at him, cold all over. A chain of dead men to be forever tethered with. “I have not earned the right,” she croaked out.

“No false modesty, please! Only half a war is fought with swords, my queen, and you have fought the other half with skill and courage.” He was smiling as he turned away. “There will be hundreds dead for your brave work.”

—

SKARA JERKED AWAKE, CLUTCHING at the furs on her bed, ears straining at the silence.

Nothing.

She hardly slept now. Two or three times every night Bright Yilling’s warriors would come.

They had tried to swim into the harbor, brave men fighting the surging waves in the darkness. But sentries on the towers above had riddled them with arrows, left their bodies tangled on the chains across the entrance.

They had charged up with a felled tree shod in iron as a ram, brave men holding shields above, and made a din upon the gates to wake the dead. But the gates had hardly been scratched.

They had shot swarms of burning arrows over the walls to fall on the yard like tiny shooting stars in the night. They had bounced harmless from flagstones and slates but some had caught among the thatch. Skara’s chest was sore from the billowing smoke, her voice cracked from shrieking orders to soak the roofs, her hands raw from dragging buckets from the well. The stables where she had first saddled a pony as a girl were a scorched shell, but they had managed to stop the fire from spreading.

In the end she had climbed to the walls, soot-smudged but triumphant to shriek, “Thanks for the arrows!” at the High King’s retreating bowmen.

By fire or by water, over the walls or under, nothing had worked. Bail’s Point was the strongest fortress in the Shattered Sea, its defenders the picked warriors of three warrior nations. Bright Yilling lost twenty to every one of theirs.

And yet the reinforcements kept coming. Every morning Mother Sun rose upon more warriors of Yutmark, Inglefold and the Lowlands. More mad-eyed, bone-pierced, painted Shends. More ships outside the harbor, stopping any help from coming to the defenders. Their spirits might be buoyed by little victories, but the terrible arithmetic had only worsened. Mother Owd's cellars overflowed with wounded. Twice they had sent boats drifting out with crews of dead to burn upon the water.

Skara felt as if they were digging ditches to stop the tide. You might keep out one wave. You might keep out ten. But the tide always wins.

She gave an acid burp, choked back sick and swung her legs from the bed, pushed her head into her hands and gave a long growl.

She was a queen. Her blood worth more than gold. She had to hide her fear and show her deep-cunning. She could not use a sword, so she had to fight the other half of the war, and fight it better than Bright Yilling. Better than Father Yarvi and Mother Scaer too. There were people looking to her. People who had gambled their futures on her. She was hedged in by the hopes and needs and expectations of the living and the dead as if she slipped through a maze of thorns. A dozen opinions to consider and a hundred lessons to remember and a thousand proper things that had to be done and ten thousand improper ones she could never contemplate...

Her eyes slid to the door. On the other side, she knew, Raith would be sleeping. Or lying awake.

She did not know what she felt for him. But she knew she had never felt it for anyone else. She remembered the cold shock when she had thought him dead. The warm relief when she had seen him living. The spark of heat when their eyes met. The strength she felt when he was beside her. Her head knew he was a wretched match in every possible way.

But the rest of her felt otherwise.

She stood, heart thudding as she padded across the floor, stone cold against her bare feet. She glanced toward the little room where her thrall slept, but she would have better sense than to meddle in her mistress's business.

Her hand froze just short of the door, fingertips tingling.

His brother was dead. She told herself he needed her, when she knew she needed him. Needed to forget her duty. Needed to forget her land and her people and have something for herself. Needed to know what it felt like to be kissed, and held, and wanted by someone she chose, before it was too late.

Mother Kyre would have torn her hair out at the thought of it, but Mother Kyre was gone through the Last Door. Now, in the night, with Death scratching at the walls, what was proper no longer seemed so important.

Skara slid the bolt back with trembling fingers, biting at her lip with the need to stay silent.

Gently, gently, she eased open her door.

Raith kept his eyes closed afterward, and breathed. He just wanted to hold someone, and be held, and he slid his bandaged hand up her bare back and pressed her tight against him.

Rakki was dead.

He kept realizing it fresh. Kept seeing that last glimpse of his face before the fire, and the earth fell.

She kissed him. Wasn't harsh or hurried, but he could tell it was a parting kiss, and he strained up to make it last. Hadn't done enough kissing in his life. Might not get the chance to do much more. All the time he'd wasted on nothing, now every moment past seemed an aching loss. She put a hand on his chest, pushing gently. Took an effort to let go.

He stifled a groan as he swung his legs onto the rush matting, holding his ribs, his side one great ache. He watched her dress, black against the curtain. Caught little details in the faint light. The shifting muscles in her back, the veins on her foot, a glow down the side of her face as she turned away from him. He couldn't tell whether she was smiling or frowning.

Rakki was dead.

He looked down at his bandaged arm. He'd forgotten the pain for a moment but it was coming back now twice as bad. He winced as he touched it, remembering that last glimpse of his brother's face, so like his own and so different. Like two prow-beasts on the same ship, always facing different ways. Only now there was only one, and the ship was adrift with no course to hold to.

She sat beside him. "Does it hurt?"

"Like it's still burning." He worked his fingers and felt the fire all the way to his elbow.

"Can I do anything?"

"No one can do anything."

They sat silently, side by side, her hand resting on his arm. Strong, her hands, but gentle. "You can't stay. I'm sorry."

"I know."

He gathered up his scattered clothes, but while he was putting them on he started to cry. One moment he was fumbling at his belt, burned hand too clumsy to fasten it, then his sight started to swim, then his shoulders were shaking with silent sobs.

He'd never cried like that. Not ever in his life. All the beatings taken, all the things lost, all the hopes failed, he'd always had Rakki beside him.

But Rakki was dead.

Now he'd started crying he couldn't seem to stop. No more than you can rebuild a burst dam when the flood's still surging through. That's the problem with making yourself hard. Once you crack, there's no putting yourself back together.

She took him around the head, pressed his face against her shoulder, rocked him back and forward.

“Shhh,” she whispered in his ear. “Shhh.”

“My brother was the only family I had,” he whispered.

“I know,” she said. “Mine too.”

“Does it get easier?”

“Maybe. Bit by bit.”

She did his belt up for him, dragging the scarred leather through the scarred buckle while he stood with his hands dangling. Never thought much about having a woman fastening his belt, but he found he liked it. Never had anyone to take care of him. Except Rakki, maybe.

But Rakki was dead.

When she looked up her face was tear-streaked too and he reached out to wipe it, tried to be as gentle as she'd been. Didn't feel like those aching, crooked, scabbed and battered fingers of his had any tenderness left in them. Didn't feel like his hands were good for aught but killing. His brother had always said he was no lover. But he tried.

“I don't even know your name,” he said.

“I'm Rin. You'd better go.” And she pulled back the curtain of the little alcove her cot was in.

He limped up the steps from the forge, one hand on the wall. Past a domed oven where three women were baking bread, men gathered waiting with their platters in a hungry crowd. He limped across the yard, lit silver by high, fat Father Moon, and past the burned-out stables. As burned-out as he was.

Raith heard someone laugh, jerked his head toward it, starting to smile. Rakki's voice, surely?

But Rakki was dead.

He hugged himself as he trudged on past the dead stump of the Fortress Tree. Wasn't a cold night but he felt cold then. Like his torn clothes were too thin. Or his torn skin was.

Up the long stairway, his feet scraping in the darkness, down the long hallway, windows looking out over glimmering Mother Sea. Lights moved there. The lamps on Bright Yilling's ships, watching to make sure no help came to Bail's Point.

He groaned as he lowered himself slowly as an old man beside Skara's door, everything aching. He drew his blanket across his knees, let his skull fall back against the cold elf-stone. He'd never been interested in comforts. Rakki had been the one to dream of slaves and fine tapestries.

But Rakki was dead.

“Where have you been?”

He jerked around. The door was open a crack and Skara was looking out at him, hair a mass of dark curls, wild and tangled from her bed like it had been the first day he saw her.

“Sorry,” he stammered out, shaking off his blanket. He gave a grunt of pain as he stood, clutching at the wall to steady himself.

Suddenly she'd slipped into the corridor and taken his elbow. “Are you all right?”

He was a proven warrior, sword-bearer to Grom-gil-Gorm. He was a killer, carved from the stone of Vansterland. He felt no pain and no pity. Only the words wouldn't come. He was too hurt. Hurt to his bones.

“No,” he whispered.

He looked up then and saw she was wearing just her shift, realized with the torchlight he could see her lean shape through it.

He forced his eyes up to her face but that was worse. There was something in the way she was looking at him, fierce and fixed as a wolf at a carcass, made him suddenly hot all over. He could hardly see for her eyes on him. He could hardly breathe for the scent of her. He made the feeblest effort to pull his arm away and only pulled her closer, right against him. She pressed him back, sliding one hand around his sore ribs and making him gasp, putting the other on his face and pulling it down toward her.

She kissed him and not gently, sucking at his mouth, her teeth scraping his split lip. He opened his eyes and she was looking at him, like she was judging the effect she'd had, her thumb pressing hard at his cheek.

“Shit,” he whispered. “I mean...my queen—”

“Don't call me that. Not now.” She slipped her hand up behind his head, gripping him tight, brushed her nose up along the side of his, down the other, kissed him again and left his head light as a drunkard's.

“Come with me,” she whispered, breath burning on his cheek, and she drew him toward her door, nearly dragged him right over, blanket still tangled around his legs.

Rakki had always told him he was no lover. Raith wondered what he'd have to say when he heard about this—

But Rakki was dead.

He stopped short. “I need to tell you something...” That he'd just been crying in someone else's bed? That she was promised to Grom-gil-Gorm? That he'd nearly killed her a few nights before and still had the poison in his pocket? “More'n one thing, really—”

“Later.”

“Later might be too late—”

She caught a fistful of his shirt and dragged him toward her, and he was helpless as a rag doll in her hands. She was far stronger than he'd thought. Or maybe he was just far weaker. “I've done enough talking,” she hissed at him. “I've done enough of the proper thing. We might all be dead tomorrow. Now come with me.”

They might all be dead tomorrow. If Rakki had one last lesson to teach him, surely that was it. And men rarely win fights they want to lose, after all. So he pushed his fingers into the soft cloud of her hair, kissed at her, bit at her lips, felt her tongue in his mouth, and nothing else seemed all that pressing. He was here and she was here, now, in the darkness. Mother Scaer, and the Breaker of Swords, and Rin, and even Rakki seemed a long way off with the dawn.

She kicked his blanket against the wall, and pulled him through her door, and slid the bolt.

“This is the place,” said Skifr.

It was a wide hall with a balcony high up, scattered with broken chairs, dim for the dirt crusted to the windows. A curved table faced the door with a thing above it like a great coin, ringed by elf-letters. There had been a wall of glass beyond but it was shattered, splinters crunching under Koll’s boots as he stepped toward an archway, one door fallen, the other hanging by broken hinges. The hall beyond was soon lost in darkness, water dripping in the shadows.

“We could use some light,” he murmured.

“Of course.” There was a click, and in an instant the whole chamber was flooded with brightness. There was a hiss as Father Yarvi whipped out the curved sword he wore and Koll shrank against the wall, feeling for his knife.

But Skifr only chuckled. “There is nothing here to fight but ourselves, and in that endless war blades cannot help.”

“Where does the light come from?” murmured Koll. Tubes on the ceiling were burning too bright to look at, as though pieces of Mother Sun had been caught in bottles.

Skifr shrugged as she sauntered past him into the hall. “Magic.”

The ceiling had collapsed, more tubes hanging by tangled wires, light flickering and popping, flaring across the tight-drawn faces of the two ministers as they crept after Skifr. Paper was scattered everywhere. Sliding piles of it ankle deep, sodden but unrotted, scrawled with words upon words upon words.

“The elves thought they could catch the world in writing,” said Skifr. “That enough knowledge would set them above god.”

“Look upon the wages of their arrogance,” muttered Mother Scaer.

They passed through an echoing hall filled with benches, each with a strange box of glass and metal on top, drawers torn out and cabinets thrown over and more papers vomiting from them in heaps.

“Thieves were here before us,” said Koll.

“Other thieves,” said Scaer.

“There is no danger in the world so fearsome that someone will not brave it for a profit.”

“Such wisdom in one so young,” said Skifr. “Though I think all these thieves stole was death. This way.”

Stairs dropped down, lit in red, a humming from far below. A chilly breath of air upon his face as Koll leaned over the rail and saw their square spiral dropping into infinite depth. He leaned away, suddenly giddy. “A long way down,” he croaked.

“Then we had better begin,” said Father Yarvi, taking the steps two at a time, his withered hand hissing upon the rail.

They did not speak. Each of them too crowded by their own fears to make space for anyone else. The deeper they went the louder their heavy footsteps echoed, the louder that strange humming within the walls, within the very earth, until it made Koll's teeth rattle in his head. Down they went, and down, into the very bowels of Strokorn, past warnings painted on the smooth elf-stone in red elf-letters. Koll could not read them, but he guessed at their meaning.

Go back. Abandon this madness. It is not too late.

He could hardly have said how long they went down, but the stairs ended, as all things must. Another hallway stretched away at the bottom, gloomy, chill and bare but for a red arrow pointing down the floor. Guiding them on toward a door. A narrow door of dull metal, and beside it on the wall a studded panel.

"What is this place?" murmured Mother Scaer.

Something in the terrible solidity of that door reminded Koll of the one in Queen Laithlin's counting house, behind which she was said to keep her limitless wealth. "A vault," he murmured.

"An armory." And Skifr began to sing. Soft and low, to begin with, in the tongue of elves, then higher, and faster, as she had on the steppe above the Denied when the Horse People came for their blood. Father Yarvi's eyes were hungry-bright. Mother Scaer turned her head and spat with disgust. Then Skifr made a sign above the panel with her left hand, and with her right began to press the studs in a pattern not even Koll's sharp eyes could follow.

A green jewel above the door suddenly burned bright. There was a clunk as of bolts released. Koll took a step back, almost stumbled into Mother Scaer as the door came ajar with a breath of air like a long-sealed bottle opened. Smirking over her shoulder, Skifr hauled it wide.

Beyond was a hallway lined with racks. They reminded Koll of the ones he'd made to hold spears in the citadel of Thorlby. Upon the racks, gleaming darkly in the half-light, were elf-relics. Dozens of them. Hundreds. Hundreds upon hundreds, racks stretching away into the distance as more lights flared up, one by one.

"Elf weapons," said Skifr, "just as I promised."

"Enough to fit an army for war," breathed Father Yarvi.

"Yes. They were forged for a war against God."

Next to their craftsmanship Koll and Rin's proud efforts seemed the mud-daubs of primitives. Every weapon was the twin of the one beside it, beautiful in its clean simplicity. Every weapon thousands of years old but perfect as the day it was made.

Koll crept through the doorway, staring at the works of the elves in awe and wonder and not a little fear. "Are these as powerful as the one you used on the Denied?"

Skifr snorted. "That one beside these is a child's needle beside a hero's spear."

In a few moments on the windblown steppe that one had left six men ripped open and burning and a few dozen more running for their lives. "What might these do?" Koll whispered as he gave one the gentlest, hesitant touch with his fingertips, its perfect surfaces more like a thing grown than forged, neither rough nor smooth, neither cold nor warm.

"With these, a chosen few could lay waste to Grandmother Wexen's army," said Skifr. "To ten such armies. There are even things here that can make that staff you carry send Death." She tossed a flat box to Father Yarvi and as he snatched it from the air it rattled as if full of money.

“The staff of Gettland’s minister?” Koll blinked at her. “That’s a weapon?”

“Oh, the irony!” Skifr gave a joyless chuckle as she plucked one of the relics from the rack. “It is strange the things deep-cunning folk miss under their very noses.”

“Are they dangerous now?” asked Koll, jerking his hand away.

“They must be made ready but I can teach you the rituals, as I was taught them, as my teacher was taught them. One day with the *South Wind*’s crew and they can be prepared. A sword takes years to master, and in those years the pupil learns respect for the weapon, restraint with the weapon, but this...” Skifr pressed the relic’s blunt end against her shoulder so she peered down its length, and Koll saw the slots and holes were grips, sculpted for hands to fit as snugly as a sword’s hilt. “A man who holds this, be he never so weak, is in an instant made a greater warrior than King Uthil, than Grom-gil-Gorm, than Bright Yilling himself.”

“That is halfway to being a god,” murmured Mother Scaer, bitterly shaking her head. “The elves could not control that power. Should a man be given it?”

“We must take it regardless.” Father Yarvi carefully lifted one of the relics from the rack. As if he did not mean to put it back.

Skifr propped her weapon on her cocked hip. “As the name of God has seven letters, so we should take only seven weapons.”

Father Yarvi lifted the relic, pointing it off down those endless racks. “There is no god here, remember?” His withered left hand did not fit the grip so well as Skifr’s, but it held the ancient weapon iron steady even so. “We’ll take all we can carry.”

Father Earth trembled and Raith felt fear stab him, scrambled up, fumbling his bowl and spraying soup across the yard.

Bright Yilling was bringing down his mine.

They'd all known it was coming. Ever since Rakki was buried in the last mine and the High King's men made no secret of digging another.

King Uthil had made sure the defenders weren't idle. He'd ordered a new wall built inside the fortress. A wall of worm-riddled beams torn from the low buildings, of strakes and masts from broken-up ships, of barnacle-crusteds timbers from broken-up wharves, of roof joists and wagon wheels and barrel staves and dead men's shields. A wooden crescent not much higher than a man, running from elf-walls on one side to elf-walls on the other and with a meager walkway where folk could stand, and fight, and die. Not much of a wall to keep out ten thousand warriors.

But a long stride better than nothing if Gudrun's Tower came down.

Most of the thousand defenders still able to run were running toward it now, barging into each other, shouting over one another, drawing weapons as they went, and Raith was carried by the tide. Blue Jenner offered his hand, helped him clamber onto the walkway, and as he stood at the parapet the ground shivered again, harder even than before.

Everyone gaped at the ugly mass of Gudrun's Tower and the crumbling man-built stretch of wall beside it. Willing it to hold firm. Praying it might. Raith wished he knew the right gods to plead with, settled for clenching his aching fist and hoping. Some birds flapped from the broken roof, but that was all. As tense a silence as Raith ever knew stretched out.

"It's held!" someone shouted.

"Quiet!" roared Gorm, holding up the sword Raith used to carry.

As if that was a signal there was a cracking bang, men cringing as dust and chunks of stone flew from the back of Gudrun's Tower, a rock big as a man's head bouncing across the yard and hammering against the wooden wall near Raith.

There was an almighty groaning and the ivy that covered the tower seemed to twist, cracks shooting through the stonework, the roof leaning sideways, birds showering up into the sky.

"Gods," whispered Raith, his jaw dropping. With awful slowness the whole tower began to fold in on itself.

"Get down!" bellowed Blue Jenner, hauling Raith onto the walkway beside him.

It sounded as if the whole world was shaking itself apart. Raith squeezed his eyes shut, stones pattering on his back like hail. He was ready to die. Just wished he'd died with Skara.

He opened his eyes but all was murk. A ship in fog.

Something plucked at him and he slapped it clumsily away.

He saw Blue Jenner's lined face, all pale, all ghostly, shouting something but Raith couldn't hear him. His ears were ringing.

He dragged himself up by the parapet, coughing as he stared into the man-made fog. He could see the faint shape of the elf-built tower on the left, of the elf-built wall on the right, but in between, where Gudrun's Tower had stood, there was only a great gap. A broken mass of boulders and shattered beams, the yard between it and the wooden wall littered with rubble.

"Least it fell outward," he muttered, but he couldn't even hear his own voice.

He realized he'd left the fine helmet he took from that ship's captain outside Skara's door, but there was no going back for it. He'd just have to ask nicely that no one hit his head. Such a fool's notion he nearly laughed.

Then he saw shapes in the gloom. Shadows of men. The High King's warriors, clambering over the fallen ruins and through the breach. Dozens of them, painted shields turned dusty gray, swords and axes dulled in the gloom, mouths yawning in silent war cries. Hundreds of them.

Arrows flitted into that heaving mass of men. From the crescent of defenders, from the elf-walls high above. Arrows came from all around them, and struggling over that broken rubble they couldn't have formed a decent shield-wall if they'd wanted. Men fell in the yard, fell among the boulders, crawled, and rolled and sat down staring. He saw a big old warrior shambling on with four or five shafts lodged in his mail. He saw a red-haired man who'd got his boot wedged between two rocks tear off his helmet and fling it away in frustration. He saw a warrior with golden armrings limping along using his sword like a crutch.

They kept coming, battle cries a faint burble over the ringing in Raith's ears, surging to the foot of the wooden wall. They kept coming, as men above stabbed with spears, flung rocks down, leant out to hack with axes. They kept coming, some kneeling with shields above their heads as steps while others clawed their way up the timbers of the makeshift wall. Would've been bravery to admire if it hadn't all been bent on getting Raith killed.

He shut his eyes, wedged that battered old peg in his jaws, but no battle joy surged up now. Used to be Raith had a thirst for violence felt like it'd never be satisfied. Seemed he'd finally drunk his fill, but Mother War kept on pouring. He thought of Skara looking down. Thought of her laugh. To hear that one more time seemed something worth fighting for. He forced his eyes open.

The High King's warriors were swarming over the wall, half the walkway seething with struggling men. One was lifting his sword to chop at Jenner and Raith hit him on the side of the head with his ax, left a great dent in his helmet and sent him sprawling. A hand clutched at the parapet and Raith hacked it in half, punched a man in the mouth with the rim of his shield and flung him back, dagger spinning from his fingers as he tumbled off the wall.

He saw Jenner's eyes go wide, spun around to see a big Lowlander bearing down on him, a great ax held in both fists and the One God's seven-rayed sun bouncing on a thong around his neck. Sometimes the best thing you can do with danger is run straight at it. Raith dived at him, the ax-haft catching on his shoulder and the blade just grazing his back, jarring from the Lowlander's hands and clattering into the yard below.

They grappled, waddled, clawing and spitting at each other. Raith dropped his ax, forced his burned arm down, fumbling for the grip of his knife. The Lowlander butted at him, caught him in the

jaw, made enough room to bring his fist back for a punch, but enough for Raith to jerk his knife free too.

There might be no joy in it, but he wasn't lying down for anyone.

He dipped his chin so the Lowlander's fist caught him on the forehead instead of the nose, a trick he'd learned fighting boys way bigger than him. The peg was jolted out of his mouth, his ears ringing all the louder, but he felt the crunching of the man's hand bones. Raith stabbed him in the side, blade scraping against mail, not going through, but still a hard enough poke to double the Lowlander up wheezing. He pawed at Raith's arm with his broken hand but Raith tore free of it and rammed the knife under the rim of his helmet, just below his ear.

The Lowlander looked quite surprised as his blood poured over the holy symbol he wore. Probably been sure he'd got the right god, the right king, the right cause. Everyone finds a way to make their side the right one, after all. Now, as he stumbled back trying to hold his neck together, he found it's not the righteous win, but them who strike first and strike hardest.

Raith ducked, caught him between the legs and hefted him over the parapet, knocking another man sprawling among the corpses on the way. No doubt they'd all thought they were on the right side too.

Raith stood staring, trying to catch his breath. He saw Mother Owd behind the wall, dragging a wounded man away. He saw Blue Jenner trying to untangle his sword from a dead man's bloody hair. He saw Grom-gil-Gorm send a man flying with a sweep of his shield. The High King's warriors had been driven off the wooden wall, but more were still pouring through the breach.

Then Raith saw something tumble from the walls above, and flinched as liquid fire showered the men crammed into that narrow space. He felt the heat of it across his face, remembered the heat of it underground. Even through the ringing in his ears he could hear the screams.

Another clay jar fell, another burst of flame, and the High King's men crumbled and fled. No one stays brave forever, no matter how right they think they are. Gettlanders were cheering, and Vanstermen jeering, and Throvenmen whooping, chanting the names of King Uthil and King Gorm and even Queen Skara in celebration. Raith kept quiet. He knew they'd be back soon enough.

"You all right?" he heard Blue Jenner ask.

"Aye," muttered Raith, but the truth was he was sick. Sick of fighting and he wanted to be back in Skara's bed.

There were corpses everywhere, and a stink of oil and cooking meat, and wounded men squealing for help that wasn't coming. In place of the settling dust smoke drifted, and from the murk a high voice came calling.

"Well, that was quite a start to the day! That surely got the blood flowing!"

Something edged into the breach. A door with a splintered corner and the hinges still hanging off. Three knocks rang out, then Bright Yilling's soft face appeared around one side. "Might I come in and talk without being pricked full of arrows?" He gave his bland little smile. "That would make a poor song, after all."

"Reckon Skara would sing it happily enough," Raith muttered, and he'd have hummed along himself with few regrets.

But Gorm was more interested in glory. "Come forward, Bright Yilling! We will listen."

"You are most gracious!" The High King's champion let his door topple down the hill of smoking

masonry and sprang nimbly after it, into that stained, ruined, arrow-strewn corner of the yard.

“What brings you here?” called Uthil. “Do you want to surrender?” There was some laughter at that, but Yilling only grinned up alone at the crescent of frowns. They said he worshipped Death. Certainly seemed he’d no fear of meeting her.

“I want what I wanted when we first spoke. To fight.” Yilling took his sword by the crosspiece and drew it, scratching daintily at his top lip with the pommel. “Will one of you two kings test his swordwork against mine?”

There was a pause, while nervous muttering spread down the length of the wooden walls. Uthil raised one brow at Gorm, gray hair flicking about his scarred face with the breeze, and Gorm raised one brow back, slowly turning a pommel on his chain around and around. Then he gave an extravagant yawn, and waved Bright Yilling away. “I have better things to be about. My morning turd will not make itself.”

Yilling only grinned the wider. “We must wait to put that famous prophecy of yours to the test. At least until my men kick over your wall of twigs. What of you, Iron King? Is your taste for turds or swordwork?”

Uthil frowned down at Yilling for a long, tense moment. Long enough for the muttering to swell into eager chatter. Two such famous warriors meeting in a duel was a thing a man might see only once in his lifetime. But the King of Gettland didn’t mean to be hurried. He peered at his sword, licked his little finger, gently rubbed some tiny blemish from the blade.

“It has been a while since I was tested,” said Yilling. “I visited Thorlby hoping for a fight, but there was no one there to kill but women and boys.”

Uthil gave a sad smile, then. As if he would’ve liked to give a different answer, but knew there could be only one. “That jewel you have for a pommel will make a fine bauble for my son to play with. I will fight you.” He handed his sword to Master Hunnan, clambered somewhat stiffly over the parapet and slid down to the yard below.

“That is the best news I have had all month!” Yilling gave a childish little caper. “Shall I fight you with my right hand or my left?”

“Whichever causes you to die most quickly,” said Uthil, plucking his blade from the air as Hunnan tossed it down. “Your attack interrupted my breakfast and there is a sausage I am keen to get back to.”

Yilling spun his sword about in his left hand as nimbly as a dress-maker might her needle. “Old men are particular about their mealtimes, I understand.”

As if the whole business had been arranged for years, the two famed warriors began to circle each other.

“This will be one for the songs,” breathed Jenner.

Raith worked his aching hand. “I’m less keen on songs than I used to be.”

Fast as a snake Yilling darted in, blade a bright blur. Raith’s own arm twitched as he thought how he’d have blocked, how he’d have struck back. Then he saw he’d have been dead.

Bright Yilling twisted with inhuman speed, sword whipping in a low cut. But Uthil was equal to it. Steel scraped as he parried, stepped effortlessly around the blade, slashed back. As quickly as they’d come together they broke apart, Yilling grinning with his arms spread wide, Uthil frowning, sword dangling by his side.

“Whoever wins,” croaked Raith, eyes rooted to the duel, “the war goes on.”

“Aye,” said Jenner, twitching with the movements of the fighters. “None of us have any other choice.”

Another exchange, steel darting faster than Raith could follow, thrust, thrust, slash and parry, and both men spun away into space, picking their way between the bodies, the rubble, the scattered rubbish.

“All this just for the fame of it?”

“Fame’s worth more to some men than anything.”

Slow silence, and the slow walking, slow prowling, slow circling around each other. Yilling crouched low, flowing like Mother Sea into different stances, different shapes, chuckling at every exchange like it was a fine new joke. Uthil stood stiff upright, solid as Father Earth, frowning as if he circled a funeral. They watched each other, feeling out the moment, riddling out the opponent, the silence stretching until it seemed it had to snap. Then with no warning the clash and ring and scrape of steel, Death lurking at both men’s shoulders, clinging to the edges of both men’s blades, the steel question asked and the steel answer given then the quick breaking apart and the slow prowling, slow circling, slow silence.

“It is a great shame that one of us must lose.” Yilling dodged a high cut, eyes slightly crossed as he watched Uthil’s point flicker past his nose. “There is much I could learn from you.”

“I fear we have time for only one lesson. Death waits for us all.” Yilling sprang forward as the king was still speaking but Uthil was ready, steering the thrust away, twisting his wrist so his sword raked down the sleeve of Yilling’s mail and across the back of his hand.

Yilling jerked back, blood pattering on the already-bloody stones of the yard. With a carefree chuckle he tossed his sword across to his right hand.

Someone screamed, “Bleed, you bastard!” from the tower above and suddenly everyone was shouting, hooting, roaring their insults and their defiance. They smelled victory. They smelled blood.

Uthil came on, metal twinkling as his sword caught the sun. Deadly thrusts no mail could have stopped. Yilling dodged, twisted, steel screeching as he pushed Uthil’s blade just wide on one side, turned so it whipped past him on the other, tottering back, off-balance.

Uthil sprang forward for the finishing blow and his foot twisted on a stone. The slightest stumble before his sword came hissing down. The slightest stumble, but long enough for Yilling to drop onto his knees, jerking away so the king’s blade left a cut down his smooth cheek and clanged into the stones just beside him.

Yilling’s own sword was left straight through Uthil’s body, most of the blade sticking bloody from his back.

The cheering stuttered out to leave a dumbstruck silence.

“A stone,” grunted Uthil, frowning at the sword-hilt pressed against his chest. “Poor weaponluck.” And all of a sudden he fell, Bright Yilling jumping to catch him as he whipped his sword free.

“No,” muttered Jenner, slapping at the parapet with his palm.

All along the wooden crescent there were curses, hisses, groans of dismay as Bright Yilling lowered Uthil to the dusty ground, settling his arm so that the Iron King of Gettland clutched his

sword to his chest, steel his answer in death as it had been in life.

“A good death,” murmured Blue Jenner.

Raith tossed his shield clattering down on the walkway. “A death, anyway.”

Mother Sun broke through the clouds as Bright Yilling wiped his sword, making the diamond pommel flash, the blood on his face glisten. He looked like Death’s chosen indeed, smiling among a harvest of corpses with Uthil’s body at his feet.

“I will come back for the rest of you!” he called as he turned toward the breach.

So that was the end to the day’s murder.

Skara liked sharing her bed.

Considering the fuss that had always been made of it, she wasn't sure how much she enjoyed the coupling. It seemed to her messy, strange and uncomfortable. Faintly ridiculous, even. She might have laughed the first time had he not been taking it so seriously. Some sticky fumbling. Some awkward grunting. Some clumsy peeling and unpeeling of skin with no grace or romance in it. In her dreams they had both known just what to do. In reality she hardly knew what she wanted, let alone what he did.

But she liked his body beside hers afterward. She liked the strength, and the roughness, and the warmth of him. She liked the way her chest fitted against his broad back, the way her legs twined with his, the way his ribs swelled against hers when he breathed. She liked the way he twitched and shuddered in his sleep, like the dogs used to by the firepit in her grandfather's hall. She liked the sour-sweat stink of him, even, which had no business being pleasant but for some reason she could never breathe in deeply enough.

She liked not being alone.

She touched his shoulder. Felt the rough skin of a scar under her fingertip. Followed it down to where it met another, then another, then another.

"So many scars," she whispered.

"In Vansterland we call 'em warrior's rewards," she heard him say. Not asleep, then. She would have been surprised if anyone in Bail's Point was. Why sleep through your last night alive, after all?

"They feel like whip marks."

He was silent, and she wondered if she should have said nothing. She had no notion what the rules were between them any more, but she was learning that baring your body to someone didn't make baring your heart any easier. Harder than ever, maybe.

Raith's shoulders shifted as he shrugged. "Before I was Gorm's servant, I was bad. After, I wasn't always bad enough."

"I'm sorry," she muttered. Sorry that he'd been whipped. Sorry that she hardly knew what to say about it. They were so different, in every way. It made no sense that they could fit together. But when she slid her arm over his side and he slipped his fingers through hers they fitted together well enough. Maybe any living hand fits when Death is offering you hers.

"What are we doing?" he asked.

"Holding hands."

"Tonight we are. What about tomorrow?"

"I didn't think you were much worried about tomorrow. It's one of the things I like about you."

"Tomorrow used to seem a long way off. It got close of a sudden."

The truth was she had no idea what they were doing, now or tomorrow. She had spent a lot of thought on what it might be like to have him. None at all on what she might do once she got him. It was like that puzzle box an emissary from Catalia had brought as a gift for her grandfather. Four days it had taken her to get it open and, once she had, there was another box inside.

In spite of Raith's warmth she gave a shiver, whispered the words into his battered ear. "Do you think Bright Yilling will come tonight?"

"He's in no rush. Reckon he'll wait for dawn."

She thought of the blood tapping from the point of Yilling's sword in the darkness and pressed herself tighter to Raith's back.

"King Uthil's dead," she muttered. He had seemed a man forged from iron, indestructible. But she had seen him laid out pale and cold before Bail's Chair.

"Death waits for us all," said Raith. "All it takes is a stray pebble and no skill, no name, no fame can shield you from her."

Skara glanced toward the door, torchlight around its edge. Out there, she had to be strong. Had to show no fear and no doubt. But no one can stay strong all the time. "We're doomed," she whispered.

Finally he rolled toward her, but in the darkness she could hardly tell more from his face than from his back. Just the faint gleam of his eyes fixed on her, the hard set of his cheek. He didn't speak. He didn't deny it.

She gave a ragged sigh. "I missed my chance to jump off Gudrun's Tower."

"I'll admit it's a lot lower than it was."

She touched his chest, ran her fingertip through the few pale hairs there. "I suppose I should be ready to jump off one of the others."

He caught her hand in his bandaged one. "Might be Blue Jenner could get you away. Like before."

"So I can be the one who always runs? A queen with no country? An object of contempt?"

"Not to me. You're about the best thing ever happened in my life."

From the little he'd told her, his life had been horrible. "What comes second?"

She could just see his smile. "Rabbit stew, probably."

"Flatterer."

His smile slowly faded. "Might be Blue Jenner could get both of us away."

"Gudrun and the stableboy, living out their lives herding goats by a mountain stream?"

He shrugged again. "I've always liked goats."

"You've got a lot in common." She gripped his hand, looked into his eyes, trying to explain it to him. Trying to explain it to herself. "I am a queen, whether I feel like one or not. I can't just be whoever I want to. I have to lead. I have to stand for Throvenland. The blood of Bail is in my veins."

"So you keep saying." He rubbed at the faint scar on her palm with his thumb. "I'd like to see it stay there."

"So would I. But my father died defending this place." She pulled her hand free of his. "I won't run."

"I know. Nice to dream, though." He gave a weary groan as he started to sit up. "I should go."

She caught him first, dragging him close, heard him sigh and felt all the resistance sag out of him. She liked the power she had over him. Not a queen's power. Just her own.

"You don't want to stay?" she whispered in his ear.

"Can't think of a queen whose bed I'd rather be in." He turned his head to look up at her. "Well, Laithlin is a damn handsome woman—ah!"

She caught him by the shoulder and pushed him down, slipping her leg over his hips so she straddled him. She kissed him, slow kisses while they still had time, while they still had breath, easing away a little with each one, smiling as she felt him straining up to meet her—

"My queen!"

She could not have sprung from the bed more quickly had it been on fire, staring toward the door as it rattled from heavy knocks outside.

"What is it?" she called, getting her elbow caught in her shift and nearly tearing it in her hurry to pull it on.

"My queen!" Blue Jenner's voice. "There are ships off the coast!"

—

"WHERE THE HELL'S RAITH?" snapped Jenner as he followed Skara down the walls, her hood up against the drizzle.

"Hiding in my bed," was most likely not the best answer, but a good liar mixes in truth wherever possible, and Skara was getting to be a better liar every day. "He hasn't always been at my door the past few nights," she said, offhand. "I have a feeling he's finding comfort with a girl."

Jenner grunted. "Guess I can't blame him."

"No." Skara hurried up the steps toward the roof of the Seaward Tower. "We have to take whatever comfort we can get."

"They were Gettlanders." Master Hunnan stood at the battlements, frowning into the night. "Six ships."

"Were?" snapped Skara, stepping up beside him and staring out to Mother Sea, trying not to think of the long, long drop to the waves. Off to the north she saw lights on the water. Whoever they were, they had lamps burning, but they were already drifting away into the darkness. She felt her shoulders slump.

"They tried to break through to the fortress but they were soon driven off," growled Hunnan. "They're rowing back north fast as ever they can with a dozen of the High King's ships following tight as hounds on a fox."

Hope died like embers doused with ice, and Skara propped her fists on the battlements and frowned into the black sea, the smallest glimmer of moonlight on the waves.

"Queen Laithlin's ships, I reckon." Blue Jenner tugged thoughtfully at his beard. "But if their aim was to slip in why are they lit so brightly?"

Skara glimpsed a shadow flitting on the dark water and the embers of hope suddenly flared brighter than ever. "Because they were only a distraction. There!" She threw an arm around Jenner's shoulders, pointing with the other. She could see oars dipping now, a ship driving straight and swift

toward the harbor.

“I think she has doves for prow-beasts,” murmured Hunnan.

“It’s the *South Wind*!” Skara hugged Blue Jenner tight. “Order the chains dropped!”

“Drop the chains!” roared the old sailor, hugging her every bit as hard. “Father Yarvi’s back!”

IV.

SUN-OATH,
MOON-OATH

The hinges groaned, a crack of light showing down the middle of the gates, then widening. Dawn fell on the hard faces in the entrance passage. On Gorm's scars. On Rulf and Jenner's weather-battered cheeks. On Father Yarvi's gaunt frown. It glinted at the corners of Skara's eyes, the cords in her neck shifting as she swallowed.

"You should stay here," said Raith, knowing she'd never agree.

She didn't. "If we plan to surrender, I should be there."

Raith glanced at Mother Scaer, hunched in the shadows, something bulky held under her coat, a gleam of dull metal showing as she shifted from one foot to the other.

"We don't plan to surrender," he said.

"But we must seem to. And anyway." Skara set her thin shoulders under the weight of her mail, narrowing her eyes against the glare. "I mean to look Bright Yilling in the face when he dies."

Raith could've told her there were no secrets worth learning in the face of a dying man, not even your bitterest enemy. Only pain and fear. A glimpse of the pain and fear you'd feel when your turn came. And everyone's turn would come soon enough. But those who knew it didn't want to hear it, and those who didn't had to learn it for themselves. So Raith kept silent.

The gate stood wide open, now, the boot-scarred, wreckage-strewn, arrow-wounded ground stretching away, cold and empty, dew glittering in the grass. Far off, just showing in the dawn haze, were the sharpened stakes that marked the High King's lines.

Blue Jenner cleared his throat. "We sure about this plan?"

"Bit late to think up another," said Rulf.

"We have waded into the swamp to our necks," Mother Scaer snarled through clenched teeth, and she twisted her head in a circle and made her neck bones click. "The only way out is through."

"We are sure." Father Yarvi showed no sign of second thoughts, the tapping of his staff echoing from the elf-stone walls as he set off down the entrance passage. Strolling toward the Last Door with elf-magic their only hope of victory. Everything gambled on one last, mad cast of the runes. The gods knew Raith had never been much for prayers, but he mouthed a quick one then.

"Stay close," he muttered over his shoulder.

Skara's eyes were fixed ahead. "I know where to be."

As they stepped into the dawn they spread out to make an arrowhead. Father Yarvi went at the point, head high. Raith, Jenner and Rulf took the left, Gorm, Soryorn and Hunnan the right, all six of them carrying the biggest shields they could find and wishing they were bigger. Skara and Mother Scaer walked behind. Dosduvoi came last, a dove prow-beast mounted on a pole and held high above them, to show they came in peace.

Even if there'd never been a bigger lie.

KOLL STOOD ABOVE THE GATE, frowning into the wind. Frowning down at the ten tiny figures creeping out across no-man's land. Frowning at the few men of the *South Wind's* crew scattered on the walls, clinging to the relics they brought out from Strokom. Frowning toward the High King's army, surrounding Bail's Point on every side, like the jaws of a world-swallowing wolf about to snap shut.

Everywhere the glint of metal caught the dawn. The banners of heroes stirred in the breeze. The greatest warriors of Yutmark, Inglefold and the Lowlands. The fiercest of the Shends. The most ruthless mercenaries, dragged from every corner of the world by the promise of plunder. All the High King's matchless power, gathered by Grandmother Wexen in one place and with one purpose. The greatest host assembled since the elves made war on God, and fixed on Koll's destruction.

Well, not just his, but if things went ill for Father Yarvi the future for his apprentice did not exactly burn bright.

Koll realized he was clutching tight at the battlements and made his aching hands unclench. He hadn't felt this scared since...the last time he felt this scared. Not long ago, now he thought about it. There had been Strokom, and before that Prince Varoslaf, and before that the climb up the walls not far from where he stood.

"Gods," he muttered to himself, watching those ten little figures halt on a hump of ground to await the inevitable. "I need to learn courage."

"Or better yet," murmured Skifr, "avoid danger."

He glanced down at the old woman, sitting cross-legged, her head tipped back against the chill stone, her hood of rags drawn over her face so all he could see was her mouth, twisted faintly in a smile.

"Can we really beat all these men?" he whispered, tugging nervously at one hand with the other.

Skifr unfolded her long limbs and stood, twitching back her hood. "All these? Hah!" She rummaged in her nose with one long finger, then neatly flicked the results over the walls toward the High King's men. "I almost wish there were more." She held out her hand and, ever so gingerly, as though afraid it might burst into flames, which indeed he was, Koll handed her the first of the drums. "No host of men can stand against the power of the elves." Skifr tapped the drum against the side of her head then slotted it into the blunt elf-relic she carried, knocked it home with a click, spun it so it gave a whirring rattle and the letters written upon it became a blur. "You will see."

"Do I want to see?"

"All will see, whether they wish to or no." And Skifr planted one boot on the battlements, elbow propped on her knee so that her elf weapon pointed at the gray sky. High above them, birds were gently circling. Sensing a meal would soon be served, perhaps. "Be happy, boy, if you know how." Skifr took a long breath through her nose, and smiling blew it out. "The signs are auspicious."

Soft and low, in the language of the elves, she began to chant.

SKARA SAW THEM NOW, and her heart began to beat even faster. A group of warriors, forming a loose arrowhead like theirs, striking out from the High King's lines across the open ground toward them.

Time crawled. She burned to run, to fight, to scream, to do anything but stand still and wait.

No ordinary warriors, these. Their fame was displayed for the world to see in the bright ring-money on their arms and their fingers. Their victories boasted of by the gold on their sword-hilts, the amber on their shield-rims, the engraved patterns on their high helmets.

“Pretty bastards,” snarled Raith through tight lips.

“More jewels between ’em than a royal wedding,” grunted Blue Jenner.

They all smiled. Just as they had smiled when they killed the people she loved. Just as they had smiled when they burned the hall, the city, the country she grew up in, and Skara felt her stomach give a painful squeeze, sweat prickling under the weight of her mail.

“How many of them?” she heard Gorm mutter.

“I count twenty-five,” said Rulf. “And a minister.”

“Mother Adwyn,” growled Scaer. “Grandmother Wexen’s errand girl.” Somewhere behind them, faint on the breeze, Skara could hear chanting.

“Twenty or twenty thousand,” Father Yarvi shifted his grip about his elf staff, “this will end the same way.”

Skara wondered what way that would be as she watched Bright Yilling amble forward at the head of his Companions.

Apart from the fresh cut Uthil had given him, it was the same face she had seen when her grandfather died. The same bland smile he had worn when he cut off Mother Kyre’s head. The same dead eyes that had looked into Skara’s in the darkness of the Forest. She felt her gorge rising, clenched her fists, clenched her jaw, clenched her arse, as Yilling swaggered to a stop a few strides from Father Yarvi.

“A shame,” he said. “I was looking forward to coming in there for you.”

“We have saved you the trouble,” snapped Skara.

“No trouble, Queen Skara.” She felt her breath catch as Yilling’s eyes met hers, and he gave a puzzled little frown. “Wait, though...have we met before?” He jumped up in a boyish little caper of excitement. “I know you! The slave in King Fynn’s hall!” He slapped at his thigh in delight. “You surely outwitted me that night!”

“And will again,” she said.

“I fear that time has passed.” Yilling’s eyes wandered on. “Have you come to fight me, Breaker of Swords, as Uthil did?”

Gorm shook his head as he watched Yilling’s Companions, hands loose on sword hilts, ax handles, spear hafts, all confident menace. “I fear that time has passed too,” he said.

“A shame. I had hoped to send Death another famed warrior, and add your song to mine and so make a greater.” Yilling squinted over his shoulder at Mother Sun, and gave a smoky sigh. “Perhaps Thorn Bathu will step from the shadows now. She killed my favorite horse in one of her raids, you know.” He raised a brow at the man beside him. A tall man with a horn at his belt. “Rude of her, eh, Vorenhold?”

Vorenhold’s teeth showed white in his beard. “That is her reputation.”

“Warriors.” Bright Yilling puffed out his smooth cheeks. “Obsessed with their fame. You must be

Father Yarvi.”

“He is.” Adwyn’s purple-stained lips were twisted with contempt. “And I am surprised to see you here. I felt sure you had wriggled away as soon as the fighting started.”

Gettland’s minister shrugged. “I wriggled back.” The blood was thumping in Skara’s skull. Mother Scaer shifted her shoulders, something moving beneath her coat.

Bright Yilling kept smiling. “I am glad to finally meet you in person. You are a young man, to have caused so much trouble.”

“One could say the same of you,” said Yarvi. The chanting was growing louder. One of the Companions was frowning up toward the gatehouse. “Is it true that after you killed King Bratta you made a cup from his skull?”

“I did.” Yilling gave a happy shrug. “But the wine leaked out of the nose holes.”

“There is a lesson there,” said Yarvi, and Skara saw he gripped his staff so tight the tendons stood stark from the bloodless back of his hand. “Things do not always go the way we hope.”

“A lesson you should have learned,” snapped Mother Adwyn. “Not long ago, Grandmother Wexen gave you another chance, but you slapped her hand away.” Skara bared her teeth at that. She remembered no chances, only the corpses on the floor of the Forest. Only Yaletoft burning on the black horizon. “You have nothing left to bargain with. You will all be led to Skekenhouse in chains to face the judgment of the One God.”

“Judgment is coming!” Skara remembered her grandfather toppling into the firepit. The blood pit-pattering from the point of Yilling’s sword. Her heart was beating so hard it almost strangled her voice. “But not from the One God. And not to us!”

The smiles of the Companions were fading, their hands straying toward their weapons. Bright Yilling tidied a strand of hair behind one ear. “She looks well but she talks too much.” And he peered up toward the walls of the fortress, where the strange wailing was growing too loud to ignore.

Mother Adwyn was glaring at Yarvi. “You and Queen Laithlin stand accused of using elf-magic, and must answer for your crimes!”

“Must I?” Father Yarvi barked out a laugh. “Let me show you what elf-magic looks like.”

He jerked his staff up so it rested on his withered hand, the end pointed toward Bright Yilling’s chest.

The High King’s champion had an expression between puzzled and bored. He lifted his hand toward Yarvi, as though to brush aside this minister’s blather.

“Greet your mistress!” screamed Skara.

There was a sharp pop. Something flew from the top of Yarvi’s staff. Yilling’s fingers vanished and his face was spattered with blood.

He took a drunken step back, frowning down. He pawed at his chest with his ruined hand. Skara saw a little hole in his bright mail there. It was already turning dark with blood.

“Uh,” he grunted, brows high with surprise, and toppled backward.

Someone said, “Gods.”

A sword hissed as it was drawn.

A shield-rim caught the sun and flashed in Skara’s eyes.

She was knocked sideways as Mother Scaer elbowed past her, shrugging her coat off one shoulder. She heard wing beats as somewhere in the grass a bird took to the skies.

Vorenhold lifted his spear, bridge of his nose creasing with rage. “You treacherous—”

Mother Scaer stepped between Gorm and Soryorn as they raised their shields, the sinews in her tattooed arm flexing as she lifted the great elf-relic to her shoulder.

“No!” screamed Mother Adwyn.

ANOTHER KIND OF STEEL

Raith was throwing up his arm to block that gilded spear when the shield of the man who held it was ripped apart, the iron rim flopping. He was flung back as if by a giant's hammer, his fine green-dyed cloak on fire and his broken spear tumbling away end over end.

Then came the thunder.

A noise like the Breaking of God, a rattling boom fast as a woodpecker strikes. Mother Scaer's elf-weapon jerked in her grip like a thing alive, her whole body shaking with its mad fury, her scream turned to a jagged warble, shards of metal showering from its top and fire spitting from its mouth.

Before Raith's smarting eyes Bright Yilling's Companions, storied warriors every one, were in the space of a snatched breath all smashed like beetles on an anvil, mown down like corn before the scythe, blood and splinters and mail-rings showering and their bent and shattered weapons spinning and their ruined limbs flying one from another like straw in a mad gale.

Even as his jaw was dropping Raith heard more cracks behind them, fire stabbing from the walls of the fortress. He flinched at a flash in the High King's lines, a monstrous blooming of fire, broken stakes and earth and armor and men and the parts of men thrown high into the air. The ground shook, Father Earth himself trembling at the power of the elves released.

His ax seemed a pointless little thing now and Raith let it fall, caught Skara's arm and dragged her down behind his shield, Blue Jenner locking with him on one side and Rulf on the other to form a feeble little wall, huddling in terror while the ministers sent Death across the ruined fields before Bail's Point.

—

THERE WAS A GREAT thud as the weapon jolted in Skifr's hands again, a trail of fog curving down through the air toward the High King's lines. It touched the earth among some penned-up horses. Koll gasped as fire shot up in clawing fingers, clapped his hands over his ears at the shuddering boom.

Horses were flung into the air like the toys of a bad-tempered child, others reared on fire, or charged off, dragging burning wagons. Koll gave a kind of moan of horror and dismay. He hadn't known what the elf-engines would do, but he hadn't dared guess it might be this.

The gods knew he was no lover of fighting, but he could understand why bards sung of battles. The matching of warrior against warrior. Of skill against skill and courage against courage. There was no skill or courage here. Nothing noble in this blind destruction.

But Skifr wasn't interested in nobility, only vengeance. She slapped the side of her weapon and the drum dropped out, tumbling down the outside of the wall to bounce in the ditch. She held out her hand.

"More."

Everywhere elf-relics clattered, stuttered, stabbed, battering Koll's hearing so he could hardly

think.

“I...” he stammered, “I...”

“Pfft.” Skifr dug her hand into his bag and pulled out another drum. “You told me once you wanted to see magic!” She locked it into the smoking slot where the first had been.

“I changed my mind.” Wasn’t that what he did best, after all? But over the noise of screaming weapons, screaming men, screaming beasts, no one could have heard him, let alone taken the slightest notice.

He blinked out over the parapet, nose almost on the stone, trying to make sense of the chaos. Over to the north there seemed to be fighting. Steel glinting through drifting smoke. Signs of bone and hide bobbing over a seething throng.

Koll’s eyes widened even further. “The Shends have turned on the High King!”

“Just as Father Yarvi told them to,” said Skifr.

Koll stared at her. “He never told me.”

“If you have not learned that Father Yarvi is a man who says as little as possible, there is no help for you.”

To the east the High King’s men were struggling to form a shield-wall. Koll saw a warrior running forward, holding up his sword. Great bravery, but it was a wall of cobwebs. There was a barking clatter from the little knot of shields around the *South Wind*’s prow-beast and the would-be hero fell, shields knocked from the line beyond him like coins flicked over.

“That won’t do,” said Skifr, pressing the elf-weapon to her cheek. Koll wanted to weep as he pushed his fingers into his ears. Another thud. Another trail of fog. One more earth-shaking boom, a vast hole ripped from the line. How many men gone in an instant? Burned away as though they had never been or flung ruined like sparks whirling from Rin’s forge?

They crumbled, of course. How could men fight the power that broke God? Swords and bows were useless. Mail and shields were useless. Courage and fame were useless. The High King’s invincible army streamed down the road and across the fields in a mad confusion, not caring where they ran as long as it was away from Bail’s Point, trampling through their camps and flinging away their gear, driven by the screaming Shends and the merciless elf-weapons, turned from men with one purpose to animals with none in their panic.

Squinting into the dawn haze, Koll saw more movement beyond them—horses spilling from the trees near the abandoned village.

“Riders,” he said, pointing.

Skifr lowered the elf-weapon and snapped out a laugh. “Hah! Unless my eye for portents deceives me, that is my finest pupil at work. Thorn never was one to miss out on a fight.”

“It’s not a fight,” murmured Koll. “It’s a slaughter.”

“Thorn never was one to miss out on a slaughter either.”

Skifr stood tall, burns creasing on her neck as she stretched up to look about her. Everywhere, Grandmother Wexen’s mighty host was being scattered like chaff on the wind, Thorn’s horsemen moving among them, steel flashing as they cut them down, harrying them through the blackened ruins of the village and off to the north.

“Huh.” She pulled the drum from her elf-weapon and tossed it back to Koll, made him juggle it in a panic before he clutched it desperately to his chest. “It seems the day is ours.”

SLOWLY, WEAKLY, HESITANTLY AS a moth breaking from its cocoon, Skara pushed Raith’s limp arm away and, using the rim of his shield like a crutch, wobbled to her feet.

The sounds all seemed strange. Screaming, and shouts, and the calls of birds. Now and again the stuttering bark of elf-weapons. But all far away, as though it happened in another time and place.

Mother Scaer stood rubbing her bruised shoulder. With a grimace of disgust she tossed her still-smoking relic to the ground.

“Are you hurt, my queen?” Blue Jenner’s voice. It took Skara a moment to realize he was talking to her. She looked stupidly down at herself. Her mailshirt was all twisted and she tried to drag it straight, brushed mud from her side.

“Dirty,” she mumbled, as though that mattered, her tongue clumsy in her dry mouth as she blinked across the battlefield. If it could be called a battle.

The line of stakes was buckled and torn, great pits dug from it and broken earth and broken gear and broken bodies flung into smoldering heaps. The High King’s army, so terrible a few moments before, was burned away like the morning fog before Mother Sun.

Father Yarvi gazed down at the shattered bodies of Yilling’s Companions, his elf staff, his elf weapon, tucked under one arm. Not frowning or smiling. Not weeping, or laughing. A studied calmness on his face. A craftsman well satisfied with his morning’s work.

“Up, Mother Adwyn,” he said.

From among the corpses the minister lifted her head, red hair plastered to her scalp with clotted blood.

“What have you done?” She stared at Yarvi in slack disbelief, tear-streaks on her mud-spattered face. “What have you done?”

Yarvi twisted his withered hand in her coat and dragged her up by it. “Exactly what you accused me of!” he snarled. “Where is your court for this? Where is the jury? Who will judge me now?” And he rattled his elf staff, his elf weapon, in her face, and threw her down cringing among the bodies.

One of them had somehow staggered up, blinking about him like a man woken from a dream. Vorenhold, though Skara hardly recognized him now. His mail was as tattered as a beggar’s coat, his shield hanging in splinters from its bent rim, one earless side of his face all scored and bloody and the arm that had held a spear gone at the elbow.

He fumbled the horn from his belt, lifted it as though to give a blast, then saw the mouthpiece was broken off. “What happened?” he mumbled.

“Your death.” Gorm put a hand on his shoulder and pushed him gently down to his knees, then with a sweep of his sword sent his head spinning away.

“Where is Yilling?” murmured Skara, tottering to the corpses. Gods, she could hardly tell one from another. Those who had stood so proud a few moments before, made butcher’s offal. Perhaps she should have felt triumph, but all she felt was terror.

“This is the end of the world,” she whispered. The end of the world she had known, anyway. What had been strong was strong no longer. What had been certain was wreathed in a fog of doubt.

“Careful, my queen,” Raith muttered, but she hardly heard him, let alone marked him.

She had seen Bright Yilling’s body, wedged among the others, arms flung wide, one leg folded beneath him, mail soaked dark with blood.

She crept closer. She saw the smooth cheek, the long scratch Uthil had given him.

Closer yet, fascinated, fearful. She saw the bland little smile on the plump lips, even in death.

She leaned down over him. The same blank eyes that had haunted her dreams ever since that night in the Forest. The night she had sworn vengeance.

Did his cheek twitch?

She gasped as his eyes flicked to hers, gave a squawk of shock as his hand clutched her mail and dragged her down. So her ear was pressed to his face. So she heard his rasping breath. But not just breath. Words too. And words can be weapons.

Her hand was on her dagger’s grip. She could have drawn it. Could have sent him through the Last Door with a flick of her wrist. She had dreamed of it often enough. But she thought of her grandfather, then. *Be as generous to your enemies as your friends. Not for their sake, but for your own.*

She heard Raith growl, felt his shadow fall across them, stabbed her palm out behind her to stop him. Bright Yilling’s hand fell, and she pulled away from him to see his red-spotted face.

He pressed something weakly into Skara’s palm. A leather pouch, and inside she saw slips of paper. Slips like the ones Mother Kyre used to unfold from the talons of Grandmother Wexen’s eagles.

She leaned down over Bright Yilling, the fear gone, and the hate gone too. She took his hand in hers, slipped her other around the back of his head and gently lifted it toward her.

“Tell me the name,” she murmured, and turned her ear to his lips. Close enough to hear his final breath. His final word.

It was a great affair.

Many powerful Gettlanders who had not gone to war would be angered that King Uthil was howed up at Bail's Point, denying them the chance to have their importance noted at an event that would live so long in the memory.

But Laithlin forced through clenched teeth, "Their anger is dust to me." Her husband's death had made her queen-regent, the young King Druin clinging to her skirts and her power greater than ever. Thorn Bathu hovered at her shoulder with an eye so vicious and vengeful only the bravest dared meet it even for a moment. Once Laithlin spoke it was a thing already done.

And, after all, there was no shortage of famed figures to attend the Iron King's funeral.

There was the young Queen Skara of Throvenland, lately a pitiful refugee, now celebrated for her courage, her compassion and her deep cunning most of all, her white-haired bodyguard frowning silent behind her chair.

There was her betrothed, Grom-gil-Gorm, the Breaker of Swords and Maker of Orphans, his chain of pommels grown longer than ever, his feared minister Mother Scaer brooding at his side.

There was the infamous sorceress Skifr, who had killed more warriors in a few moments than King Uthil in a bloody lifetime, sitting with her cloak of rags drawn tight about her, reckoning the omens in the dirt between her crossed legs.

There was Svidur, a high priestess of the Shends, a green elf-tablet on a thong around her neck. It turned out Father Yarvi had once begged guest-right at her fire after a storm, then convinced her to make an alliance with Grandmother Wexen, then, when it suited him, to break it.

There was the deep-cunning Minister of Gettland himself, of course, who had brought elf-weapons from the forbidden depths of Strokom, and used them to destroy the High King's army, and changed the Shattered Sea for ever.

And there was his apprentice, Koll, whose coat was too thin for the season, and so sat cold and mournful in the sea wind feeling as if he had no business being there.

The king's ship, the best in the crowded harbor of Bail's Point, twenty-four oars upon a side, was dragged by honored warriors to the chosen place, keel grinding against the stones in the yard of the fortress. The same ship in which King Uthil had sailed across the Shattered Sea on his famous raid to the Islands. The same ship which had wallowed low in the water with slaves and plunder when he returned in triumph.

On its deck they laid the body of the king, wrapped in the captured standard of Bright Yilling, rich offerings arranged about him in the manner Brinyolf the Prayer-Weaver judged the gods would most appreciate.

Rulf laid a single arrow beside the body, and Koll reckoned he was struggling to keep back tears. "From nothing, to nothing," he croaked out.

Father Yarvi laid his withered hand on the old helmsman's arm. "But what a journey in between."

Queen Laithlin put a cloak of black fur over the dead king's shoulders, and helped her little son wedge a jeweled cup in his fists, then she placed one hand upon his chest, and stood looking down, her jaw clenched tight, until Koll heard Father Yarvi lean close to her and murmur, "Mother?"

She turned without a word and led the mourners to their chairs, the sea wind catching the battered grass on which the battle had been fought, or the slaughter perpetrated, and setting it thrashing about their feet.

Three dozen captured horses were led onto the ship, hooves clattering at the timbers, and slaughtered so that their blood washed the deck. All agreed Death would show King Uthil through the Last Door with respect.

"The dead will tremble at the news of his coming," murmured the Breaker of Swords, and gave a great sniff, and Koll saw tears glistening on his grizzled cheeks.

"Why do you cry?" asked Skara.

"The passing of a fine enemy through the Last Door is as great a sorrow as the passing of a fine friend. Uthil was both to me."

Father Yarvi helped the young King Druin set a torch to the pitch-soaked kindling. In a moment the ship was all ablaze, a sorrowful moan drawn from the warriors gathered in a great half circle. They told sad tales of Uthil's prowess, and sang sad songs of his high weaponluck, and spoke of how the like of his swordwork would never be seen again.

His heir, not even three years old, sat dwarfed in a great chair with his feet dangling, the sword that Rin had forged and that his father had carried with him always laid naked across his knees, beaming at the procession of warriors who shuffled past to offer sorrow and loyalty and grave-gifts but lately stolen from the High King's fallen. He said "hello" to every one, and ate cakes given to him by his mother until there was honey smeared all around his mouth.

Father Yarvi glanced sideways at him. "Two years old, and he handles this with better grace than I did."

"Perhaps." Queen Laithlin ruffled Druin's pale blond hair. "He sits straighter, but he has not sworn so fine an oath as you did."

"He does not have to." Yarvi's jaw worked as he looked back to the fire. "Mine still binds us all."

They sat, cold and silent, as Father Moon rose and his children the stars showed themselves, and the flames of the burning ship, and the burning goods, and the burning king lit up the faces of the hundred hundred mourners. They sat until the procession of warriors was over, and the boy-king was snoring gently in Queen Skara's arms. They sat until the flames sank to a flickering, and the keel sagged into whirling embers, and the first muddy smear of dawn touched the clouds, glittering on the restless sea and setting the little birds twittering in the grass.

Queen Skara leaned sideways, and laid her hand gently on Queen Laithlin's, and Koll heard her murmur, "I am sorry."

"Don't be. He died as he would have wanted to, with steel in his hand. The Iron King! And yet... there was so much more in him than iron. I only wish...that I had been beside him at the end." Laithlin shook herself, pulled her hand free of Skara's to briskly wipe her eyes. "But I know what things are worth, cousin, and you will buy nothing with wishes."

Then the queen regent clapped her hands and the slaves with clinking collar chains began to dig the earth over the still-smoldering pyre, raising a great howe that would stand tall beside that of Queen Skara's father, killed in battle, and her great-grandfather Horrenhod the Red, and kings and queens of Throvenland, the descendants of Bail the Builder himself, dwindling away into the mist of history.

Laithlin stood, adjusting the great key of Gettland's treasury, and spoke in a voice that betrayed neither doubt nor sorrow. "Gather the men. We sail for Skekenhouse."

Away down the road, the High King's captured warriors were still heaping the High King's fallen warriors on poorer pyres. Pyres for a dozen, pyres for a hundred, their smoke smudging the sky for miles around.

Koll had become a minister to learn, not to kill. To change the world, not to break it. "When does it end?" he muttered.

"When I fulfill my oath." Father Yarvi's eyes were dry as he stared out toward gray Mother Sea. "Not a moment before."

—

UNTIL HE REACHED THE BOTTOM STEP, Koll was still arguing with himself over whether to go down.

He could hear the tapping of Rin's hammer. Her tuneless humming under her breath as she worked. Time was that seemed a welcome as he stepped through her door. A song sung just for him. Now he felt like an eavesdropper, prying on a private conversation between her and the anvil.

She was frowning as she worked, a warm yellow glimmer across her face, mouth pressed into a firm line and the key she wore tossed over her shoulder so the chain was tight around her sweaty neck. She never did things by halves. He'd always loved that about her.

"You took to working gold?" he said.

She looked up, and when her eyes met his they seemed to steal his breath. He thought how much he'd missed her. How much he wanted to hold her. Be held by her. He'd always thought, hating to admit it to himself, that maybe she wasn't pretty enough. That maybe someone prettier would trip and fall into his arms. Now he couldn't believe he'd ever felt that way.

Gods, he was a fool.

"King Druin's head is smaller than his father's." Rin held up the resized King's Circle in her pliers, then set it back and carried on tapping.

"I thought you were only interested in steel?" He tried to wander into the forge the same carefree way he used to, but every step was a nervy challenge. "Swords for kings and mail for queens."

"After what those elf-weapons did, I've a feeling swords and mail might not be quite so popular. You have to change. Make the best of what life deals you. Face your misfortunes with a smile, eh?" Rin snorted. "That's what Brand would've said."

Koll flinched at the name. At the thought he'd let Brand down, who'd treated him like a brother.

"Why did you come here, Koll?"

He swallowed at that. Folk always said he'd a gift with words. But the truth was he'd a gift with ones that meant nothing. At saying what he actually felt he'd no gift at all. He pushed his hand into his pocket, felt the cool weight of the golden elf-bangle he'd taken from Strokorn. A peace offering, if

she'd have it.

"I guess I've been thinking...maybe..." He cleared his throat, mouth dry as dust as he glanced up guiltily at her. "I made the wrong choice?" He'd meant it to be a firm admission. An open confession. Came out a self-justifying little squeak.

Rin looked less than impressed. "Did you tell Father Yarvi you made the wrong choice?"

He winced down at his feet but his shoes didn't have the answers. Shoes don't tend to. "Not yet..." He couldn't get the breath to say he would do, if she asked him to.

She didn't. "Last thing I want to do is upset you, Koll." He winced harder at that. Something folk only say when upsetting you is their first priority. "But I reckon whatever choice you make, you soon get to thinking you made the wrong one."

He would've liked to say that wasn't fair. Would've liked to say he was so caught up between what Father Yarvi wanted, and what Rin wanted, and what Brand would've wanted, and what his mother would've wanted, he hardly knew what he wanted at all anymore.

But all he managed was to croak out, "Aye. I'm not proud of myself."

"Nor am I." She tossed her hammer down, and when he met her eye she didn't look angry. Sad. Guilty, even. He was starting to hope that might mean she'd forgive him when she said, "I laid with someone else."

Took him a moment to catch up, and when he did he wished he hadn't. His fist closed painful tight around the elf-bangle in his pocket. "You...Who?"

"What does it matter? It wasn't about him."

He stood staring at her, suddenly furious. He felt ambushed. Wronged. He knew he had no right to feel that way, and that only made him feel worse. "You think I want to hear that?"

She blinked, caught somewhere between guilt and anger. "I hope you hate to hear it."

"That why you did it?"

Anger won. "I did it because I needed to, you selfish prick!" she barked. "Not everything's about you and your great big talents and your great big choices and your great big bloody future." She stabbed at her chest with her finger. "*I* needed something and you chose not to be here!" She turned her back on him. "No one'll complain if you choose not to be here again."

The tapping of her hammer chased him back up the steps. Back to the courtyard of Bail's Point, and the war, and the smoke of dead men.

Raith's back ached, and his chest was sore, and his long-broken hand and his newly burned hand both stung in their own ways from the work. He'd dug ten graves' worth of mud already, and found no sign of Rakki, but he kept digging.

He'd always fretted over what his brother might do without him. Never thought about what he'd do without his brother. Maybe he'd never really been the strong one after all.

Spade up, spade down, and the calm thud, thud of the blade in the soil, and the steady heaping of the earth to either side. It spared him from having to think.

"Looking for treasure?"

A long figure stood at the lip of the pit with Mother Sun behind, hands on hips, gold and silver glinting on the unshaved side of her head. The last person he'd hoped to run into out here. But so it goes, with hopes.

"Digging for my brother's body."

"What's that worth now?"

"It's worth something to me." He flung soil so it scattered across her boots, but Thorn Bathu wasn't one to be put off by a little dirt.

"You'll never find him. Even if you do, what then?"

"I build a proper pyre, and I burn him proper, and I bury him proper."

"Queen Skara was thinking of burying Bright Yilling proper. She says you have to be generous to your enemies."

"And?"

"I bent his sword in half and buried that. His carcass I cut up and left for the crows. I reckon that more generous than he deserved."

Raith swallowed. "I try not to think about what men deserve."

"The dead are past help, boy." Thorn closed one nostril with her finger and blew snot onto Raith's diggings through the other. "All you can do is take a price from the living. I'll be heading to Skekenhouse in the morning. Take a price from the High King for my husband."

"What price will pay for that?"

"His head'll make a start!" she snarled at him, spit flecking from her twisted lips.

Being honest, her fury scared him a little. Being honest, it excited him a lot.

Reminded him of his own. Reminded him of a simpler time, when he knew who he was. When he knew who his enemies were, and all he wanted was to kill them.

"Thought you might want to come along," said Thorn.

"Didn't think you liked me much."

"I think you're a bloody little bastard." She poked a stone with her toe and it rolled down into the

pit. “That’s just the kind of man I’m after.”

Raith licked his lips, that old fire flickering up in him like Thorn was the sparking flint and he was the ready tinder.

She was right. Rakki was dead, and no amount of digging would help him.

He chopped the shovel hard into the soil. “I’m with you.”

SKARA WAS CHANGED. OR perhaps she’d been changing bit by bit, and he hadn’t seen it till now.

She’d given up the mail, and looked less like the great painting of Ashenleer behind her. But she still wore the long dagger at her belt, and the arm ring with the red stone Bail the Builder once wore into battle. She still had the sword Rin made, though some boy from among the burned-out farmers knelt beside her with it in Raith’s place.

A queen indeed, and with learned advisors at her side. Blue Jenner hadn’t lost his raider’s slouch, but he’d cut back his wispy hair, and trimmed close his beard, and gained a fine fur and a gold chain to sit on top of it. Owd had shed weight and heaped on dignity since she was Mother Scaer’s apprentice, a disapproving frown on her sharpened face as she watched Raith skulk into the audience chamber, his stolen helmet clutched under his arm.

Skara looked down at him, chin high and shoulders back so her neck seemed to go on a mile, quite at home in Bail’s great chair and seeming as lofty as Laithlin ever had. Could it really be the same girl whose bed he’d shared a few nights before? Whose fingers had trailed across the scars on his back? Whose whispers had tickled at his ear? Seemed a dream now. Maybe it had been.

He wobbled out a bow. Felt quite the fool, but what else could he do? “I’ve, er, been thinking—”

“*My queen* would be the proper opening,” said Mother Owd, and Skara made no effort to put her right.

Raith winced. “My queen...I’ve been offered a place on Thorn Bathu’s crew. To lead the attack on Skekenhouse.”

“You minded to take it?” asked Jenner, bushy brows high.

Raith made himself look right in Skara’s eyes. As if it was just the two of them, alone. Man and woman rather than killer and queen. “If you can spare me.”

Perhaps there was the faintest flicker of hurt in her face. Perhaps he just wanted to see one. Either way, her voice stayed smooth as glass. “You are a Vansterman. You have sworn me no oaths. You are free to go.”

“I have to,” said Raith. “For my brother.”

It actually hurt in his chest, he hoped so hard she’d say, *No, stay, I need you, I love you.*

But Skara only nodded. “Then I thank you for your faithful service.” Raith couldn’t stop his cheek from twitching. Faithful service, that was all he’d given her. The same as any dog. “You will be much missed.”

He tried to find some sign in her face that he’d be missed at all, but it was a mask. He glanced over his shoulder, saw a messenger from the Prince of Kalyiv waiting, fur hat clutched in eager hands, impatient for her moment.

Mother Owd was frowning down mightily at him. “If there is nothing else?” No doubt she guessed some part of what had gone on and was keen to see his back. Raith could hardly blame her.

His shoulders slumped as he turned away. Felt like he’d outwitted himself altogether. Used to be the only thing moved him was the chance at punching folk in the head. Skara had showed him a glimpse of something better, and he’d traded it for a vengeance he didn’t even want.

Blue Jenner caught up to him in the doorway. “Do what you have to. There’ll always be a place for you here.”

Raith wasn’t so sure. “Tell me, old man...if you’ve done evil things...does that make you evil?”

Jenner blinked at him. “Wish I had the answers, boy. All I know is there’s no changing yesterday. You can only look to do better tomorrow.”

“Aye, I reckon.” Raith wanted to give the old raider a parting hug, but that gold chain made him seem too grand. So he settled for just an awkward grin down at his boots, dirty from digging, and skulked away.

The dawn was crisp and clear, and Skara's breath, and Laithlin's breath, and Druin's breath, and the breath of their gathered guards and slaves and attendants made a gently rising cloud of smoke as they looked down from the ramp leading to the harbor.

King Uthil was ashes and King Druin too young for the task, so it fell to Father Yarvi to lead the fleet to their reckoning with the High King in Skekenhouse. Standing for Father Peace did not prevent the young minister of Gettland from doing Mother War's work that morning, and as well as any warrior.

As Mother Sun showed herself bright over the looming walls of Bail's Point she cast long shadows from dozens of prow-beasts, lined up neatly as the heads of horses on parade, every oarsman calm and ready. Father Yarvi gave one grim wave to Queen Laithlin, then his high, hard call rang out across the silent harbor, and as though all those hundreds of men had one mind and one body, the ships began to move.

"It seems Father Yarvi has become our leader," said Skara.

"War has a way of revealing things in people." The pride was plain in Laithlin's voice as she watched the ships of Gettland glide out to sea, two by two. "Some flourish and some falter. But I always knew Yarvi had resolve in him. Yours has surprised me more."

"Mine?"

"Did you not stand firm here against the numberless armies of the High King? You are very much changed, cousin, from the girl brought wet-eyed and weary into my chambers."

"We all are changed," murmured Skara.

She saw Thorn Bathu stand scowling at the prow of her ship, one boot up on the rail as though she could not get to Skekenhouse fast enough. The boat had belonged to one of Bright Yilling's Companions, a golden ram for a prow-beast, but Thorn had charred it black so it better fitted her black mood and, if you stood on the High King's side, her black reputation. Skara's eyes moved down the crew on their sea chests, dangerous men all bent on vengeance, until she saw a white head bobbing with the stroke and made herself look away.

Yesterday, in Bail's Hall, she had wanted to ask him to stay. To order him to stay. She had opened her mouth to do it, but at the last moment, she had let him go. She had made him go. She had not even been able to say a true goodbye. It would not have been proper.

She was not sure if you could call it love. It was nothing like the bards sing of. But whatever she felt was too powerful to risk having him outside her door every day, every night. That way she would have to be strong every moment, and sooner or later she would weaken. This way, she had to be strong only once.

It hurt her to push him away. It hurt her more to see how much she hurt him. But Mother Kyre had always told her hurts are part of life. All you can do is shoulder them, and carry on. She had her land,

and her people, and her duty to think of. Taking him into her bed had been foolish. Selfish. A reckless mistake, and she could not afford to make another.

Blue Jenner gave Skara a nod from the steering platform of the *Black Dog*, and as she raised her arm in reply a rousing cheer went up from the crews of Throvenland. Men had been flooding into Bail's Point since the victory to kneel before her and swear loyalty, and though the ships might have been taken from the High King, the warriors were hers.

"You must have twenty crews, now, cheering for you," said Laithlin.

"Twenty-two," said Skara, as she watched her ships follow the Gettlanders out of the harbor.

"No meager force."

"When I came to you I had nothing. I will never forget how much I owe you." Wanting to make some kind of gesture, Skara beckoned to her thrall. "You should take back the slave you lent me—"

"Has she displeased you?"

Skara saw the fear in the girl's eyes. "No. No, I just—"

"Keep her." Laithlin waved her back. "A gift. The first of many. You will soon be High Queen over the whole Shattered Sea, after all."

Skara stared at her. "What?"

"If the wind blows our way, Grandmother Wexen will be toppled from her high perch in the Tower of the Ministry. The priests of the One God will be driven back to the south. The High King will fall. Have you spared no thought for who will replace him?"

"I was a little distracted with getting through each day alive."

Laithlin snorted as if that was a petty reason to ignore the turning of the wheels of power. Perhaps it was. "The Breaker of Swords is the most famous warrior left alive. The one king never defeated in battle or duel." She nodded toward the wharves, and Skara saw him striding up the long ramp toward them, men ducking out of his way like scattering pigeons. "Grom-gil-Gorm will be High King. And you will be his wife."

Skara put a hand on her churning stomach. "I hardly feel ready to be queen of Throvenland."

"Who is ever ready? I was a queen at fifteen. My son is a king at two."

"It's sore," piped Druin, jerking the King's Circle from his head.

"He feels its weight already," murmured Laithlin, easing it gently back down over his wispy yellow hair. "I have buried two husbands. Those marriages began with what was best for Gettland, but they gave me my two sons. And, almost without realizing it, respect can develop. Liking. Even love." Laithlin's voice seemed suddenly broken. "Almost...without realizing it."

Skara said nothing. To be High Queen, and wear the key to the whole Shattered Sea. To kneel to no one, ever. To have whole nations look to her for an example. A girl just turned eighteen who could scarcely make her own stomach obey. She tried to calm her nervous guts as the Breaker of Swords stopped before them. Puking over the boots of her husband-to-be would make a poor omen.

"Queen Laithlin," he said, bowing awkwardly. "Queen Skara...I wished to trade a few words, before I leave for Skekenhouse. We are..." He winced toward the jostling ships, one hand fussing at the grips of the daggers that bristled from his belt.

"To be married?" Skara finished for him. She had always known she would not get to choose her

own husband but somehow, as a girl, she had fancied the perfect prince would be offered up and her head and her heart would be in blissful accord. Now she saw how naïve she had been. Her head knew Gorm was a good match. Her heart would have to make the best of it.

“Forgive me,” he said, “if lover’s words are...heavy in my mouth. I have always been more of a fighter.”

“That is no secret.” Strange how his nervousness made her feel calmer. “It is not a chain of conquered ladies’ keys you wear.”

“No, and nor will my wife.” The Breaker of Swords held up a chain, the low sun glinting on gold and silver, glittering on polished stones. “The pommels of Bright Yilling and his Companions,” he said, as he lifted them over Skara’s head. “You have claimed a famous vengeance for your grandfather.” He settled the chain upon the fur on her shoulders. “And deserve to wear them as proudly as I wear mine.”

Skara blinked down at the flashing jewel in the chain’s center, a diamond the size of an acorn in a claw of gold. She knew it well. Had seen it every night in her dreams. It had gleamed with reflected fire on the hilt of Bright Yilling’s sword as he killed Mother Kyre and King Fynn.

She felt a shiver of disgust, wanted to tear the chain off and fling it in the sea along with the memories of that night. But for better or worse they were part of her, and she could not refuse the gift. She straightened, and worked her shoulders back, and wondered if she did not like the weight of the chain upon them after all.

To her, it murmured a reassurance. She had been through the fire, and like the best steel come out stronger.

To others, it spoke a threat. No matter your fame, make an enemy of this woman and you will end up one more lump of metal on her chain.

“A gift fit for a High Queen of the Shattered Sea,” she said, pressing it to her chest.

“I wished to set your mind at rest since I am...perhaps not the man you would have chosen. I wished to tell you that I mean to be a good husband. To defer to you in matters of the coin and the key. To give you sons.”

Skara swallowed at that, but it was a proper thing to say, and Mother Kyre would never have forgiven her if she had not made a proper reply. “No less do I mean to be a good wife to you. To defer to you in matters of the plow and the sword. To give you daughters.”

Gorm’s craggy face broke out in a strange grin. “I hope so.” He glanced down at Druin, staring up at him from so far below. “Small people, at your feet, to whom you can give the future. That seems a fine thing.”

Skara tried not to let her doubts show. Tried to give a winning, willing smile. “We will find our way through it together, hand in hand.” And she held hers out to him.

It looked tiny, and white, and smooth in his great scarred paw. It looked like a child’s hand. But its grip was the firmer. It seemed his trembled.

“I have no doubt you will make as fine a husband as you do a warrior,” she said, putting her other hand under his to still it.

“We will be as formidable together as Mother Sea and Father Earth.” He brightened as he moved to more familiar ground. “And I will start by bringing you the High King’s head as a wedding gift!”

Skara winced. “I would prefer peace.”

“Peace comes when you have killed all your enemies, my queen.” Gorm took back his hand, bowed again, and strode off toward his ship.

“If that chain around his neck should have taught him anything,” murmured Laithlin, “it is that there are always more enemies.”

THE MINISTER'S BATTLEFIELD

“You think you have so much time,” said Skifr, staring into the flames. “So many brave prizes ahead, so many harvests to reap. Mark my words, my dove, before you realize it, your glorious future has become a set of tired old stories, and there is nothing ahead but dust.”

Koll puffed out his cheeks. The firelight on Skifr’s face reminded him of the forgelight on Rin’s, dragged their miserable last meeting to his mind. Two women could hardly have looked less alike, but when you’re in a sorry mood, everything brings up a sorry memory.

“Have some tea, eh?” he ventured, trying and failing to sound perky as he pulled the pot off the fire. “Perhaps things won’t seem so dark afterward—”

“Seize life with both hands!” snapped Skifr, making Koll jump and nearly upend the pot in his lap. “Rejoice in what you have. Power, wealth, fame, they are ghosts! They are like the breeze, impossible to hold. There is no grand destination. Every path ends at the Last Door. Revel in the sparks one person strikes from another.” She huddled into her cloak of rags. “They are the only light in the darkness of time.”

Koll dumped the pot back, making tea slop and hiss in the flames. “Have some tea, eh?” Then he left Skifr alone with her darkness, and took his own out of the ruin and onto the hillside, staring down toward Skekenhouse, seat of the High King.

The Tower of the Ministry rose from the center, perfect elf-stone and elf-glass soaring up and up, then sheared off by the Breaking of God, a crusting of man-made walls, towers, domes, roofs covering the wound like an unsightly scab. Specks circled those highest turrets. Doves, perhaps, like the ones Koll used to tend, bringing panicked messages from far-flung ministers. Or eagles sent out with Grandmother Wexen’s desperate last orders.

The High King’s vast new temple to the One God squatted in the elf tower’s shadow, a damned ugly thing for all the effort lavished upon it, still crusted with scaffolding after ten years of building, half the rafters bare like the rib-bones of a long-dead corpse. He’d built it to show men could make great works too. All he’d proved was how feeble their best efforts were beside the relics of the elves.

Roofs spread out around tower and temple in every direction, a maze of narrow streets between buildings of stone and buildings of wood and buildings of wattle and hide. Outside stood the famous elf-walls. Miles of them. Crumbling in places, shored up by man-built bastions and crowned by man-built battlements. But strong, still. Very strong.

“We need to get in,” Thorn was snarling, elf-bangle smoldering red as she glowered at the city like a wolf at a chicken coop. Koll wouldn’t have been surprised to see her drooling like one, she was that hungry for vengeance.

“No doubt,” said Mother Scaer, eyes narrowed to their habitual slits. “How, is the question?”

“We still have elf-weapons. I say we crack Grandmother Wexen’s shell and prick her from the

wreckage.”

“Even with elf-weapons it will take time to overcome those walls,” said Father Yarvi. “Who knows what mischief Grandmother Wexen could cook up in the meantime?”

“We could shoot burning arrows over them,” offered Rulf, patting his black horn bow. “Man-weapons will do for that, and we’d soon get a good blaze going.”

“This is my city now,” said Father Yarvi. “I do not wish to see it burned to the ground.”

“*Your* city?” sneered Mother Scaer.

“Of course.” Yarvi took his eyes from Skekenhouse and turned them calmly upon her. “I will be Grandfather of the Ministry, after all.”

Scaer gave a disbelieving snort. “Will you indeed?”

“If Vansterland is to have the High King’s chair, and Throvenland the High Queen’s key, it seems only fair that Gettland should have the Tower of the Ministry.”

Mother Scaer narrowed her eyes even further, trapped on uncomfortable ground between suspicion at the thought of Yarvi raised up and ambition at the thought of Gorm enthroned. “We should have a proper moot upon it.”

“Must people as wise as we really discuss the obvious? Must we hold a moot to establish that Mother Sun will follow Father Moon across the sky?”

“Only fools argue over what they don’t have,” murmured Koll. He seemed to be the only minister trying to smooth the way for Father Peace, and he hadn’t even sworn his Oath.

Rulf pushed his thumbs into his weathered sword-belt. “For weeks they were stuck outside our elf-walls. Now we’re stuck outside theirs.”

“Bright Yilling made the mistake of trying to climb over them or dig under them,” said Yarvi.

“What should he have done?” snapped Thorn.

Koll already knew the answer, even if he didn’t much like it. “Talked through them.”

“Precisely.” Father Yarvi took up his staff, and began to pick his way down the hillside. “The warriors can stay here. You stand on the minister’s battlefield now.”

“As long as there’s vengeance to be found there!” growled Thorn at his back.

Yarvi turned, teeth bared. “Oh, there will be vengeance enough for everyone, Thorn Bathu. I have sworn it.”

—

BEFORE THE GATES OF Skekenhouse the road was churned to a squelching bog, littered with trampled rubbish, with torn tents and broken furniture and dead animals. The possessions of folk who’d tried to crowd into Skekenhouse for safety. Or maybe those who’d tried to swarm out for it. Folly, whichever. When Mother War spreads her wings, there is no safe place.

Koll felt as if he had a rock in his throat. He’d hardly been more scared approaching Strokorn. He kept finding himself creeping closer to Rulf and his shield, hunching down as the elf-walls loomed over them, the long banners of the High King and his One God hanging weather-stained from the battlements.

“Ain’t you the one climbed into Bail’s Point alone in bad weather?” grunted the helmsman from the side of his mouth.

“Yes, and I was properly terrified then too.”

“Madmen and fools feel no fear. Heroes fear and face the danger anyway.”

“Could I be none of the three and go home?” muttered Koll.

“There can be no going back,” snapped Mother Scaer over her shoulder, shifting the elf-relic under her coat.

“Have no fear, friend.” Dosduvoi hoisted the pole he carried a little higher, the *South Wind’s* prow-beast mounted at the top. “We have a minister’s dove to keep the shafts off.”

“A pretty enough piece of carving,” said Koll, flinching at a flicker of movement on the battlements, “but a little slender for stopping arrows.”

“The purpose of a minister’s dove,” hissed Father Yarvi over his shoulder, “is to stop the arrows being shot at all. Now be still.”

“Halt there!” came a shrill command, and their party clattered to a stop. “Three dozen bows are upon you!”

Father Yarvi puffed out his chest as if offering it as a good home for arrows, though Koll noticed he kept his elf-metal staff gripped tight in his good hand.

“Put away your weapons!” His voice could not have been steadier if he was the one atop the wall. “We are ministers, come to speak for Father Peace!”

“You have armed men with you too!”

“We will speak for Mother War if we must, and in voices of thunder.” Father Yarvi gestured toward the armed men spreading out through the muddy fields around the city. “The warriors of Gettland and Throvenland surround your walls. The Breaker of Swords himself approaches from the sea. And behind us on the hill the sorceress Skifr watches. She whose magic laid low the High King’s army. She waits for my word. That you will agree to terms, and can have peace.” Yarvi let his arms drop. “Or that you will not, and can have what Bright Yilling had.”

When the voice came the challenge had all drained away. “You are Father Yarvi.”

“I am, and I have Mother Scaer of Vansterland with me.”

“My name is Utnir. I am elected to speak for the people of Skekenhouse.”

“Greetings, Utnir. I hope we can save some lives between us. Where is Grandmother Wexen?”

“She has sealed herself in the Tower of the Ministry.”

“And the High King?”

“He has not been seen since news came of the defeat at Bail’s Point.”

“Every victory is someone’s defeat,” muttered Koll.

“Just as every hero is someone’s villain,” said Rulf.

“Your leaders have abandoned you!” called out Mother Scaer.

“Best you abandon them,” said Father Yarvi, “before they drag all of Skekenhouse through the Last Door with them.”

Another pause, perhaps the muttering of voices above, and a chill breeze whipped up and made the

long banners flap against the elf-stone.

“There is a rumor you have made an alliance with the Shends,” came Utnir’s voice.

“So I have. I am an old friend of their high priestess, Svidur. If you resist us, I will give the city to her, and when it falls its citizens will be slaughtered or made slaves.”

“We had no part in the war! We are not your enemies!”

“Prove yourself our friends, then, and play your part in the peace.”

“We hear you spoke fine words before Bright Yilling. Why should we trust you?”

“Bright Yilling was a mad dog who worshipped Death. He murdered King Fynn and his minister. He burned women and children in Thorlby. Over his end I shed no tears and harbor no regrets.” Father Yarvi lifted his withered hand, his voice firm and his face open. “But I am a minister, and stand for Father Peace. If you wish to walk in his footsteps you will find me there beside you. Open the gates to us, and I swear a sun-oath and a moon-oath that I will do all I can to safeguard the lives and property of the people of Skekenhouse.”

After all the blood spilled it made Koll proud to see his master making of the fist an open hand. More voices whispered above, but finally Utnir seemed satisfied. Or satisfied he had no choice, at least. “Very well! We will give the keys to the city into the hands of your men!”

“History will thank you!” called Father Yarvi.

Koll realized he’d been holding his breath, and let it out in a cheek-puffing sigh. Mother Scaer gave a grunt in her throat, and shrugged her coat closed. Dosduvoi leaned down to Koll, grinning. “I told you the dove would keep the arrows off.”

“I think Father Yarvi’s words were our shield today,” he answered.

The minister himself was drawing Rulf into a huddle. “Gather your best-behaved men and take command of the gates.”

“I’ve not many left,” said Rulf. “Some of those that were on the *South Wind* with us have fallen sick.”

“Those that rowed to Strokomp?” muttered Koll.

Father Yarvi ignored him. “Use what you have and see the defenders disarmed. I want good discipline and good treatment for all.”

“Yes, Father Yarvi,” said the old helmsman, turning to beckon men forward with one broad hand.

“Then give the city to the Shends.”

Rulf looked back at him, eyes wide. “You’re sure?”

“They demand vengeance for all the High King’s raids upon them. I gave my word to Svidur that she could have the city first. But let Thorn Bathu and Grom-gil-Gorm have their pieces of it too. That is the lesser evil.”

“You swore an oath,” muttered Koll, as Rulf walked off to give the orders, shaking his bald head.

“I swore an oath to do all I can. I can do nothing.”

“But these people—”

Yarvi caught Koll’s shirt with his withered hand. “Did these people complain when Yaletoft burned?” he snarled. “Or Thorlby? When King Fynn was killed? Or Brand? No. They cheered Bright

Yilling on. Now let them pay the price.” He smoothed Koll’s shirt gently as he let him go. “Remember. Power means having one shoulder always in the shadows.”

Father Yarvi might've said no fires, but something was burning somewhere.

The smoke was a faint haze that turned day in the streets of Skekenhouse to muddy dusk. It scratched at Raith's throat. Made every breath an effort. Shapes moved in the murk. Running figures. The looters or the looted.

Strange how smells can bring the memories rushing up so clear. The stink of burning snatched Raith back to that village on the border between Vansterland and Gettland. Halleby, had they called it? That one they'd torched for nothing, and Raith drowned a man in a pig trough. It'd seemed a fine thing to do at the time. He'd boasted of it afterward and Grom-gil-Gorm had laughed with his warriors and called him a bloody little bastard, and smiled to have so vicious a dog on his leash.

Now Raith's mouth was sour with fear and his heart thud-thudding in his aching head and his palm all tacky around the grip of his ax. He startled at a crash somewhere, a long scream more like an animal than a man, spun about straining into the gloom.

Maybe he should've been giving thanks to Mother War that he stood with the winners. That's what he used to tell his brother, wasn't it, when Rakki shook his head over the ashes? But if there was a right side, it was hard to imagine Thorn Bathu's crew of killers on it.

It was a vicious crowd he'd joined up with, bright-eyed like foxes, slinking like wolves, their persons neglected but their weapons lavished with gleaming care. Most were Gettlanders, but Thorn welcomed anyone with a score to settle and no qualms over how they went about it. Raith didn't even know the names of most of them. They were nothing to each other, bound together only by hate. Men who'd lost families or friends. Men who'd lost themselves and had nothing left but taking from others what'd been taken from them.

Some dragged folk from their houses while others crashed through inside, smashing chests and slitting mattresses and turning over furniture, supposedly to find hidden treasure but really just for the joy of breaking. The victims fought no more than sheep dragged to the slaughter-pen. Used to surprise Raith, that they didn't fight. Used to disgust him. Now he understood it all too well. He'd no fight left himself.

Folk aren't just cowards or heroes. They're both and neither, depending on how things stand. Depending on who stands with them, who stands against. Depending on the life they've had. The death they see waiting.

They were lined up on their knees in the street. Some were pushed down. Some were flung down. Most just joined the end of the line on their own, and knelt there, meek. A slap or a kick where one was needed to get them moving, but otherwise no violence. A beaten slave was worth less than a healthy one, after all, and if they weren't worth enough to sell, why waste even that much effort on 'em?

Raith closed his eyes. Gods, he felt weary. So weary he could hardly stand. He thought of his brother's face, thought of Skara's, but he couldn't get them clear. The only face he could see was that

woman's, staring at her burning farm, calling her children's names, her voice gone all broken and grief-mad. He felt tears prickling under his lids and let his eyes flicker open.

A Vansterman with a silver ring through his nose was dragging a woman around by her armpit, laughing, but the laughter was all jagged and forced, like he was trying to convince himself there was something funny in it.

Thorn Bathu didn't look like laughing. The muscles working on the shaved side of her head, the scars livid on her pale cheeks, the sinews standing stark and merciless from the arm she gripped her ax with.

"Most o' these are hardly worth the taking," said one of the warriors, a great big Gettlander with a lopsided jaw, shoving an old man down onto his knees at the end of the line.

"What do we do with 'em, then?" said another.

Thorn's voice came flat and careless. "I've a mind to kill 'em."

One of the women started sobbing a prayer and someone shut her up with a slap.

Here was the dream. To plunder a big city. To take whatever you saw for your own. To strut like the biggest dog down streets where you'd be sneered at in peacetime. To rule supreme just 'cause you had a blade and were bastard enough to use it.

Raith's eyes were watery. The smoke, maybe, or maybe he was crying. He thought of that farm burning. He felt crushed, as buried as his brother, could hardly breathe. Seemed like everything worth saving in him died with Rakki, or was left behind with Skara.

He fumbled at the strap on his helmet, pulled it off and tossed it down with a hollow clonk, watched it roll on its edge down the cobbles. He scrubbed hard at his flattened hair with his nails, hardly felt it.

He looked sideways at that row of people, kneeling in the road. He saw a boy clench his fist, clench a handful of dirt out of the gutter. He saw a teardrop dangling from a woman's nose. Heard the old man at the end wheezing fear with every breath.

Thorn's boots crunched as she walked over to him.

She took her time. Working up her courage, maybe. Enjoying getting there, maybe. Letting the haft of the ax slowly slide through her hand until she was gripping it by the palm-polished end.

The old man flinched as she set her feet behind him, working them into the ground like a woodsman beside the chopping block.

She shook out her shoulders, cleared her throat, turned her head and spat.

She lifted the ax.

And Raith let his breath out in a shuddering sigh, and he stepped between Thorn and the old man and stood facing her.

He didn't say a word. He wasn't sure he could've got a word out, his throat was so raw and his heart going so hard. He just stood there.

Silence.

The warrior with the crooked jaw took a step toward him. "Get your arse shifted, fool, before I—"

Without taking her eyes off Raith, Thorn held up one long finger and said, "Sss." That was all, but enough to stop the big man dead. She stared at Raith, eyes sunken in shadow, their corners just

catching the angry red gleam from that elf-bangle of hers.

“Out of my way,” she said.

“I can’t.” Raith shook the shield off his arm and let it drop. Tossed his ax clattering down on top of it. “This ain’t vengeance. It’s just murder.”

Thorn’s scarred cheek twitched and he could hear the fury in her voice. Could see her shoulders almost shaking with it. “I won’t ask again, boy.”

Raith spread his arms, palms toward her. He could feel the tears on his cheeks and he didn’t care. “If you’re set on killing, you can start with me. I deserve it more’n they do.”

He closed his eyes and waited. He wasn’t fool enough to think this made up for a hundredth part of the things he’d done. He just couldn’t stand and watch no more.

There was a crunch and a white-hot pain in his face.

He stumbled over something and his head cracked on stone.

The world reeled. He tasted salt.

He lay there a moment, wondering if he was leaking all over the street. Wondering if he cared.

But he was breathing still, for all he was blowing bubbles from one nostril with each snort. He put one clumsy hand to his nose. Felt twice the size it used to. Broken, no doubt, from the sick feeling when he touched it. He grunted as he rolled onto his side, propping himself on an elbow.

Hard faces, scarred faces, swimming around him, looking down. The old man was still kneeling, lips moving in a silent prayer. Thorn still stood over him, ax in her hand, the elf-bangle smoldering red as a hot coal. From the smear of blood on her forehead Raith reckoned she must have butted him.

“Phew,” he grunted.

Took a hell of an effort to roll over, blood pattering from his nose onto the backs of his hands. Up onto one knee and he gave a wobble, threw one arm out to steady himself, but he didn’t fall. The dizziness was fading, and he stumbled as he stood, but got there in the end. Back between Thorn and the old man.

“There we are.” He licked his teeth and spat blood, then he held his arms out wide, and closed his eyes again, and stood swaying.

“Gods damn it,” he heard Thorn hiss.

“Is he mad?” said someone else.

“Just kill him and be done,” growled the one with the lopsided jaw.

Another pause. A pause seemed to go on forever, and Raith winced, and squeezed his eyes shut tighter. Each shuddering breath made a weird squeak in his broken nose, but he couldn’t stop it.

He heard a slow scraping and pried one eye open. Thorn had slid her ax through the loop at her belt and was standing, hands on hips. He blinked stupidly at her.

Not dead, then.

“What do we do?” snapped the one with the ring through his nose.

“Let ’em go,” said Thorn.

“That’s it?” The warrior with the crooked jaw sprayed spit as he snarled the words. “Why should they be let go? Didn’t let my wife go, did they?”

Thorn turned her head to look at him. “One more word and you’ll be the one kneeling in the street. Let ’em go.” And she dragged the old man up by his collar and shoved him stumbling off toward the houses.

Raith slowly let his arms fall, face one great throb.

He felt something spatter against his cheek. Looked round to see the big man had spat on him.

“You little bastard. You’re the one should die.”

Raith gave a weary nod as he wiped away the spittle. “Aye, probably. But not for this.”

THE TEARS OF FATHER PEACE

Father Yarvi strode at their head, the tapping of the elf-staff that had killed Bright Yilling echoing down the hallway. He went so swiftly Koll had to jog the odd step to keep up, Skifr's cloak of rags snapping about the elf-weapon she held down by her side, the gear of Rulf and his warriors rattling as they followed. Mother Adwyn stumbled at the back, her fin of red hair grown out into a shapeless mop, one hand trying to drag some slack into the rope around her chafed neck.

The hallway was lined with weapons, bent and rust-speckled. The weapons of armies defeated by High Kings of the past few hundred years. But there would be no victory for the High King today. From beyond the narrow windows, Koll could hear the sack of Skekenhouse. Could smell the burning. Could feel the fear, catching as the plague.

He put his head down, trying not to imagine what was happening out there. Trying not to imagine what might happen here, when Father Yarvi finally came face-to-face with Grandmother Wexen.

“What if she has fled?” snapped Skifr.

“She is here,” said Yarvi. “Grandmother Wexen is not the fleeing kind.”

High doors of dark wood stood at the end of the hallway, carved with scenes from the life of Bail the Builder. How he conquered Throvenland. How he conquered Yutmark. How he climbed a hill of dead enemies to conquer the whole Shattered Sea. Another day Koll would've admired the craftsmanship, if not the conquest, but no one was in the mood for woodwork now.

A dozen guards blocked the way, mailed men with frowns fixed and spears leveled.

“Step aside,” said Father Yarvi, Rulf and his warriors spreading out across the width of the hallway. “Tell them, Mother Adwyn.”

“Let them through, I beg you!” Adwyn spoke as though the words hurt her more than the rope, but she spoke even so. “The city is fallen. Blood spilled now is blood wasted!”

Koll hoped they would listen. But you know how it goes, with hopes.

“I cannot.” The captain of the guards was a warrior of no small fame, his silver-studded shield painted with the eagle of the First of Ministers. “Grandmother Wexen has ordered that these doors stay sealed, and I have sworn an oath.”

“Oaths,” muttered Koll. “Nothing but trouble.”

Skifr nudged him aside as she stepped past, raising her elf-relic to her shoulder. “Break your oath or meet Death,” she said.

“Please!” Mother Adwyn tried to duck in front of Skifr, but the warrior who held her rope dragged her back.

The captain raised his shield to look proudly over the rim. “I do not fear you, witch! I—”

Skifr's weapon barked once, thunderously loud in the narrow space. Half the captain's shield blew apart, his arm flew off in a gout of fire and knocked over the man beside him. He was flung against the door, bounced off and crumpled on his face. One leg kicked a little then was still, blood spreading

about the smoldering corpse, blood spattered across the fine carvings on the door. A little piece of metal fell, bounced, tinkled away into a corner.

“Does anyone else wish to stay loyal to Grandmother Wexen?” asked Yarvi.

As if by prior agreement the guards flung down their weapons.

“Merciful god,” whispered Mother Adwyn as Rulf stepped smartly over their dead leader, seized the iron handles and heaved on them to no effect.

“Locked,” he growled.

Skifr raised her elf-relic again. “I have the key.”

Rulf flung himself to the floor. Koll clapped his hands over his ears as the weapon spat fire, blasting chunks from the beautiful woodwork where the two doors met, splinters flying in stinging clouds. Before the echoes faded Skifr stepped forward, raised her boot and kicked the ruined doors shuddering open.

Even for a man who’d seen the wonders of Strokom the Hall of Whispers was dizzying, elf-stone and elf-glass soaring up into the distance, a ring-shaped balcony five times a man’s height above them, another as far above that, another above that. It was all lit by a flickering madman’s glare, for in the center of the round expanse of floor a huge fire burned. A pyre of books, and papers, and scrolls as high as a king’s barrow, the heat of the roaring flames sucking the sweat from Koll’s brow.

Statues of the six Tall Gods loomed high, flames glimmering in their garnet eyes, and standing even taller a new statue of the One God, neither man nor woman, gazing down with bland indifference on the destruction. Smaller figures were picked out against the flames. Gray-robed Sisters of the Ministry, some staring in horror toward the door, some still frantically feeding the fire, half-burned papers floating high into the echoing space above, fluttering down like leaves in autumn.

“Stop them!” bellowed Yarvi, voice shrill over the roar of the flames. “Collar them! Chain them! We will choose later who to spare and who to blame!”

Rulf’s warriors were already spilling through the doors, their mail, and blades, and eager eyes shining with the colors of fire. A shaven-headed girl was dragged kicking past, blood on her bared teeth. An apprentice like Koll, only doing as she was ordered, and he rubbed at the old chafe marks where his own thrall collar had sat, long ago.

Some might think it strange that a man who’d suffered as a slave himself could be so quick to force slavery on others, but Koll knew better. We all teach the lessons we are taught, after all.

“Where is Grandmother Wexen?” snarled Skifr, spit flecking from her burned lips.

“Above!” squealed a cringing minister. “The second balcony!” There was no loyalty left in Skekenhouse, only fire and chaos.

Across the wide floor to a narrow passageway, ash fluttering down around them like black snow. Up a curving stair, higher and higher, their breath echoing and their shadows dancing in the darkness. Past one doorway and out of another, into the garish light.

An old woman stood at the elf-metal rail in a robe that trailed the floor, white hair cut short, a great stack of books beside her, their spines marked with gold, set with gems. She snatched up an armful and flung them over the rail: years of work, decades of lessons, centuries of learning gone to the flames. But so it goes when Mother War spreads her wings. She rips apart in a gleeful moment what it takes her weeping husband Father Peace lifetimes to weave.

“Grandmother Wexen!” called Yarvi.

She froze, shoulders hunched, then slowly turned.

The woman who had ruled the Shattered Sea, chosen the fates of countless thousands, made warriors quail and used kings as puppets was not at all what Koll had expected. No cackling villain. No towering evil. Only a motherly face, round and deeply lined. Wise-seeming. Friendly-seeming. No gaudy marks of status. Only a fine chain about her neck, and strung upon it papers scrawled with writing. Writs, and judgments, and debts to be settled, and orders to be obeyed.

She smiled. Hardly the desperate prey, finally at bay. The look of a mentor whose wayward pupil has at last answered their summons.

“Father Yarvi.” Her voice was deep, and calm, and even. “Welcome to Skekenhouse.”

“Burning books?” Yarvi eased ever so slowly toward his old mistress. “I thought it was a minister’s place to preserve knowledge?”

Grandmother Wexen gently clicked her tongue. The disappointment of the learned teacher at the rash pupil’s folly. “That you should lecture me on a minister’s place.” She let a last armful of books fall over the balcony. “You will not benefit from the wisdom I have gathered.”

“I do not need it.” He held up his elf-staff. “I have this.”

“The elves had that, and look what became of them.”

“I have learned from their example. Not to mention yours.”

“I fear you have learned nothing.”

“Forget learning,” growled Skifr. “You will bleed for the blood of my children you have shed, the blood of my children’s children you have shed.” She leveled her elf-weapon. “My one regret is that you can never bleed enough.”

Grandmother Wexen did not so much as flinch in the face of Death. “You are deceived if you think the blood of your children is on my hands, witch. I heard you were seen in Kalyiv, and was happy that you were gone from the Shattered Sea, and more than content that you would never return.”

“You are made of lies, minister,” snarled Skifr, the sweat glistening on her furrowed forehead. “You sent thieves and killers to pursue me!”

Grandmother Wexen gave a sorry sigh. “Says the thief and killer who licks the feet of the prince of liars.” She swept Koll, and Skifr, and finally Yarvi with her eyes. “From the moment when you kissed my cheek after your test, I knew you were a snake. I should have crushed you then, but I chose mercy.”

“Mercy?” Yarvi barked out a laugh. “You hoped you could make me bite for you, rather than against.”

“Perhaps.” Grandmother Wexen looked with disgust at the elf-weapon Skifr cradled in her arms. “But I never dreamed you would resort to *this*. To break the deepest laws of our Ministry? To risk the world for your ambitions?”

“You know the saying. Let Father Peace shed tears over the methods. Mother War smiles upon results.”

“I know the saying, but it belongs in the mouths of murderers, not ministers. You are *poison*.”

“Let us not pretend only one of us stands in the shadows.” Father Yarvi’s eyes glittered with reflected fire as he eased forward. “I am the poison you mixed with your own schemes. The poison

you brewed when you ordered my father and brother killed. The poison you never supposed you would drink yourself.”

Grandmother Wexen’s shoulders sagged. “I am not without regrets. That is all power leaves you, in the end. But Laithlin’s arrogance would have dragged us into Mother War’s embrace sooner or later. I tried to steer us clear of the rocks. I tried to choose the lesser evil and the greater good. But you demanded chaos.”

The First of Ministers ripped a paper from the chain around her neck and flung it at Yarvi so it floated down between them. “I curse you, traitor.” She raised her hand, and tattooed upon her palm Koll saw circles within circles of tiny letters. “I curse you in the name of the One God and the many.” Her voice rang out, echoing in the towering space of the Hall of Whispers. “All that you love shall betray you! All that you make shall rot! All that you build shall fall!”

Father Yarvi only shrugged. “There is nothing worth less than the curses of the defeated. If you had stood upon the forbidden ground of Strokom, you would understand. Everything falls.”

He took a sudden step forward, and shoved Grandmother Wexen with his withered hand.

Her eyes went round with shock. Perhaps, however wise we are, however wide the Last Door gapes, the crossing of the threshold always comes as a surprise.

She gave a meaningless squawk as she tumbled over the rail. There was an echoing crash, and a long shriek of horror.

Koll edged forward, swallowing as he peered over the balcony. The fire still burned below, smoke pouring up, the shimmering heat like a weight pressing on his face. The all-powerful First of Ministers lay broken at its edge, her twisted body seeming small from so high up. Everything falls. Mother Adwyn slowly knelt beside her, palm pressed to her purple-stained mouth.

“So I have kept my oath.” Father Yarvi frowned at his withered hand as though he could hardly believe what it had done.

“Yes.” Skifr tossed her elf-weapon rattling down on the balcony. “We both have our vengeance. How does it feel?”

“I expected more.”

“Vengeance is a way of clinging to what we have lost.” Skifr leaned back against the wall, slid down it until she was sitting, cross-legged. “A wedge in the Last Door, and through the crack we can still glimpse the faces of the dead. We strain toward it with all our being, break every rule to have it, but when we clutch it, there is nothing there. Only grief.”

“We must find something new to reach for.” Father Yarvi planted his shriveled hand on the rail and leaned over. “Mother Adwyn!”

The red-haired minister slowly stood, looking up toward them, the tears on her cheeks glistening in the firelight.

“Send eagles to the ministers in Yutmark and the Lowlands,” called Yarvi. “Send eagles to the ministers of Inglefold and the Islands. Send eagles to every minister who knelt to Grandmother Wexen.”

Mother Adwyn blinked down at the corpse of her mistress, then up. She wiped her tears on the back of her hand and, it seemed to Koll, adjusted quite smoothly to the new reality. What choice did she have? What choice did any of them have?

“With what message?” she asked, giving a stiff little bow.

“Tell them they kneel to Grandfather Yarvi now.”

The dead men lay in heaps before the doors. Priests of the One God, Raith reckoned, from their robes with the seven-rayed sun stitched on, each with the back of their heads neatly split. Blood curled from under the bodies, making dark streaks down the white marble steps, turned pink by the flitting drizzle.

Maybe they'd been hoping for mercy. It was well known the Breaker of Swords preferred to take slaves than make corpses. Why kill what you can sell, after all? But it seemed Gorm was in the mood for destruction, that day.

Raith sniffed through his broken nose, splinters crunching as he stepped over the shattered doors and into the High King's great temple.

The roof was half-finished, bare rafters showing against the white sky, rain pattering on a mosaic floor half-finished too. There were long benches, perhaps where the faithful had sat to pray, but there were no faithful here now, only the warriors of Vansterland, drinking, and laughing, and breaking.

One sat on a bench, boots up on another, a gilded hanging wrapped around his shoulders like a cloak, face tipped back, mouth open and tongue stretched out to catch the rain. Raith walked past him, between great pillars tall and slender as the trunks of trees, neck aching from looking up to the fine stonework high above.

A body was laid on a table in the middle of the vast chamber, swathed in a robe of red and gold that spilled across the floor, a jeweled sword clutched in hands withered to white claws. Soryorn stood beside him, frowning down.

"He is small," said the standardbearer, who seemed to have lost his standard somewhere. "For a High King."

"This is him?" muttered Raith, staring in disbelief at that pinched-in face. "The greatest of men, between gods and kings?" He looked more like an old flesh-dealer than the ruler of the Shattered Sea.

"He's been dead for days." Soryorn jerked the sword from the High King's lifeless hands leaving one flopping off the table. He set the blade on the floor and took out a chisel, meaning to strike off the jewel-studded pommel. Then he paused. "Have you got a hammer?"

"I've got nothing," said Raith, and he meant it.

The high walls at the far end of the hall had been painted in pink and blue and gold, scenes of winged women he couldn't make a start at understanding, the work of hours and days and weeks. Gorm's warriors chuckled as they practiced their aim with throwing axes, smashing the plaster away, scattering it across the floor. Men Raith had laughed with once, as they watched farms burn up near the border. They hardly spared him a glance now.

At the back of the temple was a marble dais, and on the dais a great block of black stone. Gromgil-Gorm stood with his fists upon it, frowning up toward a high window filled with chips of colored glass to make a scene, a figure with the sun behind handing something down to a bearded man.

"Beautiful," murmured Raith, admiring the way Mother Sun caught the glass and cast strange colors

across the floor, across the block of stone and the candles, the cup of gold, the wine jug that stood upon it.

Gorm looked sideways. "I remember when the only things beautiful to you were blood and glory."

Raith could hardly deny it. "I reckon folk can change, my king."

"Rarely for the better. What happened to your face?"

"Said the wrong thing to a woman."

"Her counterargument was impressive."

"Aye." Raith winced as he touched one finger to his throbbing nose. "Thorn Bathu is quite the debater."

"Ha! You cannot say you were not warned about her."

"I fear I'm prone to recklessness, my king."

"The line between boldness and folly is a hard one even for the wise to find." Gorm toyed thoughtfully with one of the pommels strung around his neck, and Raith wondered what dead man's sword it had balanced. "I have been puzzling over this window, but I cannot fathom what story it tells."

"The High King given his chair by this One God, I reckon."

"You're right!" Gorm snapped his fingers. "But it is all a pretty lie. I once met the man who carved that chair, and he was not a god but a slave from Sagenmark with the most awful breath. I never thought it fine craftsmanship and my opinion has not changed. Too fussy. I will have a new one made, I think."

Raith raised his brows. "A new one, my king?"

"I shall soon sit enthroned in the Hall of Whispers as High King over the whole Shattered Sea." Gorm peered sideways, mouth pressed into a smug little smile. "No man was ever favored with greater enemies than I. The three brothers Uthrik, Odem and Uthil. The deep-cunning Queen Laithlin. Bright Yilling. Grandmother Wexen. The High King himself. I have prevailed over them all. By strength and cunning and weaponluck. By the favor of Mother War and the treachery of Father Yarvi."

"The great warrior is the one who still breathes when the crows feast. The great king is the one who watches the carcasses of his enemies burn." How hollow those words rang to Raith now, but Gorm smiled to hear them. Men always smile to hear their own lessons repeated.

"Yes, Raith, yes! Your brother may have spoken more, but you were always the clever one. The one who truly understood! Just as you said, Skara will be the envy of the world as a queen, and manage my treasury well, and bear me strong children, and speak fair-sounding words that will bring me friends across the sea. As it turns out, you were right not to kill her."

Raith's knuckles ached as he bunched his fist. "You think so, my king?" His voice almost croaked away to nothing, he was so sickened with jealousy, sickened with the unfairness of it, but Gorm took it for tearful gratitude.

"I do, and...I forgive you." The Breaker of Swords smiled as though his forgiveness was the best gift a man could have, and certainly a better one than Raith deserved. "Mother Scaer likes things that are constant. But I want men about me, not unquestioning slaves. A truly loyal servant must sometimes protect his master from his own rash decisions."

“The gods have truly favored you, my king, and given you more than any man could desire.” More than any man could deserve. Especially one like this. Raith stared up into that smiling face, scarred by a hundred fights, lit in garish colors from the window. The face of the man he’d once so admired. The face of the man who’d made him what he was.

A killer.

He snatched up the golden cup from the altar. “Let me pour a toast to your victory!” And he tipped the jug so it slopped over, dark wine spattering red as blood spots on the marble dais. He took the sip the cupfiller takes to make sure the wine’s safe for better lips than his.

There was an echoing crash behind them, bellowed insults, and Gorm turned. Long enough for Raith to slip two fingers into his pouch and feel the cold glass between them.

The High King’s stringy corpse had been knocked from its funeral table and flopped onto the floor while two of Gorm’s warriors fought over his crimson shroud, fine cloth ripping as they dragged it between them like dogs over a bone.

“There is a song in that, I think,” muttered Gorm, staring at the naked body of the man who’d ruled the Shattered Sea, sprawled with scant dignity on his unfinished floor. “But there will be many songs sung of this day.”

“Songs of the fall of cities and the death of kings,” said Raith. He knelt, offering the golden cup to his master. Just as he used to after every duel and battle. After every victory. After every burned farm. After every petty murder. “A toast to the new High King!” he called. “Drunk from the cup of the old!”

“I have missed you, Raith.” Gorm smiled as he reached for the cup, just as Skara had when she was fitted for her mail, but this time Raith’s hands stayed firm. “I have been ungenerous, and we can see what happens to an ungenerous king. You shall return to me, and carry my sword again, and my cup too.” And Gorm-gil-Gorm lifted the drink to his lips.

Raith took a long breath and let it sigh away. “That’s all I ever wanted.”

“Ugh.” The Breaker of Swords wrinkled his nose. “This wine has an ugly flavor.”

“Everything has an ugly flavor here.”

“Too true.” Gorm narrowed his eyes at Raith over the cup’s rim as he took another draft. “You have changed a great deal. Your time beside my queen-to-be has taught you much of perception and patience.”

“Queen Skara has made me see things differently, my king. I should tell her I’m quitting her service to return to my right place. That’d be the proper thing.”

“The proper thing? I might almost call you housebroken!” Gorm drained his cup and tossed it rattling on the altar, wiping the stray drips from his beard. “Go to the queen, then. She should be ashore by now. We are to be married in the morning, after all. She will be sad, I think, to lose her favorite dog.” And the Breaker of Swords reached down to scratch roughly at Raith’s head. “But I will be happy to have mine back.”

Raith bowed low. “Not near so happy as the dog will be, my king.” And he turned and strutted down from the dais with some of his old swagger, nodding to Soryorn, who was just coming the other way with the High King’s scarred pommel.

“Shall we burn this place, my king?” Raith heard the standardbearer ask.

“Why burn what you can use?” said Gorm. “A few strokes of the chisel will change these miserable statues into Mother War, and at once we have raised a mighty temple to her! A fitting gift for she that has given her favored son the whole Shattered Sea...”

Raith stepped out smiling into the night. For once he had no regrets.

THE HAPPIEST DAY

Skara stared at herself in the mirror.

She remembered doing the same when she first came to Thorlby, a hundred years ago it seemed, after she fled from the burning ruins of her grandfather's hall. She had hardly recognized the brittle-looking girl in the glass then. She was not sure she knew the sharp-faced woman there now any better. A woman with a proud defiance in her eye, and a ruthless set to her mouth, and a dagger at her jeweled belt she looked more than willing to use.

Skara twisted the armring Bail the Builder had once worn, the red stone winking. She remembered her grandfather giving it to her, thought how proud he would have been to see her now, pictured his smiling face, then flinched at the thought of his body pitching in the firepit, had to swallow the familiar surge of sickness, shut her eyes and try to calm her thumping heart.

She had told herself that when she saw Bright Yilling dead she would be free. She felt her thrall gently arranging the chain of pommels around her neck, the chain the High Queen's key would soon hang from, and she felt the cold weight of it on her bare shoulders, the weight of things done and choices made.

Instead of banishing the ghosts of Mother Kyre and King Fynn she had added the ghosts of Bright Yilling and his Companions. Instead of freeing herself from the cold touch of his fingertips in the shadows of the Forest she had chained herself further with his death-gripping fist on the fields before Bail's Point.

Mother Owd had been right. The faster you run from the past, the faster it catches you. All you can do is turn and face it. Embrace it. Try and meet the future stronger for it.

There was a heavy knock at the door, and Skara took a long, sharp breath, and opened her eyes. "Come in."

Blue Jenner was due to take her father's place in the ceremony, which seemed apt, as he was the closest thing she had to family now. She felt a fresh surge of sickness at the sight of the sacred cloth over his shoulder. The one that would be wrapped around her hand and Gorm's to bind them together for a lifetime.

The old raider came to stand beside her, his battered features looking doubly battered in the mirror, and slowly shook his head. "You look a High Queen indeed. How do you feel?"

"As if I'm going to puke."

"I hear that's just how a girl's meant to feel on her wedding day."

"Is everything ready?"

If she had been hoping a great flood had swept the guests far out to sea she was disappointed. "You never saw the like! Queen Laithlin brought miles of white hangings with her, and the Hall of Whispers is all garlanded with autumn flowers and carpeted with autumn leaves. The statue of the One God lost its head and'll soon lose its body and the Tall Gods back in charge where they belong. Say what you

will about Grandfather Yarvi, he's a man who gets things done."

Skara puffed out her cheeks. "Grandfather Yarvi, now."

"Lot of people climbed up a way lately."

"Climbed up a hill of corpses." She adjusted the chain of pommels around her neck, Bright Yilling's diamond flashing on her breastbone. "And none higher than me."

Jenner was hardly listening. "Folk have come from all across the Shattered Sea. From Gettland and Throvenland and Vansterland. From Inglefold and the Lowlands and the Islands. Shends and Banyas and the gods know where some of 'em hale from for I surely don't. I even saw some emissaries from Catalia, set out to speak to the High King and found there's a new one since they left."

"How is the mood?"

"There's many raw wounds still, and always those who tend toward the sour, but mostly folk are happy Mother War's folding her wings and Father Peace is smiling again. There are plenty who despise Gorm, plenty more who mistrust Yarvi, but the love for you goes a long way."

"For me?"

"Your fame's spread far and wide! The warrior queen who fought for her land when there was no one else! The woman who laid Bright Yilling low but gave him succor as he died. Majesty and mercy combined, I heard. Ashenleer come again."

Skara blinked at herself in the mirror. She remembered no succour between her and Yilling. Only that pouch of papers. She gave an acid burp, pressed her hand to her guts and wondered if Ashenleer had been plagued with fears in the stomach. "The truth and the songs rarely sit close together, do they?" she muttered.

"Not even in the same hall, but truth-telling isn't what skalds are hired for." There was a pause, and Blue Jenner looked up at her from under his brows. "Are you sure you want to do this?"

She was very, very far from sure, but she did not need his doubts heaped on her own. "I made a deal. I cannot turn back even if I wanted to."

"But do you want to? Maybe there are worse men than the Breaker of Swords, but I think I know you, my queen. If you could pick anyone, I doubt he's the husband you'd choose..."

Skara swallowed. The girl she had been before the flames took her grandfather's hall might have longed to make a different choice. The girl who had pressed herself tight against Raith in the darkness too. But she was not a girl anymore.

She lifted her chin and regarded her advisor through narrowed eyes. She made herself look sure. "Then you do not know me as well as you think, Blue Jenner. Grom-gil-Gorm shall be made High King today. He is the most famed warrior about the Shattered Sea. An alliance between Vansterland and Throvenland will make us strong, and our people strong, and never again will men bring fire to Yaletoft in the night!" She realized she was shouting, and forced her voice down. Forced her heart to be silent, and spoke with her head. "Gorm is the husband I would choose. The husband I have chosen."

Blue Jenner looked down at his boots. "I never meant to doubt you—"

"I know what you meant." Skara put her hand gently on his shoulder, and his eyes came up to hers, a little dewy. "You stood for me when no one else did, and I know you still stand for me. I pray you

always will. But this is my duty. I will not turn from it.” She could not. However much it hurt.

Blue Jenner gave that gap-toothed smile she had come to love, his weathered face filling with happy creases. “Then let’s get you married.”

They both turned as the door banged open. Mother Owd stood staring, her new robe too long and somewhat tangled with her feet, her chest heaving and a sheen of sweat on her pale forehead. One needed no great mind to see she was weighed down by heavy news.

“Out with it,” snapped Skara, sick tickling at the back of her throat.

“My queen...” Mother Owd swallowed, eyes round in her round face. “Grom-gil-Gorm is dead.”

"I know it was you!" snarled Mother Scaer, her rage filling the Hall of Whispers to the top, echoing back so savagely Koll hunched into his shoulders, "or that bitch of yours—"

"If you are talking of Queen Skara she is neither a bitch nor is she mine." Grandfather Yarvi's smile was as unmarked by Scaer's fury as elf stone by arrows. "If you knew I was responsible you would be presenting evidence, but I know you have none because I know I had nothing to do with it."

Scaer opened her mouth but Yarvi talked over her. "We speak of Grom-gil-Gorm, Breaker of Swords and Maker of Orphans! He used to boast that no man had more enemies! Every pommel on that chain he wore was someone's score in need of settling."

"And, after all..." Koll spread his hands and tried to look as earnest as any man could. "Sometimes...people just *die*."

Mother Scaer turned her freezing glare on him. "Oh, men will die over this, I promise you!"

Yarvi's guards shifted unhappily, their faces hidden behind gilded faceplates but their elf-weapons on conspicuous display. The men who'd rowed the *South Wind* to Strokom had sickened. Three had died already. It seemed without Skifr's magic beans the ruins were every bit as dangerous as the stories said. For now there would be no more relics brought from within, but Grandfather Yarvi found no shortage of men keen to carry the ones he had. The moment they took them up, after all, they were made stronger than any warrior in all the songs.

"Have you really nothing better to do, Mother Scaer, than toss empty threats at my apprentice?" Grandfather Yarvi gave a careless shrug. "Gorm died without an heir. Vansterland could fall into chaos, every warrior vying to prove himself the strongest. You must keep order, and ensure a new king is found without too much blood spilled."

"Oh, I shall find a new king." She glowered at Yarvi and growled the words. "Then I will dig out the truth of this and there will be a reckoning." She pointed up toward the statues of the Tall Gods with a clawing finger. "The gods see all! Their judgment is always waiting!"

Yarvi's brow furrowed. "In my experience they take their time about it. Dig out whatever truth you please, but for now there shall be no High King. All the last one brought us was blood, and the Shattered Sea needs time to heal." He put his withered hand reluctantly on his own chest. "For now power shall rest with the Ministry, and Father Peace shall have his day."

Mother Scaer gave a disgusted hiss. "Not even Grandmother Wexen presumed to set herself so high."

"This is for the greater good, not my own."

"So say all tyrants!"

"If you despise my methods so, perhaps you should give up that elf-weapon you carry? Or is it not quite the evil you first feared?"

"Sometimes one must fight evil with evil." Scaer looked toward Yarvi's guards, and shifted the

relic she carried beneath her coat. “If you have taught the world one lesson it is that.”

Yarvi’s frown hardened. “You should have the proper respect, Mother Scaer. For the office of Grandfather of the Ministry, if not the man who holds it.”

“Here is all the respect I have for you at once.” And she spat onto the floor at his feet. “You have not heard the last from me.” And her footsteps clapped in the great space above as she stalked from the Hall of Whispers.

“A shame.” Yarvi wiped the spittle calmly away with his shoe. “When we were always such good friends. Still.” And he turned to Koll with a grin at the corner of his mouth. “Enemies are the price of success, eh?”

“So I’m told, Father Yarvi—” Koll quickly corrected himself. “*Grandfather* Yarvi, that is.”

“So it is. Walk with me.”

Though Mother Sun was high and bright there had been rain that morning, and the gray stones of Skekenhouse were dotted with puddles. The fires had all been put out but there was still the faintest tang of burning. The killing had been stopped but there was still an edge of violence on the air. The calls of the traders came muted, the eyes of the people were cast down. Even a dog’s distant bark sounded somehow fearful. Mother War might have folded her wings but Father Peace was far from settled at his loom.

A crowd of supplicants had gathered in the long shadow of the Tower of the Ministry. Folk come to beg for some prisoner released or some indulgence granted. They knelt in the wet, cringing as Grandfather Yarvi swept past, implacable, and called out thanks to him for saving the city from the Shends.

None mentioned that he’d been the one who gave the city up to the Shends in the first place. Not to his face, anyway.

“Folk used to nod to you,” murmured Koll. “Bow if they really wanted something. Now they kneel.”

“It is only proper that they kneel to the Grandfather of the Ministry,” he murmured, acknowledging the most servile efforts with a generous wave of his shriveled hand.

“Aye, but do they really kneel to him, or to the elf-weapons his guards carry?”

“What matters is that they kneel.”

“Are fear and respect really the same?”

“Of course not,” said Yarvi, walking on and leaving more of his many guards to clear away the crowd. “Respect soon blows away in a storm. Fear has far deeper roots.”

Teams of thralls crawled among the ruins, struggling under the ready whips of chain-masters, working to restore the city to the way it had been before the sack. Some of them, Koll was sure, were folk who’d stood high in the favor of Grandmother Wexen. Now they found that the higher you climbed, the farther there was to fall.

It made Koll wonder whether they’d really changed the world so much for all that blood shed. Different folk wearing the collars, maybe, and different folk holding the chains, but life was still life. Same questions. Same answers.

“You are unusually quiet,” said Grandfather Yarvi as they walked on toward the docks.

“Sometimes you work so hard for something that when it comes you hardly know what to do with it.”

“Victory rarely feels much of a victory, in the end.” Yarvi’s eyes slid sideways and it seemed, as ever, that he could see straight into Koll’s thoughts. “Is that all, though?”

“There’s something that’s been...well...*bothering* me.” It had in fact been burning a hole through Koll’s mind since the day it happened.

“You’ve never been one to keep your worries to yourself.”

Koll twisted his neck and felt the reassuring rattle of the storekeeper’s weights under his shirt. “My mother always told me honesty was a man’s best shield.”

“Fine advice, as your mother’s always was. Be honest, then.”

“Grandmother Wexen...” He picked at a fingernail. “She said she didn’t send the men who burned Skifr’s family.”

Yarvi peered at Koll down his nose. He seemed to peer from a long way up, since he became Grandfather of the Ministry. “A lie. Like the lie about there being a traitor within our alliance. Grandmother Wexen knew how to sow discord among her enemies. Now she does it from beyond the Last Door.”

“Maybe...” Koll pressed the tips of his forefingers together so they turned blotchy white. Every word was an effort. “Ask who benefits, you always told me.”

Grandfather Yarvi came to a sudden halt and Koll heard the guards halt with him. He could see their shadows stretching out toward him on the cobblestones. The shadows of the elf-weapons they carried. “And who benefits?”

“You do,” croaked Koll, not looking up from his fingers, and added in a rush, “or we do. Gettland. All of us. Without that hall-burning Skifr would not have come north. Without Skifr there would have been no journey to Strokum. Without the journey to Strokum, no elf-weapons. Without elf-weapons, no victory at Bail’s Point. Without victory at Bail’s Point—”

The weight of Father Yarvi’s bad hand on his shoulder put a stop to Koll’s blathering. “The future is a land wrapped in fog. Do you really think I could have planned all that?”

“Perhaps...”

“Then you flatter and insult me both at once. I have always said that power means having one shoulder in the shadows. But not both, Koll. Skifr was our friend. Do you really think I could send men to kill her? To burn her children?”

Looking into his pale eyes then, Koll wondered whether there was anything the First of Ministers would not do. But he had no more evidence than Mother Scaer, and even less chance of getting satisfaction. He forced a quick smile onto his face, and shook his head. “Of course not. It just... bothered me, is all.”

Grandfather Yarvi turned away. “Well, you cannot be so easily bothered if you are to take my place as Minister of Gettland.” He tossed it out like a trainer might a bone and, sure enough, Koll chased after it like an eager puppy.

“Me?” He hurried to catch up, his voice gone high as a little girl’s. “Minister of Gettland?”

“You are the same age I was when I took up Mother Gundring’s staff. I know you do not quite

believe in yourself, but I believe in you. It is high time you took your test, and swore your oath, and became a minister. You will sit beside the Black Chair, and be Father Koll, and your birthright will be the plants and the books and the soft word spoken.”

Everything he’d wanted. Respect, and authority, and his talents put to use. Father Koll. The best man he could be. So why did the thought fill him with dread?

The docks crawled with humanity, people bargaining, arguing and threatening in six languages Koll knew and at least six he didn’t, ships tangling at the wharves, tangling with each other as they came and went, oars clashing and scraping.

Many were leaving Skekenhouse in the murk of mistrust that had followed Gorm’s death. The Shends had already cleared out with their plunder, grumbling at getting only a part of what they were promised. The Throvenmen were heading home to rebuild their broken farms, their broken towns, their broken country. Without the chain of Gorm’s fame binding them the Vanstermen were splintering into factions already, racing back to safeguard what was theirs or set about taking what was someone else’s before winter gripped the north.

“Lots of people leaving,” said Koll.

“True enough.” Grandfather Yarvi gave a satisfied sigh as he watched the hubbub. “But people arriving too.”

There were sharp-eyed merchantwomen of Gettland, servants of the Golden Queen come to clamp levies on every ship that passed through the straits. There were zealous prayer-weavers fixed on driving out the One God and singing the songs of the many on every street corner in Skekenhouse. And every day more landless warriors swaggered in, hired by Grandfather Yarvi from all across the Shattered Sea, the white eagle of the Ministry fresh-daubed on their shields.

“They’re bringing plenty of swords with them,” murmured Koll.

“Indeed they are. We must keep Father Peace smiling for a while.”

“Since when did Father Peace smile at swords?”

“Only half a war is fought with swords, Koll, but only half a peace is won with plows.” Yarvi propped his withered palm on the hilt of the curved sword he still wore. “A blade in the right hands can be a righteous tool.”

Koll watched a group of frowning warriors stroll past, weapons worn as proudly as a new wife might wear her key. “Who decides whose hands are right?”

“We will. We must. It is the duty of the powerful to put aside childish notions and choose the lesser evil. Otherwise the world slides into chaos. You aren’t still having doubts are you, Koll?”

“Doubts?” Gods, he was made of them. “No, no, no. No.” Koll cleared his throat. “Maybe. I know how much I owe you. I just...don’t want to let you down.”

“I need you beside me, Koll. I promised your father I would free you, and I did. I promised your mother I would look after you, and I have.” His voice dropped softer. “I have my doubts too and you...help me choose what is right.” There was a weakness there Koll hadn’t heard before, had never expected to hear. A desperation, almost. “Rulf has gone back to Thorlby to be with his wife. I need someone I can trust. Someone who reminds me I can do good. Not just greater good, but...*good*. Please. Help me to stand in the light.”

“I’ve so much still to learn—” blathered Koll, but however he twisted there was no slipping free.

“You will learn by doing. As I did. As every man must.” Yarvi snapped his fingers. “Let us put aside the Test.”

Koll blinked up at him. “Put it aside?”

“I am Grandfather of the Ministry, who will refuse me? You can swear your oath now. You can kneel here, Koll the woodcarver, and rise Father Koll, Minister of Gettland!”

He might not have pictured it kneeling on the quayside, but Koll had always known this moment would come. He’d dreamed of it, boasted of it, eagerly learned the words by heart.

He wobbled slowly down and knelt, Koll the woodcarver, damp soaking through his trousers. Grandfather Yarvi towered over him, smiling. There was no need for him to threaten. The faceless guards still lurking at his shoulders did it for him.

Koll only had to say the words to be a minister. Not only Brother Koll, but Father Koll. To stand beside kings and change the world. To be the best man he could be, just as his mother had always wanted. To never be an outsider. To never be weak. To have no wife and no family but the Ministry. To leave the light, and have one shoulder always in the shadows. At least one.

All he had to do was say the words, and stand.

There was an overgrown courtyard at the heart of the house that Skara had taken for her own. It was choked with weeds and throttled with ivy but someone must have cared for it once, for late flowers were still blossoming in a sweet-smelling riot against the sunny wall.

Even though the leaves were falling and the year was growing cold, Skara liked to sit on a lichen-spattered stone bench there. It reminded her of the walled garden behind the Forest where Mother Kyre had taught her the names of herbs. Except there were no herbs. And Mother Kyre was dead.

“The atmosphere in Skekenhouse is...”

“Poisonous,” Mother Owd finished for her.

As usual, her minister chose an apt word. The citizens were steeped in grudges and fear. The remains of the alliance were at one another’s throats. Grandfather Yarvi’s warriors were everywhere, the white dove of Father Peace on their coats but Mother War’s tools always close to twitchy fingers.

“It is high time we left for Throvenland,” said Skara. “We have much to do there.”

“The ships are already being fitted, my queen,” said Blue Jenner. “I was going to offer Raith an oar —”

Skara looked up sharply. “Has he asked for one?”

“He’s not the kind to ask. But I heard it didn’t work out too well for him with Thorn Bathu, and it’s not as though he can carry Gorm’s sword anymore—”

“Raith made his choice,” snapped Skara, her voice cracking. “He cannot come with us.”

Jenner blinked. “But...he fought for you at the straits. Saved my life at Bail’s Point. I said we’d always have a place for him—”

“You shouldn’t have. It is not up to me to keep your promises.”

It hurt her, to see how hurt he looked at that. “Of course, my queen,” he muttered, and walked stiffly into the house, leaving Skara alone with her minister.

The wind swirled up chill, leaves chasing each other about the old stones. A bird twittered somewhere in the dry ivy. Mother Owd cleared her throat.

“My queen, I must ask. Is your blood coming regularly?”

Skara felt her heart suddenly thudding, her face burning, and she looked down at the ground.

“My queen?”

“No.”

“And...might that be...why you are reluctant to give an oar to King Gorm’s sword-bearer?” Blue Jenner might be baffled but plainly Mother Owd guessed the truth. The trouble with a shrewd advisor is they see through your own lies as easily as your enemy’s.

“His name’s Raith,” muttered Skara. “You can use his name, at least.”

“He Who Sprouts the Seed has blessed you,” said the minister softly.

“Cursed me.” Though Skara knew she had no one else to blame. “When you doubt you’ll live through tomorrow you spare few thoughts for the day after.”

“One cannot do the wise thing every time, my queen. What do you want to do?”

Skara dropped her head into her hands. “Gods help me, I’ve no idea.”

Mother Owd knelt in front of her. “You could carry the child. We might even keep it secret. But there are risks. Risks to you and risks to your position.”

Skara met her eyes. “Or?”

“We could make your blood come. There are ways.”

Skara’s tongue felt sticky as she spoke. “Are there risks to that?”

“Some.” Mother Owd looked evenly back. “But I judge them less.”

Skara set her palm on her belly. It felt no different. No more sickness than usual. No sign of anything growing. When she thought of it gone it gave her nothing but relief, and a trace of queasy guilt that she felt nothing more.

But she was getting practiced at storing away regrets. “I want it gone,” she whispered.

Mother Owd gently took her hands. “When we get back to Throvenland, I will make the preparations. Don’t spare it another thought. You have enough to carry. Let me carry this.”

Skara had to swallow tears. She had faced threats, and rage, and even Death, with eyes dry, but a little kindness made her want to weep. “Thank you,” she whispered.

“A touching scene!”

Mother Owd stood quickly, twisting around as Grandfather Yarvi stepped out into their little garden.

He still wore the same plain coat. The same worn sword. He still carried the elf-metal staff he used to, though it sent a very different message since he killed Bright Yilling with it. But he had around his neck the chain Grandmother Wexen once wore, a rustling mass of papers of his own already threaded on it. And his face had changed. There was a bitter brightness in his eye Skara had not seen before. Perhaps he had put on a ruthless mask, since he moved into the Tower of the Ministry. Or perhaps, no longer needed, he had let a soft mask fall away.

All too often when we topple something hateful, rather than breaking it and starting fresh, we raise ourselves up in its place.

“Even my battered little stone of a heart is warmed to see such closeness between ruler and minister.” And Yarvi gave a smile with no warmth in it at all. “You are a woman who inspires loyalty, Queen Skara.”

“There is no magic to it.” She stood herself, carefully smoothing the front of her dress, carefully smoothing her face too, giving nothing away, the way Mother Kyre had taught her. She had a feeling she might need all of Mother Kyre’s lessons and more in the next few moments. “I try to treat people the way I would want to be treated. The powerful cannot only be ruthless, Grandfather Yarvi. They must be generous too. They must have some mercy in them.”

The First of Ministers smiled as if at the innocence of a child. “Charming sentiments, my queen. I understand you will soon be leaving for Throvenland. I need to speak to you first.”

“Wishes for good weatherluck, most honored Grandfather Yarvi?” Mother Owd folded her arms as

she faced him. “Or matters of state?”

“Matters best discussed in private,” he said. “Leave us.”

She gave a questioning sideways glance, but Skara returned it with the faintest nod. Some things must be faced alone. “I will be just inside,” said Mother Owd as she stepped through the door. “If you need me for *anything*.”

“We won’t!” The pale eyes of the First of Ministers settled on Skara, cold as new snow. The look of a man who knows he has won before the game is even played. “How did you poison Grom-gil-Gorm?”

Skara raised her brows. “Why would I? He suited me much better on this side of the Last Door. The one who gained most from his death is you.”

“Not every scheme is mine. But I’ll admit the dice have fallen well for me.”

“A lucky man is more dangerous than a cunning one, eh, Grandfather Yarvi?”

“Tremble, then, when you see both together!” He smiled again, but there was something hungry in it that made every hair on her spine stand up. “It is true that things have changed since we last negotiated, among the howes outside Bail’s Point. Much...*simpler*. No need to talk any longer of alliances, or compromises, or votes.”

You can only conquer your fears by facing them, her grandfather used to say. Hide from them, and they conquer you. Skara tried to draw herself up proudly, the way he had, when he faced Death. “Uthil and Gorm are both gone through the Last Door,” she said. “There is only one vote, now, and it is—”

“Mine!” barked Yarvi, opening his eyes very wide. “I cannot tell you how refreshing it is to talk to someone who sees straight to the heart of things, so I will not insult you by dithering. You will marry King Druin.”

Skara had been prepared for many things, but she could not quite smother a gasp at that one. “King Druin is three years old.”

“Then you will find him a far less demanding husband than the Breaker of Swords would have been. The world is changed, my queen. And it seems to me now that Throvenland...” Yarvi lifted his withered hand and turned it around and around in the air. “Serves little purpose.” He somehow managed to snap that one stubby finger with a sharp click. “It shall be part of Gettland from now on, though I think it best if my mother continues to wear the key of the treasury.”

“And me?” Skara struggled to keep her voice level for the thumping of her heart.

“My queen, you look beautiful whatever you wear.” And Grandfather Yarvi turned toward the door.

“No.” She could hardly believe how utterly certain she sounded. A strange calm had come over her. The calm that Bail the Builder felt before a battle, perhaps. She might be no warrior, but this was her battlefield, and she was ready to fight.

“No?” Yarvi turned back, his smile fading. “I came to tell you how things would be, not to ask for an opinion, but perhaps I overestimated your—”

“No,” she said again. Words would be her weapons. “My father died for Throvenland. My grandfather died for Throvenland. I gave up everything to fight for Throvenland. While I live I will not see it torn apart like a carcass between wolves.”

The First of Ministers stepped toward her, gaunt face tight with anger. “Do not presume to defy me, you puking waif!” he snarled, stabbing at his chest with his withered hand. “You have no idea what I have sacrificed, what I have suffered! No idea of the fires I was forged in! You do not have the gold, or the men, or the swords—”

“Only half a war is fought with swords.” Mother Kyre had always said *a smile costs nothing*, so Skara showed the very sweetest one she could as she took the slip of paper from behind her back, folded between two fingers, and held it out. “A gift for you, Grandfather Yarvi,” she said. “From Bright Yilling.”

There might have been no man in the Shattered Sea more deep cunning than he, but Skara had been taught how to read a face, and she caught the twitch by his eye, and knew Yilling’s final whisper on the battlefield before Bail’s Point was true.

“To being a puking waif I freely confess,” she said as Yarvi snatched the paper from her fingers. “I am told I keep my fears in my stomach. But I have seen some tempering myself over the last few months. Do you recognize the hand?”

He looked up, jaw clenched tight.

“I thought you might. It seems now great foresight on Mother Kyre’s part that she taught me to read.”

His face twitched again at that. “Far from proper, spreading the secret of letters outside the Ministry.”

“Oh, Mother Kyre could be far from proper when the future of Throvenland was at stake.” Now she put a little iron in her voice. She had to show her strength. “And so can I.”

Grandfather Yarvi crumpled the paper in his trembling fist, but Skara only smiled the wider.

“Keep that one, by all means,” she said. “Yilling gave me a whole pouch full. There are seven people I trust scattered across Throvenland with one each. You will never know who. You will never know where. But if I should suffer some accident, trip one night and fall through the Last Door like my husband-to-be, messages will be sent, and the story told on every coast of the Shattered Sea...” She leaned close and murmured the words. “That Grandfather Yarvi was the traitor within our alliance.”

“No one will believe it,” he said, but his face had turned very pale.

“A message will find its way to Master Hunnan and the warriors of Gettland, telling them that it was you who betrayed their beloved King Uthil.”

“I don’t fear Hunnan,” he said, but his hand was trembling on his staff.

“A message will find its way to your mother, the Golden Queen of Gettland, telling her that her own son sold her city to her enemies.”

“My mother would never turn against me,” he said, but his eyes were glistening.

“A message will find its way to Thorn Bathu, whose husband Brand was killed in the raid you made happen.” Skara’s voice was cold, and slow, and relentless as the tide. “But perhaps she is more forgiving than she appears. You know her much better than I.”

As a stick bent further and further snaps all at once, Grandfather Yarvi gave a kind of gasp and the strength seemed to go suddenly from his legs. He tottered back, stumbled into the stone bench and fell heavily upon it, elf-staff clattering from his good hand as he clutched out to steady himself. He sat,

shining eyes wide, staring at Skara. Staring through her, as if his gaze was fixed on ghosts far beyond.

“I thought...I might sway Bright Yilling,” he whispered. “I thought I might bait him with little secrets and hook him with one great lie. But it was he that hooked me at the straits.” A tear trickled from one of his swimming eyes and streaked his slack cheek.

“The alliance was faltering. King Uthil’s resolve was waning. My mother saw more profit in peace. I could not trust Gorm and Scaer.” He made a crooked fist of his left hand. “But I had sworn an oath. A sun-oath and a moon-oath. To be revenged on the killers of my father. I could not have peace.” He blinked stupidly, tears rolling down his pale face, and Skara realized, perhaps for the first time, how young he was. Only a few years older than she.

“And so I told Bright Yilling to attack Thorlby,” he whispered. “To make an outrage from which there could be no turning back. I told him when and how. I did not mean for Brand to die. The gods know I did not mean it, but...” He swallowed, the breath clicking in his throat, his shoulders hunched and his head hanging as though the weight of what he had done was crushing him. “A hundred decisions made, and every time the greater good, the lesser evil. A thousand steps taken and each one had to be taken.” He stared down at the elf-staff on the ground, and his mouth twisted with disgust. “How could they lead me here?”

Skara felt no hate for him then, only pity. She was up to her neck in her own regrets, knew she could give him no worse punishment than he would give himself. She could give him no punishment at all. She needed him too badly.

She knelt before him, the chain of pommels rattling against her chest, and took his tearstained face in her hands. Now she had to show her compassion. Her generosity. Her mercy. “Listen to me.” And she shook his head so that his glazed eyes flicked to hers. “Nothing is lost. Nothing is broken. I understand. I know the weight of power and I do not judge you. But we must be together in this.”

“As a slave is chained to his mistress?” he muttered.

“As allies are bound to each other.” She brushed away his tears with her thumb tips. Now she had to show her cunning, and strike a deal the Golden Queen herself would be proud of. “I will be Queen of Throvenland not only in name but in fact. I will kneel to no one and have the full support of the Ministry. I will make my own decisions for my own people. I will choose my own husband in my own time. The straits belong as much to Throvenland as to Yutmark. Half the levies your mother is collecting from the ships that pass through it shall go to my treasury.”

“She will not—”

Skara shook his face again, hard. “One right word severs a whole rope of will-nots, you know that. Throvenland bore the worst of your war. I need gold to rebuild what Bright Yilling burned. Silver to buy my own warriors and my own allies. Then you shall be Grandfather of the Ministry, and your secrets just as safe in my hands as in yours.” She leaned down, took his staff from the ground, and offered it to him. “You are a minister, but you have stood for Mother War. We have had blood enough. Someone must stand for Father Peace.”

He curled his fingers around the elf-metal, mouth scornfully twisting. “So we will dance into your bright future hand in hand, and keep the balance of the Shattered Sea between us.”

“We could destroy each other instead, but why? If Grandmother Wexen has taught me one lesson, it is that you are a dire enemy to have. I would much rather be your friend.” Skara stood, looking down.

“You may need one. I know I will.”

The pale eyes of the First of Ministers were dry again. “It is hardly as if I have a choice, is it?”

“I cannot tell you how refreshing it is to talk to someone who sees straight to the heart of things.”

She brushed a few stray leaves from her dress, thinking how proud her grandfather would have been.

“There is only one vote, Grandfather Yarvi. And it is mine.”

Raith heard laughter. Skara's big, wild laughter, and the sound alone made him smile.

He peered from the dripping doorway and saw her walking, fine cloak flapping with the hood up against the drizzle, Mother Owd beside her, guards and thralls around her, an entourage fit for the queen she was. He waited until they were passing before he eased out, scraping back his wet hair.

"My queen." He'd meant it to sound lighthearted. It came out a needy bleat.

Her head snapped around and he felt the same breathless shock as when he first saw her face, only stronger than ever and, soon enough, with a bitter edge too. She cracked no delighted smile of recognition, no look of haunted guilt even, only a pained grimace. Like he reminded her of something she'd much rather forget.

"One moment," she said to Mother Owd, who was frowning at Raith as if he was a barrow full of plague corpses. The queen stepped away from her servants, glancing both ways down the wet street. "I can't speak to you like this."

"Maybe later—"

"No. Never." She'd told him once words can cut deeper than blades, and he'd laughed, but that *never* was a dagger in him. "I'm sorry, Raith. I can't have you near me."

He felt like his belly was ripped open and he was pouring blood all over the street. "Wouldn't be proper, eh?" he croaked.

"Damn 'proper'!" she hissed. "It wouldn't be *right*. Not for my land. Not for my people."

His voice was a desperate whisper. "What about for you?"

She winced. Sadness. Or maybe just guilt. "Not for me either." She leaned close, looking up from under her brows, but her words came iron-hard and, however eager he was to trick himself, they left no room for doubts. "Best we think of our time together as a dream. A pleasant dream. But it's time to wake."

He would've liked to say something clever. Something noble. Something spiteful. Something, anyway. But talk had never been Raith's battlefield. He'd no idea how to bind all this up into a few words. So in helpless silence he watched her turn. In helpless silence he watched her sweep away. Back to her thralls, and her guards, and her disapproving minister.

He saw how it was, now. Should've known how it was all along. She'd liked his warmth well enough in winter, but now summer came she'd shrugged him off like an old coat. And he could hardly blame her. She was a queen, after all, and he was a killer. It wasn't right for anyone but him. He would've felt lucky to have got what he had, if it hadn't left him so raw and hurting, and with no idea how he could ever feel any other way.

Maybe he should've made some vengeful scene. Maybe he should've airily strode off, as if he'd a hundred better women begging for his attentions. But the sorry fact was he loved her too much to do either one. Loved her too much to do anything but stand, nursing his aching hand and his broken nose

and staring hungrily after her like a dog shut out in the cold. Hoping she'd stop. Hoping she'd change her mind. Hoping she'd just so much as look back.

But she didn't.

"What happened between the two of you?" Raith turned to see Blue Jenner at his shoulder. "And don't tell me nothing, boy."

"Nothing, old man." Raith tried to smile, but he didn't have it in him. "Thanks."

"For what?"

"Giving me a chance to be better. More'n I deserve, I reckon."

And he hunched his shoulders and pressed on into the rain.

—

RAITH STOOD ACROSS THE STREET from the forge, watching the light spill around the shutters, listening to the anvil music clattering from inside, wondering if it was Rin that swung the hammer.

Seemed wherever she went she soon found a place for herself. But then she was a good person to have around. Someone who knew what she wanted and was willing to work for it. Someone who made things from nothing, mended things that were broken. She was just what Raith wasn't.

He knew he'd no right to ask for anything from her, but she'd had some comfort for him after his brother died. The gods knew he needed some comfort, then. He didn't know where else to look for it.

He gave a miserable sniff, wiped runny snot from under his broken nose on his bandaged arm, and stepped across the street to the door. He lifted his fist to knock.

"What brings you here?"

It was the minister's boy, Koll, a crooked grin on his face as he ambled up out of the fading light. A crooked grin reminded Raith for a strange little moment of the one his brother used to have. He still had a twitchy way about him, but there was an ease there too. Like a man who'd made peace with himself. Raith wished he knew how.

He thought fast. "Well...been thinking about getting a new sword. This is where that blade-maker's working now, right?"

"Rin's her name and, aye, this is where she's working." Koll cocked one ear to the door, smiled like there was sweet singing on the other side. "No one makes better swords than Rin. No one anywhere."

"How about you?" asked Raith. "Didn't mark you as the type for swords."

"No." Koll grinned even wider. "I was going to ask if she'd marry me."

Raith's brows went shooting up at that, and no mistake. "Eh?"

"Should've done it long ago, but I never been too good at making choices. Made a lot of the wrong ones. Done a lot of dithering. I've been selfish. I've been weak. Didn't want to hurt anyone so I ended up hurting everyone." He took a long breath. "But death waits for us all. Life's about making the best of what you find along the way. A man who's not content with what he's got, well, more than likely he won't be content with what he hasn't."

"Wise words, I reckon."

“Yes they are. So I’m going to beg her forgiveness—on my knees if I have to, which knowing her I probably will—then I’m going to ask her to wear my key and I’m hoping a very great deal she’ll say yes.”

“Thought you were headed for the Ministry?”

Koll worked his neck out, scratching hard at the back of his head. “For a long time so did I, but there’s all kinds of ways a man can change the world, I reckon. My mother told me...to be the best man I could.” His eyes were suddenly swimming, and he laughed, and tugged at a thong around his neck, something clicking under his shirt. “Shame it took me this long to work out what she meant. But I got there in the end. Not too late, I hope. You going in then?”

Raith winced toward the window, and cleared his throat. “No.” He used to have naught but contempt for this boy. Now he found he envied him. “I reckon your errand comes first.”

“Not going to butt me again, are you?”

Raith waved at his broken nose. “I’m nowhere near so keen on butting as I was. Best of luck.” And he slapped Koll on the shoulder as he passed. “I’ll come back tomorrow.”

But he knew he wouldn’t.

—

EVENING TIME, AND THE shadows were long on the docks as Mother Sun slipped down over Skekenhouse. The last light glinted on glass in Raith’s palm. The vial Mother Scaer had given him, empty now. It’d been foreseen no man could kill Grom-gil-Gorm, but a few drips in a cup of wine had got it done. Koll had been right. Death waits for us all.

Raith took a hard breath, made a fist of his hand and winced at that old ache through his broken knuckles. You’d think pain would get less with time, but the longer you feel it, the worse it hurts. Jenner had been right too. Nothing ever quite heals.

He’d been a king’s sword-bearer and a queen’s bodyguard, he’d been the first warrior into battle and an oarsman on a hero’s crew. Now he wasn’t sure what he was. Wasn’t even sure what he wanted to be.

Fighting was all he’d known. He’d thought Mother War would bring him glory, and a glittering pile of ring-money, and the brotherhood of the shield-wall. But she’d taken his brother and given him nothing but wounds. He hugged his sore ribs, scratched at the dirty bandages on his burned arm, wrinkled his broken nose and felt the dull pain spread through his face. This was what fighting got you, if it didn’t get you dead. Hungry, aching and alone with a heap of regrets head-high.

“Didn’t work out, eh?” Thorn Bathu stood looking down at him, hands propped on her hips, the orange glory of Mother Sun’s setting at her back, so all he could see was her black outline.

“How did you know?” he asked.

“Whatever it is, you don’t look like a man it worked out for.”

Raith gave a sigh right from his guts. “Did you come to mock me or kill me? Either way I can’t be bothered to stop you.”

“Neither one, as it happens.” Thorn slowly sat, her long legs dangling over the side of the quay beside his. She was silent awhile, a frown on her scarred face. A breeze blew up and Raith watched

a pair of dried-up leaves go chasing each other down the quay. Finally she spoke again. “Life ain’t easy for the likes of us, is it?”

“Doesn’t seem to be.”

“Those who are touched by Mother War...” She stared out toward the glittering horizon. “We don’t know what to do with ourselves when Father Peace gets his turn. Those of us who’ve fought all our lives, when we run out of enemies...”

“We fight ourselves,” said Raith.

“Queen Laithlin offered me my old place as her Chosen Shield.”

“Good for you.”

“I can’t take it.”

“No?”

“I stay around here, all I’ll ever see is what I’ve lost.” She stared off at nothing, a sad half-smile on her lips. “Brand wouldn’t have wanted me pining. That boy had no jealousy in him. He’d have wanted new shoots in the ashes.” She slapped the stones beside her. “So Grandfather Yarvi’s giving me the *South Wind*.”

“Handsome gift.”

“Don’t think he’ll be sailing anywhere for a while. I’ve a mind to take her back down the Divine and Denied, all the way to the First of Cities and beyond, maybe. If I leave in the next few days, I reckon I can stay ahead of the ice. So I’m putting a crew together. Got my old friend Fror as helmsman, my old friend Dosduvoi as storekeeper, my old friend Skifr to pick the course.”

“You’re surely blessed with friends for a woman as unfriendly as you are.” Raith watched the gold glint on the water as Mother Sun sank behind them. “You’ll row away, and leave your sorry self here on the docks, eh? I wish you luck.”

“I’m not a big believer in luck.” Thorn gave a long sniff and spat into the water. But she didn’t leave. “I learned something worth knowing, the other day.”

“My nose breaks easily as anyone’s?”

“I’m someone who sometimes needs to be told no.” She looked sideways at him. “That means I’m someone who needs someone around with the guts to tell me no. Aren’t many of them around.”

Raith raised his brows. “Fewer than there used to be too.”

“I can always find a use for a bloody little bastard, and I’ve got a back oar free.” Thorn Bathu stood, and offered him her hand. “You coming?”

Raith blinked at it. “You want me to join the crew of someone I always hated, someone nearly killed me a couple of days back, to sail half the world away from all I’ve ever known or wanted on the promise of nothing but hard work and bad weather?”

“Aye, that’s it.” She grinned down. “Why, you beating away better offers?”

Raith opened his fist and looked down at the empty vial. Then he turned his palm over and let it fall into the water. “Not really.”

He took Thorn’s hand, and let her pull him to his feet.

“There!” bellowed Koll, stabbing his open palm toward the drover to halt the dozen straining oxen, the great chain creaking and twitching. There was a grinding, then a mighty clonk as the feet of the vast gable dropped into their stone-carved sockets.

“Stake it!” shouted Rin, and teams of carpenters who not long ago had been warriors, and not long before that farmers, began to hammer posts into the ground, hauling tight a web of ropes that would keep the great truss from falling.

Skara stared up, neck aching it reared so high above them. It stood over the ruined steps of different-colored marble where Mother Kyre had once greeted visitors to Yaletoft. Just where the great gable of her grandfather’s hall had stood. The one she had watched fall the night Bright Yilling came. Could it only have been a few months ago? It felt a hundred years and more. It felt as if a different girl had watched it happen in a different world, and Skara had only heard the story.

Blue Jenner showed his gap-toothed smile as he stared up at it. “Stands just where the old hall did.”

“But higher, and wider, and far more graceful,” said Skara. Each of the two posts and two rafters had been fashioned from a spear-straight pine-trunk, floated downriver from the high hills above Throvenland where the trees grew oldest and tallest, stripped to the pale wood and beautifully shaped. “It’s fine work.” And Skara set her gloved hand on Rin’s shoulder. “I swear I could not have found a better smith and carpenter anywhere in the whole Shattered Sea.”

Rin grinned over her shoulder. “A well-known fact, my queen. You’re lucky we were tired of making swords.”

“All this and modest too?” murmured Mother Owd.

Rin twitched her apron straight. “Modesty’s for folk with nothing to boast of.”

“Hold them here!” Koll called to the drovers, catching the long chain that linked their yoke to the very top of the truss and swinging underneath it.

Rin started toward him. “Where the hell are you going, you fool?”

“Up!” he called, and swarmed off underneath the chain with his legs crossed over it, nimble and fearless as a squirrel, soon far overhead and swinging in the breeze.

Rin clutched at her head with both hands, hair sticking out between her fingers, the two keys she wore rattling together on her chest. “Get down from there before you kill yourself!”

“This is an excellent chain!” called Koll as he climbed higher and higher. “You should be proud!”

“Gods damn it!” Rin screamed up at him, near-jumping in the air to shake her fist, then giving Skara a begging look. “Can’t you order him to come down, my queen?”

“I could.” Skara watched him clamber onto the highest point of the truss where the two massive beams crossed, remembering Mother Kyre’s words to her on this very ground. “But the secret to keeping authority is to give only orders that you know will be obeyed.”

“The joints all look good!” Koll slapped happily at the smooth meeting of the two rafters. “Your new bolts are all holding, Rin!”

“I’ll bolt your bloody feet to the ground when you get back down here!”

“How will I carve the roof beams then?” he called, sliding his fingers over the pale wood. “What do you fancy, my queen? Dragons?”

“Black dogs!” she called up, setting a hand on Blue Jenner’s shoulder. “Like the worn prow-beast on the ship that carried me away to safety, saw me through a storm and brought me home again!”

Blue Jenner set his hand on top of hers and gave it a pat, while a group of prayer-weavers gathered around the foot of the truss and droned out entreaties to She Who Shapes the Wood and He Who Shelters and She Who Raises High the Stones that this hall should never fall.

Koll caught one of the dangling ropes and slithered down. “Black dogs it is!”

“Why didn’t I marry a bloody farmer?” muttered Rin, scrubbing at her scalp with her fingernails.

Koll dropped the last few strides and ambled back toward them. “You couldn’t find one who’d take you?”

“How many of these will we need?” asked Mother Owd, peering up at the towering truss.

“Fifteen will make the skeleton,” said Koll, looking up and sketching the timbers in the air with jerky movements of his pointing fingers. The gods knew how he managed it, but he gave some sense of the building completed, the huge beams above, the vast space they would enclose, and Skara found herself smiling as she pictured the warm dimness within, the echoing of the skalds’ voices, the women’s oiled hair and the men’s polished cloak-buckles gleaming in the light of the great firepit, just as it used to be in her grandfather’s day.

Mother Owd gave a soft whistle as she considered the emptiness overhead. “We could be here a while.”

“The Forest took twenty-eight years to build,” said Skara.

“I hope to be finished a *splinter* more quickly, my queen.” Koll gave a smoky sigh as he looked up proudly at the work done so far. “But nothing worth building is ever built quickly.”

“Mother War strikes like lightning,” said Mother Owd. “Father Peace grows like the sapling tree, and needs the same care.”

“Yaletoft grows more like mushrooms.” Blue Jenner peered down from the steps and into the town. “You wake up one morning after the rains and there they are.”

It was true, the new city sprang from the ashes of the old, the frames of fine new houses sprouting along the wide straight streets Mother Owd had laid out between the site of the hall and the sea, the saws and hammers and masons’ shouts a constant chorus from dawn until dark.

More people flooded in every day. Some of them folk who had lived in Yaletoft and fled the burning, but Gettlanders and Yutmarkers, Inglings and Lowlanders too. Folk from all across the Shattered Sea who had lost their old lives in the war. Folk looking for fresh starts and hearing that Queen Skara had honest silver for honest work.

“Some of what Bright Yilling burned can never be replaced,” murmured Mother Owd.

“Then we must remember it fondly and look forward to fresh glories. It is hard to lose something.” Skara turned back toward the towering truss. “But it gives you the chance to make something better.”

Koll was laying out his plans with vast flourishes of his hands while Rin watched, arms folded and one skeptical brow arched high.

“I’ll hope to have five of them up and braced together before winter comes. The rest will have to wait until spring. I’ll need to go into the hills and pick out the right trees first, though.” He scratched innocently at the back of his head, sidling up toward her. “Maybe my wife will come with me, keep me warm when the snows come?”

“The snows come three men high up there! We’ll be trapped till spring.”

“Exactly,” he said, hooking the golden elf-bangle she wore on her wrist and gently easing her arms unfolded.

“You’re mad.”

“I’m just trying to be the best man I can be.” He took her chain and ducked nimbly inside so it was around both their necks. “Just trying to stand in the light.”

She laughed as he gathered her in his arms and held her tight, swaying from one foot to the other. Soon they were kissing shamelessly, eyes closed, his hand tangled in her hair, her hand up under his chin, their jaws working. Never mind seeing it, it was kissing one could hear from a few strides distant, and several of the waiting workmen tossed their tools down and wandered off, shaking their heads.

Mother Owd rolled her eyes. “The one drawback of this particular smith and carpenter.”

“We all have our foibles.” Skara was glad for them, but watching made her sad for herself. She turned away and stared out toward the sea, and found she was thinking of Raith.

By now, if the *South Wind* had beaten the ice on the Divine, he would be rowing down the long Denied. She hoped he was happy, but he had always struck her as someone to whom happiness did not come easily. They had always had that much in common, if so little else. She thought of his face, forehead deep-furrowed and mouth pressed hard, the way it used to be. She thought of the warmth of him beside her. She wondered if he ever thought of her. She wondered if—

“An eagle came from Grandfather Yarvi,” said Mother Owd.

Skara shook herself. She had no time to waste on fancies. “Good news?”

“The Vanstermen have a new king. Mother Scaer organized a trial by combat and this man drove every warrior before him. His name is Yurn-gil-Ram.”

Jenner scratched at his sparse hair. “Means naught to me.”

“He is a chieftain from the utmost north where the snows never melt, and they call him The Ram because he breaks men with his head.”

Skara puffed out her cheeks. “Charming.”

“He has declared himself the greatest warrior the Shattered Sea has ever seen, and offers to kill anyone who dares challenge him.”

“I am eighteen years old and already had my lifetime’s fill of warriors’ boasting.”

“They say he mixes blood with his beer and is making a chain from the fingerbones of his enemies.”

Blue Jenner gave Skara a wink. “Sounds fine husband material, my queen.”

She snorted. “Send him a bird to say Blue Jenner happily consents to wear his key.”

“Marriage is the last thing on his mind,” said Mother Owd, folding her arms tight. “Grandfather Yarvi fears he is already planning raids over the border into Gettland.”

Jenner gave a disgusted shake of his head. “Can the Vanstermen really be battle-hungry again? Aren’t they scared of elf-magic?”

“Even as a bow only has so many arrows,” said Owd, “it seems those elf-weapons can only send Death so many times. And with the witch Skifr gone to the south, Strokorn is once again forbidden.”

Blue Jenner put his weathered face in his calloused hands and gave a groan. “Seems the world hasn’t changed as much as we thought.”

“In the ashes of every war the seeds of the next take root,” murmured Skara. She felt the old nerves bubbling up her throat, pressed a hand to her stomach and tried to swallow them back down again. “Send a bird to Mother Scaer with our congratulations and a bird to Queen Laithlin with our sympathies.”

“And then?” asked Mother Owd.

“Watch carefully, speak softly, smile sweetly, gather our friends close, pray fervently to Father Peace for calm and keep our swords handy.”

“Orders that suit any situation.”

“Might be wise to rebuild the walls of Bail’s Point too,” said Jenner, “and stronger than ever.”

“My queen!” A boy was hurrying up from the docks, his boots squelching in the half-frozen mud. “There are three ships coming in! Their sails have the white horse of Kalyiv!”

“Prince Varoslaf’s emissaries,” said Jenner. “You want to greet them at the docks?”

Skara considered the message that would send. “We must not seem overeager. Set a chair here, beneath the gable. It would be proper for them to come to me.”

Mother Owd smiled. “We must always think of what is proper.”

“We must. And then, where necessary, ignore it.”

“I’ll carve you a better one in due course, my queen.” Koll thumped one of the rough chairs down the carpenters sat on while they ate. “But this might have to serve for now.” And he flicked a little dirt from the seat with the side of his hand.

It was a simple old thing, and a little rickety, the wood blackened in places by fire.

“It is not the chair that makes the queen,” said Mother Owd. “But the queen that makes the chair.”

“It must’ve come through the night Bright Yilling came,” murmured Blue Jenner, “and survived.”

“Yes.” Skara smiled as she stroked its arm. “But so has Throvenland. And so have I.”

She sat, facing the sea, with Mother Owd at her left hand and Blue Jenner at her right. Chest up, shoulders down, chin high, the way Mother Kyre had taught her. Strange, how what had seemed so awkward once could feel so natural now.

“Warn the emissaries my hall is still a little drafty,” said Skara. “But the Queen of Throvenland is ready to receive them.”

As always, four people without whom:

Bren Abercrombie, whose eyes are sore from reading it.

Nick Abercrombie, whose ears are sore from hearing about it.

Rob Abercrombie, whose fingers are sore from turning the pages.

Lou Abercrombie, whose arms are sore from holding me up.

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You know who you are...

BY JOE ABERCROMBIE

HALF A KING
HALF THE WORLD
HALF A WAR

JOE ABERCROMBIE is the *New York Times* bestselling author of *Half a War*, *Half the World*, *Half a King*, *Red Country*, and the First Law trilogy: *The Blade Itself*, *Before They Are Hanged*, and *Last Argument of Kings*. He spent ten years as a freelance film editor, and is now a full-time writer who lives in Bath, England, with his wife, two daughters, and son.

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