

# R.J. VICKERS

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The Lands and Seas of The Kinship Thrones Northreach Kohlmarsh Chell Alturren Dardensfell Whitland Ruunas Eshok Desert Varrival Legend Leagues **Kingdom Capital** Kingdom Boundary

#### Glossary of Terms

**Baylore** / Itrea – Itrea is the land west of the Kinship Thrones to which the Makhori once fled, so it is known as a stronghold of magic. Baylore is the largest city in Itrea.

**Dragonleaf** – A distinctive straight-trunked tree with clusters of flax-like fronds at the top.

**Emberwood** – A tall, dark-wooded tree that blooms red in summer.

Kinship Thrones – The name for the nine kingdoms all joined under Whitish rule. Long ago, the expanding Whitish Empire was divided between the high king's nine sons, though some kingdoms (such as Varrival) had been settled long before Whitish influence.

Makhor / Makhori - A name for anyone with magical blood.

**Pigeonwood** – A tall, many-branched tree that is sparse underneath and bushy on top.

**Quarter** – A period of ten days. There are four quarters in a span.

**Span** – A period of 40 days. There are eight full spans plus one incomplete span in a year.

#### Prologue

As the shadows began lengthening on their third day since leaving the group, the man and boy were forced to admit they had once again been defeated. The ocean had failed to emerge from the suffocating glut of trees.

"No fire tonight," the man said. He dropped his sack on a patch of mossy earth and limped to a fallen log. "Too tired." Settling on the log with a groan, he massaged the swollen tendons around his knee.

"I can do it," the boy said. "I've watched you often enough."

He was lanky but strong. The man nodded and watched the boy duck beneath a vine, knife extended. Soon he would be a boy no longer.

They had started out from Lostport two quarters back, and had been forced to separate from their party of prospectors when the man had fallen and injured his knee. They had spent the past three days depleting their meager provisions as they hacked through the forest in a desperate bid to find the coast.

"We'll have to start hunting soon," the man said gruffly. He unlashed the rope from his tattered sack and reached a hand in, searching for the last of the wayfarers' bread.

"So we're giving up?" The boy's shoulders appeared around a tree as he straightened, two knobbly sticks in

hand.

The man grunted, noncommittal.

Turning away emphatically, the boy snagged three more splintered shards of wood from beneath a fallen tree. They were as dry as wood came in these parts. "Make your own fire," he muttered, tossing the wood to the ground behind him. The shards landed just beyond the man's reach.

He sighed yet said nothing as the boy crashed through the snarled layers of moss and vines, following that evertaunting downhill slope.

Before long the boy stopped, his eyes on a sturdy tree slumped perpendicular to the slope. He tested the bark, found it damp but free of moss, and began edging his way along the trunk, knees locked tight to the bark. He had barely left the roots behind when the slope dropped so steeply below him that his jaw clenched in fear. He trained his gaze on the bark and continued forward with slow precision.

When the trunk suddenly split into a web of branches, the boy stopped, as though waking from a daze, and looked down. Below him—far below, yet so close he could jump and reach it—lay a shimmering finger of water. Mountains curved around it on three sides, looming dark and watchful, but the far edge of the inlet rounded a green slope and opened to the sea.

The sea. They had found their way at last.

For what seemed an eternity, the boy could not turn his gaze from the water. He shook his head a few times, afraid the vision would evaporate like a swathe of silver mist, yet it remained, unchanging.

Breathing fast, though no longer from fear, the boy slithered his way back to the base of the tree. With a final backward glance at the slanting trunk, he turned and began scrambling up the hill.

Back at their camp, the man was just clearing a bramble from the place he intended to use as a fire pit when the boy's head emerged from the slope below in a shower of leaves.

"Just there," he gasped. "The ocean—swear I saw it—
" He clambered up beside the man and sank to his knees, shoulders heaving.

"Where?" the man asked urgently. "Are we headed the right way? How close?"

The boy took another rasping breath, coughed, and finally steadied his shaking hands. "I reckon we could make it by nightfall. No way to miss it. Water's ahead of us no matter where we go."

A smile creased the man's weary face, and he tousled the boy's hair. "Could I make it before nightfall same as you?"

"If your knee's not too sore."

The man nodded and reached for his pack. "In that case, what are we waiting for?"

Grinning, the boy scooped his belongings into his pack and led the way down the perilous slope. The sun had long since ducked below the surrounding peaks, and in its absence everything took on a dull, murky cast. After speaking so confidently of their goal, the boy kept an eye on the shadows, fearful of the sudden onset of darkness.

Yet the grey light held, until at long last the trees thinned below them and a sliver of rippling water emerged amidst the heavy greenery.

"Nearly there," the boy panted.

The man nodded grimly. His knee was paining him worse than ever, setting his whole leg shaking with each ponderous step.

The boy was growing impatient. No longer watching

carefully to be certain the man was close behind, he plunged forward, sweeping vines and branches and roots out of his path as effortlessly as if they were flies. Then the trees ended. The ground dropped away in a short mud bank; for a moment the boy swayed, looking down, before he held his breath and jumped. He landed on his feet, teeth clacking together.

The beach was a crescent of smooth black stones, the water rattling across them like wind through dried beanpods. Beyond, the ocean lay peacefully cradled between the somber green hills. The boy was standing there, gaze trained on the horizon, when he caught sight of something brilliant red nestled amongst the rocks. He knelt and reached for it. The ruby that slipped free was twice the size of his thumb, polished by the constant churning of the waves until it shone almost from within.

"Look at what—" he shouted, before realizing that the man had fallen behind somewhere in the trees. He was about to turn and rejoin his companion when he spied another stone, this one purple. It was an amethyst nearly the size of the ruby.

"That's madness," he said under his breath. Again he turned for the trees, and again he was distracted by a new gemstone. By the time the man appeared and slid awkwardly down the mud bank, the boy had amassed more precious stones than he could carry. He had set his pack on a driftwood log and begun stacking the gems beside it.

"Thank all the faithless gods of Lostport," the man said. He sank onto the log and rubbed his grimy face. "I thought we would die before we saw the ocean again."

Kicking the pile of gemstones, the boy said, "Have you seen this?"

The man stared blankly at the ground. At last he focused on the pile of gleaming gems, and he blinked

several times. "Am I dreaming?"

The boy grinned. "Look at this. And this!" He handed two of the largest stones to the man. "We didn't have to search through the forest. The rivers brought everything right to us!"

"You know what we have to do now?" The man took the two gems and weighed them, one in each hand. "This secret is too good to keep to ourselves. We are going to build ourselves a boat, row back to Lostport, and sell this secret to the king. We'll be rich men, my boy."

When the boy glanced sideways, he could see the man's eyes gleaming.

Under the man's careful instruction, the boy spent the next three days building a raft from logs lashed together with vines. The boy held his breath the first time they launched the raft, but the logs were buoyant and barely gave beneath their weight.

Five days later, exhausted and sunburnt, the man and boy arrived at the main port, where they were greeted warmly by the merchants who had funded their mission. From there they were taken to the king, who gave a greater reward than either had dared to hope for.

And so it all began.

### Chapter 1

Laina tightened her grip on the helm as a wave knocked her ship sideways.

"Port tack, Doran," she called over the building gale. "Cut him off."

As her brother tightened the portside sheet, Laina glanced left at her competitor. Even through the lancing rain, Conard's triumphant smile was clear. Laina wanted to slap it away.

Then her *Lark* began to heave sideways as a new gust of wind caught the sails, plunging the ship to the left. Conard had a second to react. Their ships—his small and sleek, hers larger and fatter-sailed—were on a collision course. He could have ducked away in that instant, ceding victory to Laina, but a sudden wave rolled his ship sideways. His mainsail flopped against the crest of a wave, and a pair of barrels thundered sideways and rolled off the rail.

In the confusion, Conard gripped the helm and tried to maintain his footing, while Laina wrestled her own wheel to starboard once more.

It was too late. With a monstrous, slow creaking, the two boats surged together. The bowsprit of Conard's ship crashed down just before the stern of Laina's, and water erupted from the split.

Laina was hurled back against the rail; she grasped for

a handhold, but nothing materialized. She crashed backward into the water. Behind her, Doran screamed like a child.

Then she knew no more.

\* \* \*

Several dozen leagues north of Lostport, Conard blinked in the sudden brightness as a rough sack was torn from his head. A fierce gust of wind assailed him, and he staggered.

"Steady there," a deep voice counseled.

Conard looked around. He stood on the deck of a twenty-oar rivership, the standard for Whitland's trade.

"Where are we?" he asked.

The man beside him, with the burlap sack still in hand—clearly someone in King Faolan's employ, since his brightly-colored uniform looked out-of-place beside the oarsmen—gave a shrug. "Somewhere in Kohlmarsh, I would imagine. This crew is bound for the lakes of Kohlmarsh, and the goods will continue to the northern sea and on to Whitland. As for you and I—well, suffice it to say you are banished from Lostport, and I am to leave you somewhere far enough abroad that you never have a hope of returning."

Conard grimaced. "That hardly comes as a surprise. Curse it."

Three or four days ago, as close as he could reckon given that he had been drugged and unconscious through long stretches of it, Conard had been hauled from the cells beneath King Faolan's hillside manor and dumped aboard this ship. Which was quite a fine rivership, he had to admit. Not that it measured up to his poor, destroyed sailing vessel.

"What happened, then?" Conard asked. His mind was

beginning to clear, and as it did, the jarring memory of Laina tumbling over the rail of her *Lady Lark* resurfaced. "What have I done to deserve banishment? Surely I could pay for the king's wrecked ship, but is Laina…?"

He was afraid even to think it. Of course, had she not survived the fall, the king would surely have ordered him drowned. Everyone in Lostport had heard stories of the Convict's Caves, a set of sea-caves that filled with water every high tide. Murderers and traitors were chained to the wall of the cave and left to drown, waiting in terror as the water crept, hairsbreadth by hairsbreadth, up the walls.

"The princess has survived her ordeal," the man said stoutly. "Though it appears her brother will be an invalid for life. His legs have lost all function."

"Bloody Varos," Conard swore. Doran was the heir to Lostport. "They should have killed me when they had the chance."

The man shook his head. "Princess Laina saved you. She insisted the collision was her fault, not yours. She has a soft heart, thank the dear lady."

Head reeling, Conard stepped to the rail. What had he done? Thank all the gods that it had been Doran, not Laina, who took the blow.

In a single move, he had thrown Lostport into chaos.

Who would inherit the throne?

Not a cripple, certainly. He had no hope of providing his kingdom an heir.

"And what of my wealth?" Conard asked, speaking more to the river and the bleak grey Kohlmarsh flats than to his companion.

Yet the guardsman heard and stepped to the rail beside him. "All taken. You will be taken to the Twin Cities, if you wish, or left at a smaller settlement somewhere in Kohlmarsh, with enough coin for a meal and a single set of clothes to keep you warm. The rest has been reclaimed."

"Shame," Conard said. "Easily won, easily lost, I suppose. I never made for much of a nobleman anyway."

In a lower voice, the guardsman said, "I would not have dealt you such a dire blow, if the decision had been in my hands."

"Thank you." Conard turned and strode to the bow of the squat rivership, no longer desirous of conversation. His questions had been answered.

He had never traveled north of Lostport, but from what he could see, the nearby lands were grim and lifeless. Traders often brought tales of the black hills of Ruunas, the craggy peaks of Dardensfell, and the shimmering coast of Chelt, yet Kohlmarsh seemed nothing but a boggy wasteland.

Conard tried to imagine his life as an exile. For the first time, he noticed an unfamiliar weight on his left wrist—a narrow, flat iron band, too tight to rotate easily but loose enough that it did not impede his circulation. It was the mark of the exile. A band so thick would not be removed easily, and, were he to return to Lostport, he would be easily identifiable to anyone who bothered to look. His punishment would be less reversible the second time around.

Of course he would return, though. How could anyone live so far from the rainforest? There was something so raw, so untamed about the mountains and fjords surrounding Lostport; this land felt bare and lifeless. Ever since his father's death, he had been obsessed with exploring the wild reaches of the kingdom, venturing farther than anyone had before, seeking mysteries rather than jewels. He could not give that up, no matter what it cost him.

More importantly, he could never turn his back on

Laina. He had adored her the moment he first saw her, as a fourteen-year-old boy staggered by his own good fortune, and in the years that followed he had grown to love her more with each day. Yet he had never told her as much. He had been forced to watch as her father negotiated for ever-wealthier suitors, constantly trying for a royal conquest. Conard hadn't the slightest chance with her.

If he returned to Lostport, would Laina despise him? Or did he have a chance at making amends?

Doran, crippled. He still could not believe it.

\* \* \*

Faolan tapped cautiously on his son's bedroom door. With Doran in such delicate health, he was afraid the slightest disturbance would damage him beyond repair. If the common bastard hadn't seen to it already.

"Come in, Father," Doran called. Already his voice had strengthened.

Faolan slipped into the well-heated room, careful not to let in too great a draft. The chill of winter was slow to recede this year. He should never have sanctioned the sailing trip, not on such unsteady seas.

"How did you know it was I?" Faolan asked, trying to smile for Doran.

He grimaced. "You've visited me six times today. And the medic never bothers to knock."

"Ah." Clearing his throat, Faolan settled into the chair beside his bed. The chair was carved from the sturdiest emberwood, dark and polished and very expensive—throughout the rest of the Kinship Thrones, that is. In Lostport, the ember trees were akin to a weed.

But Faolan would have given all the wealth of Lostport to be in a land with decent healers. Even those who used the mystic arts. Perhaps they would be best of all.

"And you still can feel nothing in your legs?" Faolan asked, though he knew the answer.

"No." Doran lifted the bedsheets to reveal a knee and thigh creased with angry red marks. "I've been pinching myself all day. I keep tricking myself into believing I've felt something, but I should have given up long ago. It's useless."

"You must not do this to yourself." Faolan took Doran's hand and pressed it between his own. "I will not have you hurting yourself any further."

Doran tugged his hand free. "You forget. I can feel nothing."

The coldness in his voice was painful to hear.

"Can I do anything for you?"

Doran looked away. "Bring me a book. Something diverting. If I'm no longer fit to rule, at least save me from dying of boredom."

"Has Laina been in to see you?"

"Oh, about a hundred times."

Faolan stood. Laina and Doran had always been close, and now he felt that he was excluded from their confidences. "I'll leave you to rest."

"Don't forget the book," Doran begged.

"Of course not."

With a sigh, Faolan turned and let himself out of Doran's room. Ever since his children had been old enough to think for themselves, they had worried him. Laina had always been the brash one, the leader. As much as he had attempted to groom Doran for the throne, his son had never transformed into the heir Faolan envisioned. He had been scholarly when he should have been commanding, thoughtful when he should have taken action. And now a fog of depression hung over him. Crippled, broken in spirit,

Doran could never rule. More importantly, if Whitland learned Doran could never provide Lostport an heir, the high king had the authority to appoint a successor of his own choosing. It could spell the end of Lostport's independence.

At the end of the sloping, curved hallway, Faolan paused before the door to his study, which overlooked the harbor below. He heard voices within. One belonged to Harrow, an ambassador from Whitland who had forsaken his own homeland to become Faolan's closest friend and advisor, and another to his gardener. Faolan knew without needing to listen that they discussed the great forest road, yet since his son's accident, he could not bring himself to care.

"Your Grace," Harrow said comfortably when Faolan pushed open the door. "Just the man we need. The architects from Ruunas have arrived, and they are ready to start on the next phase of the project. They wait for your word."

"Why should I care about miserable architects?" Faolan stomped to his customary chair behind the desk and sat heavily. "Doran can't rule Lostport from his bed. My line will end with my death. Whitland will snatch our kingdom up at once. There is no reason to continue with our plans."

The gardener backed to the doorway and gave a hurried bow. "I will take my leave, my lord," he mumbled.

Faolan waved him out without glancing his way.

"Be sensible," said Harrow. "You are still our king, and you cannot give up at the first sign of hardship. Besides, you may someday have a grandson to pass the title on to."

"Unlikely," Faolan grumbled.

"Oh, I would—"

"I have a better idea." Harrow leaned his head closer

and glanced at the door. "I have heard of far-off kingdoms where healing miracles are traded as commonly as glass. In Cashabree, and even in Itrea, there are those who can heal with magic."

Faolan grimaced. "And how might I buy one of these so-called 'miracles'? It is Whitland we must answer to, even now, and your blasted king would have my head for the very suggestion."

"He's no longer my king," Harrow said sharply. "We should ask for independence. It could be the only way."

Faolan shook his head. The sky outside was beginning to turn a dusky pink, striping the study in its faint glow. He should be returning to his daughter's bedside, not indulging his friend in fruitless scheming. "You want us to sail up to Whitland and ask politely for our independence? With no troops and a mountain of debt? It's useless. I should just abdicate now."

"Whitland is in more trouble, financially, than the High King is willing to admit," Harrow said. "If we were able to help him out—pay off our debts and give a little extra—he might just be willing to let our tiny port throne fall out of his grasp."

Faolan shuffled a pile of papers into order, scowling at his desk. "That sounds like the most dimwitted scheme I have ever been privy to. Are you planning to rob an entire kingdom? We have gone deeper into debt each year since our founding. No one has enough riches to pay that off."

"Just listen," Harrow said. "I have thought this out. If we build more than just a road to the gemstone beaches—a city, say—we could attract investors and wealthy nobility to come settle in this exciting new land. With the money they bring in commerce and economic growth, and the wealth from our own gemstones, we will have enough to bring Whitland begging at our doorstep."

This time Faolan could not disguise his keen interest. Even he was not immune to the enticing wealth that lay behind this newest scheme. If he could liberate his trading ports, it would be no trouble at all to send a fleet in search of the healing knowledge to cure his son. And once he could walk again, they would build a glittering empire beyond anything in the Kinship Thrones.

"So, why is it that Whitland needs money so desperately?" Faolan asked at last.

Harrow scratched uncomfortably at his neat, dark beard. "That's the one misgiving I have about this plan. Whitland wishes to send troops south and subdue Varrival. Apparently the desert-dwellers have grown dangerously wealthy from their glass trade, and have begun encroaching on Whitland's southern borders."

"And we would, of course, rather support Varrival," Faolan said. "Given that we are similarly aligned against Whitland." It was not too great a hurdle, though. As soon as Lostport had gained independent sovereignty, Faolan could turn and support the three outliers—Varrival, Ruunas, and Cashabree—in their efforts against the High Throne. "I say we do it anyway."

He did not miss the triumphant gleam in Harrow's eye. "Your word, Your Grace. As soon as you sign the edict, the builders are ready to commence work on your gemstone city."

"Very well, then." Faolan glanced at the window, beyond which he could see the forest overtaking his tidy gardens. Everything could change with this new flow of wealth. Lostport would ascend to the world stage.

Harrow cleared his throat. "We could have this project done before next winter, Your Grace. Once King Luistan knows that we intend to help finance Whitland's war, the High King might even send architects and laborers to help us complete the project. I have heard rumors that Dardensfell and Kohlmarsh have refused to send aid, so Whitland is more desperate for funds than it will admit."

After a long moment, Faolan nodded. "The idea is sound. We have put too much work into this project to abandon it now. I will sign the edict. And you must call on Whitland for as much manpower as it can muster."

Harrow's smile grew. "I knew you would agree."

Faolan shook his head with amusement. With a graceful strike, he signed the two papers his advisor slid before him. Then, as the last purple glow of evening faded behind the hills outside, he pushed back his chair and stood. "Evening, Harrow."

He must return to his son. Doran deserved to know he had a chance.

#### Chapter 2

When the rivership made berth at last in a small, reeking village in Kohlmarsh, the guardsman asked Conard if he wished to disembark there or continue north.

"This is the closest village to Lostport. We have traveled twelve days since leaving the coast; you can see now how remote and untouched the southern lands remain."

"Why are you giving me a choice?" Conard asked suspiciously. He still had not decided whether the guardsman was genuinely sympathetic or trying to trick him into something, so he was wary of any friendly suggestions.

"King Faolan thought you would want a chance at establishing yourself in one of the twin cities, either in Kohlmarsh or Dardensfell."

Conard snorted. From what he had seen of Kohlmarsh, his only desire was to leave the kingdom as quickly as possible.

The guardsman shrugged. "Dardensfell is quite impressive, actually. It has a spine of immense mountains along its western border, and the rest of the land is temperate and covered with plains excellent for riding. But if you were to return to Lostport—not that I may condone such behavior—your best chance is to disembark here and make your way south."

"I'll get off here," Conard said at once. Whether or not

the guardsman was trying to help him, he did not wish to travel any farther than necessary from his home.

The crew had finished tying the rivership to the dock. Houses lined the water, and the entire village seemed to have sprung up in a claustrophobic huddle around the small dock. As the gangplank was lowered and Conard waited his turn to disembark, he began to pick up the source of the reek specific to the village—unlike the rest of Kohlmarsh, with its fetid stench of decay rising from the lowland bogs, this village was swathed in a dull haze of acrid peat smoke that curled from each chimney before settling among the streets.

Conard bent forward and stretched his hands to the ground, back aching from the long ride cramped on the rivership. When he straightened, the guardsman handed him a small bundle tied in a blanket, what Conard assumed was the meager allotment of supplies allowed an exile.

"Thank you," he said grimly. "I appreciate everything you've done for me."

The guardsman gripped Conard's shoulder in farewell. "You may not remember me, but I watched you as a child, running about the king's mansion like a little monkey. I hope to see you there again someday."

Homesickness hit Conard in a dizzying wave. He nodded his gratitude and turned away before the guardsman could see the pain in his eyes. He was a twelveday sail from the only home he had ever known, destitute and entirely alone in what had to be the ugliest kingdom imaginable.

At least it felt good to walk down the gangplank onto solid ground, where he could stretch his legs a bit. The boards of the dock creaked unpleasantly beneath him; several were half-rotted, and all were slicked with a grey layer of algae or moss that seemed to thrive in the cold humidity. Where the dock ended, though, the ground turned to mud even fouler than the weathered boards.

The village looked even worse from the ground. The buildings were made of packed mud, with sagging roofs of bundled reeds; the whole place looked as though a good drenching would wash it away. At least it seemed well-equipped with accommodations—the riverfront boasted a tavern, two inns, and a general store of some sort. One of the inns was even built of wood, which served to make the rest of the village look shabbier still by comparison.

Knowing his bundle was unlikely to contain much in the way of coin, Conard headed for the mud-walled inn, hoping at least to find someone to talk to.

When he pushed open the near-weightless door of woven reeds, Conard was surprised to be greeted with the aroma of sizzling meat and a halo of warm lights. A cough from behind reminded him that others had followed him off the rivership and clearly had the same plan as him. Conard stepped farther inside, noticing that the pleasant glow was created by glass orbs refracting the candlelight.

"How long is the ship stopping here?" Conard asked the man who had entered directly after him.

"Just 'til sundown. The captain wants to make the Twin Cities in another ten days. No harm trying, but he's a bit of a fool betimes."

"Are we more than halfway, then?"

The man shook his head with a grimace. "Fool, as I said."

Others were joining them now, though the guardsman had evidently remained aboard the rivership. Perhaps he would jump ship and return to Lostport as soon as they passed another vessel heading south.

Conard wished he could do the same. Unconsciously he rubbed the iron band beneath his bedraggled tunic; as soon as he realized what he was doing, he put both hands behind his back.

The other men had already taken seats and accepted mugs of some hot drink; apparently there was only one choice of alcohol, but the men appeared to enjoy the unfamiliar pink-gold spirit enough that they did not mind. Watching them covertly, Conard took a seat in the corner, somewhat concealed behind the mantle of the enormous stone fireplace.

As soon as the innkeeper took note of Conard's arrival, he greeted him with a mug of the sweet-smelling drink, beaming.

Conard tried to push the mug away. "I haven't any money," he said. "And I need somewhere to spend the night."

"Clearly you've never been here before," the man said. "Just this one night, everything is on us. Be sure to tell your friends to pay us a visit on the float south."

Conard did not bother to correct the man. "Is there any way back to Lostport, aside from the river?" he asked casually. "I was hoping to return a bit sooner than the rest of the crew, so..."

The man chuckled. "There is a bit of a path alongside the river, but you'd be trudging through muck and marsh grasses for no less than a full span. Five days walking for each day on the boat, that's what I reckon. Try your chances with another crew headed south. You'd be far likelier to survive."

Raising his mug, Conard took a whiff of the steam rising from the odd yellow drink. It was sharp and earthy yet underlined with sweetness. When the innkeeper turned back to the counter, face relaxing in a smile, Conard cleared his throat.

"One more question," he said.

The man nodded affably.

"If I stay here a while—a quarter or so—would I be able to earn my keep?"

This time the innkeeper let out a bark of laughter. "We've a shortage of labor here, and no end of jobs that need doing. 'Course you can work for a few meals and a bed. It's mighty hard tempting settlers to stay in Bogside. Most would rather continue to Lostport."

Bogside. What a depressing name for a town. Rather hesitantly, Conard said, "And what about you? Why would you stay in such a—a bloody miserable place?"

"Grew up just a ways north of here," the innkeeper said. "Odd as it'll sound, I like it here. With all the river trade, you can make a tidy business in these parts. Seafood and sweaty forests down south never turned my head."

Conard shook his head. He would never understand people like that.

He sipped at the drink, choked, and spat it out again. When he took a tentative second taste, he was surprised to find that, though bitingly strong, it slid smoothly across his tongue.

\* \* \*

Laina was perched on the end of her brother's bed, trying without success to talk him out of the foul mood he was in, when a quiet but persistent knock sounded at her door.

Doran groaned.

"Hello, Father." Laina tried to keep the exasperation from her voice. Her father's obsessive attention was doing nothing to improve Doran's temper.

As the door to the sickroom creaked open, Doran set aside the illuminated text he had been reading.

"Good morning, my dears."

Doran fixed his eyes on the ceiling of the sickroom, not turning to greet their father. Laina stood and collected his books.

"How are you feeling today?" her father asked, settling beside Doran on the stifling bedcovers.

Doran said nothing.

"Let him return to his bedchamber," Laina said. "It's much too dark in here." The sickroom was stuffy and dim, with a lingering scent of bitter herbs. Doran complained that the place gave him a splitting headache, especially when he tried to read.

"Of course, of course." Her father waved a hand dismissively, clearly preoccupied.

For the first time, Doran acknowledged their father's presence. "What is it?"

"I have—ah—made arrangements for you," he said. "I have sent for a horse and a special saddle to accommodate you. You'll be free to travel about as much as you wish."

Doran struggled to sit up. "You wish to parade me in front of the townsfolk? Humiliate me publicly?"

In Doran's place, Laina would have wanted nothing more than the freedom a horse offered. Yet her father had never been able to understand his children. Doran should have been the spoiled daughter, Laina the heir.

Her father's face slackened with disappointment. He had clearly planned this carefully, and the gift came from the depths of his love. "At least come to see the beast," he pleaded, rising heavily. Laina could see more clearly than ever the age in his sloping shoulders. In recent years, she had surpassed even her father's height, while Doran lagged behind.

"Is the horse here already?" Laina asked. She couldn't resist—horses were so rare in Lostport that she had never ridden one herself. "Where did it come from?"

Her father smoothed Doran's hair. "I sent for the beast nine days ago. She is one of the elegant plains mares from Dardensfell, bred for speed and endurance."

"I'll give her a look," Doran said begrudgingly. "But how do you intend to get me outside?"

Their father crossed to the door and opened it to admit two burly young men. With some jostling, they lifted Doran between them, a blanket tucked around his legs.

"You okay, Highness?" one asked.

Doran grunted.

Laina hated seeing her brother like this. He often refused to eat; she had to join him for most meals to ensure he didn't reject them altogether. He had confessed to her that he would be singlehandedly responsible for the ruin of Lostport. She was afraid he had lost the will to live.

As soon as they emerged from the sickroom, a draft of humid, sun-drenched air wafted over them. Laina breathed deeply, inhaling the sweetly pungent aroma of spring in the rainforest. The guards had a bit of trouble negotiating the stairs, but soon they were crossing the entrance hall to the golden light of the lawn.

In the eleven days since the accident, spring had truly taken hold, a riot of color spilling from the forest onto the neatly-trimmed lawn. Everywhere in Lostport, the forest threatened to overwhelm the small pockets of tidy civilization the settlers had created. Unruly bushes and trees billowed against the borders of their garden, boasting gaudy, over-perfumed flowers in every color imaginable.

If only Conard and Doran could share in the delight. But Doran was inured to the lushness of spring, and Conard was somewhere far away, afraid to face the repercussions of what he had done. Remorse gnawed at her.

The soft nicker of a horse startled Laina from her

thoughts. At the end of the lawn, struggling against her reins with lips extended toward a succulent apple, stood Doran's horse.

"She's beautiful," Laina said.

The two guardsmen carried Doran closer, Laina following. As they neared the horse, Doran gave in and raised a hand to stroke her sun-warmed flank.

Holding the reins was a tall, lean Darden with a mop of loose grey hair around his ears and a neatly-trimmed beard and mustache. Despite his old age, his shoulders were well-muscled and his skin tanned; Laina assumed it was a product of the active Darden lifestyle. From what she had heard, bands of warriors—men and women—roamed the plains, hunting buffalo and fighting one another for territory.

"Her name is Feather, majesty," the old man said, ducking his head politely. "She comes from our very best line of horses."

"She is lovely," Doran admitted.

Distracted from its pursuit of the apple, Feather nuzzled Doran's ear. Laina scratched the horse's glossy neck.

"The saddle has been fitted for you," their father said, surveying the scene with his hands behind his back. "You should give it a try."

At a whistle from her master, Feather bent her knees and dropped onto the lawn. Laina had not known horses were capable of such. An awkward shuffle followed as the servants and horsemaster lifted Doran bodily into the saddle. His left leg would not clear the saddle of its own accord; with some impropriety, the Darden took him by the ankle and slid the lifeless limb over the horse. They were lucky that Doran was slender.

"Now we strap your legs in, if you don't mind, my

lord," the horsemaster said. "We can rig an additional support structure behind the saddle, if you cannot sit straight without your legs to grip the horse's flanks, but—"

Doran immediately straightened.

At another whistle from the horsemaster, Feather surged to her feet in one elegant motion. Her father joined the horsemaster in buckling Doran's legs into two sturdy braces. When that was finished, their father led Feather by the reins around the perimeter of the garden. A breeze ruffled the palms and emberwood below, carrying the damp, salty air up to the garden.

"You must be the princess," the horsemaster said, joining Laina in surveying the ocean below.

"Laina," she said. She didn't like being called a princess.

"Your father mentioned that you took a nasty fall in the accident as well. Are you recovering well enough?"

"I'm fine," she said in surprise. No one bothered to ask how she felt these days, with Doran the center of everyone's concern.

"And your brother?"

She sighed. "He's very unhappy. I don't think he wants to recover, not if he remains crippled."

The man nodded. "That was the idea behind the horse. Hopefully it will remind him what he's missing." He glanced at Laina. "Have you ever learned to ride?"

"Of course not! We've never had a horse here before."

The man flashed her a grin. "You'd turn a few heads in Dardensfell, my lady, that you would. Especially if you learned to ride like a proper warrior."

Laina gave him a wry smile. "I hardly think you'd want a woman slowing you down."

"You would be surprised. Some of our fiercest warriors are women." He looked out at Doran. "Cripples,

too. One of our first kings was famously born with a twisted leg. He could do no more than hobble about, until he found himself a horse and became the greatest rider ever to live."

"I'll tell Doran." Her brother was returning now, his face a mixture of pain and hope. "What are you doing in Lostport? Surely you didn't come all the way here just to bring him a horse."

He shook his head, smiling. "I am a cartographer by trade, my lady. Lostport and the fjords beyond are one of the last great mysteries of the Kinship Thrones. I could hardly resist the chance to chart this coast."

"What about your own mountains?" Laina asked shrewdly. Whenever someone spoke of the mountains separating Dardensfell from Whitland, the terms "haunted" or "impassable" were frequently attached.

"You have a keen mind, lady." The man tugged at a button on his coat. "Perhaps you should consider cartography yourself."

It was not a bad idea. "Are you staying here long?"

"In town, yes. You should come to me for lessons."

She smiled. That would be exactly the diversion she needed.

At last Doran and her father had come to the edge of the lawn; Feather slowed, with her front hooves resting on the line of paving stones bordering the garden. The manor was perched atop a short hill, and where the lawn ended, the ground dropped away in a dizzying slope. A steep white staircase led straight down to the heart of Lostport, and to its left, a more sensible footpath wound its way to and fro until it reached the same terminus. She could have leapt and landed on the main street, it seemed, but the walk itself took the better part of a morning.

When Doran returned to the Darden's side, the

horsemaster made to help him from the saddle.

"Look for me at the Seal's Roost," he told Laina with an odd, foreign salute. "The name is Swick."

"I won't forget," Laina promised.

#### Chapter 3

For the third time, the end of Faolan's quill snapped, spraying ink across the carefully scribed page.

"Blast!" His customary smooth handwriting looked cramped and lopsided after the amount of second-guessing that had gone into this letter; on second thought, the ruined parchment was a good excuse to start anew.

My dearest Katrien,

It has been far too long since our last correspondence.

There he paused. Should he tell his wife that their son would never walk again? The first draft of his letter had been written for no other purpose. But now Faolan was no longer certain he should reveal such devastating news in so callous a fashion.

We have recently commenced a project that I have been planning for years. We are to build a city amongst the fjords, fed by the gemstones that wash up on our beaches. It shall be a jewel of civilization amidst the wilderness. Even you must appreciate the beauty of such a thing. If you would consider making the journey south to celebrate the completion of the city, four spans from now, it would gladden my heart.

Here he stopped again. It would take ages—two spans at the least—for Katrien to travel the length of two countries down to Lostport. How could he possibly ask her to endure such difficulties solely for his own satisfaction?

This is a mad dream, of course. It would be foolish for me to hope for such a thing. But I have news of our son that I wish to give you, very dire news indeed, and I wish to do so in a more personal way than is possible through written correspondence. Doran is alive, do not fear, but his future has been ripped cruelly from his grasp. This is all I may say for now. I am an old man, grown foolish. If you cannot travel south to visit me, perhaps I will take our children to Whitland in a few years' time. Such a pilgrimage would follow closely with the original contract of the Kinship Thrones, would it not? We could discuss certain political matters with the regent of Whitland in person, rather than negotiating through ambassadors and acting on hearsay.

I count the days until I see your reply. If I cannot set eyes upon your lovely face once more, at least your penmanship can bring me comfort in my old age.

Yours, now and forever,

Faolan

With a sigh, he scattered sand on the ink and blew it dry. This would have to suffice.

He had barely folded the letter when Harrow knocked once on the study door and pushed it open, unbidden.

"Good afternoon," Faolan said wearily. He had spent the morning poring over architectural sketches and employment charts and budget goals, and had no remaining patience for the enthusiasm of his advisor.

"Pity," Harrow said with a sideways smile. "You don't seem in the mood for an overnight trek to the new city."

"Harrumph," Faolan said, pushing back his chair. Rising, he stretched his arms behind him, cracking the knot in his lower back. He winced. "And it needs a name. Something wealthy-sounding, to attract the Whitland investors we need."

"Port Emerald," Harrow said cheekily. "My daughter recommended it."

Faolan shook his head in amusement.

"You will ride down with me someday, will you not?" Harrow said.

"Of course." Though he did not want his friend to know, Faolan was very curious to see the gemstone bay for himself. Ever since the forest road had opened to the public, not two days ago, increasingly far-fetched descriptions of its splendor kept winging their way up the hill to Faolan's manor. Even Laina had begun spouting a few of her own. "You knew I would never agree to something so foolish, not this late in the day and with no forewarning," Faolan said. "What was your true reason for ruining my quiet afternoon?"

Harrow raised an eyebrow. "You presume too much, my lord." Then he laughed. "You guessed correctly. Someone came to see you earlier—a young man hoping to court your daughter. I bade him wait in the entrance hall, and supplied him with enough food to satisfy a horse. He looked as though he needed it."

Faolan straightened. "You should have told me sooner. The poor fellow must be close to giving up on us." Brushing the spoiled parchments on his desk into a pile, he tucked the letter into the pocket of his doublet and strode to the door. He did not need to look back to see that

Harrow had fallen into step behind him.

The young man was sitting in a chair by the entrance, alternating between cramming morsels of food into his mouth and glancing shiftily up the off-kilter flight of steps that had failed in its design as a grand staircase. Faolan and Harrow peered at him from behind the second-floor screen, sizing him up, until Harrow gave Faolan a nudge and they started down. Now that Doran was crippled, Faolan had to seek other ways to ensure the stability of Lostport. If Laina bore an heir who reached maturity before Faolan died, the kingdom would go to her son.

As Faolan drew closer, he saw that the young man was tall but scrawny, as though his budding muscles had yet to discover the bones they were meant to support. He could see what Harrow had meant about needing a good meal.

"Good afternoon," Faolan said, crossing the hall toward the doorway. The walls resonated clearly, carrying his voice to the young man, who jumped from his seat as though slapped.

"My—your grace!" the man said. He bowed with a stiffness that clearly marked him for a Whitlander. "I am Prince Ronnick, the youngest son of King Luistan of Whitland."

"And what, pray tell, are you doing here?" Faolan asked in the best semblance of politeness he could muster. He did not need Whitland involved in these matters. The knot in his back, far from receding, had begun sending out spasms of pain that gripped his ribs and tightened his lungs.

The man gave another half-bow. "I have been traveling south, and recently crossed over through Ruunas, as part of my apprenticeship with a team of royal architects. Just a quarter ago, I heard news of the new city planned for Lostport, and decided to experience firsthand the design and construction of a truly magnificent piece of work."

Faolan wanted to roll his eyes at the flattery. "Tanner's head! Why would a prince apprentice with *architects*?"

Prince Ronnick reddened, an unattractive flush that crept to the roots of his dark, curly hair. "I said I was the youngest son—the youngest of six. King Luistan had no use for me. I traveled south to prove I was worthy of the title 'prince."

"Ah." This was better than Faolan had feared. A prince with no true power was better than a commoner, and certainly better than an influential heir. "Well, as a privileged guest, you are entitled to a set of rooms in this manor," he said. "Your fellow architects may join you, if space allows. I fear this will compare poorly to the palaces of Corona."

"Thank you. This will be quite—I mean to say, we are honored to experience your hospitality."

"Indeed," Faolan said. His entire chest was beginning to ache; if he did not sit down soon, he would be doubled over in pain. "Harrow, please show our guest to his chambers. Dinner will be served at sundown."

Turning abruptly, Faolan tried to exit the hall with a steady stride. He could not restrain himself from clenching the silk doublet atop his ribs in a white-knuckled fist.

It was a struggle to reach the top of the stairs. As soon as he was behind the cover of the second-floor screen, he sank onto one of the rough benches along the hall, hunching over his knees and massaging the searing tightness between his ribs. Suddenly his fingers prodded the folded bit of parchment in his pocket—he had forgotten to deliver the letter.

Where was his Katrien now? She would think him a tired, failing old man. She had done well to leave him behind.

For the first time since the accident, Laina and her brother were invited—no, urged—to attend dinner. She had been taking her meals up in his sickroom, always in an attempt to keep Doran from slipping further into melancholy, and it was difficult to reconcile him to the idea of appearing in public.

"No one is ashamed of you except yourself," Laina said.

"Yes, they are," Doran grumbled. "I can see it in their eyes. They won't ever say a word, but they know I'm worthless."

"Well, you weren't a very good athlete to begin with," Laina said. "As long as your mind still works properly, I don't see what the problem is."

"I can't *rule* like this. That's the problem. And no one is bold enough to say it to my face. I'm a burden, a failure. If Lostport goes back to Whitland, I'm the only one to blame."

"You could still take the throne, if you wanted to," Laina said sharply.

Doran met her eyes with a flat stare. "No. I'll never have an heir. The line would end with me. Whitland would replace me as soon as they learned the truth."

Before Laina could think of an adequate response for this, the doors opened to admit Doran's two guards, Nort and Barrik.

"Dinnertime," the taller guard, Nort, said with a halfbow.

With a seething scowl, Doran consented to being carried from the room.

As her mother had long ago noted with disdain, her father's dinners were hardly what a royal household should

expect. The food was delicious, courtesy of an inventive chef who managed to incorporate the strange native plants into his menu, but Laina's mother had disapproved of the company invited to join the royal table. Every servant, guest, and child living within the manor was accustomed to dining together. As Laina's father often argued, royal protocol was awkward and out-of-place in so primitive a land.

Laina agreed. The dinner arrangements had allowed Conard and his father to eat alongside them, which had long saved her from boredom.

Tonight, everyone had already assembled. Her father was there, along with his advisor, Harrow, and even Harrow's young children, Alvar and Kella. Seeing the two children was a surprise—usually they could not be persuaded to sit still long enough to attend formal meals. Farther down the long table sat the housekeeper, the two gardeners, the chef and his assistant, the tailor, and—who was that? An unfamiliar, awkward-looking young man had taken the seat directly opposite Laina's father. He had a pale, sickly pallor, and his freckles looked like some sort of rash spreading from beneath his mop of tight curls.

"Welcome, my dears," her father said, rising from his chair. He sounded oddly short of breath, but he approached Laina and Doran with his usual careful grace and guided his son to his chair. "We have missed you tremendously. Yet tonight is the perfect opportunity to celebrate your return to the public—we have been joined by a very special guest."

Laina did not have to look up to know who her father referred to.

As she settled into her usual seat, Laina saw, out of the corner of her eye, that the pale stranger had stood.

"I am Prince Ronnick," he said. He had a deep, steady

voice, but the bow that followed was stiff and unduly formal. "Son of King Luistan, of Whitland."

He was a marriage prospect. Laina realized it at once. Why else would her father have invited him so warmly to stay with the family?

Reluctantly Laina looked up and met the prince's eye. "Well met, your highness." She gave him a cold smile. Let everyone present remember that her manners were far more respectable than those of this impudent foreigner.

As she lifted her fork and knife and eased free a tender sliver of the white fish before her, she knew everyone's eyes were upon her and Doran. Did they think him mentally handicapped as well? With studied care, she slid the fish onto her tongue, chewed delicately, and swallowed.

Doran cleared his throat. "Thank you, Mylo," he said gruffly, glancing at the stern, bushy-bearded chef. "This is the best meal I have eaten in a long time."

His comment seemed to be the signal the others had been waiting for. In another moment, the room was filled with the musical clatter of metal on metal. Laina was glad that the unappetizing Prince Ronnick had been given the farthest possible seat from her—she dreaded the moment when she was forced to make conversation with him.

"Doran!" Alvar was leaning across the table, his small face lit with curiosity. "Is it really true? You can *never* walk again?"

Kella's hand was on the arm of her brother's chair, her expression mirroring his.

"Yes, it is true," Doran said dully.

Alvar's eyes widened.

"Excuse me, your highness."

Laina gave a start. Somehow Prince Ronnick had managed to trade seats with Harrow, who had been directly on her left, and now he was staring at her with singleminded fascination.

"What are you here for?" Laina asked bluntly. She set aside her fork, lifted her glass, and gave Prince Ronnick the same look she would bestow upon a particularly dimwitted salesman.

"Oh, I—I accompanied a convoy of architects traveling south. I intend to oversee the construction of the new city." There was something anxious and breathy about Prince Ronnick's voice that made Laina's neck itch. She took a long drink of honey water, trying to suppress the urge to scratch.

"I certainly hope you don't plan to court me."

When Prince Ronnick's forehead flushed a mottled red, her suspicions were confirmed.

Laina glanced accusingly at her father; he shook his head at her, mouth set in a hard line.

"Why not try to seize power directly?" she said. "Lostport is in a very vulnerable position, in case you didn't notice. Your dear father is going to appoint one of his sons to rule once my father is gone."

"Not me," Prince Ronnick said. "I'm his youngest son. I have no aspirations of power."

"Of course not." Laina snorted. His very presence here, exactly as Lostport reeled from a potentially destabilizing blow, meant he was entirely interested in snatching power where he could.

"At the very least, give me a chance," Prince Ronnick pleaded.

"I already have," Laina said coldly. "Excuse me." Shoveling the last bite of fish into her mouth, she rose and left the table.

What was her father thinking? Not only was she entirely uninterested in marriage, Laina was loath to form an alliance with a Whitish prince. She wished Conard was

here. She desperately needed someone sensible to talk to.

Later in the evening, her father called Laina to his study. She went reluctantly, expecting a reprimand for her brusque behavior.

"I have been thinking," he said heavily. "Something must be done about Doran. I cannot have my son live out his days in misery, constantly faced with what he cannot have. Do you think he would enjoy a trip to Chelt to recover his health?"

"Yes," Laina said at once. "Though he would be happier if I could join him, I think."

Her father shook his head. "You must remain here. Doran will never be able to inherit when Whitland learns of his impotence, but if you marry before long, you might have a son old enough to take the throne when I die. I know you don't like the idea, but it is the only way to keep Lostport from falling into Whitish hands."

"Prince Ronnick is Whitish," Laina said sharply. "Why would you sell me off to him?"

"He is the youngest of six sons. This is his only chance to gain a position of some standing. He will not enforce King Luistan's rule here."

"Does it matter that I despise him?" Laina shot back.

Her father sighed. "I wish you would not judge so quickly. However, I am willing to consider any other prospects that come forward."

Laina laughed drily. "That's likely." She could find any number of miners and shopkeepers and escaped convicts in Lostport, but not one man who would qualify as an eligible suitor.

"At least consider the prince," her father said. "The future of our kingdom depends on it."

Reluctantly Laina nodded. Her only use now lay in

providing her father a grandson. It seemed her future had ended just as thoroughly as Doran's.

## Chapter 4

Your hands, please." The short, burly riverboat captain extended his own hands, palms up, and waited for Conard to present his wrists.

Conard sighed and turned away. He hadn't liked the look of this riverboat anyway—it was wallowing sideways in the water, as though leaking or weighted down with too much stock.

This was the third captain who had checked for an exile's band before allowing him on board. Each time, Conard had turned away rather than present his wrists with their unmistakable iron circlet. He didn't want word to reach Lostport that he had hunkered down in Bogside; people would expect him to return, as close as he was, and would be on guard for him.

Two quarters had passed since Conard had first disembarked in Bogside. He had approached every ship that had passed in that time—fewer than he had expected—and none had been prepared to take him aboard. The worst were the well-apportioned ships that lured him with accommodations far nicer than anything available in Bogside, and which turned out to be so expensive Conard would need half a king's ransom to buy himself standing room on the deck.

A long walk east of town, Conard rejoined the peatdiggers he had been helping all quarter. "Thanks for giving me the morning off."

"No luck?" one of the men asked with a knowing smile.

"Bloody unfortunate-looking boat anyway," Conard said grimly. "I'd rather wait here than drown in mud."

"Might be drowning in mud soon anyway," said a scrawny young man. "The rains are s'posed to start before the end of the span."

The man he had spoken to the first night at the bar had put Conard in the hands of the peat-diggers, who had given Conard employment for as long as he wished to stay in exchange for three meals a day, as many drinks as he wanted, and a warm bed in a not-so-warm room. No one could talk about much except the approaching rains, which meant Bogside had to harvest and dry as much peat as possible to continue generating heat for the span to come. All Conard could think was that he needed to escape before the miserable weather hit.

"How many times are you going to try?" the first man asked. "Reckon the fortieth time will be lucky?"

"There are plenty of women who wouldn't mind you staying around a bit longer," a portly older man said.

Conard laughed. He knew the man was the father of two daughters close to his age, though he found the girls dull and too eager to please. Choosing a flat-bottomed shovel from a stack beside the cart, he stepped into line between two men. Then he slammed his shovel deep into the layer of peat, trying to work free the net of roots and decaying grasses that roped the earth in place. It was hard labor, more physical than anything he had deigned to participate in since he and his father had become favorites of the king, but there was something oddly satisfying about it as well. After the first quarter, his shoulders had ceased to feel as though someone had been bludgeoning them all day,

and the shirts he had brought from home were beginning to feel tight about the chest.

Finally Conard eased the chunk of peat free and tossed it over his shoulder into the cart. A few crumbs of dirt broke free and smacked him in the neck, but already he was bending to his next square of soft earth. The swath of bog they were currently attacking lay so far from Bogside that the town had receded into a lumpy haze in the distance; from his short time there, Conard had guessed that the areas where they stripped the peat were soon filled in with water, which turned the ground into a sagging mud-pit. The peat would not be returning any time soon. Of course, the marsh itself seemed infinite, so the Bogsiders were in no danger of running out of fuel. Their supply of morale was far likelier to run dry.

The only downside of the peat-digging was that it left far too much room for thought. While the company of men walked to and from the day's patch of bog, and while they shared lunch, everyone was teasing each other and telling jokes and boasting about whose goat knew the sneakiest way into the vegetable plot. But while they worked, the men grew quiet and serious.

Conard had tried to make conversation for the first several days, asking the men where they had come from (Bogside, down to the last man) and why on earth they never left (where would they go?). When he ran out of questions—and it did not help that he had little in common with these adventure-wary Bog-dwellers—Conard's thoughts returned to the one place he had been trying to avoid. Laina.

Day after day, he imagined crawling up to her, utterly humbled, and begging her forgiveness. But how could he be so cruel as to believe she could forget who had taken away the thing that she valued most dearly—her brother?

Sometimes she entered his dreams, her legs gone, half of her face hideously gouged away.

And as he dug peat, those nightmare images followed him into the day, until he could no longer remember her proud, unsullied face.

"I'll take my children here someday." Laina's voice echoed through Conard's head as his most cherished memory replayed itself. They had sailed one evening to a beach around the coast, where they had climbed to the top of a bluff and watched the sunset throw ribbons of fire over the ocean. Conard had built a small fire, barely safe from the harsh winds, and together they roasted fish they had netted earlier that day. When Conard dared to reach an arm around Laina's shoulder, she leaned into his embrace, a rare smile illuminating her eyes.

Conard slammed his shovel into the peat with more force than ever. The earth gave a dull, squishy protest as it resisted his assault.

"I don't want to rule. I would rather just build a cottage up here and watch the sunset every night."

Conard had squeezed her shoulder and contemplated taking her hand. "And I'll anchor my ship in that little cove, and bring you fish every day."

Shaking his head sharply, Conard leaned his full weight on the shovel. "Go away, Laina," he muttered, too quiet for anyone to hear.

That evening, when the laborers shouldered their shovels and headed home with four cartloads of peat, Conard trailed behind the group, not interested in joining their good-natured banter. He would likely never find passage south. He was stranded, truly stranded, with no way of returning to Lostport.

Maybe he should just catch a ship north to the Twin

Cities. He was a skilled sailor, navigator, and woodsman, and had been taught while living at the king's manor to read and write well enough to find scholarly employment; he would easily find work in such a place. He certainly could not stay in Bogside.

Could he do it? Could he turn his back on Lostport and create himself anew? He could grow wealthy and powerful, with more girls swooning after him than Lostport had to offer.

And he could learn to live with the unrequited love and the unending, hollow guilt.

Conard felt very strange when they finally returned to the outskirts of Bogside. It was as though he walked through a dream; the body he inhabited did not feel like his, and the clothing atop it chafed like never before, every thread coarse and heavy against his skin. The person who turned away from his past, from everything he cared for, was not Conard. It was a shell born of logic and necessity.

Could he truly do it?

Could he?

As the men wheeled their four carts into the drying house, Conard leaned his shovel beside the door and slipped away before anyone noticed. When Conard returned to his lodgings, the innkeeper was deep in conversation with one of the oldest men in the village, so he was able to grab a pitcher of the surprisingly delicious sun-brew on his way up to his room without attracting anyone's attention.

It was already approaching sundown. With the last of the sunlight, Conard began packing his few possessions into the coarse sack he had arrived with. He had accumulated quite a bit more clothing since his arrival, thanks to the kindness of the Bogsiders, and most of it was far more suited to the damp, chilly climate of Kohlmarsh than anything he had arrived with.

By the time he was finished packing, Conard was starting to grow lightheaded from the sun-brew. It was deceptively strong. Changing his grimy work-tunic for a cleaner, rougher shirt, he made his way downstairs for a bit of dinner.

"I wondered when you would be returning my pitcher." The innkeeper greeted him with a cheeky smile.

Conard flushed. "Sorry. I thought you hadn't noticed. I'll pay for it with dinner, don't worry."

The innkeeper laughed and cuffed him on the shoulder. "No matter. What's driven you to drink, young master? Some pretty wench turn you down?"

Conard shook his head. "I'm trying to talk myself into something. I think I might leave tomorrow."

"How? There aren't any boats going south for the next three days."

"Maybe I'll go north instead. Try my luck in the Twin Cities."

The innkeeper's eyes widened. "I'd raise a mug to that. Have a seat, lad. Dinner's on me. And I'll top you up with a bit more of the old brew, if you don't mind giving back the pitcher."

Conard found himself being led to a chair at the inn's nicest table, where he joined three of his fellow diggers and one of the barmaids. When no ships made berth at Bogside, the inns were the run of the locals, who dispensed with formality in favor of having a riotous good time. While Conard had been staying at the mud-walled inn, he had witnessed several exceedingly formal dinners performed for wealthy ships' crews, interspersed with drunken parties, raucous games of darts or Kins, and dances where the entire dining room floor was cleared and the five best village musicians played tunes until dawn.

"You're leaving?" one of the diggers said unhappily.

Conard shot the innkeeper a disgruntled look. How had the old codger managed to spread his story within the space of him walking to a table?

"Yeah, I am."

"How come? I thought none of them southbound ships wanted to take on an exile. Bad for business."

Conard sighed. He didn't want to tell anyone about his plans, especially since they were not yet half a day old. "I have to leave. I don't belong here. I don't have any family here, and I don't like being damp and cold all the time." He wondered belatedly if that last comment might offend anyone, but they were nodding together and waiting eagerly for more.

"Are you sneaking aboard one of the ships?" the barmaid asked, leaning forward conspiratorially.

"No," Conard said.

Just then, the innkeeper arrived with a fresh mug of sun-brew and a plate heaped with mashed potatoes, scrawny river fish, and goat cheese. When he had finished thanking the man and returned his attention to the table, his four companions were still staring at him, waiting for him to go on.

He sighed. "I've decided I should try heading north instead. Maybe the Twin Cities will prove to be a good home. At least there I can use some of what I learned in Lostport, instead of resigning myself to peat-digging for the rest of my life. I could even explore the mountains of Dardensfell."

Two of the diggers nudged each other and grinned. "Once you've got heaps of treasure, send us a letter, and we'll come join you."

Conard raised his mug. "Cheers. I'd like to see that day."

Though Conard's four companions did not leave the inn until late that night, news of his impending departure somehow managed to spread throughout Bogside; before long all of his fellow diggers were crowding into the inn, followed by a few of their wives and children. At first Conard was wary of the digger's two daughters, afraid that the man would try to marry them off to him before he got a chance to leave, but soon the alcohol had made him unsteady on his feet, and he was so distracted by the noise and flickering firelight that he could barely pay attention to who stood before him. From a sideways comment he picked up, he realized the man wouldn't want his daughters to leave their home in any case. That would likely mean never returning and never again seeing the people they loved best.

Just like him.

Conard woke the next morning with a headache like two woodpeckers drilling into his temples. He couldn't remember going back up to his room, and was very glad to find that he hadn't accidentally brought the barmaid up to bed with him. The sun was already up, which meant his fellow diggers had been at work for a long while already. Groaning, he sat up and rubbed his eyes. The rucksack was still in the corner, just as he had left it, though a few of the villagers had given him bits of food and sturdy traveling dishes to send him on his way.

The innkeeper greeted him with a wave as he stumbled downstairs, neck aching.

"On your way now?" he asked. "You're in luck. A merchant ship just docked to resupply. They're not likely to charge steep prices, if you can offer a hand on board."

"Wonderful," Conard groaned. He was already doubting his decision. What would he do in the Twin

Cities? He didn't feel comfortable in crowds; he much preferred wandering the forests or the fjords, the boundless spaces that he could explore for a lifetime and never truly know. Would he ever be happy living in a cramped, smelly city, with nothing but streets to pace along? "Perhaps I'll come back through here someday. I'll be sure to pay you a visit."

The innkeeper handed him a lightweight basket of reeds. "A few pickings to tide you over as you travel." He smiled at Conard and grasped his hand. "Be sure you tell any merchant ships you pass to bring their business here."

"You have my word."

With that, Conard turned and pulled back the inn door, squinting in the morning sun. No one was about this time of day—the diggers were at the peat fields, the women were weaving baskets and mats from reeds they found along the river, and those working at the two inns were preparing for the influx of visitors over lunchtime while the merchant ship lingered.

Before he even saw the ship, Conard could hear the voices of merchants shouting as they unloaded what little stock they would sell to Bogside.

"Three goats! Not four! The next village requested seven, and they offered a much higher price."

While several passengers scurried down the gangplank, two men wrestled a trio of ill-tempered goats to the shore. Giving the goats a sideways glance, Conard strode up to the man who had been shouting. "Where are you headed, sir?"

"Don't—" The captain swallowed the rest of his command, blinked, and looked down at Conard. "Looking for passage, young man?"

"Yes, in fact. Where are you headed?"

"The Twin Cities. We are making all haste to reach the central port before the end of the span; Whitland has called

for troops and arms, and we can make easy money ferrying metal between the mines and the cities once we've returned home."

"Is there a war?" Conard folded his arms, trying not to betray his surprise. He had heard no word of conflict; surely Lostport would be dragged into any dispute that involved Whitland.

"Not yet," the man said. Turning, he yelled, "Don't forget the kumaras! Or the apples!" He returned his attention to Conard, looking vaguely ruffled. "Whitland wants to quash Varrival's attacks on the borderlands before they grow dire. Everything is in a bit of turmoil right now, as you might imagine."

Conard stepped back a pace, eyeing the ship. He was no longer certain of anything. Like most Lostporters, Conard had grown up with a deep-seated mistrust of Whitland and its meddling. How could he turn around and help Whitland defeat a land even more distant and independent than Lostport?

"Sorry, I don't think I'll be sailing with you today," Conard said.

"As I thought," the man muttered. "Never leave home, these ignorant swamp-folk."

Conard did not bother to correct him. Turning, he stepped gingerly around a pair of mud puddles and made his way to the only thing that could pass for a general store in Bogside. Inside, he had to wait behind the four merchants who were bartering with the shop-owner. Once the store was empty but for him and the owner, Conard stepped up and handed his entire leather purse to the man.

"I need as many supplies as this can buy," he said. "I'm heading south."

For the next two days, Laina could hardly leave her room without coming across Prince Ronnick. It seemed that he spent the day sitting in the entrance hall, just for the pleasure of bowing and stuttering at her on her way down to the garden. The more she saw of him, the more she came to suspect that he was just as much a pawn of his father as any of his brothers. Such a weak-willed prince would surely not be scheming to wriggle his way onto a throne without a more devious mind spurring him on.

"Where is Father?" she asked Nort when the two guards appeared in Doran's room mid-morning on the third day since the unfortunate dinner. "He needs to tell that impossible prince to make himself useful and get out of the house."

"We'd be happy to kick him out for you, if you can't find the king," Barrik said slyly.

"I might well take you up on that offer."

On the way past his study, Laina called, "Father?"

There was no answer. The door was shut tightly, which generally meant no one was around.

"Haven't seen the king meself," Nort said, "but I heard something of a to-do earlier in the yard. Might be he's gone off somewhere to keep them architects in line."

"Right," Laina said. "I hope he hasn't taken Feather." Barrik snorted. "I wouldn't say he's much of a rider."

As Laina had feared, Prince Ronnick was again waiting in the entrance hall. This time he had contrived to look as though he were heading somewhere important, and had simply been interrupted in the midst of his daily duties.

"Fancy seeing you there, my lady!" Spinning on his heel, Prince Ronnick bowed with a flourish. Laina wondered if he had been practicing. "I was just heading out."

"Where?" Laina asked.

"I—erm—" He clearly had not thought that far ahead. "I thought I could go see the town. I've never seen Lostport except at night."

Laina tried to keep a straight face. "Your legs could do with a bit of muscle," she said. "A good walk down the stairs might be exactly what you need." She brushed past him before he could figure out what she meant.

Though the front lawn was bustling with household staff and unfamiliar merchants unloading supplies for the construction project, Laina's father was absent, along with his advisor. She skirted around the chaos, drawing little attention from the harried merchants, and began the long descent down the hillside stairway. The town lay at its foot, nestled amongst the trees, and beyond that the ocean stretched to the horizon. It was a relief to leave the confines of her father's manor, with Doran sulking, Prince Ronnick following her like a puppy, and the architects lurking around every corner. Here, the salty breeze whistled through the trees and lifted her braid from her shoulders, carrying a flock of shrieking seagulls ever higher.

At last she reached town and made her way toward the waterfront. Many of the homes were set farther back in the woods, some nestled so deep within that they were nearly impossible to find, yet a good hundred were clustered together on a cleared section of land behind the town center. The center itself was no more than a line of simple wooden buildings bordering the port. The same dirt road that zigzagged up to Laina's home here continued alongside the shore before connecting up with the forest road toward Port Emerald, and in the heart of town a boardwalk joined the dirt road to provide relief from the ever-present mud. Laina knocked dirt from her boots before stepping onto the boardwalk, checking to see if anyone had recognized

her. But there were more strangers about than usual, and no one spared her more than a passing glance.

Though she had never entered the building, Laina knew exactly where to find the Seal's Roost. It, along with three other inns and two taverns, was perched at the end of town just beside the dock. Laina recognized the Seal's Roost as the nicest of the four inns; if Swick could afford to stay somewhere reputable, he was likely to be a decent sort of man.

The boardwalk creaked beneath Laina's feet as she drew up to the inn.

Before she could knock, the inn door creaked open.

It was a man with a heavy leather coat; Laina guessed he was the innkeeper. His gaze traveled from Laina's sturdy boots to her face, and it was a moment before he recognized her.

"Wonderful to see you, my lady," he said, clasping a fist respectfully to his chest. "Are you here on business, or just stopping in for a wee bite?"

Laina shook her head. "That remains to be seen. Is a Darden man by the name of Swick staying here?"

The innkeeper beamed at her. "Absolutely, my lady! Would you like me to fetch him?"

"Thank you."

A moment later, Swick appeared in the doorway, ducking to clear the low frame. His beard was trimmed closer than before, his grey hair smoothed to the side; he had the air of a scholar, despite his build.

"Have you truly come to take me up on the offer of lessons?" He sounded delighted.

"Perhaps," Laina said. "I need something to occupy my time."

"Excellent. Please, come join us." He led Laina into the dim confines of the inn.

"I hope you don't mind if we camp in the dining room for a while," Swick said over his shoulder to the innkeeper, who had returned to the kitchen.

The innkeeper did not bother to reply. It seemed that Swick had already been sitting in one corner of the room—there were bits of parchment spread all across a circular table that benefitted from a rectangle of golden sunlight, and several well-cleaned plates were stacked amidst the debris. Another man sat at the table, shuffling papers as Swick approached. As she took a seat, Laina got a better look at Swick's companion. He was clearly foreign—from Varrival, the desert kingdom, if she guessed right—and he had the unmistakable red-brown skin and black hair of the glass merchants she had met in years past. Laina tried not to stare; no matter how many times she saw the merchants from Varrival, they always struck her as intriguingly foreign. This man was attractive, too, in an exotic sort of way.

"Is this the princess you spoke of?" the man from Varrival asked smoothly. His Whitish was flawless, but he rounded the letters with a far more musical accent than anyone in Lostport.

Swick slid into the larger of the two empty seats. "Of course." Laina thought his smile looked a bit smug.

"I'm Laina." She nodded politely to the Varrilan.

"Jairus," he said quickly. With his accent, the name came out soft and elegant.

"Are you a cartographer as well, or an architect here to build Port Emerald?"

"Both, my lady," he said, looking down. "I was trained as a glass-cutter, and hired to outfit a city in Dardensfell. It was there that Master Swick took me on as an apprentice cartographer. I have grown too fond of travel, of late. Maps are the easiest excuse to continue my journey."

Laina nodded. Though he was not forthcoming, Jairus

struck her as talented and well-spoken. Already she liked him.

"Have you seen a map of the Kinship Thrones, my lady?" Swick asked, extracting a still-rolled parchment from his satchel and spreading it across the table.

"Of course," Laina said. She immediately recognized the nine thrones and the rivers marked on Swick's map. "Though never one as beautiful as this."

Swick laughed. "No more flattery, my lady. We won't accomplish much that way."

Smiling wryly, Laina bent her head over the map. As always, Lostport was a single dot in the midst of an unmarked tangle of forests and mountains. The city lay at the intersection of the river and the sea, but it was utterly lost in the wilderness at the southeastern-most reach of the nine kingdoms.

"Are there better maps of Lostport?" Laina asked. "Has anyone drawn the forest road yet?"

"No. And I hope to be the first." Swick definitely looked smug this time.

"If I accompany you, can I share in the credit?" Laina asked.

"No," Swick said. Then he laughed. "What sort of question is that? I would be proud to share my fame with a princess."

To her left, Jairus paused in the middle of scribbling a note to shake his head.

"Show her your map, Jairus." Swick rolled the larger map back into a narrow tube and cleared a space in front of Laina. "This is another reason I was so keen on teaching Jairus," he said, turning to Laina. "He's a brilliant artist."

Forehead reddening, Jairus brought forth a smaller map, which Swick flattened on the table before Laina.

It was the forest road. "I thought no one had mapped

it!" Laina said. She put a finger to Lostport, in the left-hand corner, and traced the spiderweb-thin line as it wound through the trees to a crescent-shaped port tucked among mountains.

"It's not a real map," Jairus said. "Everyone we met while journeying here had their own idea of what this rainforest road looked like, and where it truly led, so I tried to draw it how I imagined it."

"I imagine this is closer to the reality than most guesses," Swick said, tapping his pen to his temple. "However, we plan to travel the road ourselves in a quarter's time. If you can persuade your father to trust us, you may come along as well."

Laina laughed coldly. "It's not you he cannot trust. It's me. I was the one sailing the ship Doran fell from. And my father doesn't believe me, but I tried to cut my friend off when a wave hit. It was my fault we crashed, not his."

"Where is your friend now?" Jairus asked, glancing at Laina before returning his gaze to the table.

"Gone," she said. "Father won't say where. He could have been put to death if he'd stayed; I bet he fled." She realized belatedly how bitter she sounded.

"I'm sorry," Jairus said. "You should come with us, though. Swick can talk to your father. He's very persuasive. I think you could use a bit of time away from home."

Jairus was very perceptive. "I'll try." Laina wondered if she could make a deal with her father; perhaps she could agree to join Prince Ronnick for dinner every night until the excursion to Port Emerald. She would even attempt to join him in civil conversation.

"Excellent," Swick said. "That means we have to educate you straightaway. We cannot afford the burden of traveling with a useless companion." He winked at Laina. "One of our most important missions will be charting

rivers and estimating peak elevations. This forest road will open the way for a new set of prospectors, and knowing which rivers are likely to carry gems from which peaks gives them an immense head start."

After that, Swick spent the afternoon showing Laina how to read the contour lines on a map of the mountains in Dardensfell, and teaching her how to estimate the height of a peak using angles and distances. Jairus was far more talkative once they delved into the realm of academics. The innkeeper supplied them with drinks and finger food throughout the afternoon, and eventually Swick abandoned his lesson for tales of his travels. Jairus had been with him for five years now, and from the way Swick described it, had more than proved his worth a hundred times over. By the end, Laina was so curious that she could not resist probing more deeply into Jairus's past.

"What is Varrival like?" she asked. "Why did you choose to leave? There aren't many Varrilans living north of the borders, are there? The only ones I've seen are merchants."

"That is true," Jairus said. "We have been a race apart for thousands of years, yet Whitland in its arrogance treats us like disobedient offshoots. We are not received well in Whitland, except when our glass-merchants and architects travel there for the sole purpose of business. There are a good many Varrilans living in Ruunas and Chelt, but not in Whitland.

"I have always wanted to travel and see more of the world. Merchants often come back with stories of lush fields, snowy mountains, and forests so dense they do not let a drop of sunlight to the earth. We have nothing but sand and more sand in Varrival."

Jairus was clearly warming to his story.

"Varrival has recently begun an attempt to expand its

rule. We have no pasturelands in the desert, so aside from the fish and birds and reptiles we can catch amongst the sands, we are heavily reliant on imported food. If we could grow our own bounty, we could prosper as never before. Whitland has little use for its southern plains, so we are attempting to claim some piece of them for our own use."

Jairus sighed. "I know it would greatly benefit my people, but I wish they could have postponed their attacks. As soon as I heard news of these plans, I decided to leave the country. Once Whitland spreads word of our attacks on their borderlands, Varrilans will have a very difficult time traveling through the Kinship Thrones. I could be arrested on sight if I ran across any Whitish soldier. I must see as much of the world as I can now, before my people become Whitland's next target."

Laina winced. "I wish I could help you," she said. "If you could live anywhere in the world, where would it be?"

"In the mountains of Dardensfell," he said at once. "I love traveling down here, but it does not feel like home. There are wonders such as you could never imagine hidden in those vast and uncharted mountains. They are a closely guarded secret of the Dardens, and more beautiful for their wildness."

"They sound incredible," Laina said wistfully. Before her brother's accident, she could have dreamed of seeing those distant lands someday. Now she was tied here, bound to the fate of Lostport.

Jairus nodded. "And I may never see them again. Anyone can pick me out of a crowd in an instant. If Whitland turns against Varrival, I will be forced to slink home. Though even my own home may not be safe against the wrath of Whitland."

"We could give you refuge here," Laina said. "Lostport is so distant and insignificant that Whitland constantly

overlooks it."

"And what about my people?" Jairus said. "Should I leave my family to fight a war against Whitland while I sit comfortably in Lostport?"

This time Laina could come up with no suitable response. "I'll talk to my father," she offered. "Perhaps he can do something." It was unlikely, though, and at the same time she couldn't dismiss the thought that Jairus's people had brought this on themselves. They had provoked Whitland by attacking the pasturelands; what had they expected in response?

Glancing at the window, Swick's eyes widened. "Look at that. We're nearing sunset! My lady, you must return home immediately. I will escort you."

"I'll be fine," she said. "I've walked this way a thousand times, and often later at night than this." She did not add that it was usually in the company of Doran or Conard.

Eventually Swick gave in, and Laina bade him and Jairus farewell.

Night had fallen by the time she reached the top of the stairs, out of breath and sweaty; pausing, she discerned a figure waiting for her in the garden, silhouetted in the light from the hall.

Expecting a reprimand, Laina lowered her head and dropped her skirts to her sides.

Her father greeted her sternly. "Where have you been?"

"In town."

His shoulders sagged. "I spoke to Doran. He wishes to travel to Chelt to convalesce by the sea. He'll leave tomorrow morning."

"King Luistan will hear," Laina said. So far they had kept word of Doran's accident from spreading, but the secret would be out as soon as he left Lostport. "He'll know we don't have an heir."

Her father sighed. "We need to find you a husband, and soon. Whitland will not sit quietly once we show signs of instability."

He took her arm and led her into the warmth of the manor.

"On the same note, Laina," he said sternly, "you should not be wandering about at night, unsupervised. Now that the future of Lostport rests on you, I expect you to exercise a bit of caution."

"I'll be safe, I promise," Laina said. "Just don't make me marry Prince Ronnick."

## Chapter 5

By the first evening of his trek south, Conard regretted ever leaving Bogside. Of course he could not return now, though—it would be far too shameful to admit himself incapable of such a straightforward task. At the general store, he had traded every coin to his name along with the less-functional gifts intended for riverboat comfort—the well-weighted candle, the pewter mug, and the intricate spyglass—for as many provisions as he could carry. He did not trust himself to light a fire in the damp, soggy marsh, so he had packed only food that could be eaten cold. That included more stiff wayfarers' bread and salted meat than he thought he could stomach.

Though it did not provide the sturdiest ground to walk along, Conard stayed close to the river, afraid he would lose his way in one of the infernal mists that could descend without warning at any time of day. He had thought himself skilled at navigation, yet there were no landmarks to gauge distance by apart from the river, and he had failed to find the path the bogsiders had spoken of. Thus his travel was punctuated by the squish of his footsteps through mud and the constant hiss of the river slipping by. By midmorning, his socks were soaked through and his boots caked with so much mud they had doubled in weight. By evening, the water had crept its way past his knees, and Conard was beginning to wonder if he would be swimming in mud

before long.

As the last of the light faded to grey, Conard selected a patch of earth that looked sturdier than most and sat on a tufted tussock to dig for his first day's rations. He would literally be digging before long, he feared—even if he kept himself on a starvation diet, the provisions he'd packed would barely last three quarters. He wished he had brought along a knowledgeable Bogsider who could tell him which roots were edible, and which plants these could be found beneath. He could have easily survived off plants and small game in the woods around Lostport; here he could only rely on fish from the river, none of which were biting.

Unlacing his boots, Conard wriggled his feet free of their sodden, muddy encasings. With no hope whatsoever that they would dry out, he used a twig to pry mud from the soles of his boots before draping his socks over the top. He groaned. Until he had sat down, he hadn't realized how much his legs ached.

"What's for dinner?" he muttered, loosening the drawstring on his leather pack. "Something delicious, I'm sure." His hands encountered first his heavy cloak, which he draped gratefully about his shoulders, and next a packet of dried goat-meat. Tentatively he nibbled on one stringy, tough corner of the jerky; to his surprise, it tasted delicious.

Suddenly an image sprang to mind, of sharing a campfire with his father and the other prospectors on that long journey through the rainforest. It had been a particularly arduous hike that day, climbing for ages to the top of a barren pass, and Conard had twice fallen so far behind he had nearly lost the group. Their dinner that night had been boiled potatoes with salt, but it had been the most delicious meal Conard had ever eaten.

Sitting now on the tussock, ignoring the cold that was already beginning to seep through his legs and buttocks,

Conard enjoyed the goat jerky with the same single-minded, ravenous pleasure. The chunk of meat was gone far too soon, but Conard was not so foolish as to snack on the next day's rations. Curling the cloak about himself like a blanket, he lay down on the lumpy patch of grass and tried to will himself to sleep.

"You'd better forgive me, Laina," he muttered, just before drifting off. "This is my penance."

\* \* \*

At first light, the entire household gathered to bid Doran farewell. Laina had joined him earlier still, guessing correctly that he was plagued with misgivings about the journey.

"I'll be a burden to my hosts," he said, reaching for Laina's hand in the darkness. "I'll be a laughingstock."

"But think of all the books!" Laina said, using Doran's own words to soothe him. "There will be vast libraries to explore, and a warm sea breeze drifting in the windows. You'll see the most stunning sunsets over the ocean, and you won't have to stay shut inside all the time."

"This is going to be the end of Lostport. My own selfishness."

Laina squeezed his hand. "We'll make it work. We won't give up our land to the greedy Whitish bastards. Especially not Prince Ronnick."

Doran laughed drily. "On the topic of selfishness..."

"He's not even a good strategic ally," Laina said. "And he's a simpering fool."

"Agreed."

That was when Nort and Barrik had come to carry Doran out to the lawn. As the household assembled, the two guards helped secure Doran into his horse's saddle, where he sat with an air of stiff dignity. Every one of them followed Doran and his guards in an odd procession down the switch-backing road to the dock, where they were joined by half the townsfolk. Word had certainly spread fast.

A well-apportioned sailing ship awaited Doran, crew scurrying about her deck in preparation. After perusing the maps with Swick the previous night, Laina could envision the exact route her brother would take through the Kinship Thrones. They would sail west from Lostport until they reached the Varrilan peninsula, at which point they would strike out through the desert to the southern Whitish grasslands. It was the exact region that had been troubled by Varrilan raids in recent spans, but Doran would be guarded by a large Cheltish convoy. Chelt was the most neutral of the Kinship Thrones—central to all trade across the continent, the seaside kingdom welcomed all and opposed none. Neither Varrival nor Whitland would antagonize a Cheltish guard.

With some difficulty, Doran was transferred from his horse to a chair on the deck of the ship.

"Isn't he bringing Feather?" Laina asked her father.

"No. The seas are too rough for her."

As the sailors began releasing the lines fastened to the dock, Laina hurried up the gangplank to say goodbye to her brother. Swallowing her tears, she drew him into a fierce hug.

"I'll miss you terribly," she whispered. "Take care of yourself. I want you safely home soon."

Doran sniffed, gripping her tightly. "You take care of yourself, too. Don't try anything too stupid."

Laina kissed his forehead and blinked back tears as she released him. Part of her wanted to stay on the boat, to leave Lostport and its woes far behind. For a brief instant, she envied her brother.

Retreating to the dock, Laina waved to Doran, back stiff in a show of resolve. Her two dearest friends had now been taken from her, and she was alone at the center of the mess her kingdom had become.

"Safe journey, milord!" Swick shouted as the boat drifted away. The entire crowd began waving and shouting good wishes as the sails unfurled and whisked Doran away into the pale morning light.

It was not until the boat had nearly vanished on the horizon that the crowd began to disperse.

"You should ride Feather home," Laina's father said, holding out the reins.

Laina understood at once the symbolic significance of the move. Her people would see Laina stepping into Doran's place as the heir.

But she was not the true heir. A woman could never inherit the throne.

"I'll walk," she said, though she stepped forward and took Feather's reins. She was just a placeholder, a means to an end.

For the first time in her life, she resented the disparity.

\* \* \*

Faolan was just wrapping up a second letter to Katrien when Laina entered his study without knocking. He had already begun his closing sentence, but at the appearance of his daughter, eyes bright with determination, the words slipped his mind.

Sighing, he set aside his pen. "I can already tell you want to beg something of me." If he was not mistaken, she was seeking distraction after the departure of her brother. The two had always been very close.

Laina made a face. "It's hardly an unreasonable request, Father. And I have Swick and his very capable assistant to look after me."

Faolan had a very bad feeling about this. "Tell me."

Laina pressed her lips together before speaking. "Master Swick is planning a trip to Port Emerald, to begin a map of the road and the mountains. He wishes me to accompany him."

"No," Faolan said at once. It was a two-day journey, and would involve a night sleeping out in tents halfway to the building site. "That is out of the question. Do you have any further need for me, or may I finish this letter in peace?"

"Father," Laina said, "You cannot treat me like a glass figurine forever. With Doran and Conard gone, what am I supposed to do with my time?"

"You could help me with the business of governing this blasted country," Faolan snapped. "It's high time you took on a bit more responsibility and stopped running about like a vagabond."

Laina blanched.

Faolan instantly regretted his words. "I'm sorry, I—"

"I'll make a deal with you," Laina interrupted. "The trip is five days from now. If I help you with paperwork until then, join you for dinner, and even engage that horrid prince in conversation, will you at least consider letting me go?"

Faolan still felt guilty for what he had said. What would Katrien have done, in his position? Would she be horrified by how few social graces Faolan had instilled in his daughter? But if she would truly give Prince Ronnick a chance, the risk could be worth a lot. Prince Ronnick was the best hope Lostport had.

"You may accompany them," Faolan said. Laina

straightened. "But *only* if you convince me that you have done your very best to get along with Prince Ronnick. One hint of a snide comment or a nasty look, and you can stay at home."

"Thank you, Father!" Laina grasped his hand and kissed his knuckles. "You are too generous."

Too right he was. Faolan smiled grudgingly and waved Laina away. He should never have indulged so many of her dangerous whims.

The next morning, Harrow joined Faolan for breakfast, determined to talk him into accompanying him on a trip of his own down to Port Emerald. After how little he had wanted Laina to do the same, Faolan was reluctant to make any plans to journey through the rainforest. It didn't help that Laina sat at the end of the table—beside Prince Ronnick, as she had promised—listening closely to every word.

"You know you want to see the city," Harrow said. "You've been waiting most of your life for this moment."

"It hardly counts as a city yet. It's merely a building site." Faolan refused to show his interest. "Besides, it will take a great deal of planning and organization to equip ourselves for such a long journey."

"It's only two days," Harrow said with exasperation.

"Prince Ronnick should go with you," Laina said. "It would be an educational opportunity for him. After all, isn't he supposed to be an architect?"

"Your majesty, I hate to presume too much, but—I would love nothing better than to join you on this expedition."

"Fine!" Faolan said. "We'll go! But—" He stopped as a brilliant idea came to him. "Laina, you can travel with us. I would feel far more comfortable if I were able to join you on your first trip to Port Emerald."

Laina glanced at Prince Ronnick, clearly discomfited that she had invited him along. "I suppose."

"Unless you would like to lose your sole opportunity to make the journey."

With a sigh, Laina said, "The whole point of my trip to Port Emerald was to map the road. I can hardly do that without Swick and Jairus there."

"Well, invite them to join us. Guards!" Faolan snapped his finger, and the two men who carried Doran everywhere jumped to their feet. "One of you, hurry down into Lostport and find this cartographer. Tell him that his pupil is about to travel the forest road, and he is welcome to accompany her if he so desires."

\* \* \*

Laina felt guilty for dragging Swick and Jairus along at such short notice; the way her father had arranged the trip, it now seemed like a selfish indulgence on her part rather than an academic expedition.

It was a selfish indulgence all along, she thought uneasily. There was no reason for her to take up cartography, except to satisfy herself.

Her father insisted that she ride Feather, which seemed like utter foolishness. Since when had she become so delicate? When she caught sight of the two cartographers waiting for her and her father's companions on the main road of Lostport, Laina hunched her shoulders forward as though she could camouflage herself against Feather's coat. The two men, both tall and lean but utterly dissimilar in every other aspect, each wore laced leather boots and shouldered a well-stuffed pack.

"Your friends seem eager to see the new port," Laina's

father commented, patting Laina tenderly on the knee. "You have chosen your traveling companions well."

To her surprise, Laina realized her father was correct. Swick was grinning unashamedly at the royal party—six altogether; she had to admit she and her father's household made an impressive array—and even Jairus appeared to be in high spirits.

"A fine morning to you, Master Swick," Laina's father said, striding ahead of the group.

Swick dipped his head respectfully, grin still in place, and Jairus hastily copied him.

"I must admit, I have long wished for a map of my own kingdom. If you can produce something suitable, I will reward you richly."

Swick bobbed his head again. "You are gracious, my lord. But I do this for my own pleasure. No reward is necessary."

"Onward, then!" her father said.

Embarrassed at her luxury, Laina held Feather steady until the rest of the group had passed before her. Then she nudged him forward, in line with Jairus and Swick. She had never ridden before, but the horse was obviously well-trained. She followed the group docilely, with almost no guidance from Laina.

"Have you been on the forest road before?" Swick asked conspiratorially.

"No," Laina said. "They just started the road a few quarters before Doran was injured. It's the fastest project I've ever seen completed in Lostport; most construction crews get lazy halfway through and have to be replaced a year too late." She glanced up, to where Harrow and her father led the way behind the dockside buildings toward the back harbor and the deeper forest. "I've been this way many times before, but it's always been through an

impenetrable wall of jungle. Doran, Conard, and I spent hours hacking our way through the mess."

After they passed beyond the line of buildings and through the rickety fence that marked what had until recently been the edge of civilization, the path narrowed and drew closer to the beach. Now there was just a narrow strip of grass and the occasional stunted tree between the trail and the sand. The tide was out; Laina knew from experience that waves often lapped at the fringe of the path when the sea had risen. Twice in her memory, a storm had washed the entire strip of grass away, leaving nothing but driftwood and lines of black mulch strewn across the sand.

Before long, the path curved left, still following the contours of the coast. Directly east of Lostport lay a deeply indented harbor that would have been ideal for mooring ships had it not been so steep and rocky; she and Conard had swam off its single beach many times, but they had never dared to venture far from the shore. Beyond that, the true mountains began. As they rounded the bend, Laina could see the familiar Mount Taleon rising before her, a rounded green peak looming above the rolling forest to the west, as steep as a dolphin's beak. Mount Taleon marked the true start of the fjords beyond, where the gentle hills gave way to deep valleys guarded by towering ridges. Laina had never truly ventured far into the rainforest, as many times as she had dreamed of it. No, that had always been Conard's greatest triumph, not hers.

"How far do the mountains extend?" Jairus asked. He had drawn up closer to Laina's side than she had realized, and she gave a start at his soft voice. "Is there ocean on the opposite side, or more land that has yet to be discovered?"

"There is more land," Laina said, "but I have never heard of anyone landing there or exploring it. I do not know if there are people there, or just wilderness. The fjords extend a long, long way, and even those sailors lucky enough to find a safe dock are unable to penetrate deeper into the rainforest."

"Mysteries beyond imagining!" Swick said. "Just think—we could be the very first to discover a whole new land! Perhaps even a *magical* one."

"Like Cashabree?" Laina asked.

Swick nodded eagerly, his grey hair dancing in the strong sea wind. "Imagine the first person brave enough to set foot past those borders. Imagine seeing proof that magic still survives in our world!"

Just then, Harrow turned and shouted, "See that? We've nearly reached the forest road!"

He was gesturing at a wooden archway, no more than three logs framing a portion of the path: the official start of the forest road.

"Have they started building already?" Laina asked, more to herself than anything.

"I can give you a detailed answer to that question in two days' time," Swick said cheekily.

Now they were approaching the wooden arch. From that point onward, the road diverged from the ocean, plunging into the dark confines of the rainforest as it followed a river deep into its steep-walled gorge. Laina held her breath as they passed beneath the logs. When she let it out, she could feel a change in the very air. The wind still rustled the leaves above and behind where they walked, but it no longer teased her hair. Beneath the trees, all was still and dense, the air sodden with unshed rain. It was as though the forest had parted its lips and allowed the intruders to walk onto the tip of its tongue.

Even Swick had grown momentarily silent. The woods around Lostport were not quite like these; they were younger and more tamed. These felt ancient and powerful.

The trees grew crooked and close together, with threads of dewy moss stretched between them like some living spiderweb. Everything was green, from the leaves to the lichen dappling the undersides of branches to the moss creeping along the ground and up every tree. Laina heard a bird screech, but the sound was far-off and dampened by the weight of the forest.

"Some forest," Swick said at last.

Jairus did not speak. His eyes were wide, hungry.

"It's opened up," Laina said in awe. She could not vocalize what she felt; it seemed somehow that the trees, always so aggressively knotted like a fence to keep her away, had now parted and instead beckoned her inward. If she had been the first to discover this road, she would have feared that the woods lured her into a trap.

"Imagine what it must have been like, cutting these trees," Swick said. He seemed to have recovered himself somewhat. "It would have taken an entire day to clear the ground I can now cover in five paces."

"It's a wide road, too," Jairus said, still looking a bit dazed. "Very even and well-formed."

Laina nodded. "How long is the walk supposed to take?"

"You'll have to ask your father about that," Swick said.
"But I understand we will be spending two nights at a campsite a little past midway, and tomorrow we will make a day trip to the building site itself."

Laina slapped Feather's hindquarters. The horse shuffled its way past Swick and Jairus and drew level with Prince Ronnick, who was walking alone with his eyes fixed on the road. "Father?" Laina called, hoping the prince would continue to ignore her. "How far is the journey today?"

Her father paused to consult with Harrow. "We should

be there just before sundown. The walk tomorrow is shorter."

Laina nodded, giving her father a bright smile. It was wonderful to be outside again, surrounded by untamed wilderness. She wished Conard could have seen this.

As they walked, they stumbled across a series of brightly-colored birds, chattering in the treetops and darting from branch to branch overhead. More surprising were the people they began encountering just after they paused for lunch. No fewer than eight people passed in the opposite direction, four of them undoubtedly builders, three ragged-looking gypsies, and one old woman who stared at Laina with a disconcerting smile as she shuffled by.

"I shared the road with a pair of Darden performers at one time," Swick said quietly. "It was one of the most memorable times of my life. It seems that news has spread throughout the kingdom of this royal project. No entertainer is going to miss out on the chance to stand directly in the path of a large chunk of money."

"But the city doesn't even exist yet!" Laina said. "Who will be paying them?"

Jairus gripped the straps of his pack, relieving the weight on his shoulders. "Ever since we arrived in Lostport, we have seen hundreds of builders pass through each day. Men of every race, some old, most young. The men will be bored and restless living out in the jungle for spans on end. They will welcome any diversion."

Swick nodded. "Indeed, the entire population of Darden whores seems to have descended upon Lostport."

Laina shifted uncomfortably on Feather.

"Don't worry, my lady," Swick said. "We won't allow you anywhere near such women of ill repute."

Suddenly Jairus ran ahead and knelt beside a narrow stream that threaded across the path. "There is steam rising from here! It must drain from a hot spring farther up."

Laina drew in a breath. Could it be the same hot spring? Long ago, when she had barely seen fourteen summers, she and Conard had delved deeper into the forest than ever before, wading through a river—often ducking or even crawling beneath low-hanging branches—as it climbed gently up from the ocean. At one place the water had begun to flow warm, and they followed the steaming tributary up a steep slope until it ended in a small hot spring beneath the trees. Conard had somehow coaxed Laina to remove most of her clothes, there in the growing darkness of evening, and he had even dared to latch his fingers into her hair and kiss her.

Laina's cheeks grew warm at the memory. Had Conard ever loved her? She wished he had not abandoned her so suddenly. If she could see him one last time, she would be able to guess the truth of his affections. She touched her hair, remembering the fierce grip of his adolescent curiosity. He was a part of her that would never return, a piece tied to childhood and innocence and freedom. All of that had disappeared now.

"You know this place," Jairus guessed. His dark eyes were too intelligent. "You are not like me, I think. I wanted my freedom so I could leave my home behind. You want freedom to become even more closely bound to your own land."

"Is that a bad thing?" Laina asked.

"No. I envy you."

## Chapter 6

Laina could not tell whether the sun had gone down when they finally reached the campground. The shadows had slunk up from the ground and begun slowly engulfing the trees, until there was nothing but grey darkness saturated with the smell of damp earth.

"A fire!" Harrow called to the rear of the group.

Laina straightened her back, just now catching the acrid scent of smoldering wood. A glow emerged from behind two wide trees, and as she rounded the bend, she caught sight of a sea of colorful tents. Many were nestled together on the cleared swath of ground closest to the road, with barely room to walk between them, but others were crammed between trees, their canvas roofs bowed to pass beneath branches, their sides squashed like a peach about to burst open.

When Laina rounded the outer wall of tents, she realized that the entire clearing was not quite as full as she had imagined. Rather, the tents formed several tiers of circles around a cleared patch of dirt in the middle that had seen heavy use. Above, silk streamers and painted ropes dipped between tree branches, giving the empty space the impression that it sat beneath a tent canopy itself. One of the tents looked more like a wagon that had unbolted its side—a wooden frame supported a wall of rich multicolored silks that could have been a miniature stage.

"Where are we supposed to set up camp?" Laina's father asked irritably. He turned in a circle, one fist digging into the small of his back.

"You're the king," Harrow said slyly. "You may have forgotten how to give orders, but these people haven't forgotten how to obey." He turned and raised his voice. "Oi! On behalf of His Majesty, King Faolan of Lostport, we order you to clear a space for these royal tents."

A hundred heads suddenly emerged from behind trees and inside tents. Most looked foreign; those wearing subdued, practical clothes were clearly construction workers, while the mobs of flagrantly-dressed newcomers had to be entertainers. One of the heads peering from behind the wagon-stage belonged to a dark-featured, beautiful young woman with long hair that she was using to cover her bare chest. Laina quickly averted her eyes. When the woman's head disappeared, two men strode purposefully around the wagon and bowed to Laina's father.

"Your majesty. You may have the place of honor." At a fluttering gesture of the man's wrist, three others sprang forward, stretching a wide, sturdy cloth across the circle of dirt. "You and your attendants may rest easy. We are happy to serve you."

A series of chairs followed the cloth; Laina alit from Feather and perched on one of these, where she was joined by Swick, Jairus, and the other four members of the royal party. Her legs and hips ached from the saddle, but she could not stretch them out properly with so many others watching.

Meanwhile, disregarding her father's protests, Nort and Barrik began directing the gypsies in assembling the enormous tent the royal party had packed.

"Fetch my quill," Swick ordered Jairus, claiming the

chair beside Laina.

"Can you map the forest just from having walked it?" Laina asked.

Swick laughed. "That's impossible. Mountains in Dardensfell, perhaps, since you can see them from a distance and get a good idea of the scale. Here, we could have been wandering in circles for all the forest has let on."

When Jairus joined them, a bundle of quills and parchments in hand, Swick's smile grew.

"Of course, my student has been doing his best to prove the contrary. Twice he has drawn near-perfect maps of long stretches of country he had never seen before. And one was even forested."

Jairus ducked his chin. "Are you trying to tell me you would be disappointed if I failed to draw you my impressions of today's walk?"

"Laina, you can join us as well!" Swick said. "Each of us maps the stretch of forest we believe we walked through today. The least accurate artist has to buy a night's worth of drinks when we return to the Seal's Roost."

It was an unfair contest, Laina thought, accepting a quill and curling sheet of parchment. She had wandered up the river several times before, and was familiar with the location of Port Emerald if she sailed along the coast. Knowing the locations of the notable mountains, and the indented coastline where this valley must inevitably end, she could guess at the blank spaces of the map.

Just as she was about to tell Swick as much, Prince Ronnick decided to sit delicately in the empty chair to Laina's left.

"Did you realize this road is six leagues from end to end?" Prince Ronnick asked.

Laina gave him a flat stare. It looked suspiciously as though her father had suggested he entertain her, and he had obeyed without any idea of what he ought to say.

"It took nearly four hundred men laboring fourteen hours a day to build this road in such a short time. The king said he was forced to pay double the usual rates."

"Fascinating," Laina said drily.

"Here's a real bit of juicy gossip," Swick said quietly. He leaned over and whispered in Laina's ear. "We heard on the road that your father was begging the Twin Cities to send their criminals over. Lostport could have turned into a pirate city!"

"And what would happen after Port Emerald was finished?" Jairus muttered. "Would he pack the criminals home again, or just execute them?"

Laina shifted uncomfortably.

"I'll be managing one of the landscaping divisions," Prince Ronnick added, oblivious to the exchange that had just passed.

"I know very little about my father's political dealings," Laina whispered, leaning over Swick to meet Jairus's eyes. "I was not allowed to hear him meet with foreign ambassadors, and I was not told why he turned his attention so suddenly to this port. I know he has been planning something of the like for years, but why the urgency? Why is Port Emerald a matter of such high concern that he was willing to beg criminals to provide labor for its construction?"

"Forgive Jairus," Swick said. "He's a bit of an anarchist."

"No, he's right," Laina said. "We shouldn't accept everything simply because it comes from a royal tongue. I can't afford to accept anything mindlessly. I must raise a son fit to rule Lostport." But only if I find someone to marry, she amended silently. Her father did not trust a woman's judgment, no matter how brilliant it could be in comparison

with a slow-thinking partner like Prince Ronnick. If she had no other men to choose from, could she bite her tongue and marry him? *I think not*, said a niggling voice at the back of her head.

"You appear to be deep in thought," Swick said. "But this is a night for festivities! Perhaps we should save the mapping competition for another day. Put aside your parchment and enjoy the camp."

As true night engulfed the forest and small lanterns began to wink into life among the trees, the camp assumed the atmosphere of a festival. Small groups of builders were already wending their way between tents, clearly in search of a familiar pleasure, be it food served by the steaming bowlful from enormous cauldrons, entertainment in the form of performances or music, or female company. Strains of music from knee-harps, flutes, and fiddles rose alongside the campfire smoke, and platters of charred yams made their rounds through the royal party.

Somewhere along the way, Jairus slipped off into the darkness, leaving his seat to be filled by a somewhat inebriated Barrik. Laina wondered if Jairus had seen one of his countrymen, or had decided to pursue the scantily-clad female performers; she thought the latter unlikely.

"Wanna dance?" Barrik leaned behind Swick and groped at Laina's shoulder.

"You're funny," she said, crossing her arms.

Barrik flexed his muscles. "That's what I'm here for, m'lady. Just us and—"

"The lady said no," Swick interjected abruptly.

Laina let out her breath. She didn't like the way Barrik was looking at her.

"If you're getting restless, go find someone in the tents," Swick said. "Make yourself scarce."

"Aww, c'mon, I was only joking," Barrik drawled. He

reached around Swick's chair once again, this time groping for Laina's hair.

Just as Laina was about to call for her father, Nort materialized and gripped Barrik by the collar. "Get up," he snapped. "You're a mess." With an apologetic look at Laina, he dragged Barrik to his feet and away from Laina.

"Thank you," Laina told Swick. "You don't have to stay and keep me company, you know. Go enjoy yourself."

Swick laughed. "I'm an old man, Lady Laina. It is an excellent pleasure simply to rest my feet and enjoy the intellectual stimulation of conversing with you." He raised his glass with a wink. "You know, it would not be impossible for you to visit my homeland someday. Unless you marry straightaway, that is."

Laina smiled, gazing off at the track of campfire smoke as it curled between branches. She liked the idea of travel. Her mother had journeyed all the way from Whitland to Lostport for her marriage, after all, and done the reverse just a few years later. Laina had never crossed beyond the borders of her own land.

Her thoughts turned to Doran, who she missed more than she had thought possible. She hoped he was safe at sea. How hard it must be for him to face the ocean again after what happened to him the last time he sailed. Perhaps she could visit him in Chelt someday.

She and Swick remained in their seats near the fire until late at night, enjoying the atmosphere and occasionally exchanging a few comfortable words. Laina had nearly drifted off to sleep when she heard the rustle of angry footsteps behind her. She blinked and straightened, her eyelids heavy.

It was Jairus, and he looked furious.

"What happened?" Laina asked. "Is something wrong?"

Jairus stamped past Laina and threw himself into the chair at her left. "Your father is about to finance Whitland's war against Varrival. He wants to buy Lostport's freedom at the expense of my people's lives!"

"He's what?" Laina snapped.

"The king told me he wants the jewels harvested at Port Emerald to go into the hands of the king of Whitland, who will use them for the sole purpose of mustering an army to crush Varrival."

"Why would Father try for our independence?" Laina asked. "We depend on Whitland for nearly everything. Most of the population of Lostport is still made up of ungoverned prospectors living however they choose."

Jairus slumped forward, arms crossed protectively over his chest. "You will have to ask him that yourself," he said darkly. "I do not think he wishes to speak to me again."

Laina did not know what to say. Her father wanted to help *Whitland*? That would offend everything his land valued—dogged independence, insubordination, and disdain for religion. How could Lostport's liberty be worth another land's devastation?

"Maybe you heard him wrong," Laina suggested weakly. "I'm sure he could never..."

Jairus shook his head. "I'm sorry. I should not have been so offensive. He is your father, after all."

"And even though he is my father and king, he can be wrong." Laina sighed. "I don't know what to say. I'll speak to him later. Perhaps he could be persuaded to change his mind."

She was no longer in the mood for celebrating the night. She retreated to a tent before long, unwilling to talk to anyone else. As she lay in the semidarkness, watching the firelight outside cast flickering shapes across the canvas, Laina wondered how well she really knew her father.

Voices were shouting below. Katrien hugged her dressing gown closer about her shoulders and shifted the curtains so she could peek at the commotion in the courtyard. It was barely dawn, and everything was still cast in a steely haze.

Katrien recognized at least two of the men below as belonging to her own household, but the others were unmistakably members of the Whitland military. They were dressed all in white, down to their immaculate gloves, and stood out like specters against the dark cobbles.

"Where is the lady of the house?" a Whitland soldier shouted. "Summon her to the yard. We must have a word with her."

Katrien thought about retreating to her cellar and hiding, but she did not want to be rooted out like a piece of vermin, still in her dressing gown and unkempt from a restless night's sleep. Instead, she roused her lady-in-waiting and began dressing herself, choosing a formal, conservative dress of muted crimson.

"You're a dear, Amadi. Now wait upstairs. I don't want you mixed up with these dangerous militants."

The lady-in-waiting curtseyed, eyes locked on the still-curtained window.

Katrien did not see any members of her household as she made her way down the curving grand staircase into the entrance hall. Most would still be abed, if they were lucky enough to have slept through the shouting.

Pausing with one hand on the front door, Katrien put a hand to her chest and felt her heart racing. She took a deep breath, stilled her expression, and emerged into the courtyard.

"What is the meaning of this?" she asked sharply,

striding toward the four soldiers who appeared to be harassing her stable-hand. "You have no right to trespass on my grounds and abuse my servants."

The guards turned to her; the stable-hand took advantage of his reprieve to slink back into a shadowed corner.

"You may not leave the house until authorized to do so."

"On what grounds do you make this claim?" Katrien said coldly.

"You are hereby placed under house arrest, which is not to be lifted until your husband renounces his intent to separate from Whitland."

Katrien drew herself up to her full height. "I have not spoken to my husband in years. His business is no concern of mine. Leave me in peace, or I will take the story of your groundless interfering to the king."

"Oh, but we are here on High King Luistan's command."

Another guard stepped forward, his red face uncomfortably close to Katrien's. "We received word on good authority that you recently received—and replied to—a letter from your husband. With whom you claim to have severed all ties. Your insubordination has become a concern of High King Luistan; your very presence here could give your husband the reach he needs to cripple Whitland."

Katrien narrowed her eyes at the guard. She refused to back down, refused to let on that she was intimidated. "What power does Lostport have over Whitland? Lostport is an isolated, impoverished outpost of civilization. It has no power among the Kinship Thrones." She gave the guard an icy smile. "Unless Whitland is far weaker and more vulnerable than it would let on."

The first guard slapped Katrien directly on the cheekbone. It stung; reflexively she retreated, allowing that the guards had her cornered.

"Two city guards will be stationed at your gates henceforth. You and your staff may not leave the grounds; if you need anything, you must request it to be brought in. We will monitor any visitations that we deem allowable, and inspect any letters or goods leaving the house."

Katrien swallowed. She would not show any sign of dismay. "Now you must remove yourselves from my courtyard. Your guards will remain *at the gates*, not within my grounds, or I will register a complaint with my father's sector."

She put a hand on the shoulder of her footman, beckoning the stable-hand to return from the corner he'd slunk into, and together they returned to the house.

Once inside, Katrien latched the doors securely and slumped against their frame. "I cannot believe this. I cannot! When have I become a threat to Whitland?"

"You said it yourself, m'lady," the footman said. "Whitland is far weaker and more vulnerable than it would let on."

Katrien nodded. She could smell sweat on her two servants; though their faces did not betray it, they must have been terrified. "We must be careful. Very careful. No one under my protection will suffer for this."

She wished she had never left dear Faolan. She had known from the moment she arrived back at her old home in Whitland that leaving him had been a terrible mistake, but never had she been more convinced of it. Something like this would not happen in Lostport. No one lived in fear of offending the religious authorities, or of getting on the wrong side of the High King. There were no hordes of military recruits thronging the streets and causing trouble

for civilians, no constant talk of war.

"Please join me for breakfast in an hour," Katrien said, straightening and adjusting her stiff cuffs. "I would like everyone to hear the news together, so we may decide as a household what measures to take."

With the two stablemen bowing behind her, Katrien swept upstairs once more. The sun was rising at last, and a stripe of light fell across her bedroom floor.

"Ready yourself, Amadi, and round up the rest of the staff. We have received unfortunate news."

As soon as her lady-in-waiting had departed, Katrien sank onto her bed, breathing in the comforting lavender aroma of her bedchamber. She retrieved Faolan's latest letter from her bedside table and read it for the twentieth time. He had hinted once again at distressing news regarding their son, but had infuriatingly neglected to provide any details. Did he think it kind to spare her the worry? Her fear was infinitely greater now that she was left guessing at a mystery.

She could not possibly send a letter to Faolan with the consent of the Whitland guard, but she could not keep silent. She would have to find some other way.

Fetching her own parchment and her finest swan's-feather quill, Katrien perched at the end of her bed and began composing a reply.

## My dear Faolan,

It brings me great joy to hear of your progress with this new Port Emerald. I know this has always been a dream of yours, and I am glad to know you are finally poised to achieve it. I have news of my own to share, but none so momentous as yours. Truly, you cannot continue to torture me by withholding news of our son. Though I cannot claim to

have been there for him as a proper mother ought, he is still dear in my heart. I think of our children each night before I go to sleep, and try to imagine those innocent, beautiful faces now grown up.

Life grows tiresome here in Whitland. Perhaps it is time for me to take a small holiday. When your city is complete, I might just travel south and join in the celebrations. Please tell me if this is an inconvenience; I would hate to impose my presence on you after treating you so unfairly.

I wish you great success. But please, do not send another letter until you can bring yourself to share news of our son. It breaks my heart to know that something is dreadfully amiss.

With great affection,

## Katrien

Katrien set the parchment aside. She had written the letter so quickly that her usually immaculate penmanship was untidy, yet she had no time to copy a second draft. No one had heard word of her house arrest yet. If she could sneak the letter past her guard before news spread, it could be well on its way to Lostport before anyone thought to detain it.

She was already tardy for her breakfast assembly. Waving the parchment before her to dry the ink, she rose, tucked a stray lock of hair back into place, and headed downstairs.

Her entire household was already assembled. She had been unable to tolerate living with her parents after returning from Lostport, so her father had set her up with her own manor and full staff, but she often found herself lonely and devoid of intelligent company. Her household consisted entirely of subordinates—servants and hired help. There were three cooks, four stablemen, two general maids, and her lady-in-waiting. It almost seemed silly, having three cooks. After all, they were only cooking for one lady and a crew of servants.

Still, Katrien could not deny that she had grown fond of them all.

"Good morning," she began gently. The stable-hand and the footman were conversing together in concerned whispers, while everyone else looked variously tired or confused. "Some of you may have noticed a commotion in the courtyard this morning. We have just been informed that our entire household is now restricted to the grounds. Lostport is aiming for independence, and High King Luistan suspects me of some involvement with my husband's schemes."

Amadi gasped. She was sixteen, nearly a woman grown, and she had always been dramatic. "What about my family? Am I never to see them again?"

"Of course not," Katrien said. "First of all, these measures are not permanent. And second, visitors will be permitted. If your parents hear of your circumstances, I have no doubt they will come inquiring about your situation before long."

"If," Amadi said. "If? What if they don't hear? What if they think I'm dead?"

"Peace," Katrien said. She returned her attention to the rest of the household. "If any of you need anything whatsoever, let me know, and I will request the Whitland guards to fetch it for us. We will be careful to present a very civil, proper household, with nothing amiss. We must not attract undue attention."

"What is that you're holding, my lady?" the senior chef

asked shrewdly. His smock was already streaked with flour from his morning baking.

Katrien had completely forgotten about her letter. Lifting it onto the table, she creased it into a neat square. "I mean to send this to King Faolan. Amadi, can I entrust you with this task?"

The girl gulped but eventually nodded.

"You know the back entrance. Go now—slip out without anyone watching, if you can, and take this letter directly to the courier. If you cannot return unseen by the back entrance, take the front door, and pretend you spent the past night with your family."

"May I visit them while I'm out?" Amadi asked innocently.

"Of course." With some concern, Katrien passed the letter to Amadi and watched her lady-in-waiting slip from the dining room. Amadi was young and thirsty for attention, but she was a sweet, honest girl nonetheless. She just hoped Amadi would not be too frightened to return from her parents' home once the job was done.

## Chapter 7

Laina was the first to wake the following morning. She needed to relieve herself, but did not wish to rouse anyone. Someone was snoring softly in the far corner—she hoped it was Prince Ronnick—and she was surrounded by the hush of gentle breathing. The sharp odor of fire-smoke had dwindled, replaced by the ever-present damp, earthy smell of the forest. It was very soothing.

Trying to gauge the time from the shade of light against the tent canvas, Laina sat up and wrapped her blankets closer about her shoulders. Since no one was awake to watch, she dug her comb from her small traveling bag and began working her knotted hair back into order.

Before long she realized that a pair of eyes had opened and come to rest on her. They belonged to Swick.

Laina put her comb aside. "Swick?" she whispered.

When she rose, Swick followed her from the tent.

"Is Jairus going to leave?" she asked when they reached a cluster of trees.

"Whatever do you mean, my lady?" Swick leaned his shoulder against a tree and frowned at Laina.

She shrugged. "After my father offended him, I thought maybe he would—I don't know, return to his people and warn them. The Varrilans could attack our coast and prevent us from ever building Port Emerald."

Swick shook his head. "I assure you, Jairus intends

nothing of the sort. He is honorable to a fault. If he is to do anything, he will stay here and use his powers of intellect to attempt to sway the king."

"It's his friend who needs swaying," Laina said. "Harrow is my father's closest friend and advisor, and the sort of persuasion he'd listen to would come to him half-naked and charm him into bed."

"Shame," Swick said. "Jairus will be so disappointed."

For once, Laina did not think he spoke in jest. "I will do what I can," she said. "I will speak to my father, and see why he has made such a rash decision. I cannot support him on this. I will not give him an heir if his legacy will be the destruction of Varrival."

\* \* \*

Faolan had been slightly alarmed to find his daughter absent when he woke in the unfamiliar, drafty tent, but she had reappeared before long, and their party was on its way before he expected. The great royal tent and all its outfittings had been left behind at the midway camp; his party continued toward Port Emerald with no more than a few water skins and a simple packed lunch. He hoped they were close, as his back was beginning to ache again, and every so often a stabbing pain would send spasms along his spine. He should have forced Laina to stay at home. That way he could have ridden the blasted horse without offending anyone and saved himself such discomfort.

Since he was putting most of his energy toward disregarding the ache in his back, hands clenched in his pockets so he was not tempted to rub the sore spot and give away his weakness, Faolan had no time for conversation with his fellows. Harrow was walking far ahead of the group, scouting for the first signs of

construction, but Prince Ronnick kept attempting to engage Faolan in conversation. Faolan had to admit the prince was rather knowledgeable about construction and city design, but he had been rather short with the young man. He wanted to walk alone.

When something warm and moist touched the back of his neck, Faolan gave a start and nearly collided with a tree.

"Nine bloody plagues! What was that?"

It was that infernal horse. With an expression of wary innocence, Laina drew her horse up alongside Faolan. This time he could not resist digging a fist into his throbbing lower back.

"I assume you wish to talk to me," he said grumpily. "Unless you have lost control of that beast."

Laina scowled. "Is something wrong, Father? You don't look very happy."

"No, everything is just fine." He frowned at her. "Continue on. No need to hold this party up on my account." He began walking again, and heard a shuffling chorus of footsteps resume behind him. "I think we are nearly to the port," he told Laina. He was not sure of that, but he desperately hoped it was true. "What was it you wished to ask me?"

Laina was silent for a long moment. Faolan looked up and tried to read her expression; she was biting her lip, but her eyes were distant.

"Is it true, what Jairus said?" she asked at last.

Faolan's shoulders immediately tensed. Jairus had been the impudent lad who had challenged him the night before. If Faolan had been a true king, he could have executed the interfering foreigner before the night was out.

"You want to buy our independence from Whitland?" Faolan straightened his chin. "Yes. We have languished under their rule for long enough."

"But why now?" Laina asked. "Jairus tells me Whitland is seeking funds to raise an army and crush Varrival. Are you just being opportunistic, or are you really that cruel? I want nothing to do with such a kingdom. I'll write to Mother and ask her to take me away from this place."

Faolan opened his mouth, attempting to formulate a reply, but at that moment a shout came from Harrow at the front of the group.

"Port Emerald!" he hollered. "We've arrived! Sweet seducer, it's a beauty."

Before them, the forest ended. The road gave way to a sheer overlook, beyond which lay a deep fjord walled in by mountains. Port Emerald. Faolan stopped abruptly and took hold of the horse's reins, allowing the rest of the party to hurry ahead.

"I mean to find Doran a cure," he snapped under his breath. "A magical cure. In Itrea, I hear there are healers who can perform miracles. But we can never seek them unless our trade has been released from Whitland's stone fist. The High King would imprison anyone seeking magic. This is our only way."

Laina drew back and grabbed her reins from Faolan. "If I were the one injured, I would rather remain crippled forever than see Varrival fall on my account."

"You have no marriage prospects apart from Price Ronnick, who you seem to loathe. I will *not* cede Lostport to Whitland. This is the only way."

"If it ends this madness, I'll marry Prince Ronnick tomorrow," Laina hissed.

When Faolan opened his mouth to reply, Laina slapped her horse forward. Faolan was left standing alone beneath the trees. He paused there, listening to the excitement of his party upon setting eyes on Port Emerald, and soon curiosity won out over distress. He limped

forward to join the others.

Standing on the rocky outcropping, Faolan could see the entirety of Port Emerald stretched below, like a split geode that had revealed a brilliant emerald core. The vista was breathtaking. Never had he seen such rich colors—the water was a jeweled turquoise, deep and clear, and the hills so verdant they could have sprouted up of their own accord.

"And where does the city go?" he muttered to no one in particular. He could not see where buildings could perch around a harbor of such sharp inclines and bottomless depths.

"In the trees, my friend," Harrow said, elbowing his way in beside Faolan. "Isn't she an empress of a port?"

"You plan to clear the trees? How?"

Harrow put an arm around Faolan's shoulders and brought him closer to the edge of the outcropping. "See there?" He made a sweeping gesture to the left. "The foundations have already begun."

When he peered around a dense layer of leaves, Faolan could see that patches of trees dotting the slopes had indeed been removed, and one had already been replaced by a series of steep terraces and what looked like the foundation of a building.

"I certainly hope you have a brilliant architect," Faolan said dubiously. "If this city succeeds, it could go down as the bravest feat of engineering in the Kinship Thrones."

"You can decide for yourself," Harrow said. "If you don't mind a bit of a steep downhill jog, we could pay a visit to the current building squad."

"The head architect is a good friend of mine," Prince Ronnick interjected from behind. "He is a man of great repute. Whitland-born. He designed the New Cathedral of Varos the Defender, just outside the walls of Corona." "Lead the way," Faolan told Harrow, who was smirking at the prince. His back twinged in anticipation, but he could not possibly have traveled so far to turn back at the final stretch.

The path cut sharply left, and thereafter proceeded to zigzag its way down the hillside. The formerly smooth, wide road was now narrow and riddled with roots; Faolan kept a close eye on Laina, afraid her horse would catch its hoof and send her tumbling over the edge. Unlike the switchback trail leading between Lostport and his own manor, this one was so thickly shrouded in trees that the elevation change was deceptive. Before he expected it, the ground leveled off and their tramping party broke from the trees into a wide meadow.

Saddled between two hunched green peaks, the meadow was home to a tumbling river that evidently flowed from a glacier hanging off the craggy mountain at the head of the valley. The grass down here was a fresh shade of green that stood out like a jewel against the dark forest on either side. Dotted amongst the green tufts were flowers, tiny bursts of yellow and lavender and cream.

Just beneath the trees on the opposite bank of the river, Faolan spotted a cluster of practical tents, two pyramids of logs, and a huddle of men deep in conversation.

"The architects," Harrow said, confirming what Faolan had already guessed.

Faolan led his party across a pair of narrow boards spanning the river; they were greeted on the opposite bank by a pair of men who had to be Ruunic.

"This is the *true* head architect," Harrow said in a loud whisper. "Not some buffoon from Whitland."

Faolan was not surprised to learn where the men were from. Ruunas was a kingdom of hills, so its builders were far more likely to be familiar with vertical architecture than anyone from the grassy fields of Whitland.

"Greetings," the head architect said, extending a hand to Faolan, who recognized the gesture and clasped the man's hand in both of his own. "It is my privilege to welcome you to the beginnings of Port Emerald, jewel of all the lands." The man's black hair was swept self-consciously off his face, and his skin, darker than most, was darkened further from the sun.

"A kind welcome indeed," Faolan said. "How goes the project?"

The head architect beckoned Faolan and his company forward. While one of the architects held the tent door aloft, Faolan and his party filed into what looked like an enormous portable office. The tent was dominated by a heavy wood table strewn with papers, and the remaining space was littered with chairs of all sorts. Faolan seated himself in the largest of the chairs, letting out a breath as his aching back unbent.

"We have just begun laying out the foundations," the head architect said. He fetched a rolled parchment and began flattening it before Faolan. "This is the master design that our architects have been following. If the pool of laborers continues to increase at the rate it has shown thus far, our project should reach completion a span before winter settles in."

The parchment now lay flat before Faolan. He could immediately recognize the shape of the port from the conceptual sketch. Two hunched mountain peaks dominated the harbor, while a third shorter rise kept watch over the nearest shore. In this sketch, a soaring cluster of towers adorned the top of that shorter rise—a castle of sorts, or perhaps a richly outfitted manor. From there, the city spread around the port in terraced levels, with arches

and stairways connecting the rows of lofty spires. The city was a work of art, the buildings like gemstones rising from the heart of a geode.

"Impressive," Faolan said. "Though I hesitate to ask whether you have managed to keep it within the budget provided..."

The head architect raised an eyebrow in smug unconcern. "Of course we have. Your kingdom is uniquely blessed with an abundance of superior building materials. The wood of the silver beech and emberwood trees is unsurpassed in quality. From these native species, we have been able to design buildings that best showcase the landscape."

"Impressive," Faolan said again. He could not help but be charmed by the illustration. It looked like a storybook kingdom, like something built with magic.

Harrow nudged Faolan. "What do you think, eh? He's a brilliant architect."

Faolan could only nod.

"It's beautiful," he overheard Leila saying to her scholar companion. "A beautiful mistake."

The foreign scholar nodded grimly.

"You were well chosen," Faolan told the head architect. "In your hands, Lostport will become the richest of kingdoms."

\* \* \*

Despite the way his last sailing excursion had ended, Doran felt lighter than he had in ages while aboard the ship that carried him away from Lostport. Just two days into their voyage, the flat, pallid Varrilan shore loomed on the horizon, and its approach meant a return to the miserable cripple he had been in Lostport.

He momentarily forgot his misery when the harbor town drew into view, a glimmering collection of houses built from dark glass bricks and thatch. He had never seen such vividly colored buildings before, nor so much sand.

They lay anchor as soon as they had drifted into the protection of the wide harbor, and rode a small fleet of rowboats onto the sloping sandy beach. Doran closed his eyes in shame as he was handed down to the first rowboat, but these sailors were obviously accustomed to unloading heavy cargo from their ship, as they handled him with much more care than he had expected.

No less than twenty Varrilans were waiting for them, armed and menacing in a way only Varrilans could be.

"Are you sure we're welcome here?" Doran asked the sailor beside him. He hadn't bothered to learn any of the crewmembers' names on their short voyage, because he knew they were talking about him behind his back, and he did not want to fool himself into caring what they thought of him.

"That's our escort," he said, lifting a hand in greeting to the Varrilans.

"I thought it was meant to be a Cheltish convoy," Doran said in consternation.

The sailor shrugged. "Probably because that's what your father wanted to hear. Meaning no disrespect, milord."

As they drew closer, four of the Varrilans waded into the water to help drag the rowboats to shore. Chestnutskinned and strong, every one of them had their dark hair shorn to a short halo of ringlets; Doran did a double-take as he realized half of their number were women, dressed so as to be indistinguishable from the men.

When Doran's boat nudged against the sand, two of the sailors leapt out immediately and lifted him from his seat, standing knee-deep in the languid waves as the Varrilans dragged the boat safely onto the sand.

Someone must have sent word, because no one looked at Doran twice, except with the respect he supposed he was owed as the heir to Lostport.

"We've got a new horse ready for you, son," one of the sailors said under his breath. "We've brought the saddle, too."

"And what about you?" Doran asked as he was carried bodily to a chair on the beach. It looked entirely out of place, the only wooden piece in sight, surrounded by soft yellow sand.

"We're returning to Lostport after you've been safely handed over," he said. Doran could not see his expression, yet he heard guilt in the man's voice. "We're merchants, milord, and we have to make a living somehow. We usually trade with Varrival's capital city, and the glass we get in return goes onto the riverships traveling north up the Samiread."

"Well, thank you for taking me this far," Doran said, feeling like a terrible burden.

"No matter. It was just a slight detour."

Several unwieldy trunks had followed Doran off the merchant ship, and he recognized the saddle sitting atop one of them. Their welcoming party had gathered all around Doran's chair, and the sailors beside them; after a moment's pause, one of the Varrilans dropped to his knees, and the others copied him. At first he thought it was an overtly formal show of respect—then he realized they did not want to talk down to him. His face went hot.

"We welcome you to Varrival," one of the shortest men said in perfect Whitish. "Your father has requested our help, and as allies of Lostport, we are happy to oblige.

Allies? Doran thought in surprise. Varrival was the only kingdom that had completely rejected Whitish rule; if

Lostport considered itself their ally, that was tantamount to treason.

"Your father would have preferred a Cheltish escort, but there was no time to arrange one. So we will have to do."

"I am very grateful," Doran said humbly. He wished there was even one Cheltish guard in their ranks, just so he could be sure they didn't mean to kidnap him and hold him ransom, but it would win him no friends to voice these fears aloud.

"My name is Koresh, and these are—" He proceeded to rattle off twenty different names, none of which Doran managed to commit to memory. Each member of his new escort bobbed their head when their name was spoken. They really did look terribly similar; Doran had no idea how he was meant to tell them apart.

Koresh switched suddenly to Varrilan, speaking a rapid string of words to a woman across from Doran.

The woman sprang to her feet and barked something sharp in Varrilan, at which point all twenty of the sailors jumped up and began bustling about, saddling the lean, sand-colored horse, unpacking Doran's three wooden chests into smaller saddlebags and satchels, and shouldering their packs.

It was only after Doran's merchant escort had returned to their ship and Doran had been lifted into the horse's saddle that he realized the others had no mounts.

"Are we walking the entire way?" he asked Koresh under his breath.

He gave a short laugh. "What would horses eat out here? It will be enough of a job keeping yours fed."

"Do you walk everywhere?" Doran asked in disbelief.

Taking the horse's reins, Koresh started through the village, the rest of their entourage following. "Of course

not! You must think us savages. No, our border villages have horses, and the southern city uses ships. There is no reason to cross most of this desert. Nothing lies within." He glanced over his shoulder and must have seen something in Doran's expression, because he quickly added, "But the land is narrow here. It should only take ten days to reach the western sea."

Doran tried his best not to groan. His body was already aching from the effort of staying upright. Without his legs to grip the horse's flanks, it was his back that had to do the work, and a fierce throbbing had lodged itself at the base of his spine. As humiliating as it would have been, he began to wish he had allowed the horse-master to add a backrest to his saddle.

To distract himself, he cast his gaze across the rolling desert, a landscape so far removed from the lush hills of Lostport that he could not imagine how it sustained life.

There was a wild beauty in the desolation, the vast emptiness. The golden sand carved a bright line against the stark blue sky, utterly devoid of life. When Doran looked over his shoulder, the coast had already disappeared behind a dune, the merchant ship along with it.

When they stopped to make camp that evening, Doran remained perched uncomfortably on his horse until one of the men noticed and drew another man over to help.

"We heard this news," one of the men said, gesturing at Doran's immobile legs. "Terrible storm did this?"

"Yes," Doran said shortly. The humiliation was still raw.

"You will—not rule?"

Doran shook his head. "I'd rather not discuss it." He could only rule until Whitland learned he could never produce an heir, at which point he would be humiliated and cast aside. Better that Laina married and gave the seat to

her son.

The night before Doran's departure, his father had come into his room and muttered that he hoped to find a magical cure for his son. "The Makhori in Baylore still trade with Chelt, and the coast is too long for King Luistan to keep a watch on every harbor. If there's a cure out there for you, Chelt is where you'll find it."

"Just give up, will you?" Doran had grumbled. No one had seen a genuine Makhor in hundreds of years, and he was afraid their powers were nothing more than a fable. It was far worse to obsess over a false hope than to resign himself to his fate.

Now, as the sun began to set behind the dunes, Doran submitted to being carried from his horse onto a blanket that had been laid out beside a mound of supplies.

"Sorry, my king," one of the guards said as they jostled him slightly on the way down.

"I'm not a king," Doran said. "And I'm not fragile, either. Don't worry."

The man bobbed his head apologetically.

"Your Whitish is better than I expected," he said as the men turned to leave. "You don't really need a translator at all.

The second man quirked a smile. "You are kind. We pretend we have not your language so people talk more."

Though the temperature began to drop as soon as the sun was down, the Varrilans did not build a fire; after sitting for a while in disgruntled silence, Doran realized there was nothing to burn out here anyway. Instead, his guards erected a circle of tents and sat all together in the middle, each one wearing a loose woven top like a blanket with sleeves.

Dinner was dried fish and dry wayfarers' bread served with apples and pears and oranges, with a few swallows of water to wash it all down.

"Is this all the water we have for ten days?" Doran asked the woman to his left as he passed her the water skin.

She laughed. "No, we reach an oasis tomorrow, and another one three days later. Then we have to walk five days without water to the sea, but there is a freshwater stream through the town on the coast."

Her Whitish was flawless. "Why have all of you agreed to do this? Surely you have better things to do."

She leaned her head toward his conspiratorially. "Your father paid us very well. We are not as generous as you think." Her white teeth flashed in another smile.

Looking around the circle, Doran realized he was beginning to tell his escort apart more easily. He could recognize the translator sitting past two others to his right, with a shadow of stubble on his chin and a deep line in his forehead; one of the men who had lifted him from his horse was broad-shouldered and stern-faced, with square features and narrow eyes. The woman to his left, on the other hand, was young and pretty, with a small nose and cheeks that rounded when she smiled.

"What was your name?" he asked. "I'm sure Koresh told me, but I can't remember."

"Nejeela," she said. "You are not what I expected from a prince."

"And you aren't what I expected from a Varrilan."

Her forehead creased. "What did you expect?"

Doran felt suddenly uncomfortable. Allies of Lostport or not, everyone spoke of Varrilans as untamed savages, warlike and backward, with no real civilization apart from their tradition of pillaging. "Well, I thought you had a few border tribes and a few nomadic tribes in the desert, and maybe a port city that all of our merchants trade with. But…"

"We have three great cities inland," Nejeela said sternly, as though reprimanding a child. "All are fed by rivers from our great mountain, and all are much finer than your pitiful Lostport."

"I meant no offense," Doran said quickly. "And I've never been past the borders of Lostport, so I'm hardly one to judge. I was just curious."

"You see us this way because we are not part of your Kinship Thrones," Nejeela said, drawing her blanket closer around her shoulders. "What do you know of Varrival?"

"Not enough," Doran conceded. "I know the first king from the original Kinship Thrones was murdered, and Whitland has seen your nation as traitorous ever since."

Nejeela laughed without humor. "Thousands of years ago, long before any written records, our people were formed from an intermixing of pale Whitish migrating south and dark Makhori moving north. Together they set up a great empire in what is now Varrival. It was lush forest when we arrived, and we stripped it back to plant our crops and herd our beasts. But unlike your Kinship Thrones, the soil did not survive the attack. Our lands gradually became drier and drier, until a great famine took hold of us and the winds drove the last moisture from the land.

"We retreated to the great mountain, our life-giver, and have lived there ever since, in three great cities that surpass any you will find in the Kinship Thrones. We were living there when the arrogant king of Whitland sent one of his sons to rule over us. His nation was new, and his people were uncivilized. We did what any sensible country would do—we got rid of the arrogant foreigner."

The story was remarkable, not least because Nejeela told it in eloquent, flawless Whitish. "I wish Lostport had done the same."

Nejeela smiled. "Your nation is still in its infancy. If

the heir of the high king had come to us at a different time, we might have welcomed him with open arms."

"I will have to come back and see your great cities someday," Doran said. "If I find a cure for my legs, that is. Did you say you're descended from Makhori?"

"The magic my people practice is subtler than what you need. We have no healers who can work miracles. As far as I know, that was never a Makhori talent." Nejeela glanced at his legs, hidden beneath a blanket. "You could sail to our capital, you know."

Doran shook his head. "I would be an embarrassment to Lostport. I must represent my nation well, which means staying out of sight until I'm cured."

"And if you never are?"

He met her eyes. "I know I'll never be able to walk again. My father believes I'm going to Chelt to search for a cure, but I never intend to return." He expected her to argue against his defeatist stance; instead she watched him with a curious look as though he were a puzzle she wished to solve.

"The Drifters of Itrea are thought to have exceptional healing powers," she said at last.

"Forget it," Doran said glumly. "I would go mad if I kept waiting for some miraculous cure to come along. I may as well get used to this."

"At least Chelt is nice."

Doran shrugged. "I suppose. Have you been?"

"My grandmother is Cheltish. I spent every summer in Redcliff until I was fifteen."

That would explain her flawless Whitish.

"You should not worry. All will come right someday."

"I hope you're right," Doran said.

Only then did he realize that several other guards had been listening closely to their exchange. After what he had seen so far, he had every reason to assume every one of them could understand him. He hugged his coat closer about his shoulders, wishing he could disappear. But no, he had to go through the embarrassing ordeal of being carried to one of the tents and tucked into a sleeping roll with twenty pairs of eyes following him.

As he lay in the darkness, staring up at the ceiling of cured hide, he tried to force himself to stop worrying about it all. He was hundreds of leagues away from anyone who knew him, surrounded by endless desert in every direction, and the problem of Lostport's succession was no longer his to solve.

\* \* \*

Conard paused in his disconsolate trudging to wipe a damp, grimy piece of hair from his eyes. Though the sun was still low in the sky, his stomach was already gurgling unhappily.

Five days had passed since Conard left Bogside. He could not tell how far he had walked; the muggy, featureless landscape betrayed no sign of relenting, and he certainly could not see the forested mountains of Lostport anywhere in the distance.

Five days had not seemed like much before now. Conard had a newfound appreciation for whoever had first explored these miserable lands. The tangled, unforgiving wilderness of Lostport was nothing compared to this.

"Damn you, Laina," he muttered, skirting around a short mound. His feet were aching. More than once he had considered wading into the river and allowing the current to carry him downstream—it could hardly make his clothes any wetter than they already were. Most of his food had gotten damp, too; everything he had not managed to eat was either moldy or so saturated with rank swamp water

that he could hardly eat it anyway.

He could turn back. He could still turn back. Not that it would do him any good at this point, though, with five days to trudge back to Bogside and no provisions to tide him over.

The sun ducked behind a layer of morose rainclouds. Conard paused briefly to shake a cramp from his calf before slogging on.

When a tinny bell rose above the water, he first thought he had imagined the sound. He had been hoping so desperately for any sign of civilization that his mind had supplied one. Swatting a gnat from his eye, he hoisted his pack more securely on his shoulders and continued walking.

Then the bell chimed again. This time the sound could not be dismissed. Not daring to hope, Conard slowed and looked over his shoulder at the formerly empty river.

There was a boat.

Unhitching the straps from his shoulders, Conard let his pack clatter to the ground. He ran clumsily down to the river, where he stopped with the water lapping at his ankles.

"Oi!" he hollered. "Come here!"

The boat was still too far upriver to notice him. As it wallowed closer, he could see that it was small and a bit makeshift, more like a gypsy craft than a proper trading vessel. That suited Conard just fine.

"Hey! Slow down! I want a ride!" Conard waved his hands over his head and splashed water toward the center of the river, trying everything he could think of to catch the attention of someone on board. He still could not make out any of the figures on deck. Was the boat actually slowing, or had he imagined it?

No, the boat was definitely making for his bank. He could hear faint shouting now, and two brightly-colored

figures moved to the railing and waved to Conard.

"Thank you!" he shouted.

Someone hurled an anchor toward the bank, and as the prongs caught, the boat drifted closer still and slipped to a halt just in front of Conard.

"What are you doing alone in the middle of the boglands?" called the man who had thrown the anchor.

"Trying to get back to Lostport!"

Conard hoisted his pack once again. The boat was now bobbing just a pace from where he stood; two men extended their arms and pulled Conard up and over the rail, sloshing water up to his coat as they did so. He hardly cared.

"Sweet seducer!" said a tall, wiry man wearing a coat patched together in shades of purple. "Why could you not take a regular ship?"

Conard hesitated for a moment before pulling the tattered sleeve back from his left wrist. He had a feeling these people had no aversion to transporting exiles. "No one would have me. And the ones that didn't ask questions were far beyond my means."

The man snorted. "Well, you seem to have gone about this the right way. You've made yourself so pitiable that no captain could pass you by with a clear conscience."

"I'll do anything you ask of me," Conard said. "I just have to return to Lostport."

"Why the urgency?" the man asked with a mocking twinkle in his eye. "Revenge? Unfinished business? Or did you leave behind a lovely lass who might be pining for you?" He swept his long, grey-streaked hair over one shoulder.

"I doubt she cares anything for me now," Conard said darkly. "But yes, you've got it in one."

"Well, we can't disappoint your lady-friend." The man

clapped Conard on the back. "Come below and warm up before you perish of the chill."

The gypsies soon had Conard dried, re-outfitted with a pair of brown trousers and a tunic that were threadbare but thankfully not too garish, and settled into the hold with a steaming bowl of stew. Other than the first man who had dropped the anchor and welcomed Conard aboard, the gypsies did not seem eager to approach him. No one spoke to him, and he thought the groups whispering in corners were casting sidelong glances in his direction.

The inside of the ship was as colorful as its inhabitants. The hold was filled with pillows and blankets and cushions, the walls draped with silks, and Conard spotted a cluster of musical instruments in one corner.

"When you return to Lostport, will you be hiding from the authorities?" the tall man asked conversationally, dropping into a cross-legged pose on a second cushion beside the low table Conard sat at.

"I suppose," Conard said, taken aback. "You aren't planning to hand me in, are you?"

The man laughed. "At least three of us aboard this ship are on the run from various authorities, mainly in Whitland. We're the last ones you can expect to be concerned with that sort of thing. I was simply making conversation."

Extracting herself from a low-ceilinged corner, a grey-haired woman made her way toward Conard with an elegant gait clearly well-accustomed to the sway of the river. Warily she sank onto a third pillow, her glance flicking between Conard and the tall man. Her eyes were large and very dark; she certainly did not look Whitish.

"Do you have a profession?" she asked abruptly. "Back in Lostport."

Conard shrugged. "My father taught me the ways of

the woods, and I can sail rather well, but I mostly lived under the tutelage of the king's household. I've continued exploring for my own amusement, not for pay."

The woman gave a sharp nod and returned her attention to the tall man. "He will prove a burden."

"Oh, be a dear. He certainly looks strong enough—he could help us stake down tents at the very least. Or perhaps catch a few rabbits."

"No. I forbid it!"

Conard had the feeling he was missing a part of this exchange.

"The others call me Grandfather," the man told Conard. "And this is Ebony."

Shooting Grandfather a poisoned look, Ebony rose and turned to leave. Before she could escape, Grandfather caught her hand and kissed it with a flourish.

"Isn't she a sweet one?" Grandfather said.

Conard did not know what to think. He finished his stew in silence, wishing he could wash the meal down with another three helpings. These people made him feel like a clumsy outsider. Unlike the kind folk of Bogside, the gypsies had marked him as an intruder and would not welcome him gladly into their company.

At least he was warm and well-fed. At least he was still heading south. Conard could ask for nothing more.

## Chapter 8

It was disappointing to return to the manor after three days in the forest. On the journey home, Laina had insisted her father take the horse, noticing that he grew weary from the walk. She wished she could have stayed another quarter at the gypsy camp.

The next morning, she went to her father's study as soon as she woke.

"Good morning, my dearest," her father said heavily when he recognized her at the door. "Come, sit down."

Laina was immediately sobered by her father's expression. She had been ready to fight him, to tear apart his plans for Port Emerald, but she had caught him in a deeply contemplative mood.

"Why are we so obsessed with this land?" he asked.

Laina was taken aback. "What do you mean?"

"Lostport. Most of my subjects are worthless vagrants. We live hundreds of leagues from proper civilization. Your mother saw this for what it was—an outpost in the middle of bloody nowhere." Her father sighed and leaned back, tilting his chin to the ceiling. "Why, in the name of all that is good, do we care so much for it?"

Reaching across the table, Laina gripped her father's hands. His grip was strong but bonier than she remembered—was he unwell? "It is my home. I can think of nowhere more beautiful. I have you here, and the

household I grew up with, and the mountains and forest and sea." Not Conard or Doran, though, she amended to herself. "Mother was wrong to leave. I would never trade the freedom of this place for all the comforts of a palace."

Her father nodded, still looking at the ceiling. "Yet you do not want our independence. You want us to remain subservient to a land whose interests are often directly in opposition to our own."

That was unfair. Laina should have seen that coming. "Father, that has nothing to do with it. Of course I want independence for Lostport. But is it really worth destroying Varrival so Doran can walk again?"

"He is my *son*," her father said coldly. "What father would not give anything for his son?"

Laina recoiled. She had no right to choose what was best for Doran, not when she had escaped unscathed. Then she thought of Jairus, and of Varrival, and of the fierce independence of the desert people.

She swallowed. The words were hard to form, but she could not remain silent. "It's not worth it. Father, you cannot."

Her hands had remained on the table, though when he began shaking his head she drew them away.

"It is not just Doran I think of," he said. "I am responsible for this kingdom and the fate of everyone within it. I am growing old, Laina. I know you would provide me with an heir, if you could, but what if I die before he comes of age? What of our kingdom then? I can't leave the fate of Lostport up to chance. I must have Doran back."

"He doesn't even want to rule," Laina said obstinately. Though it was true, it was something neither she nor Doran acknowledged openly.

"Our lives are not governed by want," her father shot

back. "I want you to inherit the throne in Doran's place. You want nothing to do with Prince Ronnick. And Doran wants to spend his days in scholarly contemplation, removed from the woes of the world. But we have to think about our people. We are their guardians, and I will *not* see this land crumble under my watch."

Laina was taken aback. Would her father truly give the throne to her, if he could? Still, she stood and kicked her chair back. "You're deliberately funding a war. And I will have no part in it."

Her father lifted a stack of papers from his desk and rapped it sharply to straighten the edges. It was a clear dismissal.

"Fine," Laina said. "Do what you will. But I won't sit quietly and let you ruin everything."

She stomped downstairs and out to the garden, where her temper carried her down the steps toward town. Before she knew where she was headed, she found herself standing outside the Seal's Roost, one fist poised to rap on the door.

It was as though Swick and Jairus had been waiting for her. A third chair had already been drawn up to their favorite table in the corner of the restaurant, and the innkeeper immediately brought her a glass of refreshingly icy water with lemon.

"You seem very intent on something," Swick said. "Am I impolite to pry?"

Laina laughed softly. "You might be able to guess what's wrong. I talked to my father about his plans for Port Emerald. He's absolutely determined to go ahead with the project."

"But you don't support it," Jairus said swiftly, as though he still doubted her.

Laina narrowed her eyes at him. "Never. I would do anything to keep your people free."

Swick glanced sideways at Jairus. "We have been discussing the same matter all morning. Your arrival is most opportune. Jairus has only just taken me up on a bet. We tried to guess whether or not you would be willing to participate in—shall we say *unsavory*—methods to achieve our goal."

"That depends on the methods," Laina said. "Murder, no. Theft—well, it depends who we'd be stealing from. Vandalism—again, it depends on the party being targeted." She gave them a fleeting smile. "Just out of curiosity, who bet which way?"

Grinning, Swick gave Laina a playful punch on the shoulder. "I knew I'd win that one! I told Jairus you'd be game."

"He thought you would do anything," Jairus said. "Even kill."

"Don't exaggerate," Swick said. "We never specified."

Jairus raised an eyebrow, his expression carefully neutral. Then they both laughed.

"Now you have to tell me what these plans are," Laina said. "I can't stand the suspense!"

Jairus sipped at his lemon-water before elaborating. "I spoke with the head architect while we were visiting Port Emerald. He told me a few details that King Faolan had not previously disclosed."

"Like what?"

"Like the fact that King Faolan is very nervous about the project drawing on too long, because it will be severely hindered by the winter rains. And the fact that Whitland has only offered its help because it sees an immediate prospect of wealth, but it has made no promises whatsoever in regards to returning the favor. And, should Whitland actually march on Varrival before Port Emerald is completed, all of its architects and labor force will be withdrawn from the project and enlisted immediately."

"Ah." Laina thought she could see where this was going. "So Father is under pressure to finish this within a deadline, and should he fail, the entire project could go to ruin."

Swick nodded. "Precisely. Our job won't be too tricky. All we need to do is provide a few obstacles. Broken cart wheels, perhaps, or missing axes."

"I could hide in the hills and dig up foundations in the night," Jairus added.

"That could get you killed," Laina said quickly. "The forest is not an easy place to hide out in—you have to slash your way through the undergrowth, unless you find a nice stream to follow. The architects and laborers will know that. They'll be able to search the area and root you out in no time. If we're to do this, we have to make it look like a series of accidents. No one should be searching for someone to blame."

"We?" Swick looked delighted. "Are you volunteering yourself to become involved with whatever we get up to?"

"I thought that was your bet," Laina said. "I want to be useful." She could not stand to sit quietly and watch events unfold from afar, not now.

"Excellent," Swick said. "Here is the plan."

\* \* \*

For the second time in half a span, Katrien was wakened early by the sound of a commotion in the courtyard.

"Not again," she muttered, slipping from her bed and making her way to the window. It was the same guards who manned her gates day in and day out—she had come to recognize them better than she wished—but they were accompanied by four unfamiliar additions. Her footman

was trying to bar their access to the house, but they were shouting at him and looked close to resorting to violence.

This time Katrien did not have time to dress before she intervened. Instead she pulled her dressing gown over her sheer nightdress and ran down the stairs. When she skidded into the entrance hall, she could hear pounding so loud she feared the guards would shatter the door.

Steeling herself, she unlatched the front doors and drew them back.

The hilt of a broadsword nearly punched her in the throat. The doors crashed open and all six guards tumbled into the hall. Katrien searched in desperation for her footman, but it was not until the guards had righted themselves that she spotted him lying unconscious on the cobblestones.

She would not betray her fear. "You have no grounds to trespass here!" she said coldly. "Remove yourselves at once, or my household will resort to force!"

One of the guards laughed. "You're alone, my *lady*. Your threats aren't worth a damn."

"Why have you come?" she demanded.

Another guard pushed his way through the group and seized Katrien's wrist. "Traitorous whore! You were scheming with King Faolan. I have your incriminating letter right here." He brandished a crumpled wad of parchment.

Katrien caught her breath. How had he found it? Had Amadi betrayed her? "This is no scheme," she said, trying not to let her voice shake. She knew the contents of the letter—she had told her husband that she intended to visit him before long. "I simply wrote out of loneliness."

"And sneaked it past our guards! Filthy, scheming bitch." Wrenching Katrien's wrist back, the guard tumbled her to the ground in one easy stroke. She fell heavily, bruising her tailbone, yet still she refused to cry out. "We came to tell you that your next transgression won't be pardoned," said another guard with a hard, hateful face. "King Luistan will see you hang if you disobey his orders again."

A brute of a man with a gash beneath his chin kicked her in the chest, hard, and Katrien's defiant response was cut short. The man hauled her to her feet and leered in her face, his beefy hands tight around her wrists. Katrien's legs wouldn't work—only the man's force kept her standing. His angry companion ripped Katrien's dress from the neck to her waist, and the brute ground his mouth against hers in a painful mockery of a kiss.

As she gasped for breath, one of the other guards cleared his throat. His face was blurry, her vision narrowed from panic.

"Time to go," he said gruffly. "We've made our point."

The brute released his grip on Katrien so suddenly that she crumpled, breathing shallowly. "Next time, I'll get my little fun," he growled. Then the men stomped from her hall without a backward look.

The sun was well into the sky now, and Katrien expected one of her servants to appear at any moment to discover her humiliation. Her nightdress was torn and filthy, and twin bruises were blooming on her wrists where the brute had restrained her.

Not until she struggled to her feet, aching everywhere, did she realize that her eyes were wet. Angrily she wiped away the tears and clutched what remained of her clothes about her. She had her staff to worry about, and her husband to warn. She could not afford to be weak.

Before she could retreat upstairs and fix the mess the guards had made, she had to see if her footman was safe. She peered around the front doors, terrified she would find yet another guard waiting to assault her, but everything was

in its place; the footman had clearly revived and was now going about his morning business.

With a shuddering sigh, Katrien closed the doors, bolted them securely, and returned to her bedroom to dress. Amadi was waiting, sitting with her feet tucked beneath her at the end of Katrien's bed, and her face drained of color when she saw Katrien.

"Don't worry," Katrien said. "Nothing has happened." "What did they do to you?" Amadi asked shrilly.

"Nothing," Katrien repeated. "You must speak of this to no one. I am leaving Corona immediately. Help me pack, sweet. You can return to your family."

"I want to go with you," Amadi said, still sounding hysterical.

"No. Your parents would never condone it."

Amadi's eyes widened. "They don't have space for me at home. I won't have anywhere to go once you leave."

Katrien was torn. "I intend to travel south to Lostport. It is a long, arduous journey, not something to be taken lightly. I will have none of the comforts of home. It will be cold, uncomfortable, and exhausting."

"I don't care," Amadi insisted.

With a sigh, Katrien pulled her knotted hair back from her face. "It is your choice. But I hope you understand what you have agreed to. Now make yourself useful and help me pack."

Giving Katrien a curtsey and an anxious smile, Amadi darted off and began shoving skirts and coats into the largest traveling cases Katrien owned. Once she was dressed in a clean frock that would not draw unwanted attention, Katrien tugged open her drawer of precious coins, gems, and jewelry and began stuffing it all into a handbag. She needed as much wealth as possible if she wanted to bribe her way south. This whole endeavor would

be very tricky. She was betting on a dangerous unknown—the hope that no one had mentioned her to the portside guards. If the dock wardens knew she was under house arrest and considered a danger to the throne, Katrien would be arrested before she set foot on a boat. And she did not want to think what fate would befall poor, common Amadi.

But there was no help for it. She would invent a name and a story, and upon her arrival in the Twin Cities would find a new means of transport that left no traces.

"Meet me downstairs in twenty minutes," she told Amadi. "Wear your sturdiest shoes."

"Shouldn't we wait until nightfall?" Amadi asked, suddenly looking wary.

Katrien cinched up the band around her purse and tucked it beneath her sash. "No. Wouldn't that look suspicious, a pair of unaccompanied women approaching the docks in the dark? Once we have left the vicinity of this house, there should be no reason for anyone to look at us twice. Daylight is our best cover."

Without looking back to see if Amadi had complied, Katrien swept from her bedchamber and went in search of the rest of her household. If Amadi decided she wished to remain behind, that was her choice. Katrien would rather keep the girl as far as possible from danger.

Katrien's footman and cook were huddled in a corner of the kitchen, the footman nursing an ugly bruise beneath his eye while the cook ladled him a bowl of mushroom broth. They both met Katrien's eye warily—she had likely interrupted their speculations over what had happened in the dark hours of the morning.

"M'lady," the footman said. "Are you well? I was out for a long time; I don't know what happened, but I saw those guards leaving after the sun was up..."

"Nothing happened," she said firmly. "But I must

leave. This city is no longer safe for me. Amadi has decided to accompany me, but I would be grateful if the rest of you would go about your lives as though I still reside here."

The cook frowned, but the footman said, "Of course, m'lady. What happens when they force their way in and figure you've flown off?"

"I don't know," Katrien said. "Take care of yourselves, though. Do nothing that would put any member of my household in danger. If you can disappear one by one, and take yourselves far from Corona, I would find peace in the knowledge you had escaped."

The footman rose to his feet and gave Katrien a deep bow. "Safe travels. You have been most kind to us. We will miss your presence."

The cook scuttled over to the pantry and swept the contents of an entire shelf into a rough wool bag. "Here. This should keep you well-fed for a while."

Katrien shouldered the bag. "Thank you. This is goodbye, I suppose." Before the cook and footman had a chance to see the tears prickling at her eyes, Katrien turned and marched from the kitchen. Amadi was already waiting in the entrance hall, two overstuffed travel cases at her feet, wearing boots that looked as though they belonged to the stable-hand.

"Ready?" Katrien asked.

Amadi gulped and nodded. "I guess."

Wordlessly they made their way to the secret entrance and slipped into the empty alleyway. They encountered no one aside from a few harried-looking shopkeepers going about their business—everyone had looked harried since the army had taken up residence in the city—but even so, Katrien could not let out her breath until they were well on the opposite side of town. Here the streets were wider, and she could smell salt above the general reek of piss and

rotting vegetables that permeated the alleys of Corona.

"Are you still certain about this?" Katrien whispered when the ocean first came into view. The water was grey and choppy today, courtesy of a stiff breeze blowing down from the north.

"Absolutely," Amadi said.

Again Katrien held her breath as she passed between the high iron gates watched over by the white-uniformed dock wardens; her chest gave an unpleasant twinge at the memory of the guards bearing down on her. They could have done much worse—she felt filthy, violated as it was, yet they had stopped short of defiling her irreparably. The two men at the gates stared confrontationally at Katrien and Amadi, but did nothing to detain them.

"Make me nervous, they do," Amadi whispered when the wardens were far behind.

Katrien nodded but did not reply. Now that she was at the harbor, she was second-guessing her rash decision. So many things could go wrong. The shipyard men could arrest her and Amadi on the grounds that they looked suspicious, begging for passage with no ticket; the men aboard the ship could rape them both and steal their small hoard of wealth; or they could even contract one of those nasty sicknesses that hit crews from time to time. They could die in any number of gruesome ways, and not a soul in the world would hear their fate.

If Faolan never received another letter from Katrien, would he be concerned? Or would he simply assume she had tired of correspondence?

She voiced none of these worries to Amadi. Instead she marched directly to the nearest dock, which housed two enormous sailing vessels and a third miniature harborflitter. A man sat at a short table there, clearly checking tickets, and Katrien was relieved to find that he was wellgroomed and wearing civilian garb. He looked like an upstanding, non-militant fellow.

"I need passage on your next ship to the Twin Cities," Katrien said, holding her chin up.

The man grunted. "Our ships don't go all the way to the Twin Cities. You'll have to catch a river-vessel when you reach the mouth of the river."

"Obviously," Katrien said, though she had not thought of it. "But surely you coordinate the full voyages, rather than simply stranding your customers at the river's mouth?" Katrien did not want to admit that she could not remember the name of the river or the city beside it. She had not been through that part of the Kinship Thrones for twenty years.

"You have the right of it," the man said, disgruntled. "Though it is rare that I negotiate with a non-ticketed customer."

"When is your next ship?" Katrien asked, this time more urgently. "I have money. I need to reach the Twin Cities as soon as I can."

"That depends on how much you are willing to pay."

Katrien unhooked the purse from beneath her sash and scooped out a large handful of jewels and coins. Dropping it in an untidy heap on the ticket counter, Katrien tried to gauge the man's expression.

He clicked his tongue at her. "Normally I'd be wary of anything but proper iron casts, but with the new interest in Lostport gems, these might just suffice."

Katrien's shoulders sagged in relief.

"Your ship leaves in four hours. She is moored just there, at the far end of the dock. Safe travels, my lady."

As she and Amadi curtseyed in unison and made their way down the wide dock, Katrien could not help but wonder if this was the last time she would set foot in Whitland. The idea filled her with a dizzy, swooping

sensation; whether fear or relief, she could not tell. So much had changed since she left Lostport, a desperate young woman with her leg still bruised from where it had struck a rock in the churning surf after she flung herself into the sea. Faolan had saved her then; would he be willing to do so again?

"I wish I could've said goodbye," Amadi said, so quietly that Katrien was not sure at first if the girl had spoken.

"It's not too late to turn back," Katrien said, giving her shoulder a squeeze.

Amadi shook her head. "I won't leave you."

## Chapter 9

Doran and his convoy reached the oasis the following afternoon; though it was visible from midmorning, it took hours of walking before they drew near. From afar, it looked like a green stain rising from the desert, like a dark lake filled with algae. As they drew closer, a few trees and bushes distinguished themselves from the grass, and Doran spotted movement along the ground. There were animals of every sort drinking from a great lake at the center of the oasis—wild horses and camels and lizards and snakes and birds, and stranger animals still, great leathery beasts with a line of horns running from nose to forehead.

"Quietly," one of the men warned as they drew closer to the oasis. "The animals allow to share us, but still could kill"

Doran clutched his horse's saddle tighter than ever, glad to be sitting well above the horned beasts.

"What are they?" he whispered.

A gray-haired woman to his right answered. "Ashikornte, we call them. Deadly if provoked."

"Ah." How reassuring.

Of course, Doran had no control over where his beast went. The horse would follow blindly wherever it was led. And the man leading it was making a beeline for the shore.

The horses and camels drew aside as they approached, and the ashikornte lumbered backward a few paces without

raising its eyes from the water.

Quicker than he expected, the entire contingent of guards took turns refilling water skins while his horse drank long and deep. Then it was time to move on, away from the lush greenery and back into the featureless wilds.

Sitting amidst the tents and sipping his thick soup that night, Doran turned once more to Nejeela and asked, "What were those things? The ashikornte, I mean. They can't have come from anywhere in the Kinship Thrones." He was surprised that Nejeela wanted to spend time with him, more so because he found her very pretty, in a rare way that none of the women in Lostport matched.

"South of Varrival lies an impassable sea riddled with rocks and storms and the worst currents anywhere in the known ocean," Nejeela said. "But legend has it that a great bridge once connected our land with the southern land, held up by magic long since lost. Among our people, we believe that this land is part of the same ancient magical kingdom that lies beyond the eastern ranges in Kohlmarsh. And we pride ourselves in passing down that same magical blood."

"But you're not Makhori, are you? Surely the High King wouldn't have left Varrival alone for so long if you were."

Nejeela gave him a sly grin. "Not all of us, but it surfaces more often than you would think. And why do you think your high king is so fixated on conquering us?"

"Ah." Doran had a lot to think about, so he fell silent, still conscious of the beautiful young woman sitting beside him. He would not allow himself to show any interest in her, though. He had nothing to offer her.

His father—and indeed everyone in Lostport—tended to view King Luistan's war against Varrival in fairly

simplistic terms. Though Varrival was an ally of Lostport, Doran had felt some sympathy for King Luistan's attacks against them. After all, Varrival was constantly raiding the border towns and trying to expand its border.

Yet it seemed that Varrival had been an independent nation long before the Kinship Thrones had arisen, and it was likely their original land extended much farther north than it currently did.

He drained his soup, licking the last salty drop from his cup, and glanced at Nejeela once more. She had been staring off at the faraway hills, eyes dark in contemplation. "What will you do if King Luistan sends his full might against Varrival?"

She blinked in surprise and turned back to look at him, crossing her legs beneath her. "We are not a warlike nation. Our only fighting forces are the border tribes, most of which have been decimated by Whitish troops." At a sharp look from another one of the guards, she leaned closer and said, "Never repeat what I said, do you understand?"

Doran nodded quickly.

"Our only safety is in pretending we are stronger than we truly are."

Doran fell asleep that night with a vague dread hanging over him, a suspicion that something terrible was looming just beyond the horizon. This war against Varrival was larger than it appeared, and it would affect not just the two nations embroiled in the conflict but the entire Kinship Thrones.

He wished Laina was there to hear everything Nejeela said; his father could be frustratingly unmovable at times, but Laina would listen. She always listened to Doran, even when he was acting the coward.

As Doran shifted on his thin blanket, trying his best to ignore the dead weight of his legs, a lump rose to his throat.

He had thought it would be a relief to leave Lostport behind, to escape his shame and his duties, yet he missed Laina and Conard terribly. He wondered if he would ever see his sister again. She should have been the heir, not him.

\* \* \*

In the six days since Conard had joined the gypsy crew, he still had not managed to learn the names of everyone on board. It certainly did not help that each time he looked carefully, an unfamiliar face seemed to have joined their ranks. Grandfather was the only one who made an effort to be friendly. Ebony could sometimes be wheedled into conversation, though only when Grandfather joined in. There were three or four children aboard as well—curious things, always climbing the outboard ladders and putting on plays for each other and jumping off the boat with a rope in hand—and they often approached Conard with impudent questions.

"Why did you get exiled? Did you kill someone?"

"Can you juggle, mister?"

"Wanna jump off the boat? Here, I'll show you how."

But whenever he tried to question them in return, they would melt away like shadows.

On his sixth evening aboard, Conard climbed to the open top deck for a bit of air and spotted something on the distant southern horizon. It rose in a gentle arc from the earth, dark green and soft beneath a veil of nighttime fog rolling off the ocean.

Conard turned to the nearest gypsy, a man not much older than him. "Can you see that?" he asked eagerly. "Those are the mountains of Lostport. We're nearing my home!"

"The home that you were exiled from?" The man

raised an eyebrow mockingly.

"Be fair," Conard said. "Didn't Grandfather say most of the crew here was exiled from somewhere or another?"

The man snorted. "Which is why we joined this crew. And vowed never to return to that vile place." He spat over the rail.

"Lostport isn't vile," Conard said. "It's my own fault I was exiled. I would do anything to be forgiven."

The man's expression was still mocking, but he said, "I heard it was something to do with the crown prince. Tried to kidnap him or something?"

Conard shook his head. "I crippled him." He found he could no longer meet the man's pale brown eyes. He stepped to the rail and folded his arms atop it, leaning out over the water. "It was such a stupid little thing. We were racing a pair of sailing ships, and a storm blew in; instead of turning back, we kept going at it until a wave threw our ships together. Doran fell off, his crew saved him, and I was arrested. When I woke up I was leagues and leagues from my home, on a dumpy little rivership headed for the Twin Cities."

The man stepped up to the rail beside Conard and mimicked him in leaning forward over the water. "What were you, then? Some sort of duke?"

Conard laughed drily. "Not likely. I was a nobody with no proper family."

"Then how did you manage to own a bloody sailing ship?"

Conard grinned as he realized how odd that must have sounded. "Long story. You know how Lostport's building this new city on a beach practically littered with gemstones?"

The man nodded.

"My dad-well, the man who raised me, anyway-

found it. So we got put up in fancy rooms in the royal manor, and I grew up as the little princess's playmate."

"No joke?" The man looked amazed. All trace of disdain had melted from his face.

Conard nodded. "What's your story, then? And what's your name? I haven't managed to learn it, even in all this time."

"None of us use our real names any longer, not here. 'Cept the kids, and they were given stage names from the start. I'm Silversmite. I've been with this company nearly ten years now, ever since I was hauled in for making off with a solid bronze statue at one of the cathedrals. Grandfather took pity on me when he saw me heading for the gallows and bought me off the executioner." Silversmite turned and grinned sideways at Conard. "I haven't dared set foot in that city again to this day. And there's no one left who would remember me anyway. You're a brave fellow, Conard."

"Not so much," Conard said. "Lostport isn't like Whitland. Laws are more flexible. There are plenty of miscreants around these parts, and the whole city depends on them. If King Faolan saw me, he would probably just throw me back on a northbound ship." *Or perhaps not*. Despite his brave talk, Conard thought that was unlikely. The king was apt to be murderous if he caught sight of the man who nearly killed his heir.

"Keen to test that theory?"

Conard stepped back from the rail. "No. Absolutely not!"

Silversmite punched him in the shoulder. "I was joking. Come on down; let's have a drink. Since we're getting close to civilization, it might be time to drain the casks!"

Grandfather, Ebony, and a crowd of others were

already helping themselves to a sweet-smelling fish stew when Conard and Silversmite joined them. Grandfather ruffled Conard's hair when he took a seat, and Ebony glowered.

"Our *guest*," Silversmite said pointedly, "has noticed a few mountains in the distance. We must be nearing Lostport. Do you know what that means?"

"Drinks all around!" trilled a small woman with plaited hair down to her waist. She spun into Silversmite's arms, her colorful, many-layered skirts twirling about her and swiping Grandfather neatly in the forehead.

"You've already had quite enough, my pretty," Silversmite said, pinching the woman's cheeks.

Giggling, she gave Silversmite a wet kiss. "I haven't even begun. There's something in the air—can you smell it? Like honey. You could get drunk just breathing in that sweet, sweet breeze."

"Lostport," Conard said to himself. He had not caught the scent himself, but he could imagine it perfectly—that lush honeysuckle aroma that rose in waves of heat from the jungle and wove through the air, braiding itself through the salty ocean wind.

Conard had thought that Silversmite spoke in jest, but as it turned out, there really were two enormous casks that a pair of men rolled up from the lowest deck of the hold. One was filled with sun-brew, the other with a much more sophisticated wine.

"Pressed from the only grapes grown in Dardensfell," Silversmite boasted.

That night, with the promise of good liquor waiting belowdecks, every member of the company made a simultaneous appearance for the first time Conard had seen. The captain anchored the boat shortly after sundown and put his feet up in one of the most comfortable chairs, and the others clustered nearby, most sitting cross-legged on pillows. Including the children, there were twenty-one in total, more than Conard had guessed. As the wine and sunbrew began to flow, the gypsies grew friendlier and more talkative, and Conard forgot his worries about seeing Laina and evading King Faolan's attention.

"Tell him about the baby!" The young woman with the braided hair—Ladybird, he gathered she was called—jumped into Conard's lap and kissed his nose. "Please, Silversmite? Or I'll kiss this handsome young man instead of you."

A moment too late, Conard leaned away from Ladybird's second attempted kiss, which landed on the corner of his mouth. If he hadn't been three mugs into the sun-brew, Conard might have been more worried for his dignity.

Silversmite chuckled. "That was a real good one, wasn't it, birdie?" He nodded at Conard, clearly pleased with himself. "See, Ladybird had been hankering for a child a few years back. She thought it'd be the greatest thing to have a cute wee one following her about. Well, I wouldn't give her one—more trouble than they're worth, I think!—and back then she wasn't whore enough to go looking for another man."

The little girl came skipping up behind Silversmite and sat on his shoulders. "I'm not trouble, am I?" she asked, wide-eyed.

Silversmite lifted her over his head and tickled her until she shrieked. "You're lovely. Ladybird is the real trouble." When he released the girl, she ran off, giggling, to rejoin the three boys. Taking hold of Ladybird's braid, he tugged it until she toppled off Conard's lap and crawled over to his side instead.

"She kept pretending she'd gotten pregnant somehow,

and once I even caught her stuffing her dress. Then one day I got home and was terrified she'd run off with someone's kid. There was a silk-lined pram by the door, all lined in pink ruffles. This was when we'd stopped for winter in the Twin Cities, of course. I tiptoed over to the pram, ready to run off and abandon Ladybird if she'd truly done it. And what do you think I found?"

Conard grinned. "What?"

"A puppy! Well, I can tell you, that puppy was the most annoying little beast I've ever seen. It was always yapping and pissing on my nicest shoes—"

"You never *had* any nice shoes," Ladybird said, pouting comically.

"It was making a mess, in any case. So you know what I went and did? I visited the orphanage and traded the puppy for a squalling infant!"

"That's our sweet Melody," Ladybird said, nodding at the little girl.

Conard laughed. "And I thought I had a strange childhood!" He followed the little girl's progress as she skipped over to the largest of the three boys and tackled him onto a mound of cushions. "Where did the others come from, then?"

"Oh, Silversmite got over his reluctance for children after that, and we had our own darling boy. The other two are Magpie's, but we don't know who the father was." She gestured at the woman talking to Ebony; she was a gorgeous Ruunic woman with midnight-black hair and black eyes.

Conard grew quiet as a sudden thought hit him. With Doran crippled, he would likely be unable to bear children of his own. Did that mean King Faolan was now desperate to marry Laina off so she could provide him with an heir? In a selfish, unkind way, Conard hoped so. He—a lowborn

exile—would never have a chance with a princess of Lostport. Not unless he was her *only* chance.

But would Laina be able to forgive him?

Silversmite had noticed Conard's sudden sober expression, and passed a newly-filled mug his way. Conard tipped it back and gulped the sweet, acidic Darden wine.

"You loved her, didn't you?" Silversmite asked keenly.

Conard eyed him warily. Though the man had been keeping pace with him drink for drink, he looked dead sober. "Yes," he muttered. "I did."

"You'll need a few more of those to forget. Here." He passed Conard another mug, this one laced with cinnamon and orange.

"Cheers," Conard said, and drained it along with the first.

The light looked odd when Conard struggled blearily into wakefulness the next morning with a gnawing headache and a bladder ready to burst. When he stumbled up to the deck to relieve himself, he realized what was wrong with the light. They were floating beneath trees. Trees! Soaring overhead were the dark-leafed branches of the silver beech and emberwood and palm trees he loved best. *I'm home!* 

Most of the company was already on deck, watching wide-eyed as colorful birds swooped through the canopy overhead and giant lizards curled their tails lazily about their lofty branches. Conard didn't even care about the town of Lostport, or the manor where he spent his adolescence. This was the home he knew—the trilling, ringing, screeching chorus of birdsong overhead; the humid weight of the air; the damp, pungent smell of decomposing leaves; and the sheer richness of color all about.

"Good to see you up so early," Silversmite teased, joining Conard at the rail.

Conard groaned. "I must have drunk half of that cask of sun-brew myself. Do we have to land in Lostport today, or can we just stay here for a while longer?"

Silversmite laughed. "It's another three days before we reach the ocean. Have you never traveled this stretch before?"

"I was unconscious the last time."

Now Conard's bladder was protesting more fiercely than ever, so he ducked away for a moment's privacy on the rear deck. When he returned, Ladybird and her two children had joined Silversmite, and the four stood at the front railing of the waddling box of a boat with their arms around each other, a sweet little gypsy family all dressed in bright rags. Conard wondered if it was just for show.

Three days later, a shout came from deck—the ocean was in sight. When Conard raced to the front of the boat, he could make out a silvery glint in the distance, a flat horizon of water just peeking through the infrequent gaps in the forest. They were swept along by a decent current now, which soon carried them into the middle of the delta and then out to the open sea. Conard spotted a small Whitish sailboat darting about the harbor; he approached Grandfather and said softly, "We might not want to attract their attention."

"Fair point," Grandfather said. "Alert the captain, will you? Unless you wish us to tie up at the main dock, pay an exorbitant fee, and submit ourselves to inspection, you may have to help the captain navigate to a safer mooring. It's been a good long while since I last paid Lostport a visit."

"You've been here before?" Conard said, startled.

"Many times. And Ebony even more. Don't be startled, boy. For many, this is the first place that comes to mind if you wish to evade capture and earn yourself a comfortable living."

"Right," Conard said. Still vaguely surprised, he made his way over to the captain's deck at the rear of the ship.

"Morning," the captain said shortly, recognizing Conard. "I suppose you'd like to tell me where I ought to tie up?"

Conard shrugged. "Grandfather thought I might be of use. Did you want to make for the docks, or somewhere a bit less conspicuous?"

The captain pulled his cuffs into line with his teeth. "Less conspicuous, I think. There are more Whitish vessels around than most of us would care to see." He raised his voice. "Oarsmen! Below!"

There was a scuffle on deck as the entire company—women and children included—pushed and shoved their way down to the hold. A row of trapdoors popped open on either side, and oars emerged like tentacles from within. It was the sort of contraption a battle-ship would use, or even a pirate ship; on this wallowing little boat it just looked comical.

Conard felt a bit lazy to be standing up here instead of pulling his weight below, but soon enough the captain was asking for advice.

"There's a sheltered cove just beyond Lostport," he said. "Before Mount Taleon—see?" He pointed at the small indentation on the coastline, the last stretch of horizontal shore before the dramatically vertical fjords took over. "Once we round the bend, there should be a bit of a lagoon beneath the trees. If we're lucky, we'll be able to tie the ship somewhere inside the trees, where no one will spot us unless they trip over us."

"That sounds like my sort of mooring," the captain said, giving Conard a brief smile.

Though this cove was too shallow for his sailing ship,

Conard had approached it from the sea many times before—when he and Laina had been young, they had befriended the harbormaster, who allowed them to borrow his oldest rowboat whenever they pleased. The best part was that he never told King Faolan what his daughter had been up to.

As soon as their riverboat rounded the mouth of the cove, Conard could see that the lagoon was exactly as he remembered it. One wide-trunked, sloping tree leaned far over the water, trailing its leaves in the surf. Behind that lay the lagoon, deep enough for a decent-sized boat yet utterly calm, its waters trapped and stilled in the tangle of roots all around.

"See that?" Conard pointed at the drunken tree. "Aim for its left. There might be a few saplings that have grown over the entrance to the lagoon, but we can row through them."

With ease, the captain aimed his ship for the point Conard had specified. Conard clenched his fists behind his back as they entered the cove, eyeing the narrow band of sediment that could catch even a rowboat at low tide, but the riverboat cleared the passage without trouble. As he had predicted, there were six budding young mangroves barring the entrance to the lagoon, but the captain steered through them and flattened them beneath his ship.

"There," Conard said, pointing to a patch of dry soil locked in place by a mat of roots. "If we tie up to that tree, we can walk straight into Lostport from here. We'll be there in no time."

This time the captain's smile was genuine. "We stumbled across a stroke of good luck, that day we dragged you in from the swamp."

"We'll see about that," Conard said. The fact that he had made it back to Lostport, to the place every force had

conspired to keep him from, could mean that his luck was changing. Or it could mean nothing. He still had not seen Laina.

Belowdecks, the oars were hastily being racked as the captain jumped ashore and tied their boat to a tree. Before long the others were emerging into the light, looking around in surprise at the place they'd found themselves. It must be strange, Conard thought, to put all of your strength into powering a boat if you couldn't even see where it was headed. The gypsies could have been rowing themselves to certain death.

"The new city they're designing lies in that direction," Conard said, pointing to the valley just before Mount Taleon. "The road should be finished by now; the whole time I was sitting in Bogside, I kept hearing reports of how quickly the work was proceeding. I believe there's a camp somewhere near the halfway mark, where the other entertainers have set up their tents."

"And Lostport?" Silversmite asked.

"Back there," Conard said. "There was an old road that followed the shore past Lostport until it nearly reached this lagoon. I assume the new forest road has connected up with that."

"Brilliant," Grandfather said. "It's all coming back to me now. I think we would be wise to split into two parties—one that travels ahead to stake our claim on a patch of that camp, and the other that visits Lostport to stock up on supplies."

Conard nodded.

"I'll lead the supply train," Grandfather said jokingly, "and Silversmite can forge ahead into the depths of the forest."

"Why me?" Silversmite said, glowering at Grandfather. "I want to see Lostport."

"You can," Grandfather said. "Just not now. If we left you in charge of the supplies, we wouldn't see you for another span. You'd have such a good time in the taverns and brothels that we'd have to extract you from the Convict's Caves before long."

Silversmite made a face at Grandfather, but he did not argue further.

"Which party are you going in?" Ladybird asked, twirling her braid between her fingers.

Conard blinked. "I'm going back to Lostport." Had it ever been a choice?

Grandfather shook his head. "Unwise, my friend. But I hardly expect to talk you out of it."

And so it was that Conard plodded to the head of the short line heading back to Lostport, his chest aching with dread. He could not turn back, yet he could not bear to face whatever he would find at the end of the road.

\* \* \*

"It will not be enough," Faolan said. He had just finished going over the architectural plans in conjecture with the funding scheme, while Harrow looked on. "These materials are far too expensive. I thought we were meant to use local woods only!"

"You can't build a palace out of wood," Harrow said with a touch of amusement. "You need stone. Good, clean stone. And we have to import it from Dardensfell. What's the point of building a city if it won't impress anyone enough to live there?"

"This is madness," Faolan said. "Madness! I cannot sanction such a gamble."

"What, then?" Harrow said. "Are we going to abandon the project? Tell all the architects to go home? Thank you, it was nice to have you here. We'll enjoy the new road to nowhere."

Faolan gave an exasperated sigh. "You are utterly impossible to reason with!"

"Why thank you," Harrow said sarcastically.

Faolan put his head in his hands. This time they were discussing the matter over breakfast, as a nice break from his stuffy office, which was now drowning in papers. Raising his voice, he called, "Mylo, could you please fetch Prince Ronnick?"

The cook appeared almost at once, untangling his apron from his neck, and gave Faolan a cursory nod before hurrying off to search for the young prince.

Digging a thumb into his lower back, Faolan leaned back in his seat. He was still recovering from the walk to Port Emerald; he felt like an old man, bent-shouldered and riddled with aches.

"Are you hoping to dismiss me—replace me with that imbecile, perhaps?" Harrow asked levelly.

Faolan shook his head. "No. I need your advice, and Prince Ronnick's as well. We will need to press Whitland for more aid, and soon. But we must make their prize seem more tempting than ever if they are to comply." At times, Faolan still wondered if Harrow retained any of his loyalty to Whitland.

Harrow leaned forward. "Even without the foreign materials, the project is beyond our current budget."

"I know," Faolan said. He folded his arms. "No matter how many different ways you tally up the numbers, they still mean the same thing—too little. We have an excess of manpower and nowhere near enough supplies to keep them busy. Once the groundwork is laid out, they will have to start cutting trees if the stones cannot arrive in time. But is that what Port Emerald is meant to be? A quaint little village of log cabins?" He pinched the bridge of his nose in frustration.

"You've given this more thought than I realized," Harrow said.

"Of course I have," Faolan snapped. "It's my son's life at stake. And my kingdom."

A stiff rap sounded at the door; Faolan knew who it was without asking. "Enter," he said. Prince Ronnick peered around the corner before marching into the room and sitting at the table. "Do you know why I have summoned you?"

Prince Ronnick glanced from Faolan to Harrow and back, clearly afraid he was about to be reprimanded for something. He was very much a child in some ways. "No, your highness."

Faolan sighed. "How much have you heard from the other architects? Our plans for Port Emerald are devastatingly expensive. Is there some way you can use your influence in Whitland to encourage the High King to invest a bit more?"

Grimacing, Prince Ronnick wrung his hands. "Well, I—that is to say, I don't have much influence in Whitland. That would be why I came to Lostport."

Faolan had feared as much. "Do you at least have any ideas?"

"Write out a schedule," Harrow interjected swiftly. "A project outline detailing exactly what result can be expected after what period of time, given a certain amount of labor and materials. Then send that to King Luistan, along with a fat purse of jewels. If that does not tempt him, nothing will"

"Who can I trust with such a crucial message?" Faolan asked. "It has to be someone King Luistan will believe, but also someone I myself trust. Harrow, if not for your family,

I would ask you to take on this burden."

"Your majesty?" Prince Ronnick said. "May I have the honor?"

Faolan had known this was coming. He did not trust or particularly like the prince, but he did not have much choice. "How will I hold you to your word?"

Prince Ronnick crossed his fists over his chest. "I am an honorable man, your highness. You have nothing to fear."

Faolan doubted that. "I have a better idea. Take my message to King Luistan with all haste, and once you can be certain of his support, return to Lostport. If the money and materials arrive when they are meant to, I will give you my daughter's hand in marriage upon your arrival."

When he saw Prince Ronnick's neck turn scarlet, Faolan knew he had guessed correctly. Despite the unlikelihood of Laina's son growing to maturity in time to inherit the throne, he knew the match would be advantageous for Prince Ronnick. It was perhaps the one prize guaranteed to win the prince to his side.

"You, my friend, are to draw up the plans," Faolan told Harrow. "Be as specific as possible. You have my license to bribe or cajole your way to as much wealth as we can bear to part with in exchange for sufficient materials. In return, your family will have quarters in the clifftop palace that our architects have envisioned."

"Thank you, my lord," Harrow said drily, "but we are perfectly satisfied with our present home."

Faolan lowered his voice. "I want someone I can trust watching over my new city. I will name you governor of Port Emerald, if I must."

Harrow nodded sharply. "Understood. I will see to it that nothing stands in the way of Port Emerald's completion."

## Chapter 10

It was an odd feeling to return to the town. When Conard rounded the last stand of trees and came out at the far end of the boardwalk, everything looked exactly as it had the day he was exiled. A part of him expected to see Laina striding through town to confront him about some mischief he had caused.

"I wonder if the old general store is still somewhere hereabouts," Grandfather said. "Bit of a dodgy old place, if I remember correctly."

Blinking, Conard dismissed the memories. "Yes, it's still around. And still as dodgy as ever. Though I do think the owner has begun stocking more expensive goods in the past few years—glass imports, namely."

Grandfather chuckled. "That won't do us much good. But we'll start there."

"If you don't mind, I might—vanish for a while," Conard said. He avoided Grandfather's eyes, afraid he was about to be reprimanded.

Instead, Grandfather clapped him on the shoulder. "Best of luck. Meet us just in front of the pier before sundown, or we might have to leave without you."

Conard nodded. Turning from the main path, he climbed a short rise, squeezed between a pair of landscaped dragonleaf trees, and came out on the first bend of the winding path up to Laina's manor. Even after so many

years, he still felt he could not claim it as his own home. He had always been a temporary guest, a passing fancy. King Faolan might have come up with another reason to remove him from Laina's presence before long, had the accident never occurred. As soon as an irresistible marriage offer came the king's way, Conard would have been a potential danger. Now...he didn't want to think about what he would find when he reached the top of the hill.

Far too soon, Conard was nearing the end of the road. He climbed the last few paces and came out onto the lawn; someone was hard at work tending to the garden opposite him, but the man was engrossed in his work and did not notice Conard's arrival. Though he expected it to have grown over somewhat, he edged along the border of the lawn until he reached a hidden pathway that he and Laina had known well. He could not count the number of times he and Laina had sneaked through the garden, up the hill behind the manor, and in through Laina's back window, only to be discovered hours later, fast asleep in their respective rooms and pretending they had simply been playing hide-and-go-seek within the manor.

The path was now carpeted in moss and daring blackberry brambles; Conard thought he could even see a few trees beginning to sprout. Without a bit more care, the way would soon vanish entirely.

Through a gap in the understory, Conard could see the gardener working below, adding new soil to the flower plots that graced the slopes around the manor lawn. He was grateful that the ringing birdsong covered any sound his feet made against the earth. When he reached the rear of the garden and stood uphill of the manor entrance, now level with Laina's second-story window, Conard had to stop and wait for his heart to slow. It's just the exertion, he told himself. I can't turn back now.

But he was not prepared to see Laina again. What could he say to her? He knew Doran had been crippled, but what if Laina was hideously disfigured as well? How could he possibly apologize to her? In one ill-fated stroke, he had destroyed the crown prince and brought ruin to Lostport.

These thoughts were not helping. Conard swallowed, wiped a trickle of sweat from his temple, and began creeping along the rear of the manor.

There was Laina's window. The curtains were drawn back, as always; Conard was the only one who had ever disturbed her privacy from above. He held his breath, dropped to his knees beside the window, and leaned forward.

The room was empty. The bed was so tidily made that it looked as though no one had disturbed it in ages.

Had Conard heard the wrong gossip? Could Laina be...dead?

Hands shaking, he rose and staggered back down toward the lawn. He no longer cared if anyone saw him. This time he made straight for the steep flight of stairs cascading down the hillside; his knees jolted with each long step down, and he felt close to falling. When he stumbled to the base of the stairs and into town, he grabbed the first person he saw and said, "The princess. Is she alive?"

Belatedly he realized that the man was a foreigner, a young Varrilan. But the man said, "What do you mean? Of course she is."

Conard nearly collapsed in relief. Without thanking the man, he stumbled off to the general store, hoping Grandfather had not moved on quite yet. He was in luck. The three gypsies were just stuffing their purchases into three cavernous sacks—Conard could see dried food of all sorts, a sturdy length of rope, and something that looked like a bundle of parrot-feathers.

"You weren't meant to be back for hours," Grandfather said when he noticed Conard. "Did you even see the girl?"

Conard shook his head. "She wasn't there."

"Where is she?"

He shrugged.

"After coming all this way—and nearly rotting yourself to death in that bog—you certainly gave up quickly."

"I can't face her," Conard muttered. "Not now."

Grandfather swept the final packet of beans into his sack and turned for the door. "Shame. Well, no point in delaying, then. You've just deprived your companions of the chance for a nice drink at the Seal's Roost."

The other two gypsies gave Conard a matching disgruntled look.

It was not long before the forest swallowed them again and the city vanished in the trees. With each step he took, Conard argued with himself—can I still turn back? No, it's too late. Will she want to see me? Of course not. How could he have gone so far just to give up at the end? He should have marched up to the front door, confronted Laina's father, and begged for a chance to apologize to Laina.

No, that would have gotten him arrested.

Conard was so deep in thought that he barely saw where they walked. He did register that the road had widened, though; it was odd to remember the long quarters of hacking, climbing, and struggling he and his father had gone through on their first visit to Port Emerald, when now they could reach the fjord with a minimum of exertion. In fact, the depths of the jungle were now far more accessible than the majority of Kohlmarsh.

The light began fading to grey before long, and Grandfather struck a match to a lantern he'd clearly just

bought. Soon after that, Conard glimpsed a series of glinting lights barely visible behind a layer of foliage; when he picked up the scent of woodsmoke, he knew they had reached the midway camp.

Tents sprawled through the trees as far as Conard could see. The center of the camp was a cleared space, trampled to dirt; above and all around that were so many lanterns and campfires that Conard could not make out a single face.

"Where's your company?" he asked Grandfather.

Immediately Grandfather pointed to the trees beyond the closest ring of tents. It took a moment for Conard to discern what Grandfather was indicating; then he recognized the banner from their boat, a gold peacock against a purple backing. Conard and his three companions edged their way through the bustling camp until they reached the cluster of tents where Silversmite and Ebony tended a white-hot fire.

"Not exactly a sought-after location," Silversmite said wryly, gesturing at their three tents.

"I like it," Ebony said. "Not so crowded."

Grandfather dropped his sack on the ground with a thud and straightened, readjusting his purple coat. "Have a dig through these, love," he told Ebony. "There should be enough food to last us half a lifetime. If you don't mind, I want to have a look around."

Grandfather melted into the chaos almost immediately, followed by Silversmite and Ladybird. After watching Ebony root through the largest of the three sacks for a while, Conard ambled off and began prowling through the camp.

Everywhere there were performers. The whole place felt like a fair, complete with strings of lights and colorful ribbons bedecking the trees overhead. Conard spotted groups from Varrival and Ruunas, but most were Whitish or Darden. Criminals and exiles, among others. A few of the tents were lined with silks and furs, with the flaps left enticingly open; Conard had no doubt as to their purpose. Past these, he saw tables and long benches laid out with wares that were still in progress—glass baubles halfway strung onto silver chains, engraved leather sheathes, jaunty caps, and intricate silver pendants. One table even held the widest array Conard had ever seen of hardened leather flasks.

Eventually he made his way to the end of the wide circle and came out into the cleared space. Twenty or so of the builders were lounging on or against logs at one end of the circle, while a group of dancers were preparing for a show. A man playing a three-pronged flute set the mood.

Just then, a horse stepped from among the tents, its owner guiding it carefully through the clearing and back toward the road. Conard was surprised; no one owned horses in Lostport. Until the forest road had been built, there had been no use whatsoever for ground transport.

Then he looked up at the person riding the horse, and forgot everything else.

It was Laina.

\* \* \*

Night had fallen too quickly. Laina could not stay in the camp until dawn, or her father would panic and send a party to find her. After that, he would never allow her to set foot outside the manor again.

Someone handed her a lantern, which she accepted gratefully. "I will return," she promised, waving to the young builder. Holding the lantern aloft, she guided Feather onto the road and turned left toward Lostport.

This was the first time she had ridden far without the company of her father or Jairus and Swick. Swick had been busy completing a map one of the architects had commissioned, while Jairus had been poking around town to see what materials were available for his plans to sabotage the construction project. The task had therefore been left to Laina to ingratiate herself with the performers and gauge whether they would be willing to help.

She had not realized how late the hour had grown. As soon as the performers had realized who she was, they had welcomed her among them, served her a fine meal, and plied her with gifts.

Now her grip on the lantern was slick with icy sweat. Swick had warned her that horses could sense emotions, so she tried not to convey any of her apprehension to Feather. As the lights began to fade behind her, the forest road seemed to narrow, until the trees were in danger of closing about her. The birdcalls had faded; only chirping insects and rustling wind broke the heavy silence.

Feather did not seem spooked by the darkness. Gradually Laina relaxed, trusting her horse to find the familiar path home. It did not seem like much time had passed before she spotted the narrow waterfall that lay close to halfway, and not long after that she recognized the hot stream.

She pulled up short. Someone had tied a silk scarf about the tree. Farther upstream, she thought she could make out a second bit of cloth, catching the lamplight in its bright yellow folds.

The hot spring was not far from the path. Laina could not continue down the road now, not with this mystery nagging at her. Neither scarf had been there when she'd ridden by earlier that day. It looked as though someone intended her to find them. "What do you say, Feather?" Laina whispered. "Should I investigate?"

Feather snorted and rubbed her ear against a tree.

Dismounting, Laina looped Feather's reins over a branch and waded into the stream. The branches ahead hung lower than she'd remembered, but she could clear most of them without bending too low. The lantern-light did not penetrate far into the trees; Laina wished she could see who waited for her at the hot pool, but everything before her was an uninterrupted wall of blackness. Soon she reached the short, rocky rise that lay just before the spring, and she picked her way carefully up the narrow waterfall.

As the lamplight spread before her, Laina could see a mop of sandy hair and an unusual raven-feather mask. A man sat in the hot pool.

The mask covered his forehead down to his upper lip, leaving his mouth and scruffy chin bare. When he turned to her, his lips twitched into a hesitant smile.

She froze, wary, and put a hand to the small knife that hung at her waist. Yet the man was almost naked, without shoes or leather to protect him. She could run much faster than him over the treacherous ground if he turned on her.

"Were those your silk scarves?" Laina asked warily. "How did you know about the spring?"

"Yes, the scarves were mine. Come join me."

That voice—it was so familiar! Could it be...? Despite the mask, Laina allowed her guard to drop.

"Are you scared?"

"Just wary of being tricked," Laina said, smiling in spite of herself.

"Oh, come on. What will it hurt?"

She was certain now it was Conard. His teasing, insistent tone usually preceded all sorts of adventurous

mischief. "Very well then." She tugged her dress over her head, until she wore nothing but her thin undergarments, and then stepped gingerly into the pool. It was difficult to keep the joy of recognition from flooding her face. She had missed him so much, more than she could have guessed. Yet she would play along with his game. He likely feared arrest if he was recognized.

"I hear Lostport has lost its heir," Conard said, sinking deeper into the hot pool. He was looking at the mist swirling through the trees, deliberately avoiding Laina's gaze. "What's happened to Prince Doran? Will he be okay?"

Laina bit her lip. "He's on his way to Chelt. He's paralyzed from the waist down, and he seems to have lost the will to live.

"And you, Laina? Were you injured?" When Conard reached up to readjust the ties that secured the mask in place, Laina saw the narrow band of iron about his left wrist. She recognized it immediately. Conard had never meant to leave her, then; her father had exiled him. He must have gone through great lengths to return here in secret.

"Take off the mask, Conard," she said gently. "I've missed you so much."

Conard froze. Moving carefully, as though she approached a spooked horse, Laina reached for the mask and lifted it free.

"It wasn't your fault," she whispered.

Conard dropped his eyes to the water. "I'm sorry," he mumbled. "I was so worried. I came to the manor earlier today, looking for you, and your room was empty. It looked like it hadn't been touched in nearly a span! I thought you were dead, or maybe you'd been crippled instead of Doran."

"It would have been better that way," Laina said sourly. "I'm fine, but Lostport is going to be handed over to Whitland when my father dies. Everything we've worked for will go to waste."

"I've ruined everything for you," Conard said flatly. "I was stupid and careless. You should kill me. Just throw me in the caves and be done with it."

Laina set aside the mask and took Conard's hands. "I'm not upset with you. It was my own fault as much as yours. You've just spent the last span trying to get back here. Did you really expect to be killed the moment you returned?"

"I don't know what I expected. I just wanted to see you again. It was worth risking a lot for that."

Laina hardly knew how to respond. It was the sweetest thing she had heard in a long time.

"I'm sorry, Laina. Nine plagues, I'm sorry. I'll do anything for you to make it up. I am utterly yours."

Laina's heartbeat quickened, though she tried to hide it with a scowl. "I'm fine. I've already forgiven you. My father is going to sell me off to Prince Ronnick before long, but I'm okay. I thought you were on the run. Now that I know you've been trying your hardest to get back here..."

Conard withdrew fractionally. "Who is this Prince Ronnick?"

"He's the youngest son of King Luistan. He's a useless prat, in case you were wondering, but my father's just promised him my hand in exchange for funding Port Emerald."

"And you—"

"I'm hoping he loses his way in the wilderness and never returns," Laina said vehemently. "He's on his way to Whitland to ask for supplies now."

Conard released Laina's hand, still looking miserable.

"I have no place here. I'm nothing but a burden. I've come back and I've seen you again, and now I should get myself as far away from here as possible. I just wanted to say I'm sorry. I've been traveling with a company of performers, but they don't really know what to do with me. I'm not a gypsy."

"Stay here," Laina said. She had never seen Conard so distressed, so serious. "I want you here. I thought I'd lost everything I used to love. My brother had lost his will to live, Lostport was no longer ours, and my dearest friend had fled rather than confess what he had done."

"I'm sorry," Conard said again.

"Stop that," Laina said. "You're here now. And you offered to do anything I asked, did you not? I might have a request for you."

Some of the worry eased from Conard's face as he narrowed his eyes. "You're going to make me regret I ever said that, I can just tell."

"Maybe," Laina said. "But it's not a selfish request. I would do it myself, if I weren't so easily recognized."

Conard slid across the pool until he was sitting beside Laina, their knees barely touching. "Do tell." The water rippled about his bare shoulders.

Laina hesitated for a long moment. Now that Conard was here, beside her, she was no longer certain she should go ahead with the plan. She liked even less the idea of mixing him up in anything dangerous. Still, she had promised Jairus she would do what she could, and anything involving Conard was more than she could have offered before. At last she took a slow breath of the sulfurous steam and said, "It's my father. He has some goat-headed notion that he can find Doran a magical cure from one of those far-off kingdoms. Only—"

"All of his ships are carefully inspected and

documented, right?" Conard said. "Do you want me to slip around the Whitish guard with my own ship?"

"No!" Laina grabbed Conard's hands again, suddenly frightened. "It's far too dangerous. You can't leave. Not when you've barely returned." With a great effort, she relaxed back against the stones rimming the hot pool. "No, I want to discourage my father's plans. He thinks he can use the wealth from Port Emerald to help Whitland win its war against Varrival, and from that purchase Lostport's independence."

"That's mad," Conard said. "Sorry, but Whitland would never agree to that."

Laina shrugged. "Remember how Harrow used to be an ambassador for Whitland? He thinks Whitland is just desperate enough to take Father's offer seriously. And Father trusts Harrow."

"Why do you want to stop them?" Conard asked. "Honestly, I would sail around the world for you if I could. Don't you want to keep Lostport safe?"

Laina bit her lip. "Not at the price of Varrival. I've met a few architects from Varrival, and a cartographer, and they think Whitland is out to destroy their land completely. One person isn't worth the lives of an entire kingdom." When Conard reached up to straighten a lock of her hair, she smiled faintly. "Besides, you just spent spans trying to get back to Lostport. Are you really so eager to leave again?"

Conard moved closer to Laina, until their shoulders were pressed together, creating a band of warmth against the chill night air. "I just want you to be happy again," he said. "If that means ensuring your father's scheme fails, I can do that."

"I am happy now," Laina said, meeting Conard's eyes with an unblinking gaze. She still could not believe he had returned.

"Remember when we found this place?" Conard said suddenly. The corner of his mouth was twitching. "It started raining, and I convinced you that we would be warmer if we took most of our clothes off and sat in the water."

"Sneaky little bastard."

"Well, I was right."

Laina grinned. "Then you told me to close my eyes. And I waited there forever and ever, squeezing my eyes shut and feeling stupid, because you were a complete wimp."

Conard laughed softly. "Any chance you'd like to replace that memory with something better?" He tightened his grip on Laina's hands. "Close your eyes."

Laina's heart was beating so loudly she was afraid Conard would hear. She did as he asked, trusting her weight to the water-slicked rocks. The chorus of cicadas and frogs rose louder than ever, masking any sound of movement that Conard made as he broke the stillness of the water.

Then she felt a warm pressure on her lips. Her own lips parted, and she leaned into Conard's kiss, tasting spices and honey on his tongue. He knelt before her, knees to either side of her own, body warm against hers. She reached up and dug her fingers through his hair, assuring herself that he was truly, truly there.

At last Conard released her. Only reluctantly did Laina relinquish her hold on him, and she opened her eyes in time to see him retreat hastily to the opposite side of the pool.

"I'm sorry. I don't know what I was thinking."

"I do," Laina whispered. She floated toward him and reached around his neck. Raising herself into Conard's lap, she kissed him again, this time soft as a whisper. "I want it, too."

Conard stroked her hair. "Sweet seducer, you have no

idea how many times I've dreamed of this."

Laina leaned against his chest, relishing his warmth and substantiality. "We have to tread carefully. Lostport's fate is sitting on a knife-edge right now. Any hint of scandal could mean its ruin."

"We'll run off," Conard said. "The gypsies I've been living with have traveled all over the Kinship Thrones; I'm sure they can introduce us to a few friends of theirs."

Laina tightened her arms around Conard. "I wish we could. But...you know how much Lostport means to me. I can't just abandon it. It is my duty to carry on my father's rule, and I would trust this land to no one else."

Conard kissed Laina's forehead. "In that case, I suppose we might just have to put our best efforts toward sabotaging the Port Emerald construction. How far along are they, anyway?"

"You haven't seen it yet?" Laina sat up and looked at Conard in surprise.

He grinned. "I just arrived at the midway camp earlier today. I told you what I was doing this morning, remember?"

Laina shook her head.

"Sneaking up that path behind your manor and looking to see if you were in your bedroom."

Laina giggled. "Of course. Well, go see the port before you start trying to wreck it. The place is fantastic. I'll look for you at the gypsy's camp when I next get the chance to ride there. Jairus and Swick—the two cartographers—will be there as well, and we can discuss our plans together."

"Is there any chance I could look for you earlier?" Conard asked slyly.

"No." Laina softened the denial with a hand against his cheek. "My father might actually kill you if he sees you again. It's not worth the risk."

"Speaking of your father," Conard said, "you ought to be getting home. I can accompany you partway, if you would like."

Laina wanted to spare Conard the trouble, but she had not forgotten her fear of riding the long, dark forest road alone. "I would love that."

As they stepped from the hot pools, steam rising from their skin, Conard threw a cloak around Laina's shoulders. She stood dripping as he fetched her dress and stepped into his boots, and then they picked their way back down the waterfall.

"I wish we could just stay here forever," Conard said when they reached the forest road.

Laina untied Feather's reins and guided the horse into pace behind her. "So do I."

\* \* \*

After walking Laina partway back to Lostport and then turning back to face a third weary trek along the forest road, Conard was nearly asleep on his feet by the time he stumbled into the gypsy camp. For the first stretch of the return journey, he had been worrying that his lantern would run out of oil and leave him stranded in the dark. Then exhaustion had overwhelmed him, and he had been unable to think of anything at all.

He was not even sure he recognized the tents in the darkness. Wending his way back toward the farthest reaches of the camp, he tried desperately to pick up some mark he recognized. Everything was so still. The fires had burned themselves to ash, and even the cicadas had ceased their chirruping. At last his lantern fell across the familiar peacock banner. Conard pried the flap of the closest tent free from its bindings, fell to his knees, and extinguished his

lamp.

"Conard?"

It was Grandfather's voice.

"Is that you? We were taking bets on whether you'd made a run for it."

Conard grunted.

"Where have you been, then? Still searching for your princess?"

"Found her," he muttered. "Then I gave her up again."

Grandfather said something in reply, but Conard was asleep before he could register the words. He had not even removed his boots.

## Chapter 11

In five minutes, I swear I will go out after her," Faolan said darkly.

"My lord, you've been saying that all night." Harrow gave Faolan's shoulder a squeeze. "Bring the cartographers in for questioning, if you must. I suspect Laina has merely gone for a brief ride down the forest road."

"Which she ought not to do!" Faolan surged to his feet and stomped down the hall to the front doors. Opening one a crack, he poked his nose into the fragrant night air and strained to see what wasn't there. "If she intended to stay out all night, she should damn well have told someone," he muttered. "And those blasted cartographers hardly count. More trouble than they're worth, the lot of them."

Harrow joined Faolan at the doorway. "Laina is a grown woman. Before Doran's accident, you used to trust her judgment. She can look after herself."

Faolan whirled on him. "And that was a *mistake!*" He wanted to shake Harrow, to burn down the town until someone could provide him with proper answers. Laina had been away since early this morning; when she had vanished into the stables, he had blithely assumed she wished to visit town once again.

He should have known better. This was Laina, after all. Sometimes Faolan could not understand how a daughter of his could have gone so badly astray. She had been far too spoiled as a child, and now rules meant nothing to her.

But what if something truly had gone wrong? What if one among the hordes of untrustworthy Whitish men had decided she would make an easy target, and had dragged her into the woods to have his way with her? The possibility was too dangerous to ignore.

"That does it," he said. "We have to go after her."

"And if she is in town?" Harrow said.

"We'll wake the cartographers and demand answers from them. If she is not with them, she must be on the road. Or—"

Grabbing his coat from the nearby chair, Faolan kicked the doors wide and strode onto the moon-washed lawn. A dark ribbon of clouds was churning across the sky; the starry veil of midnight blue was quickly turning to black.

"Oh, if she gets caught out in this—"

"She'll get wet, my lord," Harrow said firmly. "She can survive a little rain."

Just as they came to the end of the lawn, Faolan caught sight of a horse with a dark figure on its back making its way slowly up the winding path. Faolan could barely restrain himself from shouting to Laina; he could not decide whether he was furious or relieved.

With a soft clip-clop of hooves, Laina rode to the end of the road and pulled up her reins just before Faolan.

He reached for his daughter's hand and grasped it fiercely, reassuring himself that she was truly there. Her brown hair glistened in the moonlight, wet and bedraggled, and she wore a cloak Faolan had never seen before.

"Where have you been?" The words came out in a hoarse whisper. "Why did you not come home?"

"I'm home now, Father." Laina looked down, avoiding his eyes. "I'm sorry I kept you waiting. I was—detained."

Faolan nodded brusquely. Why was her hair wet? "Is it already raining down in the woods?"

"What?" Laina must have caught the direction of his gaze, because she tugged a finger through a sodden strand of hair. "Oh, not really, but I was caught in a—a brief shower."

Faolan nodded. "Come inside." He did not believe her. "I must return home," Harrow said quickly. "Until tomorrow."

"Thank you for waiting with me," Faolan said.

With a brusque nod, Harrow turned and started hurriedly down the winding road. His grand home was halfway between the town and the royal manor; Faolan hoped he would be able to reach shelter before the storm hit.

"I thought you had more sense than this," Faolan said as Laina dismounted. He took the reins and led the beast sharply toward the stable. "Time and time again, you convince me to trust you, yet in every instance you prove my faith misguided. Must I lock you in a cage?"

Laina hunched her shoulders defensively, hugging the cloak tighter than ever about her shoulders. "Father, I was just going for a ride. Nothing happened to me. I was careful."

He wrenched open the stable doors. "So careful that you could not manage to return before nightfall?" He handed the horse over to the drowsy stable-hand and turned back to Laina, arms folded. "I have decided to revoke your privileges of leaving the house," he said. "If your friends wish to visit you, they may join us at the manor."

"Father! I can't just sit inside! I'll go mad."

"It is high time you learned to tolerate responsibility," Faolan said sternly. "Most kings and queens must attend

their official business at all times. If they go outside their royal homes, it is merely for the sake of putting on a public show. Would you like that? I could marry you off to Prince Ronnick and send the pair of you to Whitland, to experience the true royal lifestyle. Trust me, it would not be to your liking."

"You would never do that," Laina said. "You need me to carry on your rule."

Faolan shrugged. "I am not convinced you would be suitable for the task."

"You're lying," Laina said fiercely. "You hate Whitland as much as I do! Why are you getting tangled up with them? First the port, then stupid Prince Ronnick, and now the war against Varrival. How can you do that? Whitland is our enemy! It always has been!"

"I would not use such a strong word," Faolan said. "We depend on them, after all."

They had reached the manor doors, one of which had shut of its own accord. When Faolan pulled it open once again, he felt the wind working against him. Just as he ushered Laina and her guards into the hall, Faolan felt the first blast of raindrops.

"You're trying to distract me," Faolan said abruptly, cutting off whatever Laina had just opened her mouth to say. "Whitland aside, you have endangered yourself more times than I am willing to allow. You will be confined to the house until I say otherwise."

\* \* \*

When Laina woke the next morning, she was not sure whether she had dreamed the whole previous night. Conard could not have truly met her in the forest, could he? He was still far away—dead or in hiding, she did not know

which.

Yawning hugely, she sat up and squinted about her room, which was grey in the early morning light. Raindrops were still pattering gently away at the roof.

There, draped over her chair, was the cloak Conard had given her. It had not been a dream.

Opening her door to go down to breakfast, Laina stopped short. Her brother's two guards were stationed outside her door, arms folded, expressions unusually stern.

"We're under orders," Nort said. "We're not to let you out of our sight until he dismisses us. That means you can't run off anywhere."

"Also means we're to watch you sleep," Barrik said with a sly grin. "Technically."

Laina scowled. "Leave me alone. At least the weather is rotten."

"Makes it almost a treat to stay indoors," Nort said, nodding.

"I'm going to see my father," Laina said. "Surely you don't have to follow me to his office?"

"Orders is orders, miss," Barrik said.

Stopping outside her father's office—it was empty— Laina felt again the ghost of Conard's kiss, his lips soft against hers. As irksome as her brother's guards were, seeing Conard again had been worth the trouble.

The hall was empty, but a hum of voices came from the dining room. When she pushed back the doors, Nort and Barrik at her back, a tumult of movement and noise assaulted her. No fewer than fifty people were crammed in the room, none familiar aside from her father.

Laina turned to leave, but her brother's guards blocked the way. Straightening, her father beckoned her over. She got a good look at the men as she pushed her way through the crowd; they had to be laborers and architects, though Laina could not guess what they were doing in the royal manor, nor what had upset them.

Settling in the chair beside her father, Laina said in a low voice, "What's going on? These men look like they're about to attack you, Father! Where's Harrow?"

"One question at a time, love," he said, his voice hoarse. "These people say they just arrived this morning, off a rivership from Dardensfell, to find that the shelter and supplies they had allegedly been promised were nowhere to be found. And, of course, the rain is coming down in torrents."

"What are you going to do with them?" she asked, alarmed.

"Right now I'm attempting to convince them not to raid my house. I just sent for Harrow."

Frowning, Laina stared at the men, who were jostling one another to approach her father. "You need to hire guards to secure our house," she said grimly. "I bet most of these laborers are acting under orders from Whitland, which could override any of your own."

"Where am I meant to find guards?" her father grumbled. "I don't trust anyone loitering about here!"

At last a giant of a man succeeded in shoving Nort and Barrik out of the way. Striding to the head of the table, he confronted Laina's father with his bare, heavily-muscled arms crossed.

"You summoned us here!" he barked. "We were promised food and lodging, in exchange for our labor. If you don't provide us with something to eat, we'll ransack your house."

Laina's father glanced at her and sighed. "How many more ships are coming south?"

"How should we know?" the man said. His voice was still loud and confrontational. "We just boarded our own

ship—under false pretenses!"

Her father nodded. "I apologize. There has clearly been a miscommunication. It is building supplies and provisions we are short on, not hands. We will provide for you as best we can, but I can do nothing to stop whatever false rumors are spurring everyone to flood into Lostport."

"They told us of unimaginable riches!" a short, scrawny man interjected. "Jewels larger than a man's fist."

"Those stories were true," Laina's father said. "But the jewels can only be harvested *after* the city is completed, in a year's time. And besides, we live at the edge of civilization. Food and supplies take many quarters to arrive here, and in the meantime, what good are jewels?"

"Do you want your house raided?" the big man yelled.

"No!" her father got stiffly to his feet and raised his hands in a gesture that was meant to calm the frenzied crowd. "Please listen."

The big man turned and hollered, "Shut up!"

Almost at once, the crowd fell silent.

Laina's father took a breath. "I will provide breakfast for the lot of you, if you can act civilly while in my home. However, I will also contact the architects about relocating you to the Port Emerald construction site as quickly as possible. There are provisions there, and if our imported supplies are not sufficient, you will have to learn to forage or fish as well."

"Haven't you heard?" the big man said. "The road washed out! It could be days before they repair it."

Laina shared a wary look with her father. "In that case," he said hesitantly, "I suppose we could put you up in the hall. But we do not have enough bedding for fifty-odd men. You will have to make do with whatever we find."

"Shall I inform the kitchens?" Laina asked softly.

"Yes, thank you," her father said. "If you can, send for

your cartographer friends. We need as much help here as we can muster."

Laina did not trust Barrik to follow her orders, so she sent Nort into town to fetch Swick and Jairus. In the kitchen, the fire had burned itself down to a smoldering pile of embers, and the usual warm aroma of baking bread and simmering stew had been replaced with the mildewed smell of rain. The entire kitchen staff was clustered about the door to the dining room, the cook Mylo perched on a stool, and all were listening carefully to the argument that still raged beyond.

"What are you all doing?" Laina asked. "Have you decided to take a holiday?"

Mylo harrumphed. "Those imbeciles plan on raiding our stores. We've been hiding food all morning."

Laina was impressed in spite of herself. She had not expected to see such initiative in her father's staff. "Well, that's excellent, but now we have to feed that mob. Something cheap, if possible. They might be here a while."

"So we heard," Mylo said grumpily. "Did you want to help, milady? We found a bag of flour that was starting to go rancid and maggoty; that would fill them up well enough, without wasting valuable stores."

While one of the scullery maids stoked the fire and Mylo began assembling odds and ends for an enormous cauldron of stew, Laina hurried about the kitchen fetching water, yeast, and the rancid flour for her bread. As a child, Laina had spent countless days lurking in the kitchen, listening to the gossip and helping out in any way she could. Along the way she had learned to cook any fish and wild vegetable that came into her hands, and to make the soft, brittle-crusted bread for which Mylo was famous.

"Is it true you vanished last night?" one of the kitchen boys asked mischievously.

Laina added a dash of salt to her bowl and began slowly incorporating the flour into the pillowed, half-risen bubble of starter yeast. "Not exactly," she said. "I was out for a ride yesterday, and did not return until late at night."

"But you went to Port Emerald, right?" the boy said.

"Just to the gypsy camp." Laina did not wish to elaborate further; Mylo and his crew were notorious for spreading gossip. A few of the younger kitchen workers had family down in Lostport, and they had the uncanny habit of knowing news long before it reached Laina's or her father's ears.

With a clatter, Mylo dumped a whole basket of dried peas into the cauldron. "I heard a story that you were spending plenty of a time with a young man—a foreigner, no less, one of the odd-looking ones from Varrival. Have you forgotten your father's promise to Prince Ronnick so quickly?"

He was just teasing, Laina knew, but she still wished she knew where the story had come from. "You should choose your sources more carefully," she said lightly. "Whatever my father might say, I have no intention of marrying that awful prince. And Jairus is just the assistant of the man I'm taking lessons from."

"Oh, of *course*," Mylo said, winking. "Here, try this." He squeezed between two barrels of sour ale and handed Laina a spoonful of broth.

She sipped it and blinked in surprise. "Is that a new spice?"

"Coriander. Newly imported from Chelt. In some circles, it's said to be an aphrodisiac."

"Oh, shut up."

Before long, Nort returned with Swick and Jairus, all three completely drenched.

"Thank goodness you're here," Laina said. "Did you

see that mess in the dining hall?"

Swick nodded, wiping his face and his grey hair with one sleeve in an attempt to dry it. "What do you expect us to do about it? We could fight them, if you'd like, but they would win."

Laina snorted. "That's helpful. No, my father just needs people to watch his back. He's afraid the men will turn violent. I say he needs to hire soldiers to guard the manor."

Jairus frowned at her. "He certainly needs protection. But where would those soldiers come from? Whitland. I have a suspicion that Whitland might have given its architects a different set of orders than your father might like."

"You think he's ordered the men to steal from Lostport?" Laina asked in a low voice.

"Among other things," Swick said. "Though I haven't been sitting in town and counting every new arrival, I have a bad feeling these foreign laborers now outnumber Lostporters. Which means that, given half a chance, they could stir up a fair bit of trouble."

Leaning toward Swick, Laina lowered her voice still further. "And what does that mean for the pair of you? You're both foreigners as well. Do you stand with Lostport?"

"As long as you remain opposed to Whitland," Jairus said. It sounded almost like a threat.

After a moment's discussion, Swick decided to join Laina's father in the dining hall while Jairus helped Laina in the kitchen. Laina could see Mylo casting pointed glances in their direction, but she ignored him for the moment.

The moment Nort and Barrik stepped away to assist Mylo, Jairus accosted Laina in a fierce whisper. "You should not go out on your own! It is hardly safe. I hope the mess today has demonstrated just how unruly these men are."

"How did you know about that?" Laina snapped.

"Your guard mentioned it. He says you have been confined to the house. Which is a good idea, I should think."

"I'm perfectly capable of taking care of myself!" Laina hissed. "You're no warrior. What makes it safer for you to travel the road than me? Unless you think all those men are just waiting for the chance to rape me." She punched the dough and folded it with unnecessary vehemence.

"It would not be unheard of," he said, frowning at the dough. "I am merely concerned for your safety. As is your father, and everyone else who knows you. You are acting in a way that disregards the reality of your situation."

"You mean because I've just ruined everything for Lostport?" Laina ripped the dough in half and pounded one of the lumps into a misshapen oval.

"No! I mean that you are a Lostporter surrounded by a sea of discontented Whitlanders; that you are one of the only women in this forsaken kingdom, and a beautiful one at that; and that, as the heir to the throne, you are too valuable to risk your life with such foolishness."

Laina was taken aback. "I can't rule. You know that. And I thought, just days ago, you were begging for my help. Would you rather I sit inside and darn socks while you and Swick risk yourselves for our plan?"

Jairus's eyes were bright with passion, though he managed to keep his voice low. "My lady, I cannot imagine you ever stooping so low as to darn a sock. But you are too intelligent to match yourself against these men in strength alone. That is a losing proposition."

"What would you have me do?" Finally satisfied with her loaf, Laina threw the bread onto the bench to proof and grabbed another hunk of dough.

"Scheme with me. The story of Port Emerald has grown out of hand. How might we stop men from coming to Lostport? And how could we persuade these new arrivals that the greater prize lies in returning home?"

Laina shook her head. "We have to deceive them. But how?"

Jairus did not respond. Though he clearly had never handled bread dough before, he watched Laina and stepped in to help as best he could. Mostly they worked in companionable silence, though every now and then one would offer a suggestion.

"The men are after jewels," Laina said softly. "But the jewels have no true value here. What if they found as many jewels as they needed and were then offered a chance at wealth back home, something they could not pass up?"

"Something like manor houses?"

"Or even purchased nobility," Laina said.

Before long, the cook began sending out small portions of food—fruits and bowls of hot porridge—to keep the men satisfied until the larger meal was finished. From the voices that drifted into the kitchen whenever the door was opened, Laina gathered that the men were still negotiating with her father.

"There are not enough jewels for this many men," Jairus said. "Your father, I believe, is counting on the wealth that will flow into this town from the establishment of a number of wealthy families. Large gemstones will turn up frequently enough, but unless they are split into worthless shards, they will not keep the men satisfied."

"Is it possible to manufacture convincing fakes?" Laina asked, quieter than ever.

Jairus hesitated a long time before responding. "Yes," he said at last. "Using my people's knowledge of glass-

working, it is possible."

## Chapter 12

It seemed like a year had passed by the time Katrien and Amadi finally sailed up to the docks marking the Twin Cities. The first ship, crossing north along the coast, had been spacious and well-appointed; as the only women aboard aside from the captain's wife, Katrien and Amadi had been assigned a luxurious suite of rooms. Even so, Amadi had fared badly on the rough seas, and had spent much of the first quarter asleep or vomiting. Katrien had been content to watch over Amadi, still tormented as she was by the abuse she had faced at the hands of the Whitish guards. The bruises on her wrists took days to fade, and every time she glimpsed them she felt dirty. Though Lostport had once driven her nearly mad with loneliness, it now felt like a welcome retreat from the political turmoil of Whitland.

The rivership they had moved to from there was far smaller and less comfortable. Given the choice between sharing the bunkroom with the men and sleeping in the hold, Katrien had chosen the hold, and they had laid their pallets down beside mountains of boxes and sacks of unknown merchandise. Amadi had been whiny and difficult throughout the first voyage—hardly reproachable, given her illness—but despite the shoddy accommodation on the second boat, she quickly cheered up once she recovered. Before long she was the favorite of the men aboard, always

flirting and teasing and, in her own sly way, winning information and favors from them.

"Do you see that, Amadi?" Katrien asked, beckoning the girl to the front rail of the rivership.

"Oh! It's a tower!"

Four towers were glinting in the afternoon sunlight, marking the heart of Dardensfell's capital.

"Indeed," Katrien said. "That is one of the Twin Cities. Here we will change to another ship, and erase any trace of our ever having traveled from Whitland."

"How much farther is Lostport from here?"

Katrien leaned on her elbows and gazed down the river beyond the approaching cities. "A very long way. Our voyage has barely begun." She wished she could join Faolan immediately. Even the quickest news took half a span to travel; anything could have changed since she and Amadi had left Whitland. Perhaps the project had been abandoned, or perhaps it was already complete. There was no way to know.

It was sunset when their ship finally made berth on the Darden side of the river. The rivership captain gave his Whitish recruits strict orders to reappear by noon the following day, and then turned to Katrien and Amadi.

"Are you continuing on with us?"

"I'm afraid not," Katrien said. "We have business here. Thank you for everything."

The man waved away her gratitude. "Do you have somewhere safe to spend the night? You're free to stay aboard until tomorrow, if that would be easier. These streets aren't the nicest after dark. Plenty of foreign river traffic flooding into the ports and causing trouble."

"We appreciate your concern," Katrien said. "But we really must be off."

Putting one hand on Amadi's shoulder, she led the girl

down the gangplank and onto the noisy dock. There were people of every race thronging the docks, some scrubbing algae from their rivership hulls, others trying to beg passage, and still others shouting and shoving their way through the crowd with crates of goods on their shoulders.

"Maybe we should have taken his offer," Amadi whispered, clinging to Katrien's arm. "Where are we supposed to spend the night? These men don't look very happy. I'm scared."

Katrien gave Amadi's shoulders a brief squeeze and then forced the girl to detach herself. "Where is the brave, impertinent young woman who charmed all those Whitish officers? These are men like any others. Appear weak, and they may take advantage of you. Hold your head high, and they will assume you have money and influence that indicate you are not worth crossing."

Immediately Amadi obeyed Katrien; her entire demeanor changed with her improved posture, and her expression grew solemn and intelligent.

"And have no fear. I know exactly where we can stay the night. I stopped here before, remember? This inn is of great repute, and the owner is wary enough of Whitland that he would not spread word of my presence even in the unlikely chance that he recognized me." She glanced up and down the riverside before ducking between two low-roofed buildings. "Besides, we won't be anywhere near these uncouth sailors."

Just two blocks from the water, the city changed noticeably. The land sloped up, giving the cobbled streets better drainage and a far better smell, and the cluster of dark, slumping warehouses, taverns, and brothels gave way to finer stone buildings with a careful eye for style. Even in the growing darkness, the lamplight revealed elegant white embellishments and carved doorways. As before, it struck

Katrien as odd that a kingdom of warring, nomadic horsemasters could be responsible for such a sophisticated city. It was as strange as if Lostport had decided to build a great walled city of stone in the midst of the rainforest.

Katrien had just spotted the main street leading directly away from the water when Amadi tugged at her sleeve. "Did you see that?" she whispered.

Katrien stopped and frowned in the direction Amadi pointed. It was a glass shop with a bulky brick chimney at the back, indicating the presence of a workshop behind the store. For a moment Katrien could make out nothing in the shadowy eaves of the storefront, but then she noticed three men standing just at the door. Two wore the unmistakable white uniforms of Whitish soldiers, and the third was a chestnut-skinned Varrilan.

"He just hit that man!" Amadi whispered.

Katrien took her arm and pulled her into the shadows of another building, where they could observe without being seen. "I don't have to remind you how dangerous these men can be."

"Your shop is not registered with the High Throne!" one of the soldiers barked. "This is an illegal operation."

"You are not customs officers," the Varrilan said furiously. "This is not your concern. My shop is located in *Dardensfell*, and as such, it is registered with the *Darden* throne. If the rules are changing, your king should have the decency to send word before deploying soldiers to harass civilians. Unless you have a different mission here?"

"We are on our way to assist in the construction of Port Emerald," the second soldier said. "But that does not prevent us from carrying out royal authority along the way."

"I can call the Darden guards on you," the Varrilan said.

The first guard slammed his fist into the Varrilan's nose so hard that Katrien heard the cartilage snap. Blood began dripping down the man's lip into his mouth; he spat at the guard, splattering his white uniform with red. Then he straightened and looked the guard in the eye, his shoulders squared proudly. "This is not your city. You have no authority over me."

"We can burn your Varos-damned shop to the ground. You and all your slimy rat-cousins can go back where you came from. We don't need bloody Varrilans breeding and robbing us and spreading their filth through all the holy kingdoms."

"Get off my doorstep," the Varrilan said in a low, threatening tone. "Or you'll wish you never set foot in Dardensfell."

Instead of retreating, the soldiers each grabbed one of the man's arms and thrust him against the wall. The shopkeeper tried to kick out at them, but his flailing feet seemed to make no impression. One of the soldiers kneed him in the stomach; when he doubled over, dropping to his knees, both soldiers took turns kicking him where he lay. The man did not cry out, though Katrien could tell from his labored breathing that he was in agony. Remaining motionless in the shadows, mute and unable to help, was the most difficult trial she had ever faced. Twice Amadi struggled against Katrien's grip as though wishing to fight off the soldiers herself, but Katrien wrapped both arms around her and held her fiercely.

At last the soldiers tired of their sport. Their uniforms were ruined beyond recall—one was spattered with blood all across the chest, and the other had a dirty hole in the knee from where he'd fallen. Standing and brushing themselves off, they turned down the street toward Katrien and Amadi and sauntered back down toward the docks

without a backward glance. If Katrien was any judge of men, these two would spend the night taking out the last of their pent-up rage on a pair of whores.

Once she judged it was safe, Katrien stepped from the shadows and approached the Varrilan, who lay curled on the ground as though he did not trust his joints to reassemble themselves in the correct arrangement if he dared move. Despite her former eagerness, Amadi hung back.

"Sir?" Katrien said quietly, kneeling before the man. "Can you hear me?"

He raised his head and peered at Katrien, blinking groggily. A line of blood, already drying, trailed from his nose to his chin, and one eyebrow was nearly lost beneath a darkening bruise. "Did you see that?" He sounded concerned.

"Yes." Katrien took the man's hand and helped him into a sitting position. "I am sorry I could not have helped. I have already tried matching my strength against a Whitish soldier, and it proved itself utterly futile."

He nodded. "It was brave of you to stay and watch, and intelligent to remain hidden. Yet—your dress looks Whitish. Why would a pair of Whitish women aid a Varrilan?"

"Those soldiers had no grounds to harass you," Katrien said. "You were bold to counter them."

"Or foolish." Disregarding Katrien's offered hand, the shopkeeper clambered to his feet and clutched the shop door. "Could I interest you in a spot of tea?"

"Thank you," Katrien said. She was now worried that her years in Whitland had left her ignorant of the greater goings-on in the Kinship Thrones; perhaps this man could give her a better idea of what to expect when she reached Lostport. "Amadi, come inside!" Hesitantly the girl approached, hands behind her back. Katrien wondered if she was wary of the first Varrilan she had ever met, or ashamed for having witnessed the beating without offering help.

Once Katrien and Amadi were seated about one of the shop tables, now cleared of its delicate glass lamp-globes and figurines, the Varrilan poured three mugs of tea and joined them.

"What is your name, if you don't mind my asking?" Katrien asked, cupping the mug between her palms. "I am Katrien, and my maidservant is Amadi."

"I am Tenori," he said. "I have been living in Dardensfell for twenty-five years now, and it galls me to be treated as a foreigner."

"Why are the Whitish soldiers behaving so cruelly?" Katrien asked. "I always thought they were unreasonable in some ways, but I have never seen them openly abuse a civilian."

"They grow bolder by the year," Tenori said grimly. "But it is worse than ever just now. How much have you heard of Whitland's plans?"

"Not enough, clearly," Katrien said. "I just arrived here from Whitland; you would think I'd know more. But—" she sighed and, after a moment's deliberation, decided to tell this man the truth. "Escaped Whitland would be more accurate. We were placed under house arrest some spans ago, and found ourselves afraid for our lives. I am the wife of Faolan, King of Lostport, you see, and he has recently become a threat to Whitland. Supposedly he is after independence."

"Your majesty!" Tenori stood quickly and clasped his fists across his chest. "It is an honor!" He resumed his seat and toyed with his mug. "Not all Varrilans would say so, of course. Whitland has recently begun sending large shipfuls of soldiers to Lostport; allegedly they are meant to help build this new Port Emerald, but there are rumors that High King Luistan is merely using it as a training regimen. The men will put in half a year's work at the port and come out fit and disciplined and ready to march to war."

Katrien clutched her mug tighter. "War with whom? Not Lostport, surely?"

"No, don't worry. Your homeland is safe. King Luistan intends to conquer Varrival. After we have been independent for thousands of years, he thinks he can crush us into submission."

"That's terrible!" Katrien said. "Whitland does not need any more power than it already has. That's the trouble—Whitish men grow up believing they are the most privileged, intelligent, morally correct members of the most powerful kingdom in the Kingship Thrones, and as soon as they are converted to soldiers, they feel justified in imposing their will however they see fit."

"And what are we meant to do about it?" Tenori said darkly. "You were put under house arrest, and I could have been killed just minutes ago. We have no power, do we? If I speak up, if I continue to live here and sell my Varrilan glass, something will happen. I am no longer free to do as I wish."

Katrien thought for a moment. "Faolan is in danger too, in that case," she said. "He thinks the Whitish soldiers are there to help, when they are solely using his project for their own means. I wish there was some way we could build Port Emerald without involving Whitland."

"I bet there are lots of people who don't like Whitland," Amadi said. Katrien and Tenori looked at her in surprise. "No one from Varrival does, right? And there are probably plenty of people who the soldiers have offended in Dardensfell. Can we ask them to come help?"

"That's a lot to ask of someone," Katrien said. "What sort of man would willingly abandon his home for a fanciful project that does not concern them in any way?"

"You might be surprised." Tenori took a long draught of his tea and watched Katrien with a calculating gaze. "Any Varrilan living in Dardensfell will be in the same situation as me. Before long, Dardens might be encouraged to report our presence to the Whitish army. We will be rooted out like weeds."

"How many of you are there?" Katrien asked.

"More than you might expect. Here in the Twin Cities, no less than five hundred. And there are more living elsewhere in Dardensfell. We mostly keep to ourselves, but I saw my people assemble in force when the Varrilan royal vessel came sailing past the Twin Cities a few years back."

"But how many would be willing to leave?"

Tenori shook his head. "At this moment, only unmarried young men are likely to join us. But in half a year's time, I would not be surprised if Varrilans were clamoring for the chance to leave Dardensfell. The promise of wealth and status in Port Emerald are temptation enough for many."

"What are we going to do, then?" Amadi said. "Surely you're not going to wait half a year?"

Katrien looked at Tenori. "No. We can take on any Varrilans who are willing to join us here, and afterward we will..." Here her plan failed her.

"How are you intending to travel south, my lady?" Tenori asked.

"Oh, I—" Katrien stopped short. If she wanted to bring a full force of Varrilan architects along with her, she could hardly find space on a simple merchant ship. "I suppose we will have to go by land. Unless you know someone who owns a ship."

"No, hardly." Tenori gave Katrien a fleeting smile, which looked sinister with the streak of blood still crusted against his chin. "If you ladies are not opposed to the idea, I suggest we ride south. There are more than enough Darden horsemen willing to stir up a bit of trouble. They are less friendly to Whitland than you might expect, and if you mention wealth and conflict, they will jump at the offer."

"How does that sound, Amadi?" Katrien asked. "Would you be opposed to horse-riding?"

"Only if you are, my lady," Amadi said pertly.

Katrien nodded at Tenori. "Then it is decided. You are certain you do not mind abandoning your home?"

"At this rate, I will not be welcome in the Twin Cities much longer. This was not the first run-in I have had with Whitish soldiers. The last time I received a shipment of glass from Varrival, I was harassed so much at the riverfront that I ended up paying double just to keep the soldiers from dumping my wares in the water."

In the end, Tenori invited Katrien and Amadi to sleep on his couch in the hopes of saving the little money they had left. "You will need to spend it wisely, if you hope to equip yourselves for a cross-country journey."

As soon as the sun rose the following morning, all three began readying themselves for a day in the city. First they would visit the Varrilan neighborhood at the rear of the Darden side, then they would see about arranging horses and an escort for the entire trip south, and finally they would begin assembling supplies.

"How much longer do we get to stay here?" Amadi asked as they headed out the door. The city looked much different in the daylight—the stone structures appeared fresh and bright, and the windows glinted in the hazy

sunlight.

"Why?" Katrien said. "Eager to stay in the Twin Cities? As cities go, they are the nicest I have ever seen."

"I was just curious," Amadi said innocently. "I don't know if I'll like Lostport, since it's so uncivilized and remote, but I do like it here."

"Sorry to disappoint you, but you are not allowed to stay here without my supervision. I would never feel right if I abandoned you."

Tenori said, "We will leave as soon as the other men are prepared to. Hopefully within the quarter."

"We will have plenty of time to explore the Twin Cities," Katrien added. "I cannot imagine anyone leaving their homes on such little notice." On reflection, she realized that she had done this twice now, but it had not been a comfortable experience either time.

It was a longer walk than Katrien had expected to reach the Varrilan neighborhood. After many spans confined to her house and sitting aboard a ship, her stamina was pitiful; she was out of breath and sweating by the time they reached the top of the hill where the wealthiest buildings in the Twin Cities were perched, dwarfed by the Darden palace and the great cathedral. The sides of her feet quickly succumbed to blisters as they continued to the farthest reaches of the city.

At one point, Katrien and Amadi had to pause when the strap on Amadi's shoe broke loose.

"I apologize," Tenori said, slowing. "I should have realized your clothes were not meant for walking. We will find you proper riding outfits as soon as we have spoken to the Varrilans."

Katrien nodded, feeling somewhat dazed. For the first time she realized what she had agreed to. When she had traveled between Lostport and Whitland in the past, she had ridden aboard ships the entire way. She had never mounted a horse in her life, nor slept outdoors, as this journey would surely require. It would be a trial for her, beyond anything she could prepare herself for. But no matter the circumstances, she would complete the journey. She had no choice. Besides, Faolan needed her; it was likely he had no idea of the extent to which Whitland was using him before its planned betrayal. She just hoped Amadi would be up for the challenge.

At long last, they drew in sight of the Varrilan neighborhood. Katrien recognized it at once for what it was—more than half of the people crowding the streets were dark-skinned, with a few half-Varrilans among them, and the open storefronts were crowded with glass objects.

"Why do you not live in the Varrilan neighborhood?" Katrien asked.

Tenori turned and gave her a lopsided smile. "Coming from anyone else, I would take that as an insult. Do you see how remote this neighborhood is? And how shabby? No one but Varrilans and others living in these impoverished parts visit the shops. It is not a proud image of Varrival; it is more of a slum, a refuge for those who tried their luck in Dardensfell and failed."

"Why didn't you fail?" Amadi asked. "Your shop is beautiful, and you're in the richest part of the city. How come you succeeded when so many didn't?"

"Not every glass craftsman is a *good* craftsman," Tenori said. "Even if he is Varrilan. And even then, not every talented craftsman is a good businessman. I played to the right powers, offered free window installations to a few of the more influential families, and became so indispensable that the most logical step was to install me directly beneath those influential families."

"And still the Whitish soldiers think they can harass

you." Katrien was nonplussed. Where would the Kinship Thrones be without Varrilan glass? Did Whitland think it could stamp out an entire race of people and escape the consequences of their vanished trade?

"Here we are," Tenori said, stopping in front of one of the first buildings. No one was paying him any attention, since he was obviously Varrilan, though Katrien could tell that the cut of his clothing was far finer than anything she could find in this neighborhood. "Allow me to do the speaking. I cannot guess how you will be received."

Though nondescript from the outside, the interior of the building was unlike anything Katrien had ever seen. The floors were carpeted in rich red and yellow fabric, the walls similarly decorated, and nearly thirty people were clustered about short tables, sitting cross-legged on cushions as they sipped drinks in tall vessels of brightly-colored glass.

"Where are the chairs?" Amadi whispered somewhat impertinently.

Tenori did not seem to mind the question. "Remember, Varrival is a desert nation. We do not have wood to spare for luxuries like chairs. Our tables are usually crafted from glass, and we sit upon cushions spun from imported silk or woven from sheep's-wool harvested in the borderlands."

"Save your observations for later," Katrien said softly. She did not want Amadi to speak out of turn and spoil their chances of working with these people.

"This is our meeting-house," Tenori added quietly, "where new arrivals can find community support and food until they are established, and where members of the Varrilan neighborhood meet to exchange news and gossip."

Weaving his way deftly between the cushions, Tenori made his way directly to a man at the back of the room who was busy with a stack of papers. Katrien kept her eyes on Tenori's shoulders, conscious of the stares that followed her. She wondered if they were the first Whitlanders ever to enter this building.

"Greetings," Tenori said, kneeling beside the man with the papers. Katrien felt awkward looming over them, so she gingerly took a seat beside Tenori, hoping Amadi would follow suit. To her relief, the girl knelt just beside her, lips pressed together.

Looking up, the man surveyed them through narrowed eyes. "It has been several spans since you last paid us a visit," he commented. "Business has been going well, I presume?"

Tenori nodded sharply. "Until yesterday, that is. The Whitish soldiers are growing more reckless."

The man suddenly switched to the Varrilan tongue. Uttering a swift string of smooth, undecipherable words, he cast sidelong glances at Katrien and Amadi, who watched him attentively as though they could understand him. Tenori replied in equally swift Varrilan, though his speech continued for much longer. Katrien hoped he was explaining the presence of herself and Amadi; she wished she could add a few words to recommend herself, but she would undoubtedly sound foolish. Instead she folded her hands in her lap and admired the smooth make of the glass table, upon which rested three woven reed mats.

After a few more rapid remarks from the unfamiliar man, he switched back to Whitish. "My apologies," he said. "Tenori says you are the wife of King Faolan of Lostport, and that you have escaped house arrest and abuse in Whitland. He also tells me that you stepped forward to help after he was assaulted by Whitish soldiers last night. I am much disposed to sympathize with you, my lady."

Katrien inclined her head gratefully.

"But why have you come here to the Varrilan

neighborhood? Surely we cannot help you return to your husband."

"No, sir," Katrien said. "I am afraid Whitland has duped and manipulated him into allowing their full military force to occupy Lostport through their involvement with the Port Emerald project, and I would like to do away with the Whitish troops."

"Do you mean to fight them?" the man asked wryly.

"No! Certainly not." Katrien glanced at Tenori. "But Tenori has expressed concern over Whitland's recent treatment of the Varrilans living here, and has told me he intends to leave the Twin Cities. If enough Varrilans and Dardens were willing to accompany me to Lostport, we could make the Whitish soldiers unnecessary. If my husband can build Port Emerald without Whitish support, he will be freed from the military presence and unburdened by their duplicity."

"You believe you can convince enough people to leave their homes here that Whitland's help will be rendered useless?"

"Yes," Tenori interjected. "I have three other Varrilan neighbors who have been treated just as poorly as I, and they would gladly remove their families to a safer place. And if I know the Dardens at all, many horse-masters would gladly accept the chance to make a stand against Whitland. Are there any within this community who would join us?"

Staring sideways at Katrien, the Varrilan scratched at his beardless chin. "Perchance. I would not willingly leave Dardensfell, but it is true that many here are dissatisfied with the opportunities they have found in the Twin Cities. If they were given honorable work and the chance at wealth and a good home, they might well be tempted away from here."

Tenori nodded. "As I suspected. Will you help spread the word?"

"Certainly. First, though, I will conduct a small test."

Stiffly the man got to his feet and addressed the room. "Friends!" Immediately all eyes were upon him. Clearly the occupants of his tea-house had already been listening to the quiet conversation, trying to glean what they could about the newcomers. "This is the queen of Lostport seated before us. She invites you to help with the construction of Port Emerald so Whitland can no longer remain involved. Who would go with her?"

"When do you leave?" a tall, broad-shouldered man called.

"As soon as I can," Katrien said. "In ten days, if possible."

"I go," a young man said in oddly-accented Whitish. "My brother also."

"Lostport is a backward place," a round-faced woman said, folding her arms. "If I wanted to travel south, I would return to Varrival."

"My family never has enough to eat here," a young woman said. "If my husband agreed, I would gladly join you."

Katrien had not expected such a positive response. For the first time, she saw an inkling of hope. Perhaps she would not always have to live under the unsettled rule of Whitland. "Thank you," she said, locking her fingers together. "I have to warn you, though, that Lostport is indeed a backward place in many ways. It does not have the comforts of a proper city, and the rains can be dramatic and unsettling. Though—" she looked at the young woman who had spoken before "—there is no shortage of food. You can live off the bounty of the forest and the ocean if you wish; no one goes hungry."

The woman gave her a faint smile and told the shopowner something in Varrilan. He laughed.

"That is decided, then," the shop-owner said. "I will assemble anyone who is interested ten days hence. You and Tenori can look for us here, if you wish."

"Thank you," Katrien said. "A thousand times, thank you. I will be forever in your debt."

The man gave her a funny sideways look. "Oh, and Tenori—" Here he switched back to Varrilan.

"What did he say?" Katrien whispered as she followed Tenori and Amadi from the meeting-house.

Tenori glanced back over his shoulder at the people who were beginning to settle back to their business. "He says there is a room for us here, if my home becomes unsafe."

## Chapter 13

Eight long, cloudless days passed, the sun beating down relentlessly on Doran and his company, the desert stretching into infinity. Sometimes his guards would shoot at lizards and rabbits with strange arrows fletched not with feathers but with some sort of fronded plant; otherwise they simply walked in silence, alert and tireless.

When Doran saw the first glimpse of the coast, wreathed in fog and dull gray in the distance, he thought it was nothing more than another damnable mirage. He scrubbed sand from his eyes and blinked a few times, but the gray line persisted.

The line of ocean vanished a few times as they approached, hidden beneath the smooth yellow flanks of dunes, but always it reappeared, hardly growing any closer. They camped in the barren wasteland once more, and Nejeela told him that they would reach the coast before noon the following day.

"Thank the gods!" Doran groaned.

"What?" Nejeela teased. "Are you tired of our company?"

"Of course not," Doran said, his face feeling a bit hot. "But this blasted desert is going to drive me mad before long. How do you *stand* it?"

"We almost never need to," Nejeela said. "No one really lives in the desert—even the nomads usually spend

their time closer to the grasslands up north. The land around the great mountain is green and lush and beautiful. You should come see it for yourself someday."

"I'll try," Doran said. He would miss Nejeela when they said their farewells, though he knew it was useless to say as much. He was a cripple—he had nothing to offer her.

As they continued plodding along the next day, his escort seemed quieter than usual. A port city rose into view as soon as they passed over the final dune, similar to the one they had started at aside from the surprising number of tall-masted ships anchored in its crescent-shaped port.

"The southern seas are wracked with storms," Nejeela said when she noticed Doran staring. "This is where sailors shelter if a storm is coming. They mostly see Cheltish ships here, though a few Itrean ships sometimes travel this way."

Doran looked at her in surprise. "I thought they were a bit more cautious than that."

"Trade with Itrea may be illegal, but then so is trade with pirates, which happens often enough," Nejeela said with a smile. "The goods they bring from Itrea are far too valuable to turn away."

As they drew closer to the port, Doran could see it was a bustling harbor indeed. One long dock stretched out into the water, and along it a steady stream of people milled about, unloading cargo and examining their ships.

"Does this mean a storm is coming?" Doran asked, eyeing the cloudless western horizon. Faint wisps of clouds trailed on the air behind them, but nothing that resembled a storm.

It was the translator, Koresh, who answered him this time. "Tomorrow. It takes a full twelve days to sail south to our capital, and none want to risk it. This town will be packed with sailors by the end of the quarter."

"But we don't need to worry about that?"

The translator gave him a half-shrug. "We leave you here. It is up to your Cheltish escort to decide if they brave the storm."

"Don't scare him," Nejeela reprimanded. "The storms are much worse to the south. It has to do with the warm winds coming up from the tropics, I think. You should be fine when you sail north."

Doran nodded, hating the pity in her tone. Did she not realize he had been a sailor himself, as accustomed to ships as any merchant? "And what about you?" He tried to banish those thoughts. "How are you going to return home?"

"We wait until the storm passes, and then we join the next merchant ship south," Koresh said flatly.

With Nejeela's look of pity seared into his vision, Doran was grateful to arrive in the bustling town at last. Almost at once, their party was descended upon by a group of colorful merchants, all wearing breezy white shirts topped with multicolored tunics and plumed hats.

"Prince Doran!" called the man in front, an older gentleman with curly black hair down to his shoulders. "We are honored to welcome you aboard the *Fair Fortune*. I hope your travels have gone well?"

"Yes, thank you, milord," Doran said.

He wished he could dismount and greet the man properly; instead he felt awkward as he towered over his Varrilan escort and the new Cheltish arrivals alike. As his Varrilan escort unpacked and handed over his belongings—most of them caked in sand—to the Cheltish sailors, Doran sat in silence and wished himself invisible. At last the curly-haired sailor wished the Varrilans a safe journey and helped lift Doran from his horse.

"Take care," Nejeela told him, clasping his hand.

Doran did not feel altogether charitable toward her after she had revealed that pity, nothing more, was the true reason for her companionship, so he merely said, "You too," trying his best to summon up a smile.

"There's talk of a storm on its way," the curly-haired sailor said. "So we'd best get under way before sundown. If we sail until sunset, we might make it to a harbor where we can wait out the worst of the wind."

"Great," Doran said. "The sooner we can leave this bloody desert, the better."

The sailor chuckled. "I'm of the same opinion myself. I've got the highest respect for the Varrilans, but I don't know how they can stand living like this."

"Apparently their major cities are a lot greener," Doran said. "What was your name, by the way?"

The sailor puffed up his chest fractionally at that. "Captain Ardenforth at your service, my prince." He gave a stately bow.

It was a relief to return to the sea after endless days of passing through the featureless desert. As monotonous as the waves could seem, at least they were moving, and at all times a line of land hovered in the eastern horizon.

As the storm began to pick up, Captain Ardenforth insisted that Doran take shelter below. Deprived of his horse, Doran asked the deckhands to set him on his bed, wondering what would happen if the ship sank.

The rocking of the ship soon made him abandon the letter he was trying to write to Laina, so he lay down and tried to think about the new opportunities that awaited him in Chelt. To his surprise, he soon fell asleep, and when he woke the sea was calm.

The morning was clear and still, so the deckhands were easily persuaded to bring Doran onto the deck, a blanket draped over his shoulders against the morning chill. The sky was a delicate blue, the last shreds of cloud burning off as the sun graced the horizon, and the deck smelled clean and briny from last night's rain.

\* \* \*

Seven days later, the spires and arches of Torrein rose in the distance. Though Doran had never seen it before, he had read of this elegant city, southernmost in Chelt and built to welcome the warm sea air.

He tried not to think of Nejeela as their captain ordered the sails reefed for the approach, and then folded away altogether. Of course she pitied him. If he wanted to stay sane, he needed to expect that wherever he went. He couldn't let it surprise him.

Drawing closer, Doran realized that a surprisingly formidable crowd had gathered on the docks to greet their ship. They must know he was on board.

Grimacing, he lifted the blanket from his shoulders and folded it away, straightening his back so he could face the crowd with as much dignity as he could muster from a sitting position.

"We have a litter ready for you, majesty," Captain Ardenforth said from behind Doran as the ship slid gently into place at the docks. Deckhands all along the ship threw ropes to a row of waiting boys, who lashed the ship into place with nimble hands.

"I appreciate it," Doran said. He just hoped they could maneuver him onto it without the crowd seeing how useless he really was.

As the crowd sent up a cheer, two of the deckhands lifted him and transferred him to the litter, which was thankfully already waiting on the ship. Then, in a dizzying motion, they lifted his litter onto their shoulders and carried him down the sloping gangplank. Doran tried not to look at

the water far below, at the angle of descent that nearly had him tumbling headfirst onto the weathered planks of the dock.

Then they were safely down, and he was able to draw back the curtains and wave to the crowd, which cheered as though he was their own king.

"Long live King Doran!" a few voices rang out.

It was all very flattering, though Doran dreaded the day when he revealed that he could never take his father's throne.

The crowds began to thin out as they climbed the sloping streets through town, until only the occasional passerby raised a hand to greet the king. From this vantage point, Doran was able to admire the harbor stretching out beneath them, the domes and spires and arches sweeping high above the buildings that encircled the waterfront.

At the very top of the rise, they reached a white stone building with balconies arcing away toward the sea from every west-facing room, different levels layered against one another like shells clinging to a rock.

He felt a spasm of dread at the idea that all of these levels might be separated by stairs, that he would never have the freedom to make his way through the place unaided. Yet when the two sailors delivered his litter to the front door, he was greeted by two men in crisp uniforms pushing a wheeled wicker chair, and beyond he could see that the floor sloped naturally between rooms inside the manor.

"You'll love it here, I bet," one of the sailors remarked as they transferred him to the wheeled chair. He was trying to crane his neck around the corner to get a good look at the gleaming white walls and vast spaces within.

"Thank you very much," Doran said, giving each of the men his best attempt at a smile. "Please give your captain my regards."

The sailors bowed and retreated, their backs receding quickly as they picked up momentum on their way down the slope.

Then Doran was left alone with his new household.

"Whose home is this?" he asked, running a hand over the wheels of his new chair. "I would hate to be an inconvenient guest."

"It's no one's, milord," one of the butlers said. "King Luistan uses it when he makes state visits. Otherwise, he keeps a household running so he can entertain diplomats and royal visitors whenever they come to Torrein."

"That's a relief, then," Doran said. He had been given precious little information regarding the arrangements his father had come to, and had half-expected to find himself dead in the middle of the desert due to a miscommunication.

"Are you really a king, milord?" the butler asked, squinting at Doran. He was young and still awkwardly built, as though his body hadn't quite grown into its frame yet.

"Not a king, an heir," Doran said heavily.

"Ah. It's just, I've never heard a king say 'thank you' before."

"Well, prepare to be surprised," Doran said drily, while the older butler gave his younger companion a dour look. "Would you mind giving me a tour?"

"Certainly," the older butler said when the younger man opened his mouth. "Please, allow me." He took the handles at the back of the chair—Doran lifted his hands quickly away from the wheels and rested them in his lap as the butler started through the spacious entryway.

The house was not built like any Doran had seen before. Instead of a grand hall for entertaining, it simply had the entrance hall, shaped like an uneven circle with a high ceiling and rooms leading off in every direction. Branching off from the same large space lay the dining hall, much smaller than any Doran was used to and yet still grand, with its arched windows and white stone walls. This room was separated from the entrance hall by a sloping floor, and the next room away from this had a wooden ramp propped over the stairs. Clearly some effort had gone into preparing for Doran's stay.

There were two great bedrooms leading away from the main hall—Doran immediately took a liking to the one closest to the dining room, as it afforded views back over the town—and a great library behind these, with a much smaller window facing north to the rolling hill country. Doran tried not to betray his immediate excitement when he saw the library. His own father had never owned a proper collection of books, since it was so difficult to get them sent to Lostport; he had read every volume they owned, even the tedious ones, at least five times over, and he hungered for more.

The tour concluded in a great bathroom with a marble tub large enough to fit three. Though the house was much smaller than his own, it displayed luxury on a scale he had never encountered before.

"Ah, here's your things," the young butler said, wheeling Doran backward out of the bathroom while he was still trying to take in the vast array of colored soaps and unguents on the shelves. Three more sailors had appeared lugging his bags, which they deposited in the doorway before taking off.

"You don't have much stuff, either," the butler commented. "Were you disinherited or something?"

Doran choked, and it was a moment before he realized he was laughing. "No, of course not. We just spent ten days walking across the desert, or I would have brought my full collection of books and clothes."

"I deeply apologize for Fabrian's behavior," the older butler said. "It has been a while since we last hosted a guest, and he is very new."

"No, I don't mind," Doran said. In truth, he was grateful for the young man's honesty. It appeared that royals here in Chelt did not associate much with commoners; if Doran was surrounded by servants and townsfolk tiptoeing around him, he would soon go mad. "And what time are meals taken here?" He wanted a chance to start poring over his new collection of books uninterrupted, and did not wish the formalities of dining to interrupt him.

"That is entirely your decision," the older butler said pompously. "We live to serve."

Doran sighed. "What does the rest of Chelt do? I think I should follow their customs while I remain here, don't you?"

Between them, the butlers explained that they ate a small breakfast whenever the lord of the household woke, an enormous meal shortly after midday, and a small evening supper—usually soup.

"That will suit me just fine," Doran said. "And now, could you please take me to my room?"

"I'll send a servant to help you unpack," the older butler said.

"That won't be necessary," Doran said quickly. How many servants did this household have? "I'll call on you if I need assistance."

"There is a bell in your room, milord," the older butler said. "If you ever wish for us to come, it hangs by the door."

"Thank you," Doran said. "And what was your name?" "Duffrey, milord. Aleric Duffrey."

The two butlers bowed on their way out, the younger man—Fabrian, that was his name—somewhat belatedly.

Once he was alone in his room, Doran immediately put his hands on the wheels of his chair and tried shoving it forward. It did move, albeit slowly, and he blamed his weak arms for that. The wooden wheels were not comfortable to hold—they bit at his palms, leaving deep indents from the effort—yet he managed to maneuver himself to the bedside, where he believed he would be able to get himself into bed. It was a small triumph, yet it was the most independence he had felt since his accident.

He took great pleasure in unpacking his suitcases by himself, wheeling himself from one end of the room to the other as he filled the shelves with clothes and books. He was grateful for the lack of drawers—he doubted he could have managed them alone if they gave even the least resistance—and he enjoyed the way the room took on a more homely look once it was filled with his belongings.

When the suitcases were shoved into the corner by the door and everything was arranged to Doran's satisfaction, he wheeled himself over to the windows, which ran from floor to ceiling along the entire curving wall that faced the sea. A door led out to one of the balconies he had seen at his first approach, and he rolled himself onto the curving outdoor space, relishing in the wind and the smell of the sea.

\* \* \*

Five days after the rains had begun, Faolan's home was an utter disaster. Most of the new arrivals from Whitland were still camped out in his entrance hall, and the entire manor was beginning to reek of sweat and mildew. Fifty pairs of boots were tracking mud across the white marble floors

many times a day, and though he had not gotten the chance to do a proper inventory, he was convinced several of his possessions had gone missing. In particular, a decorative sword that used to hang on the right wall of the entrance hallway had vanished without a trace.

At least Laina was keeping herself busy assisting the kitchen staff. With five times the usual mouths to feed, she and her two foreign friends were needed every waking hour of the day. Faolan had expected his daughter to whine and cause trouble while she was trapped indoors, but instead she was acting the obedient daughter he had always wished for.

A small part of him wished she would act up again. He missed her spirit.

"The dockmaster predicts the rains will ease tomorrow," Harrow said, coming up behind him. Faolan realized he had been standing at the top of the stairs for ages, staring disconsolately down at the chaos below.

"And what then?" Faolan said grimly. "Will my problems vanish with the clouds? No, these Whitlanders are here to stay. Whatever we might persuade them to believe, we are desperately short on supplies. The road is washed out, and what little news has made it through tells me there is not enough stone for another foundation. We are stalled with hardly anything to show for our troubles."

"Have you sent for more stone?"

"You know I have!" Faolan folded his arms in irritation. "But it takes a long time for anything to make it down that blasted river. Except Whitish troops, apparently! I wish Katrien was here. She always knew how to placate people."

"Ask your daughter if she has any ideas," Harrow said calmly. "She is more intelligent than you might realize."

Faolan wished Harrow would share in his frustration.

"I know she's bright. But I don't want to encourage her! Oh, fine. I'll speak to her now."

Gripping the rail, Faolan stomped down the stairs, barely managing to regain his composure in time to face the builders. Many of the men were drinking sour ale or eating boiled potatoes whole, lazing around with no concern for their host. Hardly any looked Faolan's way when he approached. Without greeting any of the men, Faolan sidled around the back of the hall and through the dining room until he reached the kitchen. As he had expected, Laina sat in what had become her customary chair beside the door, this time peeling turnips and tossing them into a nearby canvas sack. He had the feeling she was listening in on everything that went on next door.

"Good afternoon, Father," Laina said complacently, sparing Faolan a brief smile. "Any news?"

"What sort of news do you want to hear?" he asked dully. "More troops are on their way, I assume. And Harrow says the rains are meant to cease tomorrow."

"What then?" Though Laina did not cease her relentless peeling, he could tell she was paying close attention.

Faolan shook his head. "I was hoping you might give me an answer to that. By all the gods of sin, how are we supposed to be rid of these builders?"

"Give them work," Laina said. "It doesn't have to be construction work."

The immediacy of her answer suggested that she had spent many of her kitchen-work hours in thought.

"Send a scouting crew first. They can sort out a good place for the men to camp." Laina brushed a stray hair off her cheek with one wrist. "Then hire a Lostporter who knows the forest back to front, and give him a crew of men to help fish and gather food. That way, no one will have

grounds to complain that they're inadequately fed or sheltered."

Faolan was impressed. "And if the stones do not arrive? What will you have the men do then?"

"Go home," Laina said. "If the materials don't show up soon, winter is going to ruin Port Emerald anyway."

She was right, Faolan had to admit. As much as he wished to pretend otherwise, he knew this project balanced on a very delicate set of scales. Tip it too far in one direction, and the whole endeavor would collapse. "I should have sought your advice sooner," he said. "You are truly becoming an admirable young woman." He gave Laina's shoulder a brief squeeze.

\* \* \*

After her father left the kitchen, Laina set aside her peeling knife and let the half-naked turnip rest in her lap. She did not know whether to be hurt or pleased by his remark. Without Doran around, Laina could see more vividly than ever that she was as much a disappointment as her brother. Her father had wanted a powerful son and an obedient daughter, and had gotten neither.

Laina glared at the turnip, digging her fingernail into one of the triangular bulges where a root had begun to sprout. If she was to sit indoors and dream up strategy for days on end, she would wither and go mad. Yet it would please her father.

A movement in the corner of the kitchen drew her eye. Jairus and Swick, never far from her father's manor since the rains had begun, emerged from the rear stairwell and strode to the doorway where Laina sat.

"The rain is slowing," Swick said, by way of greeting. "If you wish to start planting obstacles, now is the time,

while your dear father is distracted."

"You mean we should ride down to the gypsy camp now?" Laina asked warily. "What of the mudslide?"

"We discussed this with one of the men who helped build the road," Swick said. "It cannot be entirely impassable, unless an entire mountain turned to mud. Those useless Whitlanders are simply trying to swindle your father."

"Would you not be happy to leave this foul-smelling house behind?" Jairus asked. "I could not so easily put up with the noise and the stench."

Laina threw her unfinished turnip into the heap and stood. "I was trying to do right by my father."

"Does that mean we leave you behind?" Swick raised an eyebrow.

Laina fought with herself for a moment. Her father would be terrified if he found her missing. Worse, he would never trust her again. Yet if her scheme worked, the Whitish troops would be rooted out before it was too late.

"No, I'll come," she said at last. "Nine plagues! Father will be furious."

"I'm so—so tired," Laina told Mylo as they passed, pretending to fight a yawn. "I'm sorry. I think I must be coming down with a cold. Sorry I couldn't finish the turnips."

Mylo waved her away. "Take care of yourself, my dear. And don't worry about us. You've been a brilliant help already."

Halfway up the narrow back stairwell, Swick turned and nudged open the hidden door that led into the garden. Jairus hurried on ahead to fetch Laina's horse as Swick bent his head against the rain and started downhill.

"How did you find this entrance?" Laina asked with some amusement. "Half of the servants don't even know it

exists."

"That was Jairus," Swick said with a grin. "He had a bit too much to drink a few nights back, and when he escaped the kitchen to empty the contents of his stomach, he happened to lean against that exact stretch of wall."

Laina snorted. She could hardly imagine Jairus getting inebriated; she had a feeling Swick was not telling her the whole story.

When they reached the base of the hill and the border of the front lawn, Swick glanced quickly at the entrance of the manor before sidling into the stables. No one was watching; even without checking, Laina was sure of this. Any man forced to brave the wind and sleet to relieve himself would be far too interested in returning to the warmth to notice anyone unusual around.

"I'd rather walk," Laina said, though Jairus had already saddled Feather.

"Not in that mud, you wouldn't," Swick said. "You're the princess. You ought to have some small comforts."

"But what about you two?"

Swick shrugged. "Bloody shame we don't have a wagon, but we'll have to make do." He patted Feather's sleek neck. "It'll be brutal out there, I'm sure of it."

Breathing in the sweet smell of hay, Laina felt the muscles in her neck relax. It had been so long since she had been outside. "I've lived here all my life," she said. "I can stand a bit of rain."

Swick nodded. Laina swung her leg over Feather's saddle, and without speaking, all three drew their hoods tightly about their faces and ventured into the storm.

All down the winding path, rivulets of water had carved narrow gouges in the usually-smooth gravel. No one was about in town—glowing orbs of candlelight shone through the curtains on most windows, and the scent of

woodsmoke curled about the rooftops, but every shop was closed and every door tightly sealed. Jairus ducked briefly into the Seal's Roost and returned wearing a sturdier pair of boots, and then they left the town behind and made for the woods.

Beneath the trees, the silence seemed heavier than usual. The leaves trapped and muffled the rain, releasing only the occasional heavy drop; even Feather's hooves seemed hushed against the sodden earth. Pools of water had collected at every low spot along the track, to the extent that some stretches of track were nothing but water. More than once Laina watched Jairus—who forged ahead, while Swick followed more cautiously—stumble in muddy water that rose to his knees. Meanwhile, Swick would pause, search for a better route, and gingerly skirt around the puddle. Though she felt guilty for leaving the other two to suffer alone, Laina was grateful to be riding safely above the mud.

Soon after they had reached the end of the inlet and the track had turned inland, Laina caught sight of what looked like a deep river stretching before them. Jairus was about to trudge on through when Laina called, "Wait! This could be the slip. For all we know, the path might be completely gone."

Swick tugged at a spiraling vine until a good length broke free, showering Laina and Jairus in rain. "Here, have a go with this."

"I notice you have not offered to help," Jairus said stiffly. Laina thought he might be jesting.

Rolling up his sleeves, Jairus waded into the first section of the flooded path and jabbed the stiff vine ahead. It struck solid ground, so he took another step forward.

"Don't you think there might be a better way through the trees?" Swick asked, still hanging back. Laina peered left and right, but could see nothing aside from the expanse of muddied water. "I trust the path a bit more," she said.

"Besides, the trees are too tight a fit for your horse," Swick said. "Augh, I suppose I'll be going for a bit of a swim before the day's up."

Several more steps forward, Jairus's vine nearly disappeared beneath the water when he tested the depth.

"Uh-oh," Swick said.

Jairus turned and looked back at Laina and Swick. "It will come up to my waist at least. Should I continue on?"

"I meant a figurative swim, not a literal one," Swick muttered. Raising his voice, he called, "The water is barely moving, but don't put yourself in danger. You haven't even reached the middle of the flooded section."

Laina didn't dare blink. What if one of the streams had overstepped its banks and now flowed through here, with an undercurrent that would rip Jairus from the path and hurl him toward a thundering river?

Moving forward, Jairus eased himself into the water until it was level with his chest; then he began stroking smoothly but quickly along the path. From his pace, Laina could tell he was nervous. As the path swept around a bend, she held her breath, waiting for the current to overpower him.

It never did. Instead Jairus seemed to find his footing and began rising from the mud like a tadpole, all glistening and coated in muck.

Turning, he cupped his hands around his mouth. "It's safe! But you can turn back, if you like. I would not blame you."

"Is that meant to be a challenge, you impertinent boy?" Swick called after Jairus. "Watch me. I'll show you how a proper man crosses a wee puddle." He took Feather's reins and guided Laina along beside him. Feather balked at stepping so deep into the mud, prancing back a step, but Swick held her firm. When he reached the deepest bit, though, he gasped.

"Nine plagues!" Shivering, he backed up again and shook his head at the water. "Jairus is a brave little scorpion. How did he plunge right in like that?"

"We could turn back," Laina offered. She did not want to, not now, but it was not she who had to swim through chest-deep mud.

"Fah," Swick said. This time he turned and marched straight into the puddle, until his chin was bobbing in mud and he had to loop Feather's reins around his shoulder so he could use both hands to swim. "Come along, you bloody horse!"

With an indignant nicker, Feather wallowed into the mud behind Swick and began struggling forward. Her hooves still touched the ground, but Laina could tell the mud was trying to trap her. Her head bobbed with each step, and the water lapped at Laina's waist. She raised her hands to keep them dry, pitying Jairus and Swick more than ever.

Halfway through the puddle, Feather's hooves slipped, and the sudden drop jolted away Laina's feeling of safety. Sweeping her head side to side, Feather fought to regain her footing while Laina clung to the saddle, her nerves on fire. If she fell, would she be able to swim with her skirts weighing her down? She would sink. Now the lapping waves seemed menacing, little fingers trying to yank her from her safe perch and drag her under.

One wave struck Laina in the waist with such force that water splashed over her shoulder. It was the current! Now she could feel the water moving, swirling about her waist in subtle yet insistent flurries. She and Feather were drifting toward the edge of the path; soon they would be slammed against a tree, and she would fall—

At last Feather righted herself and heaved herself forward with a surge. Laina gasped and remembered to breathe. A few steps farther along, the water seemed to be receding. Soon they would be on dry ground.

"That wasn't so hard," Swick said, stepping gingerly from the puddle and standing beside Jairus, who was covered in goose-pimples but refused to shiver. "And you thought we'd turn back!"

"Are you injured?" Jairus asked Laina softly. He must have noticed her expression.

"No, of course not." Laina tried to shake off the lingering unease that Feather's misstep had brought about. It was not the cold or the filth that had scared her, but her own helplessness. It would have been too easy to drown. "I'm fine. Though I'd rather not cross that again until the rains have slowed."

"Tonight," Swick said. "We're counting on the storm blowing over tonight."

It was dark by the time they neared the gypsy camp. Swick and Jairus had brought sleeping rolls, food, and a tent, but everything had gotten soaked in crossing the puddle, so they had to count instead on the generosity of the performers.

"Conard would find us a place," Laina said. "His performer friends may not like it, but he would not turn me away."

"What a sweet boy," Swick teased. "Perhaps he can sing love ballads by the firelight while we dry off."

"Oh, hush," Laina said. Now that they were here, though, she was no longer so sure of herself. Conard had begged for the chance to come visit her, but would he be equally receptive to her own sudden appearance? Refusing to voice her misgivings, she nudged Feather forward and led the way through the camp toward the back of the clustered tents. She did not know where Conard had set up camp, but she hoped she would stumble across him.

As it turned out, everyone in the camp must have recognized her instantly—the horse probably helped, she thought ruefully—because whispers began following them through the tents, and before long Conard himself appeared before them.

"Laina!" he said, blinking in surprise. "I thought they were joking."

"Sorry; I should have sent word." Laina realized for the first time that he was wearing a brightly-colored tunic and a string of bells atop his exile's band; apparently the gypsies had begun integrating him into their troop.

"How did you make it?" Conard asked. "The road is blocked. Which means—how did you get here, anyway? Did you bloody well swim?"

"Yes, we did," Swick said, gesturing down the length of his sodden, muddy clothes.

Conard frowned at him, as though he had just noticed Laina was not alone. "Who are your friends?"

"Swick is a cartographer from Dardensfell," Laina said, nodding to Swick. "In fact, he's the one who gave me my horse. And his assistant is Jairus."

Conard nodded. He gave Jairus an odd, sideways look, sizing him up. "Well. What are you doing here?"

"Can we discuss this somewhere private?" Laina said quietly.

Glancing around at the crowd of onlookers, all wearing expressions of studied innocence, Conard beckoned stiffly. "This way. We can talk at the camp."

Laina could tell they had reached Conard's troop when

they were accosted by performers who were far less subtle in their curiosity. At once she, Jairus, and Swick found themselves surrounded by colorful people—an old man with long, graying hair; a striking black-haired woman who looked Ruunic; and a young couple with their arms around each other's waists. There were three children trailing at the heels of the old man, giggling and whispering to one another.

"What've you gone and found?" the old man asked, grinning at Conard. "That's the princess there. Is this finally an explanation for what you got up to that night you vanished on us?"

Laina's cheeks went hot at the mention of that night in the hot pool. It was so strange to meet Conard like this, surrounded by other people, after such an intimate moment alone. There was so much she wanted to say, and none of it she wanted overheard.

"Don't overwhelm them just now," Conard said, elbowing the gray-haired man and the young couple out of the way. "They've just swam through a bog, it looks like. They'll want fresh clothes and a warm drink."

Laina dropped stiffly to the ground as Conard joined her. "Who is he, again?" he whispered, pointing his chin at Jairus.

Conard was jealous! Somewhat flattered, Laina whispered, "I told you. He's Swick's assistant, the Varrilan who won't stand for my father's meddling. We're helping him coax the Whitish army away from Lostport. And no, I'm not *interested* in him." She shook her head at Conard's expression.

He grasped her hand briefly, hidden behind Feather's flank. "Good. I was worried."

By the time Swick led Feather to a tree and tied her beside one of the tents, the young woman had already produced a new dress for Laina. "This should fit! It might be a bit short, but Conard will appreciate the cut." She winked at Laina.

"That's Ladybird," Conard said. He lowered his voice and added drily, "Entertainer extraordinaire."

Laina looked from Ladybird's loosely plaited golden hair to her rouged lips and plunging neckline and guessed exactly where her specialties lay.

"I'll help you get dressed, if you would like," the girl added. "Unless Conard wants to."

He rolled his eyes at Laina; clearly he would love the chance, if he could get rid of the audience. Laina bit her lip and tried not to grin.

Ladybird led the way into the tent, while Laina clutched her skirts about her knees and tried not to drip mud onto the mounded rugs.

"Conard does nothing but talk of you," Ladybird confided as soon as they were alone. "He never speaks of you by name, though. I think Grandfather is the only one who knew his secret lover was a *princess*."

"I'm not his lover," Laina said. "Not exactly." She held up her arms obediently as Ladybird tugged the muddy dress over her head.

"Well, give it a few days trapped in this camp, and that might well change."

Laina snorted. "You haven't been plying your charms on Conard, have you?" she asked, her voice muffled beneath the dress.

At last the dress slid free of Laina's arms; Ladybird threw it into the corner in a rumpled pile and fetched the new gown. "Oh, believe me, Conard would have none of that." She gave Laina a significant look. "As I said, he's *obsessed* with you. Won't even take a playful peck from me."

Laina was not sure whether to be dismayed or

reassured by this.

"Anyway, how long are you staying? You can't be off too soon, not with the trials you must have gone through to get here." Ladybird batted her eyes at Laina. Then, while Laina raised her arms obediently, she draped the new gown over her head. It was a tight fit, but eventually she tugged it straight and Ladybird began doing up the laces.

"Is everything okay in there?" Conard's voice asked from beyond the tent flap.

"Nearly done," Laina said, wincing as a cord bit into her back. She had never cared much for fine dresses, and owned just one lace-up gown, which she saved for the nicest of occasions—the sort that never took place in Lostport. This one, despite belonging to the gypsies, could have passed for something a bit more fashionable. It was red, with orange and yellow accents, the sleeves billowing at the shoulders and the skirt slashed all around. With the final laces tied, Laina realized the swooping neckline was cut lower than anything she had worn before. She hoped she looked alluring, not simply bedraggled.

Belatedly she remembered that they had come here on a crucial mission, not to seduce Conard. Perhaps he would be more amenable to her idea if she presented it looking like this.

Then she bit her tongue in annoyance. Who was she, to contemplate seduction and trickery?

"You look lovely!" Ladybird squealed, taking Laina's hands and eyeing her head to toe. "But your hair must be fixed. It looks such a mess!"

Laina touched a hand to her usual braid, which was neither muddy nor unraveling. "No. Leave it be." Too much attention to her appearance, and she would no longer feel like herself.

"Conard!" Ladybird called. "She's ready." Grinning,

she ducked out of the way as Conard stepped into the tent.

When he saw Laina, his face went blank before his features resolved into a frown. "What's she playing at?"

Laina's anticipation vanished. "I didn't ask for this dress," she said grimly. "Now everyone will think me a harlot."

"No, that's not what I meant!" Conard said. "I just—I've never seen you like this before. You look stunning. But I think Ladybird has some mischief in mind. She usually does."

"I feel a bit foolish," Laina said, trying not to blush. "How am I going to discuss serious business looking like this?"

"Who cares?" With a mischievous grin, Conard closed the gap between them and kissed Laina hard on the mouth.

## Chapter 14

As promised, the rain began to ease by sundown, and the following morning dawned clear and sunny. When the Whitish builders announced that they would stop in town to re-provision before heading to Port Emerald, Faolan hardly dared believe what he heard.

"Have they received new orders?" he asked Harrow. His advisor had arrived to watch in disbelief as the laborers filed down the lawn toward the road.

"I did hear a rumor," Harrow said, tearing his eyes from the procession. "A rumor of treasure, treasure that they can do away with. Those men intend to abandon the project and steal as much wealth as they can in the process."

Faolan frowned and scratched his jaw, which he had allowed to grow stubby with hair during the fuss over the Whitish laborers. "Is this fact, or mere speculation?"

Harrow gave him a fleeting smile. "I said I had heard a rumor. I don't know a thing about what the Whitlanders believe or intend."

Either way, all fifty of the insufferable Whitlanders had now vacated Faolan's manor. He did not need to worry about their rationale; they were no longer his concern.

"Now we must simply tidy the place up a bit," Faolan said, trying not to sound gloomy. For the duration of the Whitlanders' stay, he had tried his best to avert his gaze and

ignore the layers of dirt, the discarded potatoes and stale bread crusts, and the soiled carpets. Now, when he turned back to the hall and caught sight of the mess within, it was all he could do not to groan. His manor looked as though a mudslide had swept through it.

One of Doran's guards—Nort, if he remembered properly—was beginning to gather and remove the blankets and sleeping mats that had been left behind. "I need every servant in this manor working alongside you," Faolan told the guard, clapping him gratefully on the shoulder. "I want this place looking presentable before sunrise tomorrow."

Nort gave a brusque nod and continued at his work. Limping past him into the dining hall, Faolan collapsed into his favorite chair.

"Would you like a spot of ale, my lord?" Mylo said, shuffling from the kitchen with a bucket of soapy water.

"Tea, please, if you can spare a moment." Faolan put his hands to his head and tried to ignore the dull ache that was spreading from his back up to his shoulders.

The house quickly descended into a chaotic bustle, each servant racing to and fro with unwonted urgency, first clearing out the last remnants of the army and then scrubbing the manor from its lofty ceilings to its marble floors. Nursing his tea and enjoying the shaft of sunlight that spilled into the dining room from the high window, Faolan read through the figures he and Harrow had estimated. Since he did not trust Prince Ronnick to do a proper job of passing on his plea for more materials, he began drafting a letter to High King Luistan, with a second set of more precise instructions accompanying an estimation of the exact benefits Port Emerald would bring Whitland.

As it was, Faolan did not think to look for his daughter until the sun was nearly going down. He had assumed she was still in the kitchen, where she had spent the past several days, but when Mylo appeared with a bowl of creamy potato soup, Faolan realized he had seen neither Laina nor her foreign friends all day.

"Is my daughter in the kitchen with you?" he asked, pausing with his spoon halfway into the soup.

Mylo blinked in surprise and rocked back on his heels. "I thought she was resting! All the excitement wore her out yesterday, I'd say."

"And that cartographer?" Faolan narrowed his eyes at Mylo. The cook was an honest, practical fellow, but Faolan could not be certain he told the truth.

"Oh, he and the Varrilan left earlier today," Mylo said. With a respectful bob of his head, he shuffled back into the kitchen.

Faolan dropped the spoon and pushed back his chair with a screech of wood. Resisting the urge to run, he strode into the entrance hall and up the stairs to Laina's room. He ducked his head around the corner just to ascertain she was not in his office, and then came to a stop before her door, breathing hard. He knocked.

No sound came from within. Could Laina be asleep? Quietly, one hand on the doorframe, Faolan eased the door open and peered into the room beyond.

As he had known it would be all along, the room was empty.

\* \* \*

"Jairus and I have begun planting the seeds of a rumor," Swick said over supper that evening. Conard was sitting in a circle of makeshift chairs—mostly logs, with a few odd stools thrown in—with Laina beside him and Ebony making the rounds with a cauldron of hot mulled mead.

"We've asked King Faolan's kitchen staff to spread word of a mine up in the mountains, practically overflowing with gems. Only one man knows its precise location, and he's currently trying to extract as much wealth as possible before anyone discovers his secret. Then, before anyone can stop him, he intends to flee Lostport and buy himself an estate in Whitland."

"And it's not true, not the least bit?" Grandfather asked wistfully. It seemed that the two older men had found much in common. Grandfather and Swick had been trading stories and chuckling over their youthful misdeeds for hours now.

Laina shook her head. "We'll know the soldiers have fallen for their bait if they head for Port Emerald in the next span. Until now, they've been sitting idly in my father's manor, ordering the servants to bring more food and ale than we could possibly give them. They don't intend to do anything but cause trouble."

"So, in a few days' time, fifty new Whitlanders are going to flood into Port Emerald," Conard said. "How does that help anyone?"

"Sorry, but that is where your part comes in," Laina said.

Swick waved her into silence. "Not yet! We haven't finished laying the foundation."

Conard thought he heard Laina sigh.

"As the Whitlanders pass through the gypsy camp, we need volunteers to start a new rumor," Swick said. "We need them to believe that now is an especially good time to take any wealth they can and return to Whitland. Land is cheap, say. High King Luistan is offering generous rewards to anyone willing to help fund his war."

"I still don't understand," Conard said. His trepidation for what they would ask him to do was growing, but he had already given his word.

With what looked like reluctance, the young Varrilan—Jairus, if he remembered correctly—spoke up. "With my knowledge of glass-working, I could forge a mountain of fake gems; nothing more than dyed glass. Unless these soldiers have worked with precious stones before, they would not recognize the deception."

"That leaves you, Conard," Laina said. "We need you to infiltrate the Whitish ranks, earn the trust of the builders, and pretend to discover the thief's secret mine."

Conard's misgivings had been entirely justified. He had meant to keep a low profile, to hide amongst people who passed beneath the king's notice. This would draw exactly the sort of attention he did not need.

"You can still refuse," Laina said quietly. "I don't know anyone else to call upon, but it's too much to ask of you. If anyone realized you had tricked them, the consequences would be terrible."

Conard met her eyes and saw something desperate there. Was it worry for him, or fear that he would refuse to help? "Of course I'll do it," he said, with what he hoped was a reassuring smile. He did not want to sound reluctant. "So I'm to pose as a builder, then? I've never built anything in my life, unless setting up a tent counts."

Laina tugged at his patched coat. "That's better than some," she teased, her eyes still serious. "I don't think most of those useless Whitlanders have spent a night outside before. They traveled from their homes in comfortable barges and immediately set up camp in my father's hall. I bet you'll be their wilderness hero."

Conard snorted. "Sure."

Far too soon, it was time to retire for the night. Conard could not help but think his time with Laina was hastily drawing to a close. The next time he saw her, he would be in disguise, unable to speak to her or show he recognized her. He hoped she would trust him to stay true. He would never be tempted to sympathize with Whitland, no matter how well the builders treated him.

Despite a good deal of grumbling from Ebony and Silversmite, the performers shuffled around until Laina, Swick, Jairus, and Conard were able to share one of the larger tents. Whether by accident or design, he and Laina ended up beside one another. At first he thought he might 'accidentally' roll toward Laina in the dark secrecy of night, but when he saw Jairus's dark eyes fixed on her, he realized he was still unsure of Laina's intentions. Perhaps he had misjudged her completely. She could be manipulating him for her own ends, while secretly carrying on an affair with Jairus.

Disgusted with himself, Conard drew his knees in to his chest and turned to the canvas wall. Laina would not do such a thing. She had more honor than anyone he knew.

"Good night," he said to the wall.

Swick extinguished their candle with his thumb and forefinger.

"Night, Conard," Laina said softly.

At daybreak the next morning, Conard was startled awake by shouts and the sound of hundreds of feet tramping down the road. He was disoriented for a moment—he had slept poorly, dreaming time and time again that Laina had crawled beneath the blankets with him and molded her body to his, only to wake and find himself alone.

A moment later, Laina and the old horse-master sat up in unison, both looking in the direction of the commotion.

"It's the Whitlanders," Laina said, alarmed. "I didn't expect them so soon!"

"They must have camped just down the road," Swick

said, already on his feet and pulling on an overcoat. "Jairus!"

With a muttered curse in Varrilan, the young man sat up and threw off the blankets.

"Don't move," Swick told Conard and Laina. "We'll be right back."

Still cursing under his breath, Jairus hopped after Swick, trying to pull on his second sock as he went.

"What are they doing?" Conard whispered. He was still watching the tent flap Jairus had vanished through, wondering as before if Laina had fallen for Jairus or was simply helping him through a sense of moral obligation. To him, Jairus seemed dour and prickly and inescapably foreign.

"My guess is that they've gone to procure your uniform."

At Laina's voice, Conard was wrenched from his thoughts. "My what? Oh, you mean my disguise?"

She nodded, her mouth twisting in distaste. "I wish you didn't have to leave so soon. You can still say no."

Untangling his legs from the blankets, Conard crawled over to Laina's side, where he knelt tantalizingly close while still maintaining a finger's breadth of space between them. "Consider this a way of beginning to repay the wrong I've done your family."

"You know you don't have to," Laina said, her brown eyes wide, "but thank you." She bent her head to rest on Conard's shoulder, a warm, comforting presence at his side.

After a moment's hesitation, Conard reached up and wound his fingers through her hair. As dangerous and trying as the subterfuge might become, he realized he was grateful for the chance to prove himself to Laina.

"You know I won't be able to see you for a long time," he said.

Laina snaked an arm around his waist and held him closer still. "I know. Just don't—don't become one of them. I couldn't bear to lose you."

"Never," Conard said.

Just as he bent to kiss Laina, the tent flap swung open again to reveal Jairus and Swick, this time with armfuls of white clothes and muddied boots.

"Better hurry," Swick said. "The army plans to stop here for a quick midmorning tea before racing on toward Port Emerald. Don't want to get caught out in more rain, by the sound of things."

Laina and Conard shared a pained look. With a last squeeze of her hands, Conard rose and accepted the uniform.

"How did they manage to keep those pants so white?" Laina asked, narrowing her eyes at the somewhat muddied breeches. "Has someone managed to drain the swimming hole since yesterday?"

Swick chortled. "They probably paid a few poor fellows to lie on their faces and make a boardwalk."

Conard began stripping to his underclothes, again conscious of Jairus's silent, critical stare. "What I'm more concerned about is what happened to the owner of these clothes." He frowned at Swick. "Is some poor Whitlander lying naked in the middle of the woods?"

"Don't worry, we gave him a blanket," Swick said.

Conard could not tell if he was joking.

At last he was dressed, and all of his buttons were done up properly—which had taken some work. "How do I look?" he asked Laina, turning in a circle.

"Very handsome," she said drily. "I hate to say it, but the uniform suits you."

"The boots are a bit tight," Conard said.

Swick laughed. "We had to choose a short man. Jairus

and I are not strong enough to take down anyone particularly imposing."

"The laborers will be leaving soon," Jairus said. It was the first time Conard had heard him speak all morning. "Is someone ready to repeat the rumors of cheap land and titles back in Whitland?"

"I believe Ladybird was planning to whisper it in a few ears," Conard said. He sighed. "I supposed I should join them, before it becomes too conspicuous." Ignoring Jairus and Swick, he knelt and drew Laina into his arms. "Send for me," he whispered. "If you ever need anything, I will come for you."

Laina gripped him tightly but did not say anything. In that single embrace, Conard tried to convey every shard of love he had been holding back—the fear that Laina would hate him, the spans he had traveled to return, and the new pang of leaving once again, this time without any guarantee of return. Even if he were to return, what would he gain? Laina could never be his. She was the heir to the throne of Lostport; he was a stray fosterling. And an exile now, as well.

At last Conard kissed Laina on the forehead and released her. For now, everything would have to go unsaid.

Outside the tent, Conard was surprised to find the entire company—aside from Ladybird, who must have genuinely been trying to spread the rumor—waiting to bid him farewell.

"Come back to us," Grandfather said, nearly crushing Conard in a hug. "In one piece."

"I'll miss you," Silversmite said solemnly, putting both hands on Conard's shoulders and examining him in his new uniform. "Take care of yourself."

"And you," Conard said. "I'm not leaving forever, you know. I'll be sure to say hello whenever the laborers stop

here for a day."

"Be careful, though," Grandfather said. "As much as we'd love to see you, we would rather you not get yourself in trouble."

Nodding, Ebony gave Conard a brief hug, which surprised him. He had thought the woman barely tolerated his presence.

Then, with Silversmite and one of the children tailing him conspicuously, Conard turned from camp and began picking his way toward the road. The campground air was rich with woodsmoke, and voices were beginning to drown out the birdsong, most of them searching around to discover who had caused such a commotion. Before long, a sea of white uniforms came into view; the Whitlanders were clumped together as though for protection, and only a few had dared to sit on logs around the clearing.

As Conard drew closer to the laborers, his friends held back, until at last he looked over his shoulder and could no longer pick them out from among the crowd.

"Hey," one of the builders called, noticing Conard. "You're not from our group. Are you just stopping here for a day off?"

Conard had to think fast. He had foolishly thought the men might mistake him for part of their own group; now he realized, far too late, that they were only fifty in number and had spent the past two spans traveling and living together. They would know each other inside and out. "Actually, I'm a new arrival myself," he said. Better not to pretend he had insider knowledge of Port Emerald—that would quickly make him look a fool. "I was traveling through Dardensfell when I caught wind of this Port Emerald, and I thought I might try my hand. I've been stuck in Lostport for ages, first because I didn't have supplies, and then on account of that bloody rain."

The man nodded affably. More were listening now, and all seemed eager to meet this new arrival.

"So, are you heading out soon?" Conard asked. "I was about to start down the road myself, but I'd love the company if you won't be long."

Two of the men took Conard by the shoulders and drew him into their ranks. "We're moving out right now," one said, pounding him on the back. "Come along. You can stay with us, if you want. Soldiers are no good by themselves."

Almost immediately, the laborers began shuffling toward the road and trailing away from the midway camp in a well-formed, two-by-two line. A few of the men were rubbing at their eyes, clearly nursing hangovers, while others looked back through the trees to wave to the women they had already promised to return to. At this rate, it was probably good the men had camped down the road rather than infiltrating the performers' clearing.

As they went, Conard listened to the men joke and grumble about the delay and the work awaiting them, and cautiously began asking what questions he could, trying to learn as much as possible without revealing himself as an outsider. He gave his name as Kellar, which he hoped sounded Whitish, and was relieved when no one questioned him.

"I've only heard rumors," Conard said. "Does the High King actually believe Port Emerald will be a success?"

The man plodding along in front of him gave a shrug. "He certainly believes he'll get money out of King Faolan. Else he wouldn't have bothered."

"Some men are saying the High King doesn't care one whit about Port Emerald," the man beside Conard said softly. "He's using this as a cheap way to build himself an army, I reckon. As soon as work is done here, we march on

Varrival."

"I'd heard about Varrival," Conard said. "But I'm confused. I thought King Luistan had sent out two separate armies, one for the building project, and the other to suppress Varrival."

"Naw," the man in front said. "This'll harden us up, turn us into a strong team. Perfect for fighting."

"Why wait, though?" Conard asked. "Why not march on Varrival now? Is it really that strong, that it could stand up to the full force of Whitland?"

The man beside Conard gave him a sideways look. "Unfortunately, yes. How much do you know about Varrival?"

Conard shrugged.

"The kingdom has been independent and secretive for centuries now. No one knows how strong its weapons are, or how large its numbers. They just know Varrival has a high enough opinion of itself to push for more land. I'd guess High King Luistan is more worried than he would let on."

Conard pursed his lips, wondering if Jairus had been entirely honest with him. If Whitland was so worried about confronting Varrival, why should Jairus be concerned? "And are we intending to march on Varrival in winter? What if we're snowed in?"

Someone behind him snorted unkindly. "It's a desert, halfwit. Winter's the only decent season."

Biting his tongue, Conard swallowed what he had meant to say. If they were traveling to Varrival by land, which he suspected they would be given they did not own any seafaring vessels, they would have to pass through the southern reach of the mountains. If Varrival would not see snow, the mountains certainly would.

He realized, a moment late, that pretending

ignorance—even dullness—would have given him free reign to ask as many questions as he wished.

By the time the company had stopped for lunch and then resumed their now-weary trudge toward Port Emerald, Conard had ceased to draw attention, instead melting into the endless line of white uniforms, griping and massaging his aching shoulders along with everyone else. At least the path had dried out; Conard had been dreading another swim akin to the one Laina had faced on her way to the midway camp.

At that thought, Conard's chest tightened. He hoped she would get home safely. And he hoped it would not be too long before he saw her again.

"You reckon we'll reach the port before nightfall?" a man in front of Conard muttered loudly.

"That's the midway camp we were just at," Conard said. "Means this can't be much longer than yesterday's slog."

"Feels like it," someone else said.

Because you were sleeping in tents last night, not in the king's comfortable manor, Conard thought, though he said nothing.

It was midafternoon before the front of the line gave a shout—they had seen the end of the track. What with the rain and the mud, Conard had not yet found a chance to visit the port. He wondered if he would recognize it, so many years later. As he waited for each of the men to pause at the viewpoint before continuing down the track, Conard peered through the trees in search of evidence of the building project. Voices drifted back toward him—

"Sweet seducer!"

"Doesn't look like much."

"Where are we supposed to live?"

"Would you look at that water!"

Eventually he made his way to the front and took his

turn stepping up to the ledge.

The view was incredible. Before, when he and his father had stumbled across the fjord, the beach had been hemmed in by mountains and trees; they had only been able to see that which hugged the water's edge. Now, with a bit of height, he could see tall, jagged peaks thrusting themselves into gaps between the innermost ring of hunched green mountains. These peaks still clung to their last vestiges of snow, the pinnacles accented with rich black shadows and sun-washed patches of white.

Unbidden, the same craving for adventure that had haunted his father now rose within him. If only he could abandon the Whitlanders, pack up as many supplies as he could carry, and follow those mountains into infinity...

But the next two men were jostling for their turn at the lookout.

"Never seen a few mountains before?" one of them teased Conard. "Budge along, or we'll end up sleeping outside again."

He tried to think of a witty response and failed; with a muttered "Sorry," he shuffled aside and returned to the path, which now took a sharp dive down the hill.

The sun was low above the peaks when they finally reached the builders' encampment. Light filtered through the trees in hazy shafts of gold, while the crickets and cicadas were beginning to take up their evening chorus. After walking through such dense, unmarred forest, it was startling to see the beginnings of the construction project—a cleared swath of trees stacked high with stripped logs, marble and granite stones, and finished bricks. Only two men were still at work in the clearing, one dousing the brick kiln, another recording what looked like an inventory. Behind them, a wide, brown river tore its way through the valley, swollen with the recent rains.

Gradually the army was clustering around the riverbank at the far end of the clearing; it took Conard several moments before he realized someone was standing there, apparently waiting to welcome the new arrivals. Once most of the men had stopped moving about and trading complaints under their breath, the man addressed the entire party.

"Greetings!" he called. "We had word of your arrival. I am the head architect here, and it is my privilege to welcome you to Port Emerald." The man was tawnyskinned and black-haired; if Conard had to hazard a guess, he would say the head architect was from Ruunas.

"If you had word, does it mean you've got somewhere for us to stay?" the leader of the Whitish company asked aggressively.

"Yes, indeed. A few of your number will be required to help provide food for the camp, but we should have sufficient tents to accommodate all new arrivals."

"We're starving!" someone yelled from the back of the group. "Have you got dinner for us?"

A few men laughed, while others added emphatic shouts to the din.

Without the least sign of perturbation, the head architect smiled and beckoned them toward the bridge. "I had an inkling this would happen," he said, his words nearly lost beneath the cacophony of movement. "Your dinner is waiting."

Over the bridge and past another stand of trees, they emerged at the base of the construction site, amidst a sea of tents. Though just three skeletal structures had been erected, the labor was in plain evidence—stairs now ran up and down the half-cleared mountainside, with terraced building foundations set at odd intervals, nestled amongst the trees. Those tents that did not fit comfortably on the

flat land that extended from the river's mouth to the beach instead dotted the mountainside, clustered atop building foundations in staggered pairs or trios. It looked like a vertical campsite, with each set of tents stacked atop the one beneath.

"Enjoy your meal," the head architect said, still with that knowing smile. "Afterward, I invite you to join me for drinks around the fire, at which time I will elucidate you regarding your work at this camp."

"Which tents can we use?" the leader of the army asked quickly.

"Any ones you find empty," the architect said. "Unless you can convince the others to share. I hope you do not mind a bit of a climb—most of the unoccupied tents are up there." Eyes twinkling, he nodded up the mountainside.

## Chapter 15

Now that Conard had left the midway camp, Laina had no true reason to stay there herself. She knew her father would be terrified as soon as he found her missing, and she did not want to cause him any more distress than she already had. So it was that she, Jairus, and Swick packed their own muddied belongings and turned back toward Lostport. The old gypsy man and Swick exchanged a surprisingly fond farewell while Jairus waited at the edge of their cluster of tents, eager to be away from the bustle of camp.

"Do you think he will manage?" Jairus asked once they had returned to the road and begun the slow journey home.

"What?" Laina said. "To fool the Whitlanders, or to pull off the entire scheme?"

"The whole scheme," Jairus said. "Is he capable of convincingly playing such a central part?"

Laina got the distinct feeling that Jairus had not been impressed with Conard. She had not spoken of him much, simply said he was an old friend and fellow adventurer, but Jairus must have been expecting something more notable. "Do not doubt him," she said, a bit more harshly than she intended. Conard had found his way back to her from a bog in the middle of Kohlmarsh, with his exile's band still fast around his wrist. He would not fail.

After that, both Laina and Jairus were quiet for a while. She was upset that Jairus would look down on someone like Conard; if so, what must he think of her? She had never left Lostport and had spent most of her young adulthood shirking responsibility? Jairus, for his part, was indecipherable.

To compensate for the silence, Swick began a one-sided conversation that helped pass the time.

"Remarkable people, those gypsies," he said. "I've traveled with bands of theirs from time to time. When you're going through cities in foreign lands, they provide a bit of protection and anonymity. That Grandfather character, though—I'd guess he knows more than all of us combined. Doesn't look it, but he's brilliant."

Laina leaned forward to give Feather's ear a pat and pretended she was not listening.

"It seems he used to be embroiled in a spot of political scheming back in Whitland. He was born to a high-ranking family with no money, and was sold as a scribe to King Luistan's most dangerous opposition to pay off a family debt. This was when the High King was still in his youth, of course. His hold on the throne was tenuous at best."

"Really? They neglected to tell us that down here." Laina had always known King Luistan as *the* High King. There was no other, and never could have been.

"Questions of illegitimacy," Swick said offhandedly. "Not the most inventive challenge his opponent could have come up with. It was a cousin of his, raised away from the capital in unusual circumstances, and with Grandfather's help he became a serious danger to the royal line. Back in Dardensfell, we loved hearing news of their scheming and counter-scheming. Most everyone was rooting for an overthrow, but more than anything, we loved seeing Whitland in a bit of turmoil." Swick shook his head fondly. "It's remarkable to think that a man who could pass as a faceless gypsy once had such a pivotal role in Whitish

politics."

"Had you heard of him back then?" Laina asked. This time she could no longer feign disinterest.

"Not specifically," Swick said, scratching his beard. "The king's cousin wanted to appear strong and independent, though there were reports that said he went nowhere without his faithful scribe."

"What happened?"

"An assassin did away with the cousin. Everyone in Dardensfell believes the king ordered him to the task, though the king—of course—says otherwise. Anyone associated with the cousin was charged with high treason. Suddenly the brilliant scribe was forced to vanish for good. He first headed into Chelt, looking to set himself as a figures-keeper for the merchants trading along the coast, but he was pursued there and nearly got himself killed."

"How did he get away?" Laina asked.

Swick shrugged. "That was as far into the story as he got. At first I was talking to him as though he was simply a well-traveled gypsy, so I asked him about his favorite towns to perform at, and which stories were his most popular. It was a fair while before he let on that he was more than he seemed."

"You should have said something," Jairus muttered, quietly enough that Swick could pretend not to hear. "I would have been interested to hear his story."

More interested than you were in Conard, Laina thought sourly.

"Many people are more than they seem," Swick remarked. "If you had taken the time to ingratiate yourself with the gypsies, you would have found them more than willing to divulge their stories."

"What about the woman with him?" Laina asked. "The one draped in—"

She stopped abruptly—she had seen something lying on the road ahead. From here she could make out nothing more than a shadowed outline. "What is that?" she hissed, pointing ahead. Was it an animal waiting to prey on them?

Jairus and Swick both moved closer to her horse, each taking one end of the reins, and they proceeded more carefully. With her high vantage point, though, it was Laina who first realized what it was. The rounded shape was the curve of a man's back. Someone had collapsed on the road.

"He needs help!" she cried, jumping down from her horse. "Is he awake?"

Swick hurried forward and knelt at the man's side. When he rolled the man onto his back, Laina cried out.

It was her father.

For a moment she could not breathe. She dropped to her knees beside her father, dizzy. Then, as a thousand frantic questions fought for breath, all she could manage was, "Is he alive?"

Never had she seen him looking so small, so utterly helpless. "Is he—?" she whispered again, putting a hand to his chest.

Swick's hand was at her father's throat. "He's alive. But very weak. Moving him would put him in grave danger, but anything is better than leaving him here."

"Can he ride Feather? We could tie him on with our coats, couldn't we?"

Swick nodded, already shrugging out of his long coat.

While Swick performed a careful assessment of Laina's father, examining his pulse and his extremities and checking the color of his eyes, Laina led Feather forward and urged the horse to kneel. Laina wanted nothing more than to throw her arms around her father and lend her strength to him, but knowing this would do more harm than good, she resisted the urge. She could hear his ragged breathing as he

fought for air.

"He appears to have a concussion," Swick said gently. "He may also have suffered a stroke; I know his health hasn't been brilliant of late. Either he stumbled and fell and hit his head, or he collapsed from the stroke and hit his head then."

"Why was he here?" Jairus asked. "He had no business in the woods, and certainly nothing that would require leaving his attendants behind."

Laina was hesitant to reply. "He—I think he must have gone after me," she said weakly. "I left without telling him, and he must have been worried." Tears of angry guilt pricked at her eyes. She should never have been so careless. She should have taken her father's concern seriously. "We need to get him home. Now."

One thing was certain. Laina would never disobey her father's wishes again. If that meant she was housebound for the rest of her life, so be it.

Delicately, Jairus and Swick helped her father into a sitting position and then, hands beneath his arms, lifted him off the ground and onto the horse. He was not a large man, but he was heavier than Jairus and Swick; Laina could see their faces go red with exertion. At last he was in place, and Swick used the arms of all three coats to tie him to the saddle.

"Quickly now," Swick said, taking Feather's reins with a careful eye on Laina's father.

They could not afford a moment's delay.

It seemed an eternity before Laina recognized the inlet leading up to Lostport, the water now drained from the exceedingly muddy path, and the sun was low in the sky before they entered the town.

The entire household converged on Swick as soon as

he pushed open the manor doors. It seemed they had all forsaken their tasks, waiting anxiously for word of Laina and the king. Swick beckoned for Nort and Barrik to join him on the lawn. "The king is in a bad way," he said softly, though no one missed his words. A current of whispers swept through the hall, while frowns deepened and eyes darkened. Even Harrow materialized from the kitchen; he had evidently been too concerned to return home, though he would have said otherwise had Laina's father returned unscathed.

"What happened?" one of the kitchen wenches asked Laina.

She shook her head, not trusting herself to speak.

Then Swick, Nort, Barrik, and Jairus came through the doors, her father held between them.

"Out of the way!" Nort barked. The onlookers scattered, allowing the four men to carry Laina's father upstairs and to his bedchamber. Harrow followed, and she wished she could do the same.

"He's not—not *dead*, is he?" Mylo asked, his voice husky.

"No," Laina said fiercely. Looking around, she realized the entire household—Mylo, his three kitchen hands, the housekeeper, the two gardeners, and the tailor—were now watching her, waiting for her to explain. Taking a deep breath, she sat up straighter. She was the voice of authority now.

"The king should recover before long," she said. "He took a bad fall in the forest, and has been unconscious since we found him. But he is in good hands now. Don't fear."

Though she wanted nothing more than to go upstairs and sit by her father's side, she knew this would accomplish naught. Instead she said, "Has anyone begun dinner? Swick

and Jairus have walked a long way, and would appreciate a good meal. Someone could prepare the guestroom for them as well. They will stay here to tend to the king until he is well again."

For a moment no one responded. Laina feared they would question her authority, or ask why she had vanished and brought this pain upon her father in the first place. At last Mylo gave her shoulder a brief squeeze and led his three assistants back into the kitchen. The housekeeper made her way to the guestroom, while the others slipped back to their own tasks. Laina was left alone in the hall.

No one remembered Laina for a long time. It was well past nightfall before Mylo emerged from the kitchens, gave a start to see her still sitting there, and ordered her to bed.

Jairus met her on the stairs, his unreadable expression sterner than usual, and Laina immediately braced herself for devastating news.

"Your father woke briefly," he said. "He was very confused. We intended to fetch you, but before I left the room, he had fallen asleep again. His color has improved, though. Swick believes it is simply a concussion. His knee was dislodged, so we believe he fell."

"And?" Laina asked. She wanted a resounding promise of recovery.

"He should be fine," Jairus said, his shoulders slumping.

Laina sagged against him, no longer able to stifle the tears that had been threatening all afternoon.

\* \* \*

Doran quickly became acclimated to life in Torrein. He enjoyed the sun and the open windows, which allowed the sweet-smelling sea breeze to permeate the manor, and he especially loved the library. The books it housed were collected from every corner of the Kinship Thrones, and among them he was surprised to find a couple that spoke of Makhori magic as though it was a common occurrence. Ordinarily he would have dismissed such things as superstition and false hope—people believing such things were possible because they wished it to be so—yet after his father's talk of a Makhori cure for his legs and his impotence, Doran had to admit he was curious.

As it transpired, he ended up dining alone for the first quarter of his stay, servants coming and going and attentive to his every need yet never lingering long enough to make the dining room feel crowded. As far as he could tell, he had a cook, two servers, a housemaid, and of course the two butlers.

He considered asking the household to join him, but for now it was peaceful simply to sit with his own thoughts and become accustomed to the idea of living here. He often brought books to the table as well, which his father would have frowned upon but which no one raised an eyebrow at here.

After a few days of awkward maneuvering and sore hands, Doran began to get the hang of his wheeled chair, to the extent that he no longer needed help moving around the house or even getting into bed. He had never been terribly strong, yet his arms were growing more useful by the day, until he could even wrestle himself off the ground and back onto the chair if he made a botched attempt of climbing from his bed to the chair.

A quarter into his stay in Chelt, he was beginning to feel like himself again. He would never be able to accomplish what most men could, yet he was no longer an invalid, lying in bed all day with nothing to distract him from his wretched thoughts.

From here, he could see the Kinship thrones with more perspective. Where before Lostport had dominated his thoughts, now it seemed like such a small, insignificant piece of the puzzle that it hardly merited notice. Why would High King Luistan have any interest in regaining control over Lostport? Surely their meager gemstones were nothing compared to the wealth of his own coffers.

The simmering resentment between Whitland and Varrival was what intrigued him more, and he devoured the four books he found on Varrival. Only one was written by a Varrilan—well, translated from a Varrilan account, in any case—while the others were studies done from afar.

He learned more about the three cities ringing the volcanic mountain, and of the first city in the oasis that had come to such a terrible end.

Doran quickly learned that Fabrian was a lot more intelligent than he had originally given the boy credit for. He had been educated at the Borderlands school, which was regarded by everyone except the Whitish as the pinnacle of science and other fields of complex knowledge, and Doran often caught him sneaking into the library. He encouraged the boy—it was nice to have someone to discuss complex matters with, someone more intelligent than the stuffy, old-fashioned Duffrey.

"The problem," he said to Fabrian one day, "is that Whitland still controls the Kinship Thrones. It used to be the most populous and technologically advanced center in this whole continent, but now it's just a backward, corrupt nation that wishes it was still on top. The original structure of the Kinship Thrones is outdated by hundreds of years. Whitland needs to accept that it's lost."

"It's a mess, sure," Fabrian said. "But what would happen if we got rid of Whitland? We'd probably fight between ourselves then. Right now we just put up with them and grumble to each other, but if Whitland wasn't in control we could start conquering each other and ruin everything we've got."

"Well, Lostport doesn't need Whitland," Doran said. "And we would be highly unlikely to get ourselves involved in any wars that would arise."

"Unless everyone wanted your resources for themselves," Fabrian pointed out.

Though Doran didn't know why, this left him with a vague feeling of unease.

That night, he wrote a letter to his family, describing the wonders of his new home in Torrein and the challenges of the journey across the desert. He was more interested in their reply, though—he probed them for details about the Port Emerald road and their relations with Whitland, about his father's thoughts on who would replace him as heir.

The best solution for everyone would be if Laina took over—she was a born ruler, though she did not know it yet. Then her heir would be the rightful king of Lostport, rather than a Whitish usurper who would impose King Luistan's authority on Lostport.

"What's it like in Lostport right now?" Fabrian asked when he saw Doran folding and sealing his letter at the dining table.

"Er—rainy?" Doran said, caught off-guard.

Fabrian snorted. "No, I meant politically. How's your relationship with Whitland?"

"Why do you ask?" Doran said carefully, one hand on the letter where he had penned that exact question.

"Well, one hears rumors..."

"You are the most irritating person I've ever had the misfortune to meet," Doran said, only half-teasing. "What are you talking about?"

"I don't really know," Fabrian said. "Just gossip, really.

The sort you'd hear at the local pub. Only, I heard that Whitland is stepping in to help with the building of Port Emerald."

"What's this?" Doran said. He had never heard more than the news of plans to build a road to Port Emerald. But now it sounded as though the fjord was to be a true port, or something of the sort.

"Your father's plans grow more ambitious by the day," Fabrian said, glancing over his shoulder. Duffrey hated when he talked about anything important with Doran. "We hear he intends to build a great city at Port Emerald, and enlist Whitish builders to help with the task."

Doran bit his tongue in surprise. Couldn't his father see how dangerous that would be? Lostport would so easily be overrun by Whitish, eager to push their influence around and punish those who had escaped their laws in the beginning.

"I haven't had any news since I left," he said truthfully. "Where have you gotten your word from?"

Fabrian lowered his voice. "The borderlands school keeps an open line of communication running to all of its former students. There are several of us here in Torrein, and a trader who brings news whenever he can. Don't say anything, right?"

"Of course not," Doran promised. "But please keep me informed. I need to know where my country stands, even if I have turned my back on it."

Fabrian nodded.

Doran had a lot to think about that evening. As he lay on his bed reading by the last light of the setting sun, his mind kept jumping from the book on ocean trade routes back to Lostport.

Why would his father go to such lengths to build a new city? What could he possibly hope to achieve?

It had something to do with Whitland, Doran knew. He just couldn't put his finger on it.

\* \* \*

"Tomorrow we move out," Tenori reminded Katrien and Amadi over supper. They had been in the Twin Cities for nine days now, exploring and gathering supplies and making the necessary arrangements for travel. At least, Tenori had been making arrangements; Katrien and Amadi, still unfamiliar with the city, had mostly been left to their own devices, and had wandered the streets endlessly. In that time they had stumbled across all sorts of curiosities a series of near-vertical gardens gracing a particularly steep section of the hillside; shops selling everything from intricate clockwork machines to animals Katrien had never seen the likes of before; and towering stone buildings both elaborate and imposing. In Whitland, stone was considered a sacred building material, reserved solely for cathedrals and royal homes. That was a shame, she could now see; the houses throughout the Twin Cities looked solid and cozy and attractive, far more than she could say for Whitish dwellings.

Of course, they had also stumbled across a few less-savory streets, one by the docks that reeked of piss and rotting fish, and another crowded with drunken men who had lunged at Katrien and succeeded in planting a very wet kiss on Amadi before she could wriggle away. After that experience, Tenori had drawn a makeshift map of the Twin Cities, on which he sketched in the nicest areas and warned them of districts to avoid at all costs.

Just as Katrien was beginning to find her feet in the Twin Cities, it was time to move on. She was surprisingly reluctant to leave, yet everything was ready. She and Amadi had traded in their nice gowns for two sets of riding clothes each, and Katrien felt very odd in her split skirts and kneehigh boots. She could not sacrifice her dignity enough to do as Amadi had done and wear men's breeches.

"I promise, these were tailored for a female rider," Tenori had said with amusement when he tried to persuade Katrien to try on a pair.

"No. Absolutely not," Katrien had said. She was unsurprised when Amadi snatched them up eagerly.

Now, for the lack of anything else to wear, Katrien and Amadi were dressed in their full riding garb, albeit barefoot.

"Are you sad to go?" Katrien asked Tenori.

He blew thoughtfully on his broth. "Of course," he said mildly. "Though a greater part of me is relieved. Some time back—before that assault you witnessed, even—the trials of living here began to outweigh the happier parts. I originally came here for the sheer novelty of it, and had myself a wonderful time negotiating the web of trade around here and getting swept up in the boisterous atmosphere of these cities. But I no longer have a reason to stay. The novelty has worn off, and I have no family to tie me here." He shrugged. "At least, that's what I keep telling myself. Whatever I might say to the contrary, I *will* miss the Twin Cities."

Katrien thought back to her own flight from Whitland. Had she, even once, felt an inkling of regret? No. Though it had taken her far too many years to discover it, she knew now that her time with Faolan had changed her forever. Once the world had opened itself to her, Whitland could never be enough.

"Could I come back here someday?" Amadi asked, swinging her feet beneath her chair. "Once I'm all grown, I mean. And I don't need your permission to live somewhere I like." She gave Katrien a challenging look.

Katrien refused to rise to the bait. "If you find Lostport unsatisfactory, by all means, return to the Twin Cities. There is certainly enough here to keep you entertained for a lifetime."

Amadi tried to hide a grin.

The following morning, they rose long before dawn. Before, Tenori had cautioned Katrien and Amadi against straying out-of-doors past dark, but this time they needed to avoid any attention from the Whitish soldiers. According to Tenori, those Varrilans who wished to join them had already assembled outside the city limits, in the field beyond the southern gates.

Though it was nearing summer, the night air still bit deep; Katrien and Amadi both wrapped themselves with cloaks and blankets before leaving Tenori's home for the last time. He had given the keys to both shop and home to the owner of the Varrilan meeting-house, with instructions to use or sell both as he judged best.

"This way," Tenori said, drawing his own hood up and beckoning Katrien and Amadi down his street. The cobbles seemed more uneven than usual in the dark, and Katrien stumbled every third step. They headed downhill at a southeastern angle, making their way ever closer to the river. After three curving blocks, the streetlights disappeared, marking the end of the well-maintained district of the city. Only the stray candle burned in a window; Katrien had expected Tenori to bring a lamp of his own, but he seemed to know the way, so she and Amadi strained to follow his shadow in the dark.

"Careful now," he whispered as they turned down a street running parallel to the river. The darkness seemed to heighten the fishy, sour stench of the area; Katrien would have known the place in her sleep. "This is not a nice alleyway. But it is the most direct route by far."

Katrien gave Amadi's hand a brief squeeze, which she answered with a nervous smile. Then they tiptoed forward.

At this hour, the only signs of life down the alleyway were small, wriggling shapes that Katrien took for rats, and the occasional form of an unconscious sailor. Just as they were coming to the end of the block, a door was thrown open, spilling light across the cobbles. Katrien blinked at the sudden brightness.

"Back!" Tenori whispered sharply, grabbing Katrien's elbow and pulling her against the wall. She pressed her spine to the bricks, trying to make herself as small as possible. Seconds later, a cluster of men stumbled from the doorway, laughing and shouting incoherently. They were all enormous, tall and thickly-muscled. Amadi clamped a hand over her mouth to stifle a gasp.

It seemed ages before the door closed and the men finally dispersed, leaving the alleyway darker and quieter than ever. Even after, it was a time before Katrien could breathe properly.

"Did you see the sign over the door?" Tenori breathed. Katrien shook her head. She had been too concerned

with the men below the sign.

"Well, it's the standard of the Cleaver's Boys. Cruel, ruthless hirelings. This is their headquarters."

Katrien's eyes widened. "I've heard of them. Even in Whitland, everyone knows their name."

Tenori nodded. "We should go. We've lingered too long."

Katrien's nerves were on fire as they crept beneath the sign of the Cleaver's Boys. At the rasping scrabble of a rat's claws, she gave a start and nearly dropped the blanket from her shoulders.

Even Tenori did not dare speak, though he touched

her elbow to warn her to keep calm.

Five more steps down, the alleyway ended. No longer worried about the reek, Katrien drew a deep breath.

"We're safer now," Tenori whispered, picking up his pace once more. "The neighborhoods past here are home to a few wealthier merchant families, the sort with their own private moorings just below their windows."

Katrien understood the need for haste by the time they reached the outskirts of the city. Dawn was beginning to break, and the city was waking up around them. Several men hurried past on their way to work, and each gave the three travelers very odd looks. It was a relief to reach the gates themselves, standing ajar beneath a tall arch of wrought iron, and slip past the yawning guards into the open land beyond.

Though she had sailed past this country twice before, Katrien had forgotten the sheer scale of the kingdom. The place they had come upon was not just a field; rather, it was the start of the vast, barren Darden plains, which stretched west to the mountains and south nearly to Lostport. Dewdrops shimmered along every stalk of grass, while the first rays of sunlight were beginning to seep above the hazy ridge of mountains to their east. Katrien drew a deep breath of fresh, earthy air and felt the tension of the Twin Cities scatter behind her.

It was only then that she realized which direction Tenori had turned. He was now leading them toward a cluster of tents, wagons, and bustling figures tucked beneath the shadow of the city wall.

"We're bringing wagons?" Katrien asked wryly. "I could have kept my proper dress."

Tenori snorted. "You do not want to sit in a wagon for an entire span. Your backside would be so purple your husband would accuse me of—"

Katrien gave him a stern look. She did not want Amadi to get any ideas.

As they drew nearer to the makeshift camp, Katrien could hear at least two dogs barking and a host of children yelling and shrieking as their parents readied to move out.

"What're the kids doing here?" Amadi asked. "They're not going to help build the city, are they?"

Katrien looked at Tenori, guessing his answer before he gave it.

"You saw what it was like. Foreigners no longer feel safe with the Whitish rule tightening its hold here. If I had a family, I would have left the Twin Cities long ago."

When Amadi skipped ahead to get a better look at the camp, Katrien asked quietly, "Have you ever wished for a family?"

"Occasionally." Tenori tugged at the straps of his heavy sack. "But I have been too busy—and perhaps too arrogant—to make time for a woman."

Katrien nodded. She knew how he felt. "It was misery that tore me from Faolan—I nearly ended my own life before he sent me home to Whitland. But there was arrogance, too. I thought I was too good for Lostport. Too civilized. I didn't realize until far too late that it is the Whitlanders who are savage."

"It's not too late yet," Tenori said. "Not until this sweet land is burned to ash and every honest man along with it"

Katrien clutched her split skirts with sweaty hands, trying not to betray her nerves.

By the time Katrien and Tenori came within hailing distance of the camp, Amadi had vanished within the milling hordes of people, presumably chasing after either the children or the dogs that had caught her attention before. They were noticed before long; clearly Tenori was a

familiar face, because everyone seemed to know who his companion was.

"Queen Katrien!" a woman called.

"Your majesty!"

To Katrien's utter bewilderment, several young men dropped to their knees as she drew near. She could not understand it—they did not owe her their allegiance. Before she could ask what they intended by the gesture, a plump Varrilan man shouldered his way to the front of the crowd.

"Tenori! I almost did not expect you."

Tenori clasped the man's hand. "I would not miss this chance for all the riches of Dardensfell. Aloor, may I have the pleasure of introducing you to Queen Katrien?"

The plump man bowed expansively, mimicking the Whitish gesture. "Ah, the vengeful flower. Well met, Queen Katrien. I was once known as one of the wealthiest men in the Twin Cities, yet I have decided that my people need me more than my estate does."

"You are too modest," Tenori said. "Aloor is one of the most influential voices behind the Varrilan resistance. We needed a cause and a figurehead, and you have supplied us with both. Aloor has mobilized his resources to provide us the means to reach Lostport."

"You supplied all of this?" Katrien looked around at the milling horses and wagons and supplies, shaking her head in disbelief. "Thank you, good sir. I am forever indebted to you."

"And I to you." Aloor bowed again.

When the first curious Dardens approached the bustling camp, Aloor gave a shout that it was time to move. He mounted a handsome, sturdy black stallion and began riding around the camp, supervising the last-minute preparations and helping where an extra hand was needed.

Bundles of food and bedding and warm clothes were thrown haphazardly into wagons, horses were saddled, and slowly the milling throng of Varrilans and Dardens began to migrate away from the city wall.

Katrien had never ridden in her life; she watched as Amadi stood on one stirrup, flopped herself over the saddle, and wriggled her way into place, trying to see if there was an easier way. Tenori had mounted with a graceful leap, something she could not be trusted to achieve.

"What're you waiting for?" Amadi asked, grinning down at Katrien from her new perch. "No one's watching. Except me." Her grin turned impish.

With the most dignity she could muster, Katrien put one foot in a stirrup and raised herself alongside the saddle. When her horse gave a snort and shifted sideways, she nearly fell off. Frowning at the saddle, she lifted her knee high enough to clear the horse's rump, and by inching her knee slowly along the saddle, she managed to gain enough leverage to pull herself upright. The horse felt very wobbly beneath her, and far too high off the ground.

"That could have been more elegant," Amadi teased.

"You must show me your ways, oh great horse-master," Katrien said.

Amadi snorted.

Only then did Katrien realize that they were lagging behind the others. She and Amadi kicked their horses into a bumpy trot; thankfully the horses seemed eager to follow the herd, since Katrien was still unsure how they ought to be directed.

"To Lostport!" Tenori shouted.

"Lostport!" Aloor's voice boomed over the train of riders. "For justice!"

They rode at a light trot—anything faster would

destroy the wagons—and at first Katrien was overwhelmed by the dust and the drumming hoof-beats and, more than anything, the fear of falling. Before long, her body began to move with the chestnut horse beneath her, and the clamor of the train faded to a lull. A new awareness billowed around her, that of vast emptiness. Every detail was sharpened out here, from the golden hue of the rolling hills to the brilliant sky to the smell of sun-burnt earth. This was a land still raw and wild.

Some of the charm was lost when they re-mounted after a quick lunch; Katrien's thighs ached, her knees had gone stiff, and a blister was beginning to swell on her right palm where she had gripped the reins too fiercely. The afternoon was a monotony of jarring hooves and blinding sunlight. By the time they slowed to make camp, Katrien could have fallen off the horse.

"Ugh," Amadi said, limping up to Tenori's campfire after she had changed out of her riding clothes. "I should've stayed in the city."

"Go find yourself a handsome horse-master and see if he wants to give you a massage," Katrien said. As she settled onto the grass, she could not suppress a groan. Sitting cross-legged was excruciating.

When Amadi turned and stalked off, Katrien hoped she had not taken the idea to heart.

"I'm sore, too," Tenori admitted, adding a handful of beans, rice, and chopped potatoes to the charred pot nestled amidst what looked like flaming mounds of dirt. "I really have let myself grow soft. Riding takes a lot out of you."

Katrien nodded, massaging her stiff knees. "What are you burning?"

Tenori laughed. "We call them buffalo pies. With no wood out here to burn, we have to use dried buffalo

excrement."

"Ugh!" Katrien moved a bit farther from the fire. "Will it contaminate the food?"

"Only if you like seasoning your stew with ashes."

"Sometimes I wish I had never left Whitland." Katrien hugged her knees to her chest, trying to get comfortable.

"Is this one of those occasions?"

She shrugged. If she had never been put under house arrest, or assaulted by the same guards who were meant to protect the citizens of Whitland, she would have lived out the rest of her days alone in the city. It would have been a comfortable, albeit empty, existence.

Yet in times like this, she would give anything to return to those days of easy ignorance. Here she was facing the unknown, launching into a journey far harsher than she was prepared for, with no guarantee of a glad welcome awaiting her at the end. What if Faolan had found himself a pretty young mistress? What if he had readily agreed to Whitland's aid, and would see her arrival—troops in her wake—as treason?

And what if they arrived too late?

"I just wish I knew I was doing the right thing," she said at last.

Tenori gestured at the camp surrounding them. "Look at everyone who has chosen to follow you. You are doing the right thing by them. That is what truly matters."

## Chapter 16

A rap on the door startled Laina from her restless sleep. "Come in," she mumbled, rubbing her eyes. It took her a moment to recognize Harrow standing in the doorway, just as bleary-eyed as she was.

"Did you stay the night?" she asked, instantly alert. Sitting up, she hugged the blankets to her chest.

"Of course," Harrow said wearily. "Your father is still unconscious. As his adviser, I must keep his affairs in order while he is unable to attend to them. Though you, perhaps, might be the more appropriate person to do so."

"Says who?" Laina asked, with only a touch of bitterness.

"If your brother was here, the task would go to him," Harrow said. "Since he is not..."

Laina sighed. For years she had felt bitter about her uselessness, yet now that she had a chance to step up and prove herself, she would rather just slink back into obscurity. "Give me a moment. I'll meet you downstairs."

As Laina changed into her most sensible, least comfortable dress, her mind was far from the task at hand. Surely her father would wake soon—if his condition was too dire, some grasping heir from Whitland would show up before long. What would happen if Laina began to fill her father's role, only to make a fatal mistake that she would never be forgiven for? What if word of her scheming made

its way to Whitland, and the High King himself came for her head?

It was with great reluctance that she finally descended the stairs to find Harrow. She clasped her hands behind her back, afraid at any moment she would be called out for the imposter she was.

"Good morning, your majesty," Harrow said, standing as she entered the dining hall.

Laina attempted a smile, but it felt brittle.

"Sit down. I have a lot to tell you. You'll need some breakfast—you look as though you might faint."

"I do not," Laina retorted, though she immediately regretted it. She sounded childish.

As Mylo plied her with porridge and fruit and sweet rolls, her father's adviser began to outline the role she would be taking on.

"I have become accustomed to the everyday business of running Lostport," Harrow said, folding his hands on the table. "I am happy to oversee taxes, shipping levies, port security, and commonplace disputes. However, everything involved in the Port Emerald project requires a bit more authority...and finesse. We will give you the records of every transaction still in progress, along with the official agreements settled between King Luistan and King Faolan.

"I must stress that this information is highly sensitive, as is the fact that a great deal of disguised tension has arisen between the two kings. Whitland has been pressing its advantage on Lostport, asking for increasingly expensive supplies, lodging, and transportation. Worse still, they have been getting away with harassing the local shopkeepers and vandalizing public property, and every time Faolan raises his concerns with King Luistan, the High King threatens to withdraw his assistance.

"Which would leave Lostport deep in debt, with a halffinished building site that won't last the winter."

Laina said nothing. She had not realized how tense the negotiations between her father and the High King had become; if she spoke now, she would reveal her utter naiveté.

"This is why we need you," Harrow said, leaning forward with urgency. "If we were to conduct negotiations in your father's stead, any misstep could land us behind bars on account of treason. You, however, will be legally recognized as your father's proxy, and when King Luistan treats with you, he will abide by your word as though the power of Lostport stands behind it."

"I see," Laina said quietly. "And how has my father been doing this? Discouraging Whitland from overstepping its bounds, I mean."

"He's been trying," Harrow said wearily. "And that's the most he can do. We're nothing but a pawn that Whitland can toss wherever it wants. If we step too far out of line, they'll crush us. We don't matter to them."

"We would have been better off without their meddling," Laina said. "I know why Father is building Port Emerald, but it doesn't seem worth the price."

"Many in Lostport would agree with you." Harrow traced his fingers around his neat, rectangular beard. "But watch yourself. Those words are treason."

Laina could stomach no more of her breakfast, so she followed Harrow to her father's office to familiarize herself with the paperwork.

"These files are the standard tax forms, and all of these are building permits owned by our citizens." Harrow lifted two boxes onto her father's desk. "I will take these home, with your permission, and set myself up to work from there. Rest assured that I will bring any matters of dispute

to you before announcing a verdict."

Laina nodded. "Thank you." She stood in front of her father's desk, glancing from her father's plush chair to the two sturdy wooden seats across the desk from it. Many a day her father had sat here with his adviser for hours, arguing over dilemmas and planning Port Emerald and moaning at the state of the kingdom over a glass of wine. She knew; she had eavesdropped more times than she was willing to admit. Meanwhile, her brother had been learning to fight with a sword and studying the history of Whitland and the Kinship Thrones.

When Harrow settled into his customary seat, Laina realized he was expecting her to take her father's place. Not daring to breathe, she crossed to the opposite side of the dark emberwood desk and perched gingerly on his chair. It felt wrong, all of it.

"Those drawers are for Port Emerald and all other matters involving Whitland." Harrow gestured at a set of three drawers to the right of the plush armchair. "The top papers are pressing matters; the middle drawer has any unfinished negotiations that have fallen by the wayside; and the bottom contains documents that are signed and officially completed. We might be wisest to begin by explaining the first of the urgent paperwork."

Laina tugged at the top drawer, dismayed to find it so crammed with papers that it resisted opening. She chose a slip at random and set it on the table, turning it so Harrow could read it.

"Ah, I'd forgotten about this one." Harrow made a face. "I believe it recently graduated from the second drawer into the more urgent one." He read it very quickly and returned it to Laina. "This is an outline of permissible logging areas and densities. As anyone who has spent a winter in Lostport knows, removing trees from the slopes

will dramatically increase the risk of slips or avalanches, yet King Luistan has been pushing Faolan unrelentingly to expand the areas open for logging. The supply road could be washed out for a full span if he's not careful."

"I thought they were building the city out of stone," Laina said. "Why do they need so many logs? Surely they won't be using enough to cause any problems."

Harrow shook his head. "You underestimate the number of construction workers and the scale of the project. Though the buildings are stone, most of them have extensive supports to allow them to perch on the hillside. In addition, the terraces and scaffolding are entirely wood. That's not even accounting for the wood used in the forges.

"The trouble is that no one's quite sure what 'too much' is. No one's studied this before. We just know that more logging means more slips, so we can't give King Luistan an exact figure to negotiate around."

"I'll work on it," Laina said. She could ask Swick for help—this was the sort of work he would adore.

They continued going through the drawer for the rest of the morning, until Laina was beginning to grasp the official wording and format used from document to document. The more they dug into the drawer, though, the more onerous the task appeared. It was impossible for one person to actually keep track of everything involved in the building project. The drawer contained everything from claims of injury to negotiations for water rights of each river along the forest road to unapproved building plans for nearly every structure currently in progress at Port Emerald.

At the end of it, Harrow said, "I'm famished. Put those papers away, would you? I can't stand to look at another one."

"How does my father manage?" Laina asked, rubbing her eyes.

Harrow shook his head. "You see why Whitland is so easily able to press its advantage now, I imagine. While Faolan is tied up with never-ending paperwork, the building troops are able to get away with quite a bit. They have the advantage of numbers."

"Can I see my father?" Laina asked nervously. She was afraid of what she would find.

"Of course." Harrow rose, his knees cracking, and tucked the two boxes of paperwork under his arm. "I've detained you too long already."

When Laina was alone in the office, she slumped back in her father's chair and raked her fingers through her hair. This was a nightmare! She had been so quick to blame her father for giving the Whitlanders too much freedom; now it was clear that King Luistan had laid a tedious trap for him. Even if she spoke with her father's full authority, she was not sure anything she decided would make a difference. King Luistan had thrown so many forms their way that they could get lost in the minutia—arguing over who had commission rights for tools and embellishments involved in the project, or which rivers the workers were allowed to dirty and which must remain clean for drinking—and forget that the true problem was the overwhelming presence of so many Whitlanders in Lostport, all following the High King's orders and geared up for war.

Just as she stood to leave, Nort pushed open the door and bowed at her.

"A letter arrived just now, milady." He handed her a sealed parchment and retreated.

Did tending to her father's business include reading his mail? Hesitantly she broke the seal and unfolded the letter.

To her surprise, she recognized the handwriting as Doran's. She realized with some shame that she had hardly spared her brother a passing thought in recent days. The escalating situation in Lostport had consumed her.

Dear Father and Laina,

I am settling in very well here. I have been given a wing of a splendid seaside palace—far grander than our own home. The best part is that my wing does not have any infernal stairs. I have a wheeled chair that I can maneuver myself, so I do not have to be followed around by tiresome servants all day. My rooms open onto a wide balcony, where I conduct most of my studies.

How goes the road to Port Emerald? And has the building project commenced? I do hope that you have been able to appoint an heir to rule in my stead, as Whitland seems poised to press its advantage.

I hope you are well. I think of you daily. I would love to hear word from you.

Fond wishes, Doran

Laina read the letter through three times, wondering if Doran had any idea of how dire the situation in Lostport had become. At last she stood and made her way to her father's grand bedroom at the end of the hall, wishing she could read the letter to him. The bedroom was too large for one man alone; whenever Laina ventured inside, she was reminded more fiercely than ever of the loss of the mother she had never known. As a young child, she had resented her mother for vanishing, though as she grew older, her father had revealed the truth—her mother had been heartsick to be trapped so far from her own kin, in a barely

civilized settlement at the ends of the earth, and her sadness had nearly cost her own life. Now Laina pitied her mother and wished she had another chance to prove that Lostport could be more than just a desolate outpost.

Nort was waiting outside the doors, and he nodded when Laina asked if she could see her father.

"He's sleeping," Nort whispered. "Peacefully now, thank the Seducer."

Laina nodded and tiptoed past the guard.

Inside, the room was musty and overheated, though the smell was disguised by a floral aroma. Barrik was there, along with a healer from town, and both were keeping her father's forehead cool with rags. The cast of his skin looked almost feverish.

"Is he going to recover?" Laina asked timidly, venturing to the bedside and taking her father's limp hand.

"Almost undoubtedly," the healer said. "He was confused when he first woke, though he has since regained some of his clarity. He appears to have taken ill while out in the forest, however. We must hope that the fever does not interfere with his recovery."

Laina swallowed. How could she have been so careless? "Is there anything I can do to help?"

"I'm afraid not." The healer gave a long sigh. "The most he can ask for right now is rest and quiet."

Laina nodded, feeling less than useless. Bidding the healer and guards farewell, she slunk off to return to her father's paperwork.

Since she had no idea where to begin, she packed the entire contents of the top drawer into a large traveling case and headed downstairs in hopes of visiting Jairus and Swick. On the way she stopped in the kitchen, mostly to see if the household staff decided to blame her or look up to her. Mylo was the only one sitting by the fire when she

rounded the corner; he was hunched over a stack of clams and splitting them open.

"Good to see you, my dear," he said, his smile guarded. "Or should I say, your majesty?"

"Oh, don't be silly," Laina said. "It's just a temporary role. Don't get too used to bowing to me."

"Perhaps we should," Mylo said, getting laboriously to his feet. "Though King Faolan will never admit it, he would cede Lostport to you if he could. Doran barely has the will to live, let alone set the kingdom's affairs in order."

"Right." Laina folded her arms. "Are you any good with sums?" She might as well ask—he was the likeliest of their household to know these sorts of things.

"Simple ones," Mylo said, cupping her cheeks in his hands. "You look weary. How are you coping?"

Laina shrugged. "I've wanted this sort of responsibility for my entire life, and now that I have it, I just want my father to get better again." She looked quickly away, eyes stinging.

"I suggest you speak to Master Swick," Mylo said. "He's far more knowledgeable than me in those sorts of matters."

"That's where I'm heading now, actually."

"Well, don't forget your lunch." Mylo handed her a cloth tied around what smelled like a fresh-baked meat pie. It was as if Mylo had already known she would be going out.

"Thank you." Laina embraced Mylo briefly, and he blinked at her in surprise. She was so uncertain of everything just now that a small measure of confidence meant everything to her.

It was sunny and peaceful out, entirely at odds with the turmoil she left behind. The light had a burnt orange cast to it, the glow of late summer—before long the flowers would fade and the rains would come. Laina took the stairs down to the city with more care than usual, afraid she would lose the precious satchel of documents. She should have invited Swick to join her at the manor, rather than risk damaging the most important paperwork in all of Lostport, but her motivation had been partly selfish. It was a relief to leave the house.

As she approached the town, Laina had a strong feeling that something was not quite right. At first she could not put her finger on it; then she realized that most of the open-fronted stores were closed and locked tight, and the only people milling about were dressed in Whitish garb.

Her people were beginning to rebel.

When she reached the Seal's Roost, she half expected to be denied entry. Thankfully the man guarding the door was the bartender who had become accustomed to her presence, and he unlatched the door without a word. Once inside, Laina turned to him with a frown.

"What is the meaning of all this? Has the town gone under siege?"

The barman scratched his beard. "I'm surprised you haven't heard. The owner of the general store shut his doors last night, saying there wasn't near enough stock to feed the townspeople, let alone the whole blasted army, and he was fed up with the looting and harassment. Well, the Whitlanders didn't take that very well. When I went for a walk this morning, the man's supply ship wasn't more than a smoking ruin in the harbor, and the general store had its doors busted in."

"Nine plagues." Laina was disgusted. High King Luistan was hardly making an effort to disguise his army as a peaceful labor force. Unless the High King had lost control over his own troops, which was more disconcerting

still.

"Strange days, these are," the barman muttered. "I expect you're after the mapmaker?"

Laina nodded, scanning the room. She had not been certain she would find Swick here, and it certainly looked as though he had gone out.

"He should be back shortly. Something about checking out a derelict building down the road."

"Mind if I wait?" Laina set the satchel of papers beside Swick's customary table and sank into a chair.

The barman chuckled. "Do we look busy? I'll bring you a drink."

Since it was still morning, the barman gave Laina a hot chocolate, which she sipped without noticing what she was doing. If only her brother was still around. He had never been one for negotiating—though he was clever, he turned shy in the face of argument—yet he would have been able to reason his way to the root of their troubles. He would have sorted through the paperwork with ease, separating the issues that mattered from the ones intended to distract.

If the matter had been less pressing, she would have written him a letter begging for his advice. Better still, she would have pleaded with him to return home. He had been in Chelt too long already.

She was just draining the last syrupy drops of her hot chocolate when Swick and Jairus slipped into the inn.

"Laina." Swick smiled generously. "Just the person I most wished to see."

Quickly Laina wiped chocolate from her upper lip.

"What do you make of this mess?" Swick asked. "Events have been moving too quickly. I fear Whitland may press its advantage before long."

Laina waited until Jairus and Swick had taken seats across from her before she whispered, "You've started the gemstones, then?"

"We have the space for it," Swick said. "It's an old forge just past the town. I think it was flooded some time ago; I can't think why else the owner would have abandoned such a charming place."

"And the cave," Jairus said. "Show her where it is."

Swick pulled a crumpled map from his trousers and smoothed it before Laina. It looked like a hasty sketch, though the road seemed accurate enough. "See, just there?" Swick jabbed his finger at a tiny black spot just behind the mountain at the head of the Port Emerald fjord. "It's an extensive cave, though it drops off a bit too steeply to encourage thorough exploration. There is a small side chamber just past the entrance where we thought the treasure ought to be hidden. It's hard to find, so it won't seem like a complete hoax, yet it's obvious enough that men will not lose their way in the caverns trying to find it."

"That would solve a few of our problems, though," Laina said.

Jairus gave her a fleeting smile.

"But we've been impolite. Why have you come to visit us, milady?" Swick asked, accepting a foaming mug from the barman. "Has your father's condition worsened?"

Laina shook her head quickly. "It's not that. Well, I suppose it is. With my father unable to attend official business, his adviser has told me it's my responsibility to step up and fill in for him.

"Can he not do it himself?" Jairus asked. "Surely he is better versed in statecraft than you."

"No offense meant, of course," Swick said, giving Jairus a kick under the table, "but he's right."

"That's the problem." Laina lifted the bag of paperwork onto the table and dropped it in front of Swick. "I don't know a thing about managing a kingdom, but Harrow doesn't have the authority to treat directly with King Luistan on sensitive matters."

"Ah." Swick lifted the top of the satchel and narrowed his eyes at the formidable stack of papers. "When you say 'sensitive matters,' does that mean your father and the High King have their disagreements on this project?"

"Yes. Very much so." Laina noticed that Swick was suddenly very alert. "They've been disagreeing all along, it seems. My father has kept the matter quiet, but I don't think he's pleased with King Luistan's interference. He just can't do much about it. That's what all of this paperwork is—small advantages the High King is trying to weasel out of my father, while distracting him from the actual problem."

"And what do you want us for?" Jairus asked a bit defensively.

"I need help deciphering these," Laina said. "I need to learn how to do complex sums, and I need to know which of these sound fair and which are completely unreasonable."

"I have a suspicion every one of them is unreasonable," Swick said.

Laina slipped the top several papers from the stack. "You're probably right. But if we can figure these out, we can keep the High King's army from doing ridiculous things like raiding our warehouses and camping out in my father's hall."

"Maybe." Swick took the top paper and gave it a cursory glance. "Or maybe they're completely beyond his control. I would have expected King Luistan to exercise more caution with his forces."

For the remainder of the afternoon, Laina sat with Jairus and Swick as they pored over the never-ending stack of contracts and proposals and decrees. Swick's expression grew grimmer and grimmer as they tackled the paperwork; when Laina finally asked him what was bothering him, he snorted.

"Those meddling bastards. They even want to buy your water rights! And look here." He brandished a crumpled paper at Laina. "This one demands that your father surrender the rights to his own house, should it be needed for strategic purposes."

Laina grabbed the paper in alarm. "He didn't sign it, surely?"

"It looks like a decree, not an agreement," Jairus said. "His consent was not necessary."

No wonder her father had crumpled the page in frustration.

\* \* \*

Conard had arrived in the soldiers' camp at a fortuitous time. With the influx of new builders, he was hardly given a second glance, and he was able to accompany the men he'd met at the gypsy camp as they were given campsites and a tour of the project.

Now that he got a proper look at it, Conard realized that the city was progressing more quickly than he had realized. Terraces snaked their way along every slope, ousting the trees, which were now confined to decorative clusters. Foundations and frames dotted the mountainsides, and even from far below Conard could see the insect-like building crews swarming about the unfinished structures. Amidst the half-built homes, a few completed ones stood out—elegant stone creations that suited the majestic setting perfectly.

The project director had noticed the direction of Conard's gaze. "That's the future home of one Grayler Barridon. He's quite possibly the wealthiest man in Whitland; owns most of the banks in the country, along with most of the jewel-merchants. You can see why that's a strategic place for him."

Conard shielded his eyes from the sun and peered more closely at the stone mansion. It was built along several levels of the slope, with supports anchoring it into the terrace below and three delicate towers rising above its pale green roof. The man who lived there would have a stunning view of the fjord, the harbor, and the mountains beyond. A fleeting thought came to him—why did he have to sabotage the building effort? What if he and Laina found a diplomatic way to persuade the builders to return home after completing Port Emerald, leaving Varrival to its own devices, and he was able to use his earnings to buy Laina the house with the best view in the harbor?

It was nothing but foolishness. If Laina knew what he was thinking, she would immediately suspect him of changing allegiances.

"You lot can start with hauling stones," the director said. "We haven't got horses, so you're responsible for the brute labor. Once you've proved your worth, you'll be reassigned." Hands on his hips, he eyed the group of new arrivals. "If any of you louts has a bit of experience behind you, don't keep quiet. Come and tell me now, before it's too late."

Four men shouldered their way to the front of the group. The director spoke to them briefly before pointing each in a different direction. One of them, a lithe, delicate-looking man with blonde hair down to his shoulders, was sent straight back to Conard's crew of beginners.

"What?" Conard muttered, moving aside to make room for him in the group. "You trying to get out of moving stones?" The man flushed. "I've worked on buildings before. I'm a mathematician, though. Captain Drail wasn't impressed."

"What's your name?" Conard asked.

"Ian. Yours?"

"Kellar. You're probably better off than me. I'll be stuck hauling bricks for the rest of my life, knowing my luck. I haven't a clue how to build things."

Ian grinned. "You can haul my bricks, and I'll teach you how the dimensions work."

"Fat chance," Conard said.

Conard could see how the other men looked at Ian. They seemed to be smiling at a private joke whenever he passed, and Conard suspected his ill luck with the building promotion had only further tainted his reputation. For the rest of the first day, Conard tried to elude Ian's company, hoping to avoid being grouped with a weakling. It was his task, after all, to befriend the builders. He wouldn't win any allies if he kept the company of loners.

No one could talk much that first day, regardless, because each man was assigned a stack of fifty stones and instructed to carry each one to a specific building site. What looked like a haphazard splay of houses was actually designed on a grid system, with each terrace assigned a number and each set of stairs leading up the terrace given a letter. Conard and each of the other builders was able to pick out their destination, written as a number and a letter, from a map showing the various sites.

On his first trip to the building site, Conard heaved two bricks on top of one another and staggered up the hill one ponderous step at a time, trying not to collapse under the weight. It had seemed like a good idea at the bottom of the hill, but halfway to his destination, he dropped to one knee and let both bricks thud to the ground. "Bloody plagues!" he gasped, sitting heavily on the closest brick. From his vantage point, he recognized several of the other men in his group, including Ian, each climbing a different flight of stairs. It seemed that he had been given one of the highest destinations, curse them.

So much for his vanity. Once he had caught his breath, Conard wiped grimy sweat from the back of his neck and hoisted one of the two bricks, leaving the other where it sat. Somehow it felt just as heavy as the two of them combined.

By the time he reached the building site, his arms had gone numb and his back ached. How was he supposed to carry up forty-nine more of the same?

One of the men working at this building site, which was little more than a foundation, hailed Conard.

"Is it just you?" he grunted. "We're promised four stone-haulers, and they send us a bloody child."

"Go stuff yourself," Conard muttered, too quiet for the man to hear. Louder, he said, "Just me. One of you could come help, if you're getting impatient."

"Bugger off," the man said.

Conard dropped the brick and slouched away. He couldn't stop thinking of the pile of white bricks, towering at the base of the hill...

He delivered the second brick quickly, since it was already halfway up the hillside, and took much longer with the third. It was past noon, and his stomach was rumbling, but the man at the building site yelled abuse at him for his tardiness. By the time he staggered back down to the mountain of bricks, he realized there was no way he would make a dent in the pile before the sun went down. After that he started walking slower, taking breaks every few terraces and wishing he had thought to bring food.

The sun dropping behind the mountains was the most welcome sight Conard had ever known. He limped down

the last four steps and collapsed atop his pile of bricks, only vaguely aware that the new recruits around him were doing the same.

Once he had caught his breath, Conard began eyeing the other piles of stone nearby, trying to gauge how well he had done. He had certainly made more progress than Ian, though several of the men were down to a mere handful of bricks. One had hauled the entire load, by the look of it.

When the project director—Captain Drail, Ian had called him—reappeared from the camp headquarters, Conard stood wearily and tried not to draw the man's attention.

"Bet you're hungry," he said, stepping onto a pair of bricks so the men could see him more easily. "I don't even know if we ought to feed you, though. Much less useful than a team of oxen. This fellow over here managed to carry out the task given to him; the rest of you lot have proven yourselves next to worthless. Come up here, young fellow."

The man who had moved every one of his fifty bricks slouched up to Captain Drail. He was a hulking man, tall and broad-shouldered and sullen.

"You, sir, will be reassigned tomorrow morning. The rest of you lot will continue hauling bricks until you've managed to do your job properly."

A collective groan went around the circle.

It was now so dark that Conard was having trouble picking out faces from the trees enclosing their work-site. Captain Drail directed the new recruits to a dining tent, where they filled their plates from a long table and returned outside to eat. Other men made their way for groups of tents huddled around individual campfires, the flames flickering gold beneath the dark branches, but Conard and most of the other new arrivals dispersed. There was no

welcoming fire at their tents.

Though he had sworn to befriend the others, Conard could not bear the thought of making conversation tonight. He was weary inside and out, too exhausted even to piece together words. Instead he slipped past the tents and down to the beach, moving by the light of the waning moon.

Once the trees gave way to silvery sand, Conard sat wearily on a driftwood log and wolfed down his already-cooled dinner. He could not say exactly what it was—some soggy mixture of foraged vegetables and hunted meat—but he could not remember a more satisfying meal.

Then he dropped to the sand and leaned against the driftwood, staring out at the water. He knew this beach, of course. The place had changed since he and his father had discovered it, though; it was now almost unrecognizable. The gemstone-littered beach they had stumbled across had been a wild place, inaccessible and untouched. Now the forest had been cut back, freeing the waterfront from its protective line of trees, and the beach was littered with the remnants of a hundred bonfires.

Sitting there in the dark, a clamor of doubts began nudging against Conard's thoughts. If he succeeded in the scheme Laina had set for him, he would be working directly to sabotage the king. He was already exiled, and could be sentenced to death if he was recognized.

What would be worse? If he lost Laina and kept his life—it could even be a good one, if he devoted himself to a worthy profession—or if he put his life on the line for the slim chance that he *might* be able to drive away the Whitish builders and *might* win himself a royal pardon and *might* be able to ask for Laina's hand in marriage?

Who was he kidding? He was not eligible to marry the future ruler of Lostport. He had been doomed in that respect long before he nearly killed Doran.

Yet he could not abandon this path. Whatever insanity it was that drove him to risk his life for the kingdom, it had not loosened its grip on him.

Stars were beginning to emerge in the velvet sky, mocking his resolve. The world is infinite, they seemed to say. Why chain yourself to one doomed corner of a many-faced land?

Rubbing his eyes in annoyance, Conard stood and collected his plate. It was harder finding the way back now, but eventually he could follow the soft patches of light and columns of smoke given off by campfires until he caught sight of the dining tent.

Ian sat outside the tent, alone and staring into the woods with a sullen expression.

"What are you up to?" Conard asked, stopping before him.

"Thinking about how daft I was to join this wretched army," Ian grumbled. "Everyone back home called me a girl, said I wasn't good for anything but dreaming and wasting time, so I thought I'd serve in Varrival and come home a proper warrior. Only they tease me here too, and I'm no stronger than I started out. I wish I could just crawl into a cave and let everyone forget about me."

For a moment Conard wished he hadn't stopped to talk to the man. He didn't want to hear these sniveling complaints, especially not since they mirrored his own thoughts so closely. "We've just started," he said heavily. "I'm not much stronger than you; I just look like I am. Once we've been hauling stones for forty days, you'll be unrecognizable."

"Sure," Ian said sarcastically. "I'm not giving up, though. Why did you come here? All the men have a reason. Some did it for the gold, some for the honor."

Conard settled on a half-truth. "Don't tell any of the others, but...I've got a girl back home. I did her a great

wrong once, and I have to redeem myself."

Ian gave him a thin smile. "Good to know I'm not the only dreamer around here."

Too right he was.

Conard slept so soundly that he didn't startle awake until most of the laborers had finished breakfast. Groggy and disoriented, he stumbled from his tent and knelt by a stream to splash water on his face. Every muscle ached, and none worse than his shoulders.

Breakfast was already being cleared away; he barely had time to grab two rock-hard rolls before he was shooed out of the dining tent. Gnawing on one of them, wishing for butter, he followed a pair of familiar faces back to the stack of bricks he had been working at the day before. Then he stopped in dismay.

The pile was exactly the height it had been the previous morning. Overnight, someone had added seventeen bricks to the pile until it rose fifty high once more.

Nearby, the other builders were muttering and stomping around in dismay. When Captain Drail strode from the trees, he cleared his throat and barked, "What's the holdup? You'll be hauling bricks for the rest of your sorry lives if you don't get a move on!"

Conard cursed and kicked at the closest brick, which just made his toe ache. There was no way in a thousand years he would be able to carry fifty of the bloody things in one day. No way.

He wanted to quit. That night he would turn and head straight up the pass and follow the forest road back to Lostport. Then he would jump on the first boat heading north.

And they would see his exile's bands. Conard rubbed

his wrists in frustration and lifted the first brick. There was no turning back now.

## Chapter 17

After a quarter of travel along the rolling Darden plains, Katrien and her company had fallen into a comfortable rhythm. What had begun as excruciating soreness had now dulled to a background ache, and the nights spent curled on a lumpy bed-roll were now eagerly anticipated rather than dreaded.

The farther they traveled, the more Katrien realized the open grassland was far less barren than she had first guessed. Herds of buffalo and packs of coyotes roamed the grasslands, along with deer, wolves, and hawks. Much of what looked like weedy grass to Katrien could in fact be eaten, which meant her companions and the roving bands of warriors they occasionally came across could easily fend for themselves while on the move.

As they rode south, Dardens and Varrilans and other enemies of Whitland continued to join their cause. At first, no more than one or two new arrivals trickled in each day; most of these were residents of the Twin Cities who had taken their time in preparing for departure. Now, though, a few bands of nomadic warriors had chosen to add their numbers to the party; these men rode on the outskirts of the group, always alert and silent. A few Varrilans had even travelled all the way up from Varrival to join the company, sweeping up from the southern end of the great mountain range and intercepting them as they went. Word had

traveled fast, it seemed.

Amadi had recovered quickly from the disappointment of leaving the Twin Cities. Katrien hadn't heard a word of complaint from her in days now. The girl seemed to thrive in the open plains—though Katrien still thought Amadi's riding clothes were improper, they suited the girl perfectly. Most days, Katrien saw Amadi riding at the head of the company, often asking questions of the Darden warriors or leaning close to confer with a young Varrilan man who had taken her fancy.

On the third day after Amadi met the young man, she brought him to Katrien's fire for dinner.

Though Katrien wished to warn the young man away from Amadi at once, she decided to give him a chance.

"Good evening," she said, gesturing to one of the rolled-up blankets opposite where she sat by the fire. "I have seen you from afar, but I don't believe we have met. My name is Katrien."

"Begging your pardon, but everyone knows that," the young man said with a mischievous sideways look. "You're famous here. The lost queen, some of them are calling you. Here to save not just Lostport but the entire empire."

Katrien folded her arms and studied the young Varrilan. "I wish they would stop that nonsense. My aim is simply to remove the Whitish builders, not to stir up a revolution against the High King. If those are the stories you've been told, many of your people will be terribly disappointed when we reach Lostport. And you still haven't told me your name."

The young man folded himself onto the blanket roll, moving with grace despite the lankiness of his still-adolescent limbs. "Kurjan, Milady. I arrived with the Varrilan contingent five days ago."

Amadi sat beside Kurjan, leaning toward him but

maintaining a hair's breadth of separation. Katrien suspected her brilliant smile hid a measure of uncertainty. *She seeks my approval*, Katrien realized suddenly. The outwardly fearless girl still needed reassurance.

"Your Whitish is very good," Katrien said, trying to make the boy feel welcome. She handed a bowl and ladle to Kurjan.

He shrugged. "I mostly grew up at the Borderlands school. It doesn't belong to any throne, exactly, but the lessons are all in Whitish."

"Tell her why you were there," Amadi whispered loudly as Kurjan began ladling wild pheasant stew into his pot.

"She'll suspect I'm trying to manipulate her," he replied with a sidelong glance at Katrien. He was clever, this Kurjan.

"Tell me whatever you wish," Katrien said. "I can tell you my story, if that helps. Though you probably already know a much more interesting version of it."

Amadi giggled. "Some of the warriors are saying King Faolan is under a spell, and you've found the counter-spell. They also think you're going to make the land rise up against the Whitish throne, or something like that. I can't tell if they think the trees are going to gobble up everything, or if the ground is just going to open up and swallow the capital."

"They sound very creative," Katrien said. "But I thought the warriors were supposed to guard us, not gossip about magic."

"I wouldn't say they're *supposed* to do anything," Kurjan said mildly. "They've joined your cause because they believe in it. They're guarding us because they can do it better than anyone." He nudged Amadi in the ribs. "And if you want to know what I was doing at the lakeside school, it's the same

reason why I've joined your cause—my parents were both killed in a Whitish raid. We were having a drought that year, so a few brave families moved into the borderlands to farm and keep us alive through the winter, but the Whitish soldiers decided we had invaded their lands and burned the two villages we had founded."

"Therein kindling your lifelong hatred of Whitland." Katrien took the proffered ladle and scraped up the last of the soup. "I don't see why Whitland is so possessive of its borderlands. They hardly see any use to begin with. There are leagues and leagues of fertile land lying untouched!"

"Exactly." Kurjan jabbed his spoon in Katrien's direction to emphasize his point. "We think it's unnecessary cruelty. But the Whitish hate the fact that we've slipped out of their control. They'll use any excuse to stamp us out."

Katrien sipped at her soup for a moment, thinking. There was clearly far more to this ride to Lostport than met the eye. She had started with the intention of ridding Lostport of its dangerous occupation by Whitish soldiers, and in the process ensuring that Whitland was not able to extend its reach any further, but each contingent that had joined her cause came for its own reasons. "And if I don't begin a revolution against Whitland?" Katrien asked. "Will my followers abandon me in disgust? I wanted this to be a quiet mission, a subtle extraction of troops. But it looks as though it will be anything but."

"Everyone wants something different," Kurjan said. "The politically savvy know that Whitland is broke and can't start anything without the jewels it's supposed to get from Lostport. The Varrilans living in the Twin Cities are fed up with the abuse and racism they're getting every day from Whitish guards, and they'll do anything to push Whitland back. And any Varrilans who remember the raids we've seen in the Borderlands are ready to march to war on

Whitland. But they'll lose. We aren't warriors, Lady Katrien. We're just very adaptable."

"What about the Darden warriors?" Katrien asked. For a young man, Kurjan knew more than he should; she wondered if his school took part in any political schemes.

"I don't know them well," Kurjan said, spreading his arms in a gesture of uncertainty. "But my guess is that there's a lot more to Dardensfell than anyone knows. They act as though they're close allies with Whitland, but only as far as politics go. Anyone you talk to on the streets is furious about the Whitish patrols causing havoc, and then the warriors are immediately flocking to your cause. I have a feeling there's a bit more to this than either of us can fathom."

"An interesting thought," Katrien said, tipping her bowl to drink the last of the soup. "You will have to join us again, young man, and teach us more. I clearly have much to learn. I've been far too sheltered, for the most part at my own choosing. I can see now how misguided I was."

"Didn't you say you thought Lostport was too rugged?" Amadi asked, still with the unnatural smile across her face. "And here you are now, sleeping on the ground and riding horses all day."

"Not to mention the fact that I can't remember the last time I had a bath."

Kurjan ducked his head to hide a grin. Once his expression was more serious, he set aside his bowl and rose. "Thank you for the dinner, Milady. It was a treat."

"And thank you for joining us," Katrien said. "It was a pleasure to meet you. Amadi, help me dig up the pillows." She began shuffling through a towering mound of supplies while Kurjan and Amadi said goodnight. They seemed stiffer than before; Amadi's smile had vanished, replaced by a sullen, uncertain look.

Once Kurjan had disappeared into the smoky crowd, Katrien returned to the fire and settled onto the blanket roll. "You were very quiet at dinner. Is something wrong?" She studied Amadi's hunched form, her features unreadable in the flickering firelight. "Have you decided you don't like him after all?"

Amadi shook her head.

"What is it, then?"

"He's so smart," Amadi moaned.

"Isn't that a good thing?" Moving closer, Katrien rubbed the girl's back, trying to hide her smile.

"But he knows so much. He knows everything about everyone. And he's been everywhere in the world. I'm so boring! I've just worked at one house for my entire life, and then ridden a boat down a river. Can you tell him I'm already promised to someone else?"

This time Katrien couldn't hide a chuckle. "That boy was just showing off. I'm certain you could amaze him with your knowledge of the Twin Cities and the class structure in Whitland."

"So exciting," Amadi muttered. "I wish you weren't here. If I was by myself, I'd tell him I came from Itrea, from the rebel city of Baylore. I'd make up all sorts of fascinating stories about the magic there, and no one would be able to say I was wrong."

"Falsehoods are not a good basis for romance," Katrien said, taking Amadi's chin in her hand. "Then again, political marriages are even less tolerable. If you want me to tell Kurjan you are not free for the taking, I certainly could. Aurum knows, there are more than enough young men running about."

"Hmph." Amadi stood and collected her bedroll, pausing to look in the direction Kurjan had vanished. Katrien took that to mean she had not given up on the

young man yet.

Though she had begun to adapt to the toils of the road, Katrien was plagued by greater worries than before. Had she started something too big, something that would spiral out of her grasp and harm Lostport in the pursuit of justice? Would her husband welcome the support, or would he see the foreign troops as an attack by the enemy?

Katrien was still staring into the dying embers when Tenori strode up flanked by a pair of warriors.

"Thank goodness you're awake." Tenori sounded somewhat out-of-breath.

"What's wrong?" Katrien rose swiftly. "Have the Whitish soldiers found us?"

Tenori shook his head. "Nothing of the sort. But there is trouble. If you will come with me..."

As they wound their way past dying fires and silent tents, Tenori explained why he had called on Katrien. "One of our Varrilan followers was recognized by a Darden warrior band and accused of treachery. The Varrilan was a mercenary in Whitland's army ten years ago when they made a move to exterminate the more belligerent bands of Darden warriors. That particular group captured the Varrilan, tortured him, and sold him back to the Whitish army for entertainment. The Varrilan mercenary and his friends are threatening to kill the warriors, who are likely to desert at the first sign of trouble."

"Where are they now?" Katrien asked, quickening her pace. "Are they in danger of killing one another?"

"The seven men involved have been restrained by another troop of Darden warriors, but I'm afraid that will do nothing but increase the inter-tribal hatred."

"This is ridiculous!" Katrien said. Why could men not set aside their petty squabbles? She wished Faolan was here to advise her.

When they reached the edge of the camp, Katrien could see a huddle of men illuminated by the dancing flames of a nearby fire. In the dark she could not tell Varrilan from Darden, though she could see that half of the men present had a tight grip on the other half.

"Your queen is here," Tenori announced, stepping into the center of the seething group. "You chose to follow her. Now accept her verdict."

Katrien hugged her arms over her stomach. This would be her first independent act as a ruler, albeit an unconventional one, and she knew her entire army of followers would support or spurn her for it.

"If you are released, will you restrain yourselves while I am here?" Katrien asked, looking around the circle.

"Of course," a bald Varrilan said sharply.

"We wouldn't want to hurt you," one of the Darden warriors said reluctantly.

Katrien nodded to the second set of warriors, who relinquished their hold on the troublemakers and stepped back a pace.

"It seems to me that you are both in the wrong. This man less so, since Whitland was not directly opposed to Varrival at the time he was serving in their army." Katrien gestured at the bald Varrilan. "Is there more to the story than I have been told?"

"This traitorous bastard is just waiting for a chance to sell us out," the tallest Darden warrior spat. "Only thieves and murderers fight for the Whitish army. Everyone knows they're a load of scum."

"I was desperate," the bald Varrilan said steadily. "I used to be a merchant, until our caravan was burned and our entire livelihood destroyed. I joined up with the Whitish troops so I would have something to show my family when I returned home. I didn't expect them to start

meddling in Dardensfell."

"Horseshit." The Darden warrior folded his arms in a way designed to show off the bulging layer of muscle. "Whitland wouldn't have gotten such a good hold on Dardensfell if the warriors hadn't been wiped out. You've been working for the enemy from the start."

"You're delusional," the Varrilan said, a hint of anger creeping into his tone. "The Whitish army is half mercenary. There are countless Dardens who join to show their loyalty to the High King, and Northerners who do it to escape the brutal winters, and coastal folk who do it out of a sense of duty. The only reason you think I'm betraying anyone is because I don't look Whitish. I haven't got the right color skin."

"That's why it's a double betrayal," another Darden said. "Whitland hates Varrival. It's been true for hundreds of years, ever since you killed their first king. Their army must have had an especially good reason to hire you, seeing as you couldn't pass for Whitish."

"Enough!" Katrien stepped between the two sets of men and frowned at the Darden warriors. "From what I heard, it sounds as though this man has suffered more than enough to make up for any imagined wrongs he did you."

"So what?" said the tall Darden. "We're bloody well trying to keep you safe, your majesty. We can't let a traitorous pig ruin this whole march."

"I believe we've established that he no longer works for Whitland," Katrien said. "If you agree to leave him in peace, we can drop this matter now."

"I'll be happy if you keep him in chains," the Darden growled.

"Fine." Katrien gestured to Tenori. "Set a watch on both groups tonight. Tomorrow they can ride beside me." Katrien woke to a shriek. It appeared that Amadi had been slipping out of the tent when Kurjan collided with her headlong.

"What are you doing, boy?" Katrien said sharply. "Get out of here at once."

"Sorry, Milady." Upon closer inspection, his face was flushed and his hair disheveled. "A man was killed last night. I just heard now, and I thought you should know."

Katrien had to bite her tongue to hold back a curse. Throwing on her riding dress and a cloak to hide the row of unfastened buttons down the back, she hurried out to join Kurjan, Amadi, and a virtual army of onlookers who had gathered to witness her reaction.

Tenori jogged to her side and ducked his head to whisper, "You've heard the news?"

"The Varrilan mercenary is dead, isn't he?"

He exhaled heavily. "Killed by his own guards, by the looks of it. They've vanished, along with the rest of their troop. Thirty-seven in all. The Darden warriors who were feuding with him last night are perfectly content now that someone has done the work for them."

Katrien took a step back. "This is madness! Is everyone going to take up arms against everyone else now?"

"You have to talk to them," Tenori said. "Persuade them that there is nothing to gain from further violence."

Clutching the folds of her cloak, Katrien turned to face the restless crowd. "You have heard the news, I see," she began anxiously. "One of your number was killed last night."

Scanning the faces, she tried to see whether mistrust or curiosity reigned. Most simply looked wary. With a deep breath, she continued.

"This is the result of an old feud, a bitter grudge nursed for far too many years. You could all turn against each other at a moment's notice. Those from Varrival could seek revenge for their fallen countryman, or those from Dardensfell could seek to exterminate an imagined threat. The kinship thrones are nothing but a disjointed set of kingdoms all swearing loyalty to Whitland and the High King. And that loyalty is the greatest lie of all.

"If you wish to take matters into your own hands, I will not stop you from doing so. You are here of your own free will. If every one of you deserts or turns on one another, I will not prevent it. I will march to Lostport, alone or surrounded by those who wish to see change, until someone puts a sword through my heart."

Kurjan began to applaud loudly at this, and after a few restless moments, more of Katrien's followers joined in.

"Why are they here, Tenori?" Katrien asked softly as the cheering grew louder still. "Why do they think I'll change anything?"

"Because even a slim hope is better than none at all."

\* \* \*

Three quarters after his arrival, Doran felt like a Cheltish native. The sun and warm sea breezes suited him, and the elegant architecture throughout Torrein inspired his curiosity. Lostport was such a dreary backwater compared to this.

And the people who came through the town! Once word spread that the heir of Lostport was living in the great hilltop manor, Doran began receiving visits nearly every morning. He would invite them for tea in the dining hall, his wheeled chair hidden away, and they would leave with no more evidence of his disability than they had come with.

There were more Varrilans than he had ever seen in Lostport, and the usual sprinkling of Whitish, but there were also a few stranger people from Cashabree, the land that was said to exude magic from its very soil, and Ruunans from the secretive hill kingdom too. He even met a few Itreans, descended from those who had fled across the sea to escape persecution, yet he was disappointed to find that they were indistinguishable from the citizens of Chelt aside from a slightly darker cast to their skin. He also verified something he had begun to suspect, which was that magic, while common in Itrea, was only gifted to a little under half the population. And healing magic was rarer still, practiced only by an odd race known as the Drifters, who never travelled overseas.

"Well, that's it then," he remarked to Fabrian after one meeting in which he had pressed an Itrean visitor unrelentingly for details of the Makhori power for which their country was famed.

"We don't call ourselves Makhori any longer," the man had said, with a half-smile. "The word carries a negative connotation—I'm sure you'd understand. We've renamed ourselves according to our powers—Weavers and Braiders and Minstrels and suchlike."

Fabrian gave Doran a frown. "What do you mean?"

Doran was almost sure the butler had been listening behind the kitchen door, yet he recounted the man's visit nonetheless. "One of the reasons my father sent me here was because he hoped I'd stumble across someone with magic powers who could heal me. But our visitor has just confirmed that it's a rare power even among the gifted, and I'm only likely to find someone who could do it if I sailed to Itrea myself."

"Why don't you, then?" Fabrian asked with a sly smile. "You're rich. You could commandeer any of the merchant ships here."

"As much as I like that idea, I have a feeling I'm

needed here," Doran said heavily. "I can't risk travelling in these uncertain times. Any news from the borderlands?"

Fabrian gave him an odd, pained look and shook his head. "I think something's happened to the messenger. We haven't seen him in a long time now."

Doran winced. He was certain someone had stopped the man, which meant there was someone here in Chelt who wanted him to remain ignorant.

"Well, we know one thing—Varrival is gearing up for war. Whitland may not have declared it officially, but every Varrilan knows what's coming."

Fabrian nodded.

"And Lostport is very closely aligned with Varrival. We might stay out of the war, but it will hurt our economy as well. They're our second-biggest trade partner, after Whitland."

"Are you going to head back to Lostport, then?" Fabrian asked.

Doran shook his head. "What good would that do? I've never been a leader, and even less so if I let people see how useless I've become. At least here, people can still imagine I'm capable of ruling. Of producing an heir. I hope my father's said I'm on a diplomatic mission. That will make Lostport look strong even through all of this."

"Why can't the king have another child to carry on the line? Or couldn't your sister marry and have a child herself?"

Doran sighed. He had revealed very little of his family to Fabrian, trying as he was to keep his mind off the future he would never have. He missed them terribly, though he would only admit it to himself. Especially Laina, who always knew the right thing to say, who could lift him out of his gloom and cajole him into doing something stupid yet exhilarating. His letter had gone unanswered, and

though he blamed the long trade routes, he had still expected to hear something by now. "My mother left soon after Laina was born," he said at last. "She was miserable living in Lostport. I think she nearly killed herself before my father insisted she return to Whitland. And my father loves her still, so we have no chance of an illegitimate heir coming along to take my place. Laina might marry if she saw it as her duty, but she would detest it. She should be the ruler, not I."

"We've found a few ways to get around that law in Chelt," Fabrian said. "We've had several women ruling the country with a man as a legal shield—one of our most famous female monarchs even married a slow-witted messenger boy so she could inherit when her brother died in the Makhori uprising."

"So she had a child?" Doran asked, wondering if the law was perhaps more lenient here.

"Certainly," Fabrian said. "As soon as the king died—he was sick at the time—Queen Arithea announced that she was pregnant. It turned out to be a girl the first time around, but by the time it was born everyone was used to her, and they protected her from the Whitish soldiers when they came knocking. Everyone was more worried about the rebellion then anyway, and by the time she had a boy, she had done a great job stabilizing the country in time for winter."

Duffrey appeared from the kitchen with a pot of tea and biscuits just then—it was midafternoon, and Doran could hear the occasional clanks rising from the kitchen below as the staff prepared for their evening meal.

"Thank you," Doran said, though he knew the old butler didn't like being thanked.

Duffrey gave him a stiff half-bow, eyeing Fabrian with distrust. Doran knew he disapproved of Fabrian's open

friendship, but it was the only thing that kept Doran from going mad.

"I wonder if Lostport could do the same," Doran mused as Fabrian poured the tea. "But Whitland is watching us a bit too closely right now. Lostport would serve as a great base for invading Varrival, after all." He froze. The words had come out unheeded, but suddenly he wondered if there was some truth to what he had said. Was Whitland helping with the construction project so they could get a foothold in Lostport?

"You think Whitland's going to take Lostport back?" Fabrian asked, his face going pale beneath his curly black hair.

"I wouldn't be surprised," Doran muttered. He needed time to think this over himself. "I'll see you later, Fabrian."

The boy understood he was dismissed and bowed his way out of the dining chamber.

Whitland had only maintained its power for so long because it seemed, at least to the majority of the nine Kinship Thrones, that an unfair division of power was better than dissolving a centuries-old alliance. Which meant that Whitland would do its utmost to preserve that alliance. Attacking one of its own thrones would send the wrong message—that Whitland intended to become the bully once more, conquering rather than peacekeeping. And according to everything Doran had heard, Whitland was not strong enough to stand on its own if the rest of the Kinship Thrones turned against it.

So, if Whitland was planning to seize power over Lostport, it would do so by subtler means.

Abandoning his half-finished tea, Doran wheeled himself hurriedly back to his bedchamber, where he found a piece of rumpled parchment and a quill and began writing a hasty letter to his sister.

## Dear Laina,

I have no time to waste with pleasantries. We are in danger—Lostport is in danger—and you are the only one who can act. The Whitish builders are a direct threat. They wish to take over Lostport by some means. I hardly know what the situation is like there, as my news has been limited, but I do know that you are relying on Whitish manpower to build Father's great folly of a port. Do not trust them, and do everything you can to talk Father out of seeing this deal through. I do not know what he is planning, but it is not safe. He is gambling away too much, and I fear that he may be doing it out of a mistaken belief that he will heal me.

If there is anything I can do from abroad to help, please tell me urgently.

Your worried brother, Doran

He did not want to write anything to his father, because he was almost certain that his father was doing this all for him, which meant that he could take Doran's plea to give up on the project as a sign of his son's depression, his self-denigration.

Yet Doran no longer felt helpless. The books here had invigorated him, and the wheeled chair had made him feel like a whole man once again. His country was at stake, and he couldn't waste time feeling sorry for himself.

At dinner, for the first time since he had arrived in Chelt, he asked the entire household to join him.

To his surprise, Fabrian was missing from their number. "Are we waiting for Fabrian to arrive, or should we eat without him?" Doran asked Duffrey, who was sitting at the opposite end of the table as though he ruled over the household.

"He has been dismissed," Duffrey said snidely. "He was caught stealing coins from your bedchamber."

Cold fear blossomed in Doran's chest, though he wasn't entirely sure what he was afraid of. He knew Fabrian was no thief.

"I need you to post this letter urgently," he told the serving-girl sitting to his right. He was ashamed that he still did not know her name. "It should travel with the next merchant ship to Lostport."

She nodded and tucked it into the pocket of her apron, her eyes flickering left to Duffrey.

"I need to know what Whitland is planning," he said to the room at large. "I know they intend to go to war with Varrival, but what are they doing in the meantime?"

The orange glow from the evening sun illuminated the faces of his household. Most of them seemed uncomfortable in his presence; he mentally berated himself for neglecting them before now. It was yet another sign that he would make a terrible king.

"We only know of their plans with Varrival," Duffrey said smoothly. "As you may have noticed, it has been a while since we last played host to a Whitish dignitary. Our news is old."

"So you haven't heard of the construction project in Lostport? Or Whitland's hand in it?"

"No, and if I had heard of it, I would have found nothing untoward about the situation." Duffrey began slicing the fish on his plate from the bone with a fussiness that grated at Doran. "Whitland has often stepped in to fund or assist with construction projects in Chelt—and other thrones as well, I would assume. King Luistan receives a percentage of each kingdom's annual profit in

taxes, so it behooves him to improve their economies."

Doran bit back the retort he wanted to throw—how dare the butler lecture him on politics? Any half-wit child knew that Whitland taxed its subordinate kingdoms. Doran felt a seething hatred for the man.

"Well, if anyone has any news, at all, please come to me." He endeavored to keep his voice light, even. "I must know where my kingdom stands."

The rest of his household nodded, none of them meeting his eye.

As Doran started on his dinner, he wished with every bite that he had not invited the household to join him. The silence stretched on and on, filling the chamber until Doran itched to jump to his feet and escape the fine house.

That night, he wheeled himself onto the balcony and breathed in the heavy sea air. The stars were emerging overhead, the hazy brilliance of Totoleon's Path arcing along the horizon.

A part of him was beginning to wonder if he had been mistaken—if Fabrian had misled him or jumped to the wrong conclusion. He had a hard time believing the boy was a thief, though. He seemed far too intelligent to jeopardize his life for something as trivial as a few coins.

Something was going on. He wanted to believe that Duffrey was deliberately trying to keep him in the dark, but if that was the case, he couldn't understand the man's motives.

He desperately wished to return to Lostport, but at the same time he would only weaken their side further if Whitland truly had infiltrated their kingdom; at least while he lived in Chelt, his father could still pretend he had a viable heir.

He would bide his time, then, and learn as much as he

could. When he returned to Lostport, he wanted to make a difference.

\* \* \*

Five days later, Conard was still struggling each day to diminish his stack of fifty bricks. For two days he had toyed with the idea of giving up, accepting that he would never make it through and instead moving at a more reasonable pace, but on the third day he, Ian, and six other men were the only ones yet to succeed at their initial task.

When the other men moved on to eat and camp with those in their newly-assigned groups, some with the masons and others with the brick-layers or cooks or woodcutters, Conard and Ian and the six other failures formed a tighter group of losers. The other men began to scorn or ignore the unlucky eight, but Conard and his fellows laughed it off.

One of the eight failures was tall and burly and intimidating; Conard and Ian speculated whether he was actually unable to move the bricks or just perfectly happy working at the simple task, but neither was brave enough to ask the silent hulk. The others were men like Ian—wiry, intelligent, and unused to physical labor. While Conard wished he hadn't proved so useless, Ian basked in the sudden camaraderie of men who were just as inept as him.

Despite his exhaustion, Conard did not forget why he was here. After much thought, he had woven a full backstory for himself—he was the son of a middle-class family, disinherited after he was caught with a sworn Star of Totoleon who had pledged chastity (knowing little about Whitland, he had stolen the idea off Ian, who had guessed that to be Conard's secret). If he returned home with enough riches, he would be able to buy the girl's freedom from the Temple of Totoleon and marry her himself. The

irony of it was that he had never slept with Laina, and probably never would.

Whenever he and the seven other failures shared dinner together, their conversation turned to wistful memories of home. Conard was always careful to steer the talk in a useful direction.

"When the war is over, I'll buy my family a proper estate," Quentin said. He was a short, earnest man with a passion for fine wine. His family had been vintners before their land was washed away in a colossal mudslide; it seemed Quentin's luck had not improved since, but he was an indefatigable optimist.

"I don't think our chances of survival are too high," Conard said darkly. "We'll probably be on the front line, useless as we are, and none of us really stand a chance against the Varrilans."

"Don't let the captains hear you saying that," Ian muttered. "They'd probably think a public execution would be good for morale."

"It would be an execution either way," Conard said, softer this time. "None of us know the Varrilan terrain. We just know it's brutally hot. And we have no idea how many Varrilans there are. We could be up against millions of soldiers. They'll stamp us out one by one. Wouldn't you rather head home with a few gemstones from Port Emerald and keep your lives?"

"Course we'd rather do that," said Emerett, a thin, grizzled ex-miner. His voice was forever hoarse from the rock dust in the mines. "Haven't you noticed there are patrols, day in, day out, checking to be sure there aren't any stray gemstones lying 'round?"

"True." Conard grimaced. "I'll let you know if I come up with a better idea."

"You do that," Ian said sullenly. "I would do just

about anything to stay out of the war."

The whiskey was flowing freely that night, honoring the completion of an entire terraced level of the city, and Conard stayed up late sipping at the spirit until the aches deep in his bones had dulled and the whisper of breeze overtook the dying murmur of voices.

"Well, I can't stay upright any longer," Ian slurred at last, blinking rapidly. He stood, bracing himself on the long table, and clapped Conard on the shoulder. "Dream of your pretty lass, will you? I'm off."

Conard nodded, running a finger around the rim of his mug to collect the last drop of whiskey. "G'night. Hope we get the day off tomorrow."

"Keep hoping," Ian said.

Then he was gone. It took Conard a long time to muster up the will to stand. The dining tent was warm and filled with sweet fumes, and he knew his own tent would be empty and bitterly cold. Maybe he should plead illness and take the next two days off. He could walk down to Lostport and visit Laina, slip into her room and kiss her awake. The thought sent fire through his veins.

Scratching his neck blearily, he rose and pushed the bench backward with a scrape. Only two men remained in the dining tent, and one was the cook.

On the way back to his tent, he veered into the forest to take a piss. The shadows looked darker than usual, more threatening. Glancing over his shoulder, he nearly walked into a thorny bush.

As soon as his trousers were down, a hand shot out of the darkness and clamped itself around Conard's mouth.

He would have screamed if he hadn't been half-smothered by a set of unnecessarily rough fingers.

"Quiet."

That voice was familiar. In his befuddled state, Conard

could not quite place it.

"If I release you, will you promise not to run or shout?"

Conard tried to reply, but ended up just biting down on the man's fingers. At last he was released. "Nine plagues!" he hissed. "How am I bloody well supposed to answer that question when you're strangling me?"

Fumbling with his pants, he turned and immediately recognized the dark features of Laina's Varrilan friend.

"Jairus. Brilliant."

Jairus, nearly invisible in a murky brown tunic and trousers, did nothing to disguise his look of contempt. "I thought you would never appear. I worried you had broken your word and run for it. Instead you come out drunk and babbling nonsense. I think Laina would be ashamed to see you like this."

"What are you doing here? You'll be drowned if they catch you."

"We have found a suitable cave. And the first gemstones are prepared. You need to see where the cave is, unless you wish to forsake your promise."

"Right, right," Conard said. "You could've chosen a better time, though! Will you go away for a moment?"

Once Conard had relieved himself, he trudged back to join Jairus just past the reach of the camp lanterns. All of his senses felt a bit muffled—though he would never admit it to Jairus, he would be hard-pressed to remember which direction the cave lay come morning.

"Why were you out so late?" Jairus asked in an undertone as they crept through the forest as quietly as was possible given the dense undergrowth. "Have you been getting too friendly with the soldiers?"

"Not that it's any of your business," Conard said tartly, "but I was sitting alone, trying to drown my woes. I miss

Laina, my back is about to break in two, and despite my best efforts I'm still a failure at construction." He gave Jairus a sidelong look. "You're jealous, aren't you? You like Laina. You'd sell me out to the captains if you had half a chance." The whiskey had loosened his tongue; he had a feeling he would regret this tomorrow, but the very act of talking about Laina eased some of his wretchedness.

"Neither of us are fit for the princess of Lostport," Jairus said stiffly. "I am doing this for my people, for the good of all Varrival, not because of any personal interest in the matter. I would never betray Swick or Laina, nor you, so long as your loyalties are not swayed."

It was true, then. Jairus had feelings for Laina. Jealousy nipped at him as he calculated every hour of every day that Jairus had spent with Laina while he himself had been hiding at the gypsy camp and working himself to death hauling bricks.

"I was her friend for longer," Conard muttered, mostly talking to himself.

"Indeed."

The dim starlight reflected suddenly off something strapped at Jairus's waist. Conard grabbed a tree to steady himself when he saw it for what it was: the blade of a wickedly sharp hatchet. Thank the Scorpion he had not continued to mock Jairus; the man could have cut him down in an instant.

They were nearing the far reaches of the builders' camp. The river shone like ink beneath the hazy starlight, with just one makeshift bridge spanning the waters.

"Did you cross there?" Conard whispered.

Jairus nodded.

Conard's senses were beginning to return to him. Ducking behind a tree, he scanned the meadow for any sign of a guard.

"Wait there," Jairus mouthed. Like a shadow, he stole along the border of the trees until he reached the banks of the river. Dropping to his knees, he crawled toward the bridge, screened by a line of reeds. When he reached the bridge, he beckoned to Conard, who followed suit. He made too much noise as he shuffled along behind the reeds, though he hoped the river's clamor was enough to disguise the sound of his footsteps.

At last they had both darted across the bridge and dashed for the welcome shelter of the trees. Conard straightened, kneading his aching back with a fist.

"Declare yourselves!" a voice rang out from several paces to their left.

Conard jumped backward and caught his foot on a log. The next thing he knew, he was sprawled out on his back with his head in a sweet-smelling flower-bush.

"Head down," Jairus whispered, stepping behind a stubby palm.

Conard could hardly have disobeyed the order, though he rolled over and struggled to his knees just in case he needed to flee.

A guard stepped out from a grove of emberwood trees, his loaded crossbow aimed at Jairus's forehead.

"What's a Varrilan doing in Lostport?" he said coldly. "Guess I'll remedy that problem."

Before the man could fire, Jairus grabbed the crossbow and wrenched it from the man's grip. Then, with his other hand, he yanked the hatchet from his belt. He slammed the handle down over the man's forehead and used the crossbow to shove him backward.

The guard swayed and dropped to the ground, his neck wrenching sideways at an unnatural angle.

"Is he dead?" Conard asked, getting to his feet.

"I don't think we should stay here to find out." Jairus

sheathed the hatchet, his eyes a bit wider than usual. Conard was certain the weapon did not belong to him.

In silence, both all too aware of the gravity of what had just happened, they followed the forest road as it wound its way up to the pass. Just as they crested the hill, Jairus turned right and plunged into the dense bush, following a track Conard could not see.

"Remember this tree," Jairus said at last, startling Conard. "It is the only true landmark you might recognize."

He indicated a towering pigeonwood tree draped in moss, ethereal and spooky-looking in the starlight.

Just past the tree, Jairus stepped into a dried-up riverbed shrouded in vines and moss. Ducking beneath a low-hanging knot of spiraling branches, Conard emerged at the mouth of a cave. It did not look like much from where he stood, though that could have been due to the darkness.

"How far does it go?"

Jairus struck a match to a candle and stepped forward. "No one has explored it much. You will see why."

It went against Conard's every instinct to follow Jairus into the impenetrable depths of the cave. The candle did little more than illuminate the rubble-strewn ground; they moved through a vast, empty cavern, every sound careening about the walls.

"Here. To the left."

The mouth of the cave had diminished into a fuzzy halo of lesser blackness by the time they turned around a column of stone and emerged in a smaller chamber. Here the light actually reached the far walls and glinted off something on the ground. When Conard knelt to look closer, he saw what looked like scattered gemstones half-buried in dust and rubble. The glass simulacra were so convincing that Conard had to suppress the urge to pocket a deep crimson ruby.

"It's perfect," Conard said. The hazy aftereffects of the whiskey had worn off as they climbed to the pass, and he was now certain he would remember the way to the cave. "Why did you say you haven't explored farther?"

Instead of answering, Jairus took three careful steps deeper into the belly of the cave. Slowing, he knelt and lowered the candle to the ground, where it flickered violently, the flame whipping side to side. "The cave drops away," Jairus said. "You would need ropes to go any farther. You must be careful here, you and the men you invite. Never come in without a light. Swick nearly stepped off the edge the first time we found this place."

"Well, you'll know where to find me if the blasted brick-hauling job gets too miserable," Conard said.

"You must not say that to Laina."

Conard snorted. "It was a joke. Though if you think Laina would respond well to suicide threats, by all means I'll try."

Jairus rose and stalked out of the cave, leaving Conard to feel his way back in the dark. Even though he knew the drop was behind him, he could not shake the sensation that the ground was about to open up and consume him. Jairus was not waiting for him outside; Conard could hear the mossy underbrush rustling at the sound of his passage.

Once they reached the road, Jairus turned back toward Lostport without saying farewell. Conard stood at the pass for a long time, staring down the familiar way home, the sea air ruffling his too-long hair. It had been ages since he last trimmed it, though perhaps it would prevent anyone from recognizing him immediately as the returned exile.

With the guard no longer stationed at the start of the forest road, Conard picked his way easily back to his tent; stretched out on his straw mat, though, he could not sleep. Dark thoughts twisted his mind—the almost comic shock

on the guard's face when Jairus slammed his hatchet across his forehead; the fleeting urge Conard had to shove Jairus into the bottomless depths of the cave; the fear that Jairus was even now slipping into Laina's bed, running his gentle, dark hands down her neck...

## Chapter 18

As the next quarter dragged on, Doran felt more and more trapped in his seaside palace. The balconies taunted him—they were so close to the freedom that beckoned beyond their walls, yet they were nothing more than cages themselves.

He considered asking to take a trip into town so he could speak with the locals, but again he was afraid that he would weaken Lostport by exposing his disability.

Instead he spent more and more time in his room, reading as many books as he could, his eyes itchy from lack of sleep. Here and there he would jot down notes, fragments of thoughts that seemed like revelations in the moment but which later appeared garbled and nonsensical.

He knew there had to be a way to escape High King Luistan's laws, to prevent Whitland from forcing an heir on Lostport when Lostport proved incapable of providing its own, and indeed there were many examples he found in the histories he read which described variations of this scenario.

A royal family in Kohlmarsh had passed the king's nephew off as his son when the royal couple was unable to bear an heir of their own. A brutal king of Dardensfell had forced a male courtesan on his eldest daughter when his own wife produced nothing but girls, and claimed his grandchild as his heir at the age of six. A queen of Ruunas

had executed the heir that Whitland tried to foist upon them when she refused to marry, and Varrival backed her claim to the throne.

The examples went on and on.

But Kohlmarsh was completely beneath Whitland's notice, bereft of any valuable land or resources, and Dardensfell was too powerful an ally for Whitland to offend. Ruunas, much like Cashabree and Varrival, only abided by Whitish law when it suited their kingdom.

Doran's father would have loved for Lostport to join the ranks of those outlier countries, independent in all but name, but Lostport was far too valuable for Whitland to lose, and too easy to maintain its hold on, given that Lostport had no army of its own.

So, it came down to this, Doran was forced to admit one night as he sat on the deck, the night breeze ruffling his hair. Lostport could make no changes to Whitland's law, so instead Doran would need to play by the rules. He would marry, and he would ask his wife to sleep with someone who would give her a child.

It had been the obvious solution all along, yet Doran had dreaded coming to this conclusion. He hated the idea of being stuck with a woman who saw him for the invalid he was, who could never truly love him.

Doran ran a hand through his hair, which had grown unruly since he left Lostport. He was twenty-five already—his birthday had passed, unremarked, at some point while he had lain in bed following his accident. His father had married and his wife had given birth to Doran by the age of twenty-five; Doran was hardly justified in considering it a burden. It was his duty, no more and no less.

He thought briefly of Nejeela—oh, what a riot it would cause if he brought back a Varrilan to be his queen!—but he could not bear to become a burden for

someone he actually felt something for. No, he needed to marry someone ugly, hopefully dull as well. Someone who could do her duty without making him feel like less of a man.

As the wind picked up, flinging the occasional burst of stinging sea spray across Doran's face, he put both hands on his knees and massaged his legs fiercely, as though he could work the feeling back into them.

At least it had been he who fell, not Laina, he thought grimly. She would have died rather than lose her freedom.

The next morning, Doran announced to his household that he was seeking a bride to bring with him back to Lostport.

"You plan to leave us already?" Duffrey asked stiffly.

"I doubt I'll find a woman that quickly," Doran said. Now that he had made his decision, he felt stronger than before, refreshed. He refused to bow to the irritating butler's demands. "Send out the word that all eligible women in Torrein are to report to me by the end of this quarter."

"As you wish, Milord."

As he waited impatiently for the first of the women to appear, Doran began compiling a list of requirements for his bride. He wrote it neatly on a sheet of parchment, which he left unfurled on his desk to refer to. The unlucky woman would need to be plain, agreeable, and good enough at keeping secrets to conceal the true father of her child. With any luck, she would also have some degree of influence in Whitland, whether through trade or through her relation to a member of the Whitish nobility.

On the morning of the third day, he found Duffrey and asked whether any progress had been made.

"Unfortunately, no," said Duffrey, his mouth twisting with something that could have been pity or simply distaste.

"The eligible girls—all two of them—would prefer not to marry someone from a far-off kingdom. They know the story of your parents, how your mother fled to Whitland after life in Lostport became too great a burden. And the rest of the girls—well, you wouldn't want to meet them anyway. They are far too common."

"That isn't good enough," Doran said angrily. "You must try harder. Bring me the common girls, if you must. Extend the invitation to the next town to the north. I *will* find a bride here."

"As you wish, Milord," Duffrey said crisply. Doran had a feeling the butler was mocking him.

Yet three more days passed without any sign of a prospective bride. Doran suspected that his butler was deliberately keeping the women away—most would jump at the chance to marry a royal heir, no matter the circumstances—or perhaps his butler had never extended the invitation at all.

This darker train of thought had Doran watching the man's every move, searching for the slip that would reveal his corruption. It was difficult, though—beneath Doran's watchful eye, Duffrey was obedient if short with him. But he could do nothing to ensure the man was faithful outside of the manor. He was helpless without his staff to look after him.

After a quarter had passed with no news, Doran decided it was time for him to take matters into his own hands, shameful or not. He waited for the household to retire before wheeling himself to the grand entryway. He had not left the manor once since his arrival in Torrein.

The step just beyond the main entrance nearly defeated him. After eyeing it from several angles, trying to decide whether he could climb to the ground and then return to his chair once he had cleared the step, he wheeled backward, approached with a bit of momentum, and dropped down the step with a bone-jarring thump.

He was free.

The sea air filled his lungs, carrying the faint whiff of fire smoke from town. Doran turned and started along the cobblestone path, his chair jolting with every movement, gripping the wheels tightly as the incline began to increase gradually.

Soon it was all he could do to keep from losing control and careening downhill. Both sweaty hands were gripping the wheels so tightly the wood bit into his skin, and he only dared release one at a time, feeling the weight of his body compelling him ever downward. He would never make it back to the manor unaided.

Suddenly, one wheel dropped into a deep crevice between stones, where the mortar had worn away. At the jarring impact, Doran's sweaty hand slipped from the wheel, and the whole chair began hurtling downhill.

The houses were flashing by so fast he couldn't register them.

The strangest part was that he felt as though a piece of him watched from above, a part that remained uninjured and could only shake its head at how careless and clumsy his crippled body had become.

His wheels jolted painfully on the cobblestones, the chair swaying wildly back and forth, and the air whistled past his ears.

Then the road came to a great arc where it curved out to sea, and the houses at its foot were rushing at him.

Doran grabbed uselessly for the wheels of his chair, only managing to tear open a strip of his hand with the friction that drove him onward.

He heard shouts from nearby—someone must have noticed him, though he could see nothing but the blur of motion all around.

He crashed into the wall at full speed, his knees hitting first and throwing his body back so his chair nearly toppled over.

Doran gave a roar of pain as the jolt of impact assaulted him.

\* \* \*

Laina barely managed to escape her home. A line of disgruntled villagers had assembled on her front lawn, so she stole into the forest and skirted around the house to the hillside, hoping no one would recognize her on the stairs into Lostport.

After the hostilities of the previous day, the Whitish soldiers felt more entitled than ever, while the shopkeepers were begging for armed protection. Laina had almost been dragged out of bed to address the situation, though she was afraid of making the wrong judgment at such a crucial time. She needed Jairus and Swick.

Out of breath and sweating by the time she reached Lostport, she nearly collided with a pair of Whitish soldiers. One of them began to apologize, while the other grabbed her wrist with a smirk.

"Pretty bit of flesh you are," he said, grasping her chin and forcing her to look at him.

Laina kicked him in the ankle and tried to twist her arm free, but the man snatched a chunk of her hair and pulled her face closer.

"Oil" Footsteps pounded closer—a villager had spotted the commotion and came to help, brandishing a broom like a spear. "That's the king's daughter, you idiot! You could be drowned for this."

As though stung, the soldier released Laina. He and his

companion slunk away, muttering to one another.

"Thank you." Laina rubbed at her smarting wrist. "I'm speaking with most of the townsfolk before the morning is over. Would you like to lend your voice to the assembly?"

"I'd love to," the man said, propping the broom against a step and leaning on it. "Only, someone has to look after the village. If I went tramping up that hill, I'd come back to find the whole place burned to dust."

"Fair point," Laina said darkly. "Well, your efforts will not go unnoticed. We are all indebted to you."

Swick and Jairus were already in the dining room pulling on their boots when Laina arrived at the Seal's Roost.

"What are you doing here?" Swick asked. "I thought you were speaking with the villagers today."

"I need your help," Laina said. "I want both of you to join Harrow as my advisers, so the villagers know they can trust my decisions."

"They will hardly trust a pair of foreigners," Jairus muttered. "Especially after last night. You should hope no soldiers drop in at your council."

Laina was alarmed. "Is something wrong? Is Conard hurt?" She knew Jairus had gone to show Conard the caves the previous night.

"I see where your loyalties lie." Jairus's voice was bitter. "Conard is not foreign, is he? No, I am the one in danger. I must have given one of their guards a concussion, and if he survives, he will immediately recognize me."

"I can go alone, if you think that best," Swick said.

"No." Laina held open the inn door. "If you're to become a target, Jairus, I want to show that you have the support of Lostport. The Whitish soldiers will not be able to harm you without directly antagonizing me."

Jairus snorted. "I doubt they would care."

As they began the long climb up the stairs once more, Laina fell into step beside Jairus. "You seem very bitter about something. Have I asked too much of you?"

He shook his head. "I dislike Conard. That's all. Your childhood friend has hardly embraced adulthood." Jairus glanced at Laina, his face hard. "I found him drunk almost senseless, and before long he was making insane threats. I do not trust him. We should find someone new to fill his part."

"Who?" Laina said. "There is no one I trust more than Conard. You shouldn't be so harsh on him, Jairus. He was exiled unjustly, and he's put himself in great peril to help us. I should never have forced the choice on him. Or on any of you."

"We all do what we must," Swick said from behind her. "And right now that includes getting to your father's hall as quickly as possible."

Laina swallowed what she had been about to say and began jogging up the steps, her heart thrumming. Had she been mistaken? Maybe she had judged Conard wrong. She had known him from a child, and perhaps the person he had once been had blinded her to his true intentions. What if he had nearly killed her brother on purpose?

That was insane. The ships had collided; it could as easily have been Conard who wound up paralyzed and unwilling to face life. Jairus spoke from petty spite, not from true concern.

As soon as she crested the hill and stumbled, panting, onto the sweet-smelling lawn, Laina wished she had gone straight to the council. The line stretched past the double doors and out onto the lawn, where Nort and Barrik were trying to maintain order.

"Meet me at the foot of the stairs," Laina told Jairus and Swick. Then she dashed off to the forest and sprinted

around to the back entrance. Inside, she struggled into a clean dress, splashed cold water on her face, and pinned a few loose hairs back into their knot. Though she knew she was flushed and still perspiring, she had no more time to compose herself.

She straightened. As her father had told Laina and Doran many times before, royalty was one part posture, one part intelligence, and two parts confidence. If she could not muster the last two, at least she could stand tall.

When she turned the corner and emerged at the top of the staircase, the restless muttering ceased and every eye turned to Laina. Someone had dragged her father's sturdy emberwood chair—the closest he had to a throne—to the head of the entrance hall, just at the foot of the stairs, and Harrow stood to one side. Jairus and Swick were edging their way along the wall, doing their best not to draw attention.

"Sorry I was delayed," Laina said, her heartbeat quickening as she descended the final two steps and took her father's place in the chair. She had never taken the seat of authority before, not even in practice. It had been her brother leading mock councils and presiding over the less serious disputes, learning from a young age how to project assurance and wisdom before a crowd, and even sitting in the great chair to read. He had been bred for this. Not Laina.

"We're sorry to hear that your father's taken ill," said the butcher's wife, who Laina knew from childhood. It was the butcher and his wife who had most frequently been called upon to chase Laina and Conard down when her father called them home for supper.

"I'm sorry as well," Laina said. "We all wish he could be here to see things right, but I will do the best I can in his stead. I have three advisers to assist me today—my father's trusted counsellor, Master Harrow, and my good friends, Master Swick and Messer Jairus, here to bring another perspective to our present troubles."

Several townspeople applauded, though most seemed anxious to proceed to the more pressing matters.

"Who is first? Unless you have a collective issue that you would like to send a spokesperson forward with, you can come speak to me one at a time."

A pair of fishermen separated from the crowd first.

"We've gone and lost everything yesterday," one said.

"They've been heckling us all along," the other added. "Demanding free fish, then saying we'd have to salt half our catch for their stores, and threatening to torch the place if we didn't comply."

"But we've only been reporting half of the fish we've caught." The first fisherman scratched his ear and gave Laina a sly look. "Been keeping ourselves afloat, so to speak, saving just enough to get us by."

"Only yesterday—"

The first man elbowed the second. "I was telling the story, halfwit. My boat, my story." He turned back to Laina. "Anyhow, soon as we heard the soldiers were harassing shopkeepers, we went and barred the shop door and slept inside that night. We weren't gonna be robbed or torched. But we wake up in the morning, then, and our bloody ship's gone! The miserable bastards nicked it!"

"Now we don't have a livelihood. No money, no salt fish, no ship. We may as well torch the shop ourselves and take up begging."

"Ah," Laina said. Every response she could come up with was so inadequate it would pass for a joke. "I suspect most of you are here for similar reasons—the Whitish builders have overstepped themselves. To them, it appears that we are helpless against their military strength." We are

helpless. She had no better plan than to keep talking until something occurred to her. "But we have advantages they don't suspect. We know our country. We understand the land and how it changes with the seasons. I propose that we deflect the Whitish aggressions by using the land—by vanishing into the forest."

Now she was onto something.

"Yes, they can burn our houses, and yes, they can make off with our possessions. But that is only so long as those valuables lie within their reach."

They were hanging onto every word. Laina paused, allowing the idea to form more clearly before she proceeded.

"I bet most of you know some sort of hidden place in the woods—a cave or a gully or a hollow tree. We can work individually or together to hide most of this town's valuables in several locations throughout the forest. The blacksmith can help us forge waterproof boxes for them. My friend Swick is a cartographer, and he can plot the location of every box on a map. That way the goods will not be lost if something happens to their owner."

"What about our boat?" the first fisherman asked.

"Shut it," another man shouted from somewhere in the crowd. "Would you rather be compensated for the boat and have it all taken a day later?"

"Thank you," Laina said, raising a hand for silence. "That is a good point. I certainly could refund you for the boat, good sir, but that would set an example, and hereafter every person who lost property on account of the Whitish would expect compensation. We simply don't have enough money for that. However—"

Again she raised a hand to quell the disgruntled voices that broke out in response to this. She waited until the room was silent.

"However, we can try to force the Whitish soldiers to pay full price for the goods they demand. The High King has been negotiating the terms of the building contract with my father, but the paperwork has not yet been signed. That means the Whitish builders are not entitled to anything. King Luistan must first prove that anything we give them will return to us in full once Port Emerald is completed. This does not include revenue earned solely by the residents of the new port."

Laina had been appalled to discover that particular document the other day—it was infuriating to know that the Whitish had not been authorized to act as they did, yet Lostport had no way of restraining them.

"We can form a law-enforcement group that takes turns patrolling the streets. I imagine the builders who stole your boat and looted the general store weren't operating in large groups. They were probably small drunken parties, not authorized by the Whitish captains. If we keep an eye on the streets at night, we can ensure no one destroys our town."

"What if the whole lot of them ransack the place?" the second fisherman asked, though he had been nodding along to Laina's words.

"Then we consider it a declaration of war."

"We'd never survive," a woman in the back called. "There are ten of the Whitish soldiers for every one of us."

Swick stepped forward. "You have allies in the rest of the Kinship Thrones. Dardensfell is not as closely allied with Whitland as many think; if summoned, our people would come to your aid."

"As would my people," Jairus said. "Whitland will march on Varrival before winter falls, and we would rather halt the army before it reaches our lands."

"But how long would that take?" said a young man

with a small girl in his arms. "We could be dead long before they arrive."

"I know," Laina said. "I will send word, though. I will do what I can. And in the meantime, will you form a patrol? Think on it. It may not be the safest idea, but it's the best chance we have. I'll leave the choice up to you."

"About those boxes," an old woman said, her voice nearly drowned out by the rising babble. Harrow rapped on the side of Laina's emberwood chair, and after a while most of the talking subsided.

"Yes?" Laina asked.

"Could we start a set of food-boxes as well?" the old woman said. "In case all of our fishing boats are taken over and our crops fail. That way we can hold out longer than the Whitish if things go badly."

"Brilliant idea," Laina said. "Would you like to help our cook, Mylo, and the general store owner compile a list of foods we ought to include? Perhaps we should create a medicine box as well."

Again the rising talk threatened to drown out Laina's voice.

"Excuse me!" she called. "If anyone else has something to bring up that I haven't yet addressed, please come forward. The rest of you, would you please continue your conversation in the garden? Mylo will bring refreshments."

That last promise mobilized the crowd immediately. The ensuing din echoed down the entrance hall so loudly Laina couldn't hear herself think.

"Very well done," Harrow said, bending down to speak directly in Laina's ear. "They were rapt."

"It doesn't solve much, though, does it?" Laina sank back in the chair. "The real problem is, we don't rule this place any longer. High King Luistan does, and if he says his soldiers can burn Lostport to the ground, they'll do it gladly.

"Yes, and it is *absolutely essential* your people do not find this out," Harrow said. "They look to you as the only source of justice in a world that has gone mad, and you cannot forsake them."

"Will you call on Dardensfell and Varrival for aid?" Jairus asked eagerly.

"Of course." Laina smoothed her hair, which was still itching with sweat. "Though I'm sure it will be too late. They'll arrive to scare the Whitlanders off our bones."

\* \* \*

There was mayhem in camp that day.

The man whom Jairus had knocked out was lying in the medical tent for most of the day, hovering somewhere between life and death, and no one could concentrate on their work while speculation ran rampant through the camp. Men kept trying to take a look at him, to see if rumors of his skull splitting in two were accurate, and Ian was convinced the entire camp was about to be put under siege.

It was a good thing they didn't know how defenseless Lostport really was.

The sun was nearing the horizon by the time the guard came to. Conard was among the onlookers waiting to hear his prognosis; he was terrified first that the man would survive and second that he had seen Conard lying in the underbrush that night.

When the two men guarding the healer's tent passed on the word that the man had survived, everyone who was in reach of the tent tried to shove their way in to hear the story firsthand. "Are we under attack?"

"Who did it?"

"Those Lostport bastards. Never trusted them."

At last the babble cleared long enough for Captain Drail to yell, "Everyone OUT!"

After that, Conard was only privy to the information the two tent-guards chose to pass along. The man was remarkably composed, and did not seem to have suffered any lasting injury from his concussion. In fact, he soon stood and walked out of his tent accompanied by just one of the guards, who was given the task of ensuring he did not fall asleep again until it was deemed safe.

"Who was it?" men shouted as he passed. "What happened? Think you'd recognize whoever did it?"

The man turned and frowned at Quentin, who had asked the last question. "Of course I'd recognize him. He was a massive Varrilan bastard. How many Varrilans are running loose 'round these parts?"

Conard went cold. Though he was lucky he had escaped without notice, Jairus was in trouble. If word got to any of the builders in Lostport, Jairus could be brought to justice—or worse, disposed of discretely. Without any true opposition to the builders, their word had become law.

After Jairus had gone to the trouble of filling Conard in on their plan yesterday, Conard felt indebted to him. Jealousy aside, he could not allow the builders to slaughter Jairus out of spiteful racism.

This was going to be another very long night.

While most of the builders were sitting down to dinner, Conard stashed as many rolls and dried fish as he could carry into his rucksack and stole away from camp. He considered sneaking through the brush as he had done yesterday, but if a new guard had been posted, he would put a bolt through him sooner than look at him. Instead he

followed the main road to the bridge, where he was dismayed to find two guards patrolling either bank of the river.

"What is your business?" one of the guards barked.

"Just heading to town for the night," Conard said. "I'll be back by sunrise. I've got a sick friend I want to visit."

"Do you want to take a guard? There might be more Varrilans lurking around. Could be they're the ones trying to attack us."

"I've got a short sword," Conard said, patting the none-too-impressive knife at his belt. In the dark they might mistake it for a proper weapon. "I'll be on the alert. And I'll ask around in town. See if any Varrilans have arrived lately."

"Good man." The guard saluted Conard and let him pass. Conard kept a hand on the hilt of his knife until he had passed the second pair of guards and returned to the shadowed forest. The veil-thin layer of clouds that had shrouded the sky the previous night had lifted, leaving the air sharp and chill. Autumn was on its way. A brilliant swath of stars lit the way, almost parallel with the forest road, the crescent moon still bright enough to throw each pebble into relief.

Eating while he walked, Conard made good time along the road; it took every bit of his resolve to slink through the forest away from the campfire light rather than pay a visit to his friends at the gypsy camp. There would be soldiers around, though, and he would be recognized far too easily.

By the time he reached the coast near Lostport, Conard could have fallen asleep standing. He was paranoid that someone would shoot him for disturbing the peace so late at night, though with any luck, word of the previous day's mishap had not yet spread to Lostport. He made straight for the Seal's Roost, where Laina had mentioned the two cartographers had taken up lodging, and rapped quietly.

To his surprise, someone appeared not three heartbeats later.

"You're not welcome here," the doorman growled. He looked burlier and meaner than most innkeepers.

"I'm looking for someone," Conard said. "Is a man named Jairus staying here?"

"You're nothing but trouble. Get out of my inn. If you want to see someone, talk to the city patrol."

When the man gestured to the street, Conard noticed six tight groups of men pacing the main street, none in uniform but all fully armed.

"What's happening? Are those *soldiers* patrolling the streets?"

The doorman grunted. "After what your lot have been doing, are you surprised?"

For the first time, Conard remembered that he was wearing his Whitish uniform. "What happened? I've been at the building site. And no, I'm not Whitish. If you fetch Jairus, he'll understand."

"Enough trouble to last a lifetime, that's what's happened," the doorman muttered. "I'll wake your friend and ask if he knows you. What's the name?"

"Conard."

He snapped the door shut in Conard's face.

Quicker than Conard had expected, the doorman returned and ushered Conard into the room, now with a pair of candles flickering on the dining table.

"What are you doing here?" Jairus hissed, drawing his coat closer around him. He was bare-chested beneath the coat, and wore loose, tattered pants without shoes.

"I had to warn you," Conard whispered. "Am I safe to talk here?"

Jairus nodded.

"That man you axed—he woke up, and he remembers it was a Varrilan man who knocked him out. You're the only Varrilan in town, and if any of them see you, they'll murder you on the spot. You have to be careful. Go into hiding."

Jairus's expression grew darker with each word Conard said.

"Actually, go to Laina and tell her I sent you. Ask for refuge in her manor."

Jairus gingerly took a seat. "Why have you come all the way to tell me this?"

"Because I owe you," Conard said. "And I know the Whitlanders are racist assholes who can't wait for an excuse to kill every Varrilan they see. I don't want to live in a world where they can get away with that."

"Thank you." It was almost a question. For the first time, Jairus did not look like a sour, brooding wretch; he was just a young man who was very far from home.

"I have to head back now, before anyone realizes I'm gone. Look after Laina for me, won't you?"

Jairus nodded, hugging his coat closer still.

Conard rose and left, thanking the doorman on the way out. He had a lot to think about on the way back toward Port Emerald—clearly the Whitlanders had done something serious enough to warrant an armed patrol keeping them at bay, and someone had spurred the Lostporters to take action against their oppressors for the first time. If King Faolan had changed his policy toward the builders, Captain Drail would not be pleased. And High King Luistan would send yet more "builders" to suppress Lostport's meager resistance still further.

Where did Laina fit in this? Had she been speaking to her father, persuading him to take a firmer stance against the builders? Or had she gone directly to the people to encourage revolt?

Either way, she was playing a dangerous game.

## Chapter 19

The days had blurred together since his fall. There was something essential Faolan knew he needed to tell Laina, but he could not recall just what it was. Everything was hazy and indistinct, and whenever he tried to keep his eyes open for too long, he was plagued with blinding headaches.

She had not visited in far too long, of that he was certain. He hoped she had not run off on some foolish mission and left the kingdom to govern itself.

Three useless attendants bustled in to offer Faolan yet another glass of water or hot brick for his feet that morning, and he was so fed up with being treated as an invalid that he closed his eyes and pretended to sleep when the next visitor arrived.

"I'm so sorry, Father."

That soft voice belonged to Laina. Faolan opened his eyes at once and struggled to sit and greet her properly. He had never felt such sympathy for his broken son.

"I've been waiting for you." His voice was hoarse from disuse. "Where have you been?"

"I'm sorry, Father. I've been busy." Laina took a seat on the edge of the bed, perching so gently it was as though she feared he would shatter at the slightest touch.

"Who has been leading the open council?" he asked urgently. That detail he could not remember pertained to an important decision that must be announced soon. "Is it you, or Harrow?"

"I've been presiding," Laina said, not meeting Faolan's eyes. "Your adviser and the cartographers from town have been helping me."

"And? Is everything well?"

Laina shrugged. "I didn't realize how many contracts you and the High King had to agree on."

"Have you been making decisions without me?"

Laina gave him a hurt look. "What else was I supposed to do? Things in town were going badly, and someone needed to take action at once."

"What steps did you take to respond?"

"I called an open council. Most of the town showed up."

Faolan nodded. "Good decision. And?"

"We're completely helpless, aren't we? We don't really have a say in anything that's going on right now. It's been like that for spans."

"I hope you kept that knowledge to yourself," Faolan said sharply. His most crucial mission for the past span had been feigning strength while around him the kingdom fell to bits in the hands of King Luistan.

"Yes," Laina said, defensive. "But the Whitlanders have gone too far. No one in town feels safe. I've organized a set of patrols to keep the streets safe at night. We can't have any more shops looted."

Faolan sat up straighter, wishing he had the strength to leave the sickroom. "I wish Doran was here still. He would know the right thing to do. Appointing a patrol is a very risky move, because it signals to the Whitish builders that you see them as a threat. If they are perceived as a danger, they will be at liberty to act as such. And if that were to happen, Lostport would go up in flames."

Laina opened her mouth to protest; she broke off

when the door creaked open.

"Excuse me?" Nort said, poking his head around the corner. "Laina, you have a visitor."

"Sorry," Laina said. "I have to see what's happened. Things are a bit of a mess right now."

And with that, she was gone, leaving Faolan alone with his headache.

\* \* \*

When Doran came to, he was lying on his back in the wheeled chair with worried faces blocking out the sky above. He didn't know how he had gotten there.

Every bone in his body ached, but the blood seemed to be coming entirely from his knees, where the wall had struck. And he couldn't feel that at all.

Would he just bleed to death, his body unable to repair itself?

"Summon his household," one of the men was saying, his face still a brown blur as Doran blinked to clear his eyes.

"No, summon the medic," a brisk woman said.

The sound of running footsteps approached, and then a panting voice said, "I'm here. What happened?"

"He crashed into the wall. Lost control of the chair, I'd reckon. Or he was trying to kill himself. I dunno."

The blurred faces parted a little as the medic approached, and Doran tried to squint so he could make out the woman's features.

"You're awake!" she said with surprise.

Doran groaned. "My household has been—been—" The words wouldn't form properly on his tongue.

"We'll take you home, and you can tell us what happened then," the medic said gently.

Doran shook his head, the movement sending a

splitting pain through his skull. "Not—yet." That, at least, he thought came out right.

"To my office, then," the medic said. "Could someone please bring a stretcher?"

Doran lifted a heavy hand and rubbed his eyes as he waited, the onlookers now keeping a respectful distance. At last he could see properly again.

"Thank you," he said. His voice sounded almost normal now, so he tried again. "Where do my servants come from? Are they from Torrein?" He slurred the last word, so "Torrein" came out more like "Train."

"No, they were sent as a peace offering from King Luistan," the medic said, frowning. She was younger than Doran had expected, her eyes and hair dark against a chestnut face. "He wanted to make a gesture of goodwill from Whitland to Lostport."

"Not a—a gesture of goodwill," Doran said, gripping his forehead with one hand as though he could hold together the pieces that ached as though they would split asunder. "They've been lying to me. Keeping me away from Lostport."

"We can talk more at my office," the medic said with a frown.

Two heavyset men with a stretcher showed up then, and with the utmost care, the medic worked with them to transfer Doran from the chair onto the blankets.

Despite their precautions, he still felt as though the movement would break him in half. He hissed through his teeth, trying his hardest not to yell out in pain with so many around to witness him. The world went dark again; it was all he could do to remain conscious.

It was not until he was transferred onto a hard mattress in the medic's office that the pressure on his chest eased its grip. He felt broken, torn into a hundred pieces, and part of him wished the damage had been more thorough so he would never have to wake again.

"What did you mean by such reckless behavior?" the medic asked sharply as she cut away Doran's pants just above the bloodied knees. "You know it reflects badly on our entire town if the visiting dignitaries come to harm while they stay with us." His legs were half-bare now, but he still couldn't feel a thing. "Does that hurt?" she asked, dipping a cloth in a bowl of water and pressing it to his knee.

"I can't feel a thing," Doran said baldly. "I lost all use of my legs spans ago, so it doesn't hurt at all. No need to be gentle."

The medic gave him a small, wry smile. "That makes my job easier." As she worked, she kept glancing at his face as though worried he would lose consciousness once again. "Tell me again why you decided to half-kill yourself just now? If you'd wanted to commit suicide, there are a lot of easier ways to do it. Jumping from one of your balconies, for instance."

Doran shook his head and immediately regretted it the movement sent daggers through his back and neck. "I need to know what's happening. My household is deliberately keeping me in the dark. If King Luistan sent them, he's done it to keep me out of the way while his troops take over Lostport."

"That's a grave accusation," the medic said mildly, continuing her work as though he had done nothing more than comment on the tidiness of her workroom. She paused suddenly and gave Doran a piercing look. "I have heard the rumors myself. And I don't doubt you're right. High King Luistan is wise to keep Lostport's only legitimate heir far away from the throne just as the kingdom is at its most vulnerable."

"I need to go back," Doran said, forgetting himself and trying to sit up.

A wave of dizziness hit him again, and he collapsed back onto the small, hard pillow, unable to see past the haze of black that had come over his eyes.

"Yes, I expect you do," the medic said drily. "But you won't be going anywhere until you recover."

"If I give my household a direct order to arrange for my return to Lostport, they won't have the grounds to refuse, will they?" Doran asked.

"Invite someone over before you do so," she said. "Someone with a bit of power. If you have a witness, they will be forced to play their part."

"Right," he said. "And I need to marry someone, too, so I can prove I am still able to bear children."

"Are you really?" The medic looked at his midsection curiously.

"No."

A stiff silence filled the room for a moment, and Doran realized with some discomfort that he had forgotten the medic was a woman. Her hair was cut short, and she wore men's clothes; if he squinted, she could have passed as a young boy, too small to be a grown man.

"Which is why I need a wife and a child to prove it," he said quietly. "Please don't repeat my words outside of this room. It could cost me my kingdom if anyone knew the truth."

"Understood," the medic said brusquely. "I am strictly apolitical. Don't expect me to meddle with either side of any conflict."

Doran nodded, sending another jolt of pain through his spine.

"Of course, from my own completely unbiased perspective, it would do us all well if you recovered as soon

as possible," the medic said.

Doran eyed her with surprise, wondering if her previous remark had carried some straight-faced humor.

"Your main danger is in bleeding out through your knees, as you are unlikely to notice either the pain or the wetness of the blood unless you could see it—for instance, nighttime could be dangerous."

"Of course," Doran said. "How long do you think I have until I can leave?"

"Leave my workroom, or leave Torrein?" the medic asked wryly.

Doran laughed softly. "Both? I don't know."

The medic finished what she was doing on his knees and washed blood from her hands. Then she gave Doran a woody-smelling draught, which he gulped down without protest.

Soon he was drifting off to sleep, the wood beams on the ceiling blurring and wavering until they faded to darkness.

When he woke, Duffrey was standing at his bedside with his thin hands clasped behind his back, the serving girl Iole at his side.

"What nonsense is this?" Duffrey asked, his face pinched with anger. "How are we expected to keep you safe if you throw yourself into danger?"

Doran saw out of the corner of his eye that the medic was working in the corner of the room, her head bent over a metal bowl. Her presence was reassuring. "Are you scolding the heir of Lostport, Duffrey?" he said lightly. "I think you may have forgotten your place."

Duffrey's face turned red, and the serving-girl shuffled backward until she was half-hidden behind him. "My *lord*," Duffrey said sarcastically. "Perhaps this discussion is better held in the comfort of your own home. This pigsty hardly befits a royal heir."

Doran glanced over at the medic, who was looking at him with a curiously blank expression. He widened his eyes briefly, beseeching her to help, and she sprang to his aid.

"My dear sir," she said, hurrying to Doran's side. "Prince Doran needs his bandages changed. Would you please wait outside for five minutes? The smell—"

Duffrey nodded sharply, putting a handkerchief to his mouth as though he had only just realized what sort of use this place had seen. He and Iole scurried out of the workroom so quickly Doran had to bite his knuckles to keep from laughing.

"What is it?" the medic whispered, readjusting his bandages.

"Can you summon a messenger? Someone who can be trusted at their word, who can slip out once they have heard me speak?"

"You think he might try to silence me?" The medic's brow creased. "I wouldn't be surprised, though. I despise that man. Wait right here. I'll be back in a trice."

She let herself out through a back door that had been cunningly hidden behind a shelf of bottles and dried herbs. Doran pulled himself into a more dignified position, half-sitting against the pillows heaped above his head; the movement was so painful he cried out.

Once the pain had subsided, he was able to take a better look around the room. There was another bed adjacent to his, covered in a black cloth—presumably so the blood stains would not show. Every wall was hidden by shelves crowded with books and metal tools and herbs, likely worth a fortune altogether.

Then Doran noticed that he was wearing different clothes—his fine silk shirt and cotton trousers had been

replaced with simple homespun garments. He was embarrassed at the thought of the medic changing him, wondering if she had gawked at the way his legs had already begun to shrivel up from lack of use.

When the medic reappeared with a child half her size who could have been a girl or a boy, Doran hurriedly rearranged his face into a smile.

"Into the corner, now," the medic told the child. "Take this. Wipe dust from every jar you find." She handed over a surprisingly clean white rag.

Raising her voice, she said, "You may re-enter."

Duffrey and Iole stumped back into the room, Duffrey looking thoroughly disgruntled. While they resumed their places beside the bed, the medic tucked the blanket around Doran's legs.

"You asked why I left the house," Doran said coldly, looking Duffrey straight in the eye. "I ordered you to bring me any eligible women who were willing to become my wife, and none appeared. I chose to take matters into my own hands and see whether the summons had been given at all." He turned to the medic. "Had you heard any word of my request before now? Surely the invitation would have been extended to you."

"None, my lord," the medic said, thankfully not pointing out that she was at least ten years Doran's senior.

"There you have it," Doran said. "You have been lying to me and deceiving me, all in service to King Luistan, who sent you to look after me—and prevent me from returning to Lostport, is that right?"

Duffrey's face remained blank, though he had gone a shade whiter than before.

"But you would be required to obey a direct order, isn't that right? Especially one made in front of a witness?"

Duffrey gave the barest hint of a nod.

"Very well. I order you to escort me safely back to Lostport in three days' time. And before that, I expect to meet every girl between the ages of twenty and thirty who lives in Torrein."

The medic crossed to her shelves as though to choose out a new jar of herbs, and as she knelt to read the labels, she gave the child a quick pinch on the arm. Without further instruction, the child dropped the cloth and hurried out the medic's front door, head down.

"Well. Consider it arranged," Duffrey said icily. "We will escort you, of course. We have been charged with keeping you safe, and that extends as far as ensuring you return to Lostport in one piece." He looked over at the medic, who straightened and gave him an innocent look. "As long as you believe he will be fit to travel in three days, that is."

"If he rests until then, yes, he should be just fine."

Duffrey gave a stiff nod. "Now, my lord, may we return you to your home?"

Doran glanced at the medic, hoping she would refuse his request, but she surprised him by agreeing. "That would be best. Would one of you help me with the stretcher?"

"What happened to my chair?" Doran asked quickly. He didn't like the idea of being paraded through town like an invalid.

"I'm very sorry to say that it has been destroyed," Duffrey said coldly. "It was not meant for our rough streets."

Doran swallowed his groan and submitted to being lifted onto the stretcher and carried through the door. The serving-girl trailed them up the sloping main street with a wide-eyed look of bewilderment.

When they reached the front door of the manor, Doran was able to lift his head enough to see that a small crowd had gathered outside; they broke into applause when they saw him, and one dirty-faced man said, "I saw you crash from my window! I'm glad to know you're alive, milord."

Doran grimaced. So his foolish blundering had been witnessed after all. "I appreciate your concern," he said with dignity that ill-befit his current position. "You may return home now, knowing I am entirely safe."

Clearly Duffrey had a reputation in Torrein, because the townsfolk scattered when he came barging past to the door. Iole scurried around him and pushed open the door, and Doran was whisked into the safety and silence of his clifftop manor.

Once Doran was safely settled in his bed, Duffrey left him while the medic did one final check to ensure his bandages were secured properly.

"I hope you don't expect me to vie for your hand," she said drily as she examined his knees. "I have no intention of leaving Chelt."

"No, of course not," Doran said, embarrassed once again. "I need someone less intelligent than you, someone who can see only the wealth and status they would gain through marrying me and not the burden I would become."

"With all due respect, my lord, I think you may be wrong," the medic said. "Any woman would be lucky to be your wife."

Doran flushed—he knew it was not true, and it was still painful to contemplate his ruin.

"Twe enjoyed your company," she said unexpectedly. "Take care of yourself, will you?"

"If you mean I should stay here rather than trying that stunt again, I think I've learned my lesson," Doran said with a forced smile. "Thank you for everything. Oh—and do you know what happened to Fabrian, the butler who

was working here when I first arrived?"

The medic's eyebrows flew up. "He was publically humiliated last quarter. Something about passing information to a foreign power—"

Doran pressed his mouth into a grim line. That sounded about right. "He was fired for theft, or so I heard. Duffrey wanted him out of the way, because he was passing me information about Lostport."

"Be careful," the medic said. "Please. This sounds very dangerous."

"I will," Doran said, though he had to admit he agreed with her. What could he do against Duffrey and the forces of Whitland when he was powerless even to leave his bed unaided?

The medic bowed her way out after that, leaving behind a pouch full of herbs to relieve pain, to slow the bleeding, and to induce sleep.

As soon as he was alone once more, Doran reached at random for one of the books on his bedside table, searching for what comfort its pages could bring him.

It was not until later that he remembered he had never thought to ask the medic her name.

\* \* \*

"We are a quarter's brisk ride from Lostport, Milady," Tenori said, drawing his horse alongside Katrien's. "I propose we send a forward party to negotiate terms with King Faolan in private. He might be somewhat alarmed if an entire army shows up on his front lawn without warning."

"Quite true," Katrien said. She had her eye on Amadi and Kurjan, who appeared to have resolved their differences with little trouble. "And who should we send in the forward party? I would like to go myself, though I have little faith in my riding abilities."

"You'll learn to canter quickly enough, I believe," Tenori said. "Why, I can hardly tell you from a Darden horse-master now."

"Very amusing." Katrien patted her horse on the neck; the beast had been reliable and steady, everything she could have wished for. "And who else will join us? I want Amadi with me, certainly, and you could not stay behind."

"That could very well be enough," Tenori said. "If we bring two of the warriors, just for protection, we will be safe yet inconspicuous."

When they broke the news to Amadi that night, she immediately said, "Kurjan can fight. Bring him."

"I believe your young beau is a scholar, not a warrior," Katrien said. "He will be a liability and a distraction."

Amadi jumped to her feet. "I'll tell him you said that. He'll make you change your mind, just wait. He knows things. Secrets, I mean."

"Why don't you bring him here, and I can tell him myself?" Katrien suggested primly. Amadi was becoming too accustomed to her liberty; she would find no home in a civilized land after this if she was not careful.

"Fine," Amadi said. She stalked off.

"She reminds me of you." Tenori gave Katrien a mischievous sideways grin. "I've never seen two women more stubborn than the pair of you."

"I forget she's not my daughter at times," Katrien said wistfully. "I should have been there for my children. No one should have to grow up without a mother."

"Well, at least you know your children are safe and adored even in your absence," Tenori said. "From what you have said of King Faolan, I'm sure he has been a loving father to your dear ones. Amadi would not have been so lucky, though, if you had never come along. Perhaps your regrettable choice has in fact done some good in the world."

"I could spend my entire life trying to repent for one choice made in the foolishness of youth." Katrien poked at the fire with a stick, enjoying the warmth it exhaled. The nights were growing colder. "Perhaps you're right. I should stop looking back."

Amadi and Kurjan were approaching now, hands clasped together in a gesture of clear defiance.

Katrien gestured to the two blanket rolls beside her. "I assume Amadi has filled you in on the situation?"

Amadi and Kurjan seated themselves beside the fire, sharing a cautious look.

"I'd never try to impose myself on you," Kurjan said. "Amadi said you're heading south in an advance party. If you don't want me to come, I'll stay here. Gladly."

Amadi pouted at him. "You're not helpful at all. Tell Katrien what you told me."

"She might think I'm trying to cause trouble," Kurjan said.

Katrien folded her arms and scrutinized Kurjan. He was being far too polite—he was trying to manipulate Katrien's sympathy with his groveling self-abasement. "Tell me," she said sharply. "And no more foolishness."

Kurjan's lips twitched. "Fine. But you won't want to hear it." He rubbed his hands over the fire. "Officially, the school in the borderlands is a no-man's-land. It owes no loyalties, and takes part in no schemes. But the professors aren't that neutral. There aren't any Whitish among them, aside from a few exiles, and half the students are from notable families in Varrival or Dardensfell or Ruunas. There are even a few odd ones from Cashabree."

When he paused, Amadi reached over and gave his

shoulder a squeeze.

"Anyway, the professors are probably the most politically involved schemers out there. They have lots of young royals—third children and bastards, of course—under their care, and they can't help but meddle a bit. And they hear plenty of secrets while they're at it."

"Including something that involves Lostport?" Katrien prompted. Despite herself, she was intrigued.

"Yes. You know about your son, right?" Kurjan asked carefully. "What happened to him?"

"I know something dire has happened to him, but he still lives." It pained Katrien to admit that she did not know more.

Kurjan's brows drew together. "He was injured in a boating accident. He's paralyzed from the waist down. From what I've heard, he's in Chelt now, as you know, recovering and living like a king."

Katrien felt numb. Her beautiful son, unable to walk ever again? It was a long moment before she could bring herself to nod.

"Your son is living in one of the nicest cliff-side manors in the entire kingdom, with servants waiting on him all the time and an endless supply of the rarest and most valuable manuscripts at his disposal. Someone's been paying his way, and it's not your husband."

Katrien drew in a sharp breath. "You mean someone wants to keep him away from the throne. Someone who wants Lostport to find itself without an heir."

Kurjan nodded. "The source is well-concealed, but everyone knows it's King Luistan who's been financing your son's comfort. He wants Lostport to descend into chaos, so he can regain his hold on the throne just in time for the Port Emerald revenue to start pouring in."

"Nine plagues!" Katrien said. "Do you think they could have arranged the whole thing? My son's injury, I mean. They tried to kill him and failed, so they are doing the best they can to keep him out of the way."

"The professors think that's a good possibility," Kurjan said gravely. "King Luistan certainly has been scheming against Lostport from the moment word of the gemstone beach got out."

"Do you have proof of this?" Tenori asked. "Is this a fact, or just speculation?"

"It's speculation grounded in fact," Kurjan said. "We know King Luistan wants more power over Lostport, we know the heir was nearly killed, and we know King Faolan isn't paying for his place in Chelt. Just ask your husband if you want proof of that." He nodded at Katrien.

"You win." Katrien prodded the fire again, staring at the flames. "You will accompany me to Lostport and help us sort this mess out."

They left in the morning, Katrien and Tenori flanked by two warriors, with Amadi and Kurjan at their rear. The entire procession rose early to see them off, and Katrien hoped desperately that this would not be the last she saw of her loyal followers. Katrien was dismayed by how gleeful Amadi was to have Kurjan accompanying them; she seemed unaware of the gravity of their mission.

When Tenori kicked his horse into a canter, Katrien hastened to follow suit, nearly jolting out of her saddle when the horse broke into a pounding, furious rhythm. Recovering herself enough to experiment, she realized that the ride was less jarring when she stood in the stirrups and raised herself a hair's breadth off the saddle. This was hardly more comfortable, though, as her legs quickly tired of the odd angle.

It was not long before the entire procession vanished amidst the grasses behind them. Again Katrien was struck by how vast and unending the Darden plains were, and how empty, as though she and her five companions were the only humans in existence.

By the time they stopped for lunch, Katrien's legs were about to fall off. No longer caring for propriety, she massaged her calves and the backs of her knees while Tenori spread a thick layer of goat's cheese on their way-bread.

"Why did I agree to this?" Katrien groaned, walking back and forth to ease her stiffness.

"It's fun," Amadi said. "Way better than plodding along all day with everyone else."

Katrien shook her head. "When you are as old as I am, you will not think so highly of being jolted around all day."

"I feel the same way," Tenori said. "And unlike you, I cannot profess myself a novice. Despite years spent in the saddle, trading and exploring and the like, I'm stiff as a rusted hinge."

"Our children learn to ride sooner than walk," one of the warriors said. "You can't teach that sort of familiarity. It must be as natural as breathing."

"I wish I was a Darden warrior," Amadi said. "I'd know all of Dardensfell by heart, and I'd get to ride around all day hunting and fighting and exploring."

"Not exactly," the other warrior said, with a fleeting smile. "It's true that women help us hunt, but most of our life is filled with less-pleasant tasks, like tanning hides and setting up camp and drying meat. And if you had spent your childhood among us, you'd have an intimate knowledge of buffalo pies."

Amadi wrinkled her nose.

"We have ten days to ride," Tenori said. "If you're still

this enthusiastic about horse-riding once we reach Lostport, we can find a clan to adopt you." He grinned at the warriors.

"That's a sight I'd pay to see," Kurjan said. "Amadi all suited up like a Darden warrior."

"Oh, be quiet," Amadi said.

\* \* \*

The unexpected visitor who had torn Laina away from her father's scrutiny was Jairus, here without Swick for the first time. His eyes were swollen and bloodshot, as though he had not slept in days, and he was drenched from the rain outside.

"It's good to see you," Laina said. "But you look awful! What's going on?"

Jairus lowered his head. "I don't want anyone to see me here. Can we talk in private?"

Curious and a bit frightened, Laina led him to the back room below her father's bedroom. It had once been a guestroom, though of late it had been converted to a pantry and storeroom. "What is it?"

Jairus removed his sodden jacket and sat on the empty frame of the bed. "I'm in trouble. Conard told me to come to you. He thought you would help."

"Tell me." Laina sat beside Jairus and took his hands.

"I went to Port Emerald two nights ago to show Conard the way to the cave we have been using. On the way out of camp, we were stopped by a guard, who I knocked out. He woke the next day and remembered I was Varrilan. Conard came last night to tell me I was in danger. The builders are ready to kill any Varrilans they find, I think. I hope there are no others in town."

Laina shook her head. "I haven't seen any of your

people around. But we need to hide you. Port Emerald will be finished before long, probably before the next span is up, and we might get enough of the builders to leave by that point that they'll give up. Will you stay here until the Whitish are gone?"

"If it does not inconvenience you, I would be forever grateful." Jairus swallowed visibly. "Your Conard is a good man. I hope he does not find himself in danger."

"I shouldn't have sent him down to the builders' camp. He's already liable to be arrested for disobeying the terms of his exile, and if the Whitish ever find out what he's doing, they'll be after his blood as well."

Jairus pressed his lips together. "It is for the good of Lostport, and all of the Kinship Thrones. I think I would do the same, if I was in his place. It would not be a burden."

Laina shrugged. She could not shake the sensation of looming danger—as long as Conard remained at the builders' camp, it was only a matter of time before he was caught. Unless he joined Whitland first.

"Would you mind if I told the household about you?" Laina asked. "They are absolutely trustworthy. Besides, no one is going to report you to the Whitish. They're our enemies as much as yours."

"Thank you," Jairus said. He withdrew his hands from Laina's grasp and stood, looking very uncomfortable.

"Shall we speak to the household now?" Laina said. "I think you should stay in this room, unless my father allows you to use my brother's old bedroom."

She led Jairus to the kitchen first, since most of the staff liked to congregate by the fire when it was rainy out. Sure enough, the housekeeper and tailor were both perched on a bench in front of the fireplace, mending a heap of clothing, while Nort and Barrik were deep in conversation

with the gardeners at one of the wood tables.

"How is the king?" Mylo asked, wiping his hands on his apron.

"Recovering," Laina said with a guilty twinge. "He is still very weak, but he doesn't seem confused. I have something to tell you."

She took Jairus by the elbow and drew him forward, into the warmth of the kitchen.

"You all know Jairus. The Whitish have turned strongly against any Varrilans here, and he's in danger if anyone sees him. We need to provide him refuge until the Whitish leave."

"Welcome to our humble manor," Mylo said slyly. "We might be able to scare up a free corner you can kip in."

Laina snorted. "I was thinking we could give him the spare room downstairs, unless my father lets him take my brother's old bedroom."

"Don't push your luck." Mylo snapped his fingers. "Nort, Barrik, help the housekeeper clean out the spare room. I'm sure we don't need half that junk anyway."

"I will help," Jairus said, depositing his wet coat by the door.

Mylo retrieved the coat and hung it on the back of a chair by the fire. "No you won't. Make yourself comfortable. And try to get warm! You look miserable."

Laina joined the tailor on his bench alongside the dancing flames. Heat tickled her back, enveloping her in the gentle smell of wood-smoke. "Come join me." She beckoned Jairus over; he came hesitantly, his gaze flickering around to assess each of the kitchen-maids and gardeners. "I want to hear everything."

Once Jairus had settled hesitantly beside her, Laina whispered, "How is the gemstone-making? Have you

started?"

He nodded. "Swick and I have trained four men from town to help us, so the work will go on even without me."

"Have any townsfolk approached Swick for help with maps?"

"Yes," Jairus said slowly. "People seem to worry their neighbors will steal their valuables, so they have insisted we keep the maps separate. Many of them have asked to take their map home so it cannot be replicated."

"Well, that way they can't blame us if the map goes missing, I suppose," Laina said. "I thought there would be more unity among the townspeople, though. There are thousands and thousands of Whitlanders, and not very many of us; I thought people would band together a bit more."

"People are inclined to mistrust each other," Jairus said. "Everyone is suspicious right now. About everything."

Laina wondered if Jairus included himself in that generalization. He certainly did not seem to trust her father's staff to keep his whereabouts secret, and he had more than enough reason to hate the Whitlanders.

The youngest kitchen wench approached with her head down, clearly wary of Jairus, and offered up two steaming mugs of mulled wine.

"Thank you, sweetie," Laina said, smiling at the girl. She was new in the household—Laina's father had taken her in after her parents sold their house to pay off a debt.

"Do you think our plans might work?" Jairus said quietly after the girl had hurried away.

"They sound like madness, don't they?" Laina sipped at her wine. "You know, I don't care what the odds are. I'll make this work. I promise."

They finished their mulled wine in silence, listening to the crackle of the fire and the rhythmic chopping as Mylo diced a mound of onions. How lucky to be a kitchen maid, with a good home and steady work, certain that the king would take care of matters too big for you. Laina was half-tempted to run off with Conard and pursue a future in the Twin Cities far to the north. As a nameless city-dweller, the fate of the land would not rest on her.

\* \* \*

Conard spent the next two days dizzy with exhaustion. He skipped dinner so he could head to bed immediately, but once in his tent, he lay wide-eyed and restless.

The following day he woke congested and achy. The sky was swollen with clouds, snagging their bellies on mountaintops and threatening rain. Conard considered visiting the healer's tent, but he did not wish to draw attention to himself. He would not be listed in the original records of arrivals, and he would have to explain the odd circumstances of his appearance. Worse, they might see his exile's band.

By lunchtime he was certain he had a fever—his throat was parched, his nose so blocked-up he could taste nothing, and he felt so weak and sore that he had to sit down between hauling each brick.

Once he had collected his soup and roll from the dining tent, Conard wandered into the woods to eat, wishing to be left alone. He sat on a springy patch of moss beneath a tree that was alive despite being split in half. The high chatter of birdsong that usually rang through the forest was quieter here, silent apart from two brown fantails twittering and chirping to one another as they flitted from branch to branch. The others must have been scared off by the construction.

Conard drank half his soup and dunked his roll into

the remainder. While he waited for it to go nice and soft, he thought he would lie down for a moment. He curled up at the foot of the tree, his knee wedged against a protruding root.

He woke to the first drops of rain. Either the clouds had grown darker than ever or it was nearing sunset; the forest was so dim he could hardly find his soup-bowl propped beneath a mossy bush. Unsteadily he rose and stumbled back toward camp. He could not stand the thought of food right now; if he was lucky, he would make it back to his tent without being seen and sleep properly for once.

No such luck. As soon as he emerged from the forest, Captain Drail confronted him. "Lazy swine! Where've you been all day?"

"I'm sick," Conard muttered. "Must've fallen over. I don't know."

"Why didn't you report to the healers, if that was the case?" Captain Drail said sharply.

"Wanted to work. Wasn't going to say anything."

Captain Drail snatched the soup bowl from Conard. "Go rest. We can't let men get the idea there'll be no consequences for disobeying orders. Once you've recovered, you'll owe five lashes."

Ordinarily Conard would have protested, but he was too miserable to do anything but nod and slouch away. He was asleep the moment he crawled into his sleeping roll.

Two days later, the fever finally broke. Ian had taken it upon himself to bring Conard water and soup, forcing Conard to drink even when he pretended he was asleep. Each time, Ian begged Conard to move to the healer's tent and seek proper care, and each time Conard refused.

It was only after he felt well enough to rise and hobble

over to breakfast on his own that Conard remembered the five lashes waiting for him. He had never been whipped or even hit before, unless you counted the play-fights he used to have with Laina. His father had always been gentle and cautious, never one to raise a fist in anger. Though he had known pain enough through his years of traversing the rainforest, camping out with nothing but a sealskin cloak as shelter, this was different. He was afraid he would scream or cry—after this he would be known forever as the man too feeble to move his bricks and too cowardly to take a lashing.

Ian and the other failures rose to greet Conard when he joined them at breakfast.

"He's alive!" Quentin said.

"Just don't touch anything," one of the others said. "I'm not gonna do like you did and lie in my tent for the next span."

"Ian," Conard whispered, taking a seat beside him. "They're going to give me five lashes. Have any of you been whipped before?"

"It was standard while we were on the barge," Ian said grimly. "As hard as you try to stay out of trouble, it's never enough. I have a few scars yet to heal."

Conard grimaced. He was the only uninitiated one in camp, and the others would immediately see as much.

Though Conard was far from fully recovered, Captain Drail approached him between bricks and informed him that the lashing would be that afternoon before dinner.

"You'll be everyone's favorite," Captain Drail sneered. "The lazy bastards will take any excuse to get off work early."

As it transpired, his ability to stand the lashing was the least of Conard's worries. He was led to a bare spot beneath a dead old tree, the entire camp looking on. Men jeered and

spat at him as he passed, though when he reached the front of the crowd he found Ian, Quentin, and the other failures forming a protective ring around the tree.

"Shirt off," said the burly soldier who was in charge of administering punishment.

Conard went cold. They would see his exile's band. He should have realized this would be standard protocol for a whipping; he could have tied a strap of leather around his wrist like a token, as the gypsies sometimes did.

"Take it off!" the soldier barked. "Or I'll do it for you."

The men laughed.

Could he somehow tear his sleeve in the process of taking the shirt off, so his wrist would remain covered? He tugged at the fabric experimentally, but it was much too sturdy to rip. He knew there were exiles among the soldiers, but they had been banished from Chelt and Dardensfell and the like, not countries that had any direct relation to Lostport or Whitland. Conard could pretend he was one of them, but he had no idea whether exiles were banded the same way in other lands.

When the soldier raised his whip in impatience, Conard sighed and unbuttoned the white uniform. There was no immediate reaction from the crowd when his band was revealed, so he dared to hope these men did not recognize it.

The first blow came before he expected it. He was standing there limply, shirt still in one hand, when the soldier laced his whip across Conard's exposed spine.

Conard shouted and stumbled forward, bracing himself against the rotting trunk.

Again the crowd roared with laughter.

With the second blow, he was slammed forward, face against the bark, so he was nearly hugging the tree. He

grasped it desperately, trying to keep his feet, as the lashes continued. He bit his tongue so hard he thought the end would fall off, yet still he could not muffle a second yelp. For the hundredth time, he wondered why he had been so witless as to agree to this mad scheme.

Laina, he thought, trying to crowd out the pain with her image. It's for Laina. I'd lay down my life for her.

Easier said than done.

At last the soldier stepped back and wiped his hands on his dirty trousers. Conard wanted to collapse at the foot of the tree and lie there, unmoving, until someone carried him away; instead he forced himself to straighten, every stripe across his back searing at the movement, and turn to face the crowd.

This time the cheering did not sound spiteful. Every one of the hardened men out there had gone through the same trial; now, in their eyes, Conard finally belonged among them.

Ian and Quentin leaped to Conard's side to support him as he limped past the crowd toward the dining tent.

Captain Drail stopped him just outside. "Come talk to me after dinner."

"Sure," Conard said, trying not to betray his fear. Had the project manager recognized his band?

Strangely enough, Conard's public humiliation appeared to have won him respect among the builders. For the first time, as he heaped turnips and fish onto his plate, he was greeted and patted on the shoulder by strangers. The latter made him wince, which only encouraged more men to do the same.

"Welcome to Port Emerald," men joked.

"Maybe you'll be able to haul a few more stones now that you're a real man."

"Wear those stripes proudly, mate."

Conard tried to return the jests, though his head had gone a bit fuzzy. He still felt sick. When he joined his friends at their usual table, a tall mug of rum was waiting for him.

"You did better than I did my first time," Ian said, flushing slightly. "I started bawling."

Emerett snorted. "Won't forget that, will we," he rasped. "I can't talk, though. My whole life's been nothing but brutality. My whole body's so scarred I could hardly feel the whip."

"What was that name you were muttering?" Justain teased. "Laina, was it? That's the princess of Lostport, that is."

Conard froze. He hadn't realized he had spoken aloud. "It was Lena, not Laina. She's my girl back home." He feigned nonchalance.

"Ooh, don't you think a lot of yourself," Justain said. "Courting the princess. What a gentleman you are."

"Shut it."

Conard escaped dinner early, saying he'd been summoned to talk to Captain Drail.

"Don't envy you," Quentin muttered.

"Good luck," Ian called after him.

Captain Drail was dining with five other leaders in his private tent, a cavernous space draped with furs and decked out with furniture that looked as though it belonged in King Faolan's manor.

"Good of you to join us," Captain Drail greeted Conard.

Conard eyed the captain suspiciously, not trusting the changed tone. Perhaps the man was only feigning courtesy in the company of his peers.

"I wanted to apologize for the way you've been treated," he said. "I've spoken to your friends, and they've told me you were deathly ill. I don't doubt it. You're still pale as sea-foam. But it's not easy, keeping a rowdy bunch of men in line. You've got to make examples of the ones who stray, or they won't heed your word." He gave Conard a serious frown. "Men noticed that you'd disappeared. If I'd let you get away with vanishing midday, we'd have men slipping off to visit the gypsy whores all day."

"Understood," Conard said. Was that all?

"But I haven't called you here just to explain what I've done," Captain Drail said, his voice resuming its usual sharpness. "Your friends say you're an intelligent man. We've need of a man who can help draw plans for the plumbing and sewage systems in Port Emerald. Someone who knows how to work with this terrain."

"But I still haven't made it through my stack of bricks," Conard said ruefully. "Won't the men talk if I'm let off easy?"

Captain Drail gave him a sharp nod. "True. But you'll be less than useless at physical labor until you're fully recovered. That's the reason I'll give. I'm sure your friends will understand."

"Thank you, sir," Conard said. He could hardly believe his luck.

"Now get out of here. The architects will expect you at sunrise tomorrow."

With a salute, Conard backed out of the tent and made his way back to his own bed, dizzy with surprise.

It was only once he had lain down to sleep that doubts began to niggle at him. Had Ian or Quentin actually spoken to Captain Drail about his intelligence, or were darker motives at work here? Conard had no knowledge of plumbing or architecture, but he certainly knew this land better than any of the Whitish. Did Captain Drail suspect the truth?

The day after his accident, Doran was wakened just after sunrise by a smug-looking Duffrey, who announced that a number of eligible women had arrived to make his acquaintance.

"Tell them to wait outside, would you?" he ordered Duffrey. "You can tell them they will accompany me for tea." He reached for one of the cleanly-pressed shirts he had left folded beside his bed. "Take me to the dining hall, please, and help me settle in at the head of the table."

"As my lord wishes," Duffrey said, with less sarcasm than usual. Doran had a feeling the man had something unpleasant in store.

As the butler retreated to order the ladies outside and warn the kitchen that a formal tea was required, Doran struggled into his shirt, careful not to let the fabric get anywhere near the still-fresh blood on his bandaged knees.

Not a moment after Doran managed to button his shirt up and smooth his hair satisfactorily into place—it was getting a bit unruly, truth be told—Duffrey reappeared with the cook, a middle-aged woman who looked fierce beneath the stains on her uniform.

"Forgive us the indignity," Duffrey said as he crossed to Doran's side. The cook took his legs while Duffrey lifted him beneath the arms, and he was raised like a corpse from his bed. By the time he was deposited in his chair in the dining hall, a sheen of fresh blood had soaked through his trousers once more. They were black, though, so he could afford to ignore it for a while longer.

"Send in the women," Doran said, gripping the arms of his chair and shoving himself backward until his shoulder blades were pressed into the chair.

As the cook retreated to the kitchen, Duffrey welcomed in no less than fifteen women, enough to fill the available chairs and then some.

They milled around the entryway, gazing at the arched white ceiling and inspecting the statues that rested in a few crevices, until at last one of them noticed Doran and hurried over to the dining hall, her heels clicking against the floor.

"Welcome," Doran said, endeavoring to sound more confident than he felt. "Thank you for joining me today. I know this seems sudden, but I find I am in need of a wife."

A couple of the girls put their heads together and giggled; Doran hoped fervently they weren't laughing at him.

"Please, take a seat."

Four of the girls were left standing once the rest had settled themselves, and Doran was saddened to find that these were the homeliest of the lot, their clothes in a much worse state of disrepair than any of his own servants.

Thankfully Iole appeared up the kitchen stairs just then, a pair of stools under her arms, and Doran invited one of the poor girls to sit beside him.

The girl who had originally taken this privileged spot smiled at her new neighbor in a predatory way.

"Don't worry," Doran said shortly. "You will each get a turn sitting next to me."

To his relief, Iole returned with two more stools just then, followed by the cook, whose arms were bulging beneath the weight of a platter heaped with teapots and cups and sugar.

Once the women had all been served, Doran turned to the plain-looking girl on his right. He was immediately drawn to the ones who looked poor, though he knew they would make a terrible match politically—he could tell they were not playing any games with him.

"Thank you for coming, lady—"

"Bree, Milord."

"Lady Bree. And what is your position in town?"

She flushed a dull red. "My parents run a fishing boat, Milord. I help prepare their catch for market." She said this last so quietly Doran could hardly catch her words; he noticed with a flash of anger that the girl on her right was eyeing her scornfully.

"And why have you come here to try your luck with me?"

When she dropped her gaze miserably, he hurriedly added, "I'm not trying to question your motives. I'm only curious. I plan to ask the same question of everyone."

"I've always dreamed of the glory of court, Milord," she mumbled. "I would love nothing more than to wed you."

"Is that the truth?" Doran asked wryly. "You might be disappointed to find that the court of Lostport is no court at all. We keep a simple household, not much larger than this manor here."

She shook her head, her voice dropping so low it was almost a whisper. "We've had a bad summer, Milord. Too many storms. My father needs to marry me off to save our family, and the man he's picked for me is horrid."

"I appreciate your honesty," Doran said gently, taking a sip of his tea. "You have made a very favorable impression."

As Lady Bree flushed with surprised delight, Doran ordered that the ladies each move one seat to the left. He had considered letting the spiteful woman beside Bree wait for last, but he had better things to do than alienate the very women who might one day save his country.

He started interrogating this woman in the same

manner, but quickly found that the conversation was out of his hands.

"Yes, my parents are part of the Darden nobility, Milord," she said smoothly. "We travel here every summer to enjoy the fresh air. What is it like in Lostport in summer?"

"Less rainy than usual," Doran said, feeling a bit miffed. He was not here to answer questions about himself.

"Ah, but you have seen much more of the country than I have now! What was it like, journeying through Varrival? It seems frightful, does it not?"

"Very sandy," Doran said peevishly. "Thank you for your company, my lady. Next!"

The woman gave Doran a cold smile as she moved to the chair on his left, her intricate hairdo quivering with indignation.

The women began to blur together before long. To his dismay, most of the wealthy-looking women were just as difficult to talk to as the first, each trying to manipulate the conversation or showing off unnecessarily or pretending to be sillier than they actually were. He had never met a highborn lady before, apart from Laina and his mother, but he could hardly remember his mother, and Laina certainly didn't act the part. He was starting to wish he could just pick Bree and get on with it, though he realized she would probably be a lot happier if she was just given a purse of coins and allowed to stay with her family.

By the time he reached a well-dressed young woman with very delicate features who seemed to be a joke among her neighbors, she seemed like a breath of fresh air.

"What is your name, my lady?"

"Odessa, Milord." Her cheeks flushed.

"That's a foreign name, is it not?" Doran asked curiously. "Where are you from?"

"Ruunas, Milord." Now that he looked at her more carefully, he could recognize the Ruunic features—black hair, almond skin, dark eyes. "I've always wondered what this manor looked like from the inside." Her eyes were sparkling with delight. "You must love living in such a beautiful place."

"Actually, I'm leaving in two days," Doran said abruptly. "Would you mind living in Lostport?" He thought this starry-eyed girl might be the exact sort of person who would follow him without complaint.

"Oh, that would be amazing! I've always wanted to see more of the Kinship Thrones. It's why I'm here, you know. Visiting my uncle."

"But would you get tired of living in Lostport for the rest of your life?"

She bit her lip, gaze turning inward. "I think not, as long as you agreed to take me on a trip to the Twin Cities at least once. I've always wanted to go."

"I'm sure that can be arranged." Doran glanced around the circle and groaned inwardly at the number of girls he still had to talk to. "Would you like to come speak with me tomorrow? Your uncle can come as well, if you would like." He was almost entirely decided on this girl. She seemed kind enough and simple enough to forgive him for the burden he would put upon her.

"Ooh, yes!" she said. Lowering her voice, she asked, "How many others are you seeing tomorrow?"

"Just you," Doran said shortly.

Her eyes lit up.

As the women switched seats once more, Doran caught the eye of Iole and beckoned her over.

"Could you please go into my room and bring my coin purse?" he whispered.

Iole nodded and scurried away as the next girl in line

turned to him with interest.

"Thank you for joining me," Doran said mechanically. He didn't bother to ask this one's name. "What are your interests in a match with Lostport?"

And so it continued, until he had spoken to every one of his guests. Most were looking either disgruntled or spiteful as they sat waiting to be dismissed—he had not been very gracious to the ones he was not interested in. He tried to imagine Laina in a similar position; either she would reject everyone outright, or she would treat every suitor the same, so they had to argue over a jug of ale later that night who was foremost in her thoughts. The coin purse Iole had brought back was pressed beneath one immobile leg, where he kept having to touch it to make sure it was still there.

"Thank you all for joining me," Doran said, catching Odessa's eye across the table. "I will seek you out if I wish to see you again."

As Lady Bree rose, banging her knee against the table leg and stumbling, Doran caught her wrist.

"What is it?" she asked softly. "You're not choosing me, are you? I hardly think you'd want a commoner for a match."

"Please just stay a moment," Doran said.

She gave him a trapped look, as though she expected to be violated. "Sorry, Milord, I have duties to attend to." She pulled her arm free.

"Please, Lady Bree. I mean you only the best. Stay, just until the others are gone."

Though her expression remained wary, she sank back into her chair and waited, grasping the arms of the chair as though she intended to flee at a moment's notice.

When the last girl had been let out, Duffrey turned from the door and stopped in his tracks when he noticed the girl still sitting at Doran's right. "Surely you don't intend to marry that disgraceful thing," Duffrey said spitefully.

Bree flushed and half-stood. "I'm sorry, Milord. I'll leave now."

Doran pressed his coin purse into her hand. "My regards to your family, Lady Bree. Thank you for joining me today."

Shock crossed her face, and she mumbled something that sounded like a cross between "A million thanks" and "You shouldn't do this."

"Go on," Doran said. "You don't need to thank me." He didn't want Duffrey to get a chance to lecture the poor girl.

Ducking her head in two quick curtseys, Bree hurried out of the room with the coin purse clutched tight to her stomach.

"Am I to assume you made your decision?" Duffrey asked drily, sidling into the dining room in Bree's wake.

"It wasn't that poor girl, if that's what you were wondering," Doran said shortly.

"May I ask—"

"Lady Odessa," Doran said. "That's who I chose."

"The one from Ruunas?" Duffrey began stacking plates together with a stiff-backed look of disapproval. "Surely you would rather strengthen your ties with Chelt—or Whitland."

"Our ties with Whitland are already strong," Doran said. "Have you forgotten my mother?"

Duffrey's lip curled. "The one who fled Lostport and returned to Whitland? What does that say about your country?"

Doran winced—even after all these years, his mother's betrayal still stung. Though his father had explained that his mother had been wretched with loneliness and half-crazed with frustration after the endless rains, and that sending her back to Whitland had saved her life, Doran still could not understand how she valued her husband and her children so little.

"We have always been very closely aligned with Whitland," Doran said tightly. "I think it is high time we turn our attentions to the south. Ruunas is almost our neighbor, after all. We cannot ignore the realities of geography."

"You say that to justify a bad decision," Duffrey said under his breath.

Doran pretended he had not heard the man. He was sick of his butler's manipulative ways.

"About your return to Lostport," Duffrey said, louder this time. "I hardly think this is an appropriate time to make the journey. Varrival is preparing for war, and they may treat any strangers in their territory as a threat. It would be wise to wait until this conflict has settled."

"The conflict is exactly why I need to return," Doran said through gritted teeth. "Lostport cannot appear weak. You have your orders—prepare to depart in two days' time. I don't want to hear any more excuses."

"Of course not, Milord," Duffrey said smoothly.

It was only after Doran had dismissed his butler that he remembered he could no longer rely on his wheeled chair to return to his bedchamber. He was trapped at the dining table until someone remembered him.

The following day, he brought two books with him to breakfast and remained at the table as he waited for Odessa. He did not want to humiliate himself in front of her by revealing how incapable he was just yet.

Odessa and her uncle arrived shortly before noon, and Duffrey was there to let them in, the picture of humble servitude. Oh, how Doran hated the man.

"Thank you very much for joining me," Doran greeted them as they took seats on either side of him. The uncle was very obviously Ruunic, from the dark brown of his skin to the way he towered over Duffrey. There were rumors that the Ruunans had selectively bred themselves to create a new race distinct from the Whitish they originated from, and in doing so had made their people more beautiful than any others in the Kinship Thrones; at this moment, Doran did not find that hard to believe.

"This is my uncle, Lord Bardrosse." Odessa's voice was higher than it had been the day before, and she kept twining her hands together with nerves.

"At your service, Milord," Lord Bardrosse said, inclining his head. "To what do we owe the pleasure?"

"I think you already know that," Doran said. "I would like to ask Lady Odessa to be my wife."

She flushed deep pink at his words, and would not meet Doran's eyes.

"Unless you would rather not wed me?" he asked with sudden concern.

"No, of course not. I mean, I would love to."

Lord Bardrosse raised his eyebrows. "I do have to ask, your grace—what has compelled you to offer your hand to my niece? Our family is certainly wealthy, but we have no political power to speak of, and Lostport has never thought to ally itself with Ruunas before."

Doran glanced up to make sure Duffrey was gone. "I admit, Whitland has recently been moving in a direction I am not comfortable with. As Lostport's future ruler, I must do what I can to prevent our downfall, which, in this case, consists of moving away from Whitland and forging new alliances. I doubt Ruunas would offer up anyone with political power for an alliance with Whitland—I believe

most countries see us as far too closely aligned with Whitland, though that has never been very accurate. Lostport is made up of exiles and criminals and prospectors, people who came there to escape the high king's power."

"You're hardly painting an attractive picture of Lostport, your grace," Lord Bardrosse said, though his lip twitched.

"I assure you, it's a very civil place now—most of the time." Doran glanced at Odessa, who gave him a shy smile. He was beginning to feel a growing unease that she would quickly realize how little he deserved someone like her.

"Well, as you can tell by our presence here, we are fully open to the idea," Lord Bardrosse said. "I am relieved to know that your motives are straightforward."

Doran nodded. Duffrey reappeared with tea just then, and he looked slightly disgruntled to find that Doran and his guests had fallen silent at his arrival. Clearly he had hoped to overhear something of importance.

"Thank you very much, Duffrey," Doran said with a forced smile. "And now, Lord Bardrosse, Duffrey, could you please excuse me for a moment? I would like to speak with Lady Odessa alone."

"Of course." Lord Bardrosse added a jot of sugar to his tea and brought the cup with him out to the entrance hall, where he perched on one of the armchairs and studied a polished driftwood sculpture in the alcove opposite him.

Duffrey left with considerably less grace, retreating down the stairs to the kitchen, where presumably he would listen behind the door.

Doran lowered his voice so even Duffrey would not hear. "There are a few things you must know about me if you are to wed me," he said.

Odessa nodded eagerly, leaning in close to hear him.

"First, I am sure you know the rumors, but—I can't walk. My legs were paralyzed in a boating accident this spring."

Odessa laid a delicate hand on his arm. "I did know that. And of course I don't hold it against you. I would like to do whatever I can to make it easier for you."

"Thank you." Doran was surprisingly touched by this. "And second, could you keep a secret your entire life, and never tell another soul?"

"Of course, my lord." Her face fell. "Unless it was something to do with Ruunas, and I was condemning my country by keeping silent."

"I would never ask that of you."

"Then yes, I would do anything for you."

It was decided, then. She was everything Doran had hoped for. And, if she continued looking at him with such eager adoration, he might find himself falling in love with her in time. "In that case, Lady Odessa, would you be my wife?"

"Yes! Oh, yes!" Odessa turned pink with happiness. "Uncle! I am to marry a king."

Lord Bardrosse rejoined them, balancing his tea cup precariously on his platter, and embraced his niece. He shook Doran's hand with a warm smile, and would have given him a hug as well if Doran had been able to stand.

"And so, do you intend to remain in Chelt, or return to Lostport?" Lord Bardrosse asked.

"Uncle, I already told you that, remember?" Odessa said. "He's returning to Lostport."

"Tomorrow, in fact," Doran said, grateful that Odessa was not opposed to the idea.

"Well, that will be excellent," Lord Bardrosse said. "Would you mind if Odessa traveled on her own to join you, stopping in Ruunas to tell her parents the happy news

along the way? She might take an extra couple quarters, but it would help relations with Ruunas immensely, I assure you."

"Of course," Doran said. He hoped Lostport was not at the stage of dissolution that his wife would be required to make an immediate presence. "It would be a much nicer journey that way, I am sure." Secretly he was glad to be spared her presence for the long journey. What on earth would they talk about? They had nothing in common. At least back in Lostport, Laina and Conard would be able to entertain her as well.

Doran amended that thought as he remembered abruptly that Conard had been exiled. What a shame—he had envisioned Conard as the surrogate father for his child. He knew the man could keep a secret. Besides, it had hardly been Conard's fault that they had misjudged the strength of the storm that ill-fated day.

He realized that Odessa and Lord Bardrosse had been waiting for him to dismiss them. Clearing his throat, he said, "Thank you for joining me. I will expect to see you in Lostport one span from today."

"Yes, of course, Milord," she said with excitement. She reached under the table and gave his hand a quick squeeze before rising. "Thank you for tea."

Doran inclined his head.

"Very well met, Your Grace," Lord Bardrosse said. Smiling, he took Odessa's arm and escorted her from the manor.

When Duffrey and the cook had carried Doran to his room, he started packing, lying down on his bed so he could reach most of his possessions. He had very little; Duffrey had expressly stated that he could not take any of the books with him, so he retained nothing of value. Just a few clothes and a lucky stone Laina had once given him.

He was to be married in less than two spans. The truth had not quite sunk in. Though he disliked the idea of spending the rest of his life with a near-stranger, he felt better now that he was doing his part for Lostport.

He may be useless as a man, but he was no longer useless as the heir to the throne.

## Chapter 20

Five days after she had ridden ahead of her followers, Katrien could see a hazy smudge on the horizon that marked the start of the rainforest. It was another day before they were close enough to make out individual trees, looming like a verdant wall above the plains. The line was virtually unbroken, aside from a bush here or a palm there that had decided to sprout a few paces away from the safety of the jungle.

When Katrien had last seen this rainforest recede behind her, she had felt a burden lift from her shoulders as she escaped the oppressive closeness and humidity of the trees. This time, though, her heart lightened at the familiar lushness. She had missed this exotic kingdom—the flowers and the brightly-colored birds and the glimmer of the sea—and most of all, she had missed her dear Faolan and her precious children.

"How much farther?" Amadi asked. Though she had not complained once, Katrien could tell that the grueling ride had begun to wear at her.

"We will stay in proper beds tonight," Tenori said. "And after that, we leave the horses behind and take to the water."

"It's two days from here," Katrien said. "I remember this part."

The trackless plains gave way to a road that followed

the riverbank downstream for a short way. This road ended at a small settlement built right along the river, which Katrien had seen in passing the first time she had floated downriver to Lostport. Just as before, its docks were crowded with small barges.

"This village only exists to serve travelers heading to Lostport," Tenori said. "It is a community of fisherfolk who do very well for themselves by ferrying passengers down the last stretch of river into Lostport. They have a corner on the market."

The huts lining the river were small but very well-kept, and a startling level of care had been put into the gardens and footpaths. Katrien and her party left their horses at a stable just outside the low fence running around the village, pausing while Amadi gave her horse a hug and kiss farewell, before following Tenori down the patterned walkway into the village center. Every detail looked as though it had been carefully thought out, not one twig out of place. Clearly the villagers had a good deal of money and plenty of time to amuse themselves.

The inn was just as small and tidy as the rest of the village; Katrien's army of followers would have to camp in the forest when they arrived. As it was, Katrien and her five companions laid claim to all but one of the inn's beds.

Though this was nothing compared to Faolan's manor, it felt like unspeakable luxury after more than a span living on horseback. If she had been younger she might have regretted the end of the exhilarating freedom they had found traveling the great Darden plains, but she had no room for regrets now. She sank gratefully into the bath that had been drawn for her, every joint spasming and then relaxing as the heat unknitted her aching muscles.

At dinner, the innkeeper and his family joined Katrien's party, eager to hear the news they brought from

the Twin Cities.

"Do you ever stop people from traveling south?" Kurjan asked, passing the platter of jungle fruits to Amadi.

"To whom do you owe allegiance?" the innkeeper asked shrewdly. "I don't wish to offend anyone."

"Can you swear yourself to silence?" Katrien countered.

The innkeeper nodded, his eyes narrowed.

"I am Queen Katrien, wife to King Faolan, here to resume my place by his side. I made a grave mistake many years ago, and I have regretted every day that I was not there to see my children grow up."

The innkeeper's eyes widened, and his wife gasped. Belatedly they both scrambled to their feet and bowed, their children copying them with some confusion.

Katrien waved a hand at them. "No formalities, please. I've just spent nearly fifty days riding through the Darden plains, as grimy as any of the horse-masters."

The family sat, still sharing startled looks.

"Allow me to be the first to welcome you back to Lostport," the innkeeper said at last. "We will speak freely. This entire village is fiercely loyal to Lostport, though we usually pretend otherwise. We act as an independent settlement, impartially dedicated to the good of any traveler, but that is because we have never been asked to do otherwise. Long ago, we promised the king of Lostport that we would defend the kingdom if we were ever called upon to do so. We may appear peaceful, but we are well-trained in fighting. Our boatmen can sink any ship that tries to pass."

"Have you had word of the trouble in Lostport?" Katrien asked.

"Of course," the innkeeper said darkly. "We have sent many emissaries to King Faolan, asking whether he would like us to sink the boatloads of Whitish soldiers, but he has bade us to keep the peace for now. He hopes to see Port Emerald to completion."

"Events are quickly spiraling out of control," Katrien said. "If I asked you to stop any further Whitish who arrive, would you obey my command as queen of Lostport?"

"Certainly." The innkeeper put a fist on his heart. "I swear it by my life."

They spent the rest of the meal sharing word from the Twin Cities and from Lostport—news of the increasing aggression against Varrilans throughout the Kinship Thrones; tales of King Faolan's lessening control over the Whitish builders; and rumors of the wealth that lay within Lostport.

"I hardly wish to share this news," the innkeeper's wife said at one point, "but you ought to know. King Faolan has recently taken ill. I believe he suffered a fall. His—your—daughter Laina has been ruling in his stead."

Katrien drew in a breath. "Is he badly injured? Will he recover?" She clutched her skirts beneath the table. "I should have returned sooner."

"I don't believe his condition is life-threatening," the woman said gently. "But we have only heard rumors."

"Thank you," Katrien said. First her son, now her husband. Was anyone in her family safe?

It was past midnight by the time Katrien's party stumbled off to bed. Lying awake, Katrien wondered why the innkeeper and his family had not questioned her claim that she was the queen of Lostport. Perhaps it was because she was hardly worthy of admiration. No one would pretend to be the queen who had abandoned her family and later fled Whitland in disgrace.

When Katrien went to wake Amadi in the morning, she

found Kurjan and Amadi tangled together in the bedsheets, both naked and snoring lightly.

"Amadi!" Katrien snapped.

Both woke suddenly. Amadi flushed scarlet and clutched the sheets over her breasts, while Kurjan lowered his head and retreated to the corner of the bed.

"Where is your sense of propriety?" Katrien scolded. "You will never make a proper match now, Amadi! You might have ruined your future with one careless night."

"I wouldn't have made a good match anyway," Amadi said sullenly. "I'm no one. Besides, I don't want someone high-born. I want Kurjan."

"I can see as much," Katrien said sharply. "Get yourselves dressed at once, and speak of this to no one."

"Sorry, Milady," Kurjan mumbled. He no longer sounded like the smooth, scholarly young gentleman he had always pretended to be. Katrien felt almost sorry for him.

Amadi and Kurjan were both subdued at breakfast that morning, and hardly spoke as they helped Katrien, Tenori, and the two warriors load one of the smaller barges. The innkeeper had intended to give them a lavish monstrosity of a barge, but Katrien wanted to leave the roomier ones behind so her followers could join her.

"Will you pass on word to our people when they arrive?" Katrien asked.

"Of course. It is an honor to serve you, Milady."

The innkeeper and his family followed Katrien's party to the dock to see them off; the children sat at the edge, hugging the rails, their feet trailing in the brown water, while the innkeeper untied the barge from its mooring and tossed the rope to Tenori.

The boat-master who was guiding the last stretch of their journey gave a shout of farewell before turning to the river. "I used to live in Lostport myself," he told Katrien, dropping to his knees on a cushion beside the tiller. "Matter o' fact, I was there when you first arrived. Hardly more than a child, you were. Don't blame you in the slightest for turning tail an' running home."

Katrien's neck grew hot. "Child or no, it was inexcusable. I had been raised for the task. It was selfish and naïve of me to abandon my responsibility."

"Don't worry yourself overmuch," the man said, tugging his cushion straight. "It'll be a right celebration when you return, mark my word."

Katrien shrugged and rose to her feet. She and her party had been asked to sit on benches ringing the barge while it took off, though the gentle sway of the river was hardly enough to knock her off-kilter. At the center of the barge was a tiny cabin that could not have fit more than two people lying back-to-back; the rest of them would be sleeping on rolls stretched out on the open deck. It was lucky the sky did not look like rain.

Earlier in the day, Amadi had asked if they would moor their barge alongside the river for the night and set up camp.

"Fancy hacking that jungle to bits?" the barge-master had laughed. "And wait till we get farther downstream. We'd be cutting through cliffs three times my height. No, little miss, we're staying safe on the river."

After ten endless days of thundering across the plains, it felt peaceful and almost meditative to sit on the barge and watch the rainforest glide by. Amadi quickly grew restless and took to pacing the small deck, while Kurjan annoyed them all by trying to gauge the depth of the river with a long stick he had stowed on board, splashing the entire party each time it got caught in the reeds below.

After spans of fear and doubt, Katrien was finally at

peace with herself. It seemed that every year of her life had led up to this moment, this reunion, and Tenori had been right to say she had not wasted the time. Without suffering, she would never have dared this fool's mission, and without loneliness she would never have taken Amadi under her care. She had thrown aside the stifling niceties of Whitland and emerged a stronger, more confident person than she had ever imagined herself to be. Faolan would hardly recognize her now.

As their first day aboard the barge drew to a close, the cloak of evening throwing the river into shadow, they passed into the canyon the barge-master had spoken of. Katrien remembered this stretch of the river vividly—the water flowed more quickly here, constrained by eroding walls of clay, and she had spent the entire journey downriver and back up battling seasickness.

"Who gets the cabin?" Amadi asked as they passed around freshly-baked rolls and cured fish. "You're not sharing it with Tenori, are you, Katrien?" She made a face.

Katrien frowned at her. "You are sharing it with me. That way you stay out of trouble."

Amadi and Kurjan shared a rueful look.

As the last light faded and the barge-master positioned a brilliant mirrored lantern at the front of the barge, the sort one might find at the lighthouse in Lostport, Katrien retreated to the corner of the barge and sat on the bench with her feet tucked beneath her. The stars were blossoming overhead, a narrow strip just visible between the tree-lined canyon walls, and everywhere the forest came alive with the chirruping of insects.

She would miss the vast freedom of life in the open. It would be a long process, adjusting once more to the etiquette of royal life. She might spend the rest of her life dreaming of the scent of the sunbaked Darden plains or the

sound of the grass whispering like water all around her tent. Though she would happily forsake the uncomfortable camp bed, there was nothing in Lostport equal to the gold-infused immensity of a sunrise in the grasslands.

\* \* \*

After his first two orientation days, during which Conard met everyone involved in infrastructure design at Port Emerald and received a crash course in plumbing and drainage mechanisms, the two men in charge of infrastructure gave Conard a tour of the full site.

"We'll be pointing out areas where we hope to add various plumbing or drainage features. You can tell us anything you know about the landscape—how deep the outer soil extends, which rocks are more brittle than others and ought to be removed, and where we have to keep the trees in place to prevent erosion."

"Right," Conard said. Someone must have realized he came from Lostport; they had no other reason to suspect his intimate knowledge of the landscape.

They started off by climbing the stairs on the western side of the city. These steps were narrow and roughly-carved, a workman's access to the city that would later be replaced with finer stairs or perhaps a wall. Conard was amazed at how easy the climb was, eight hundred steps up a precariously steep hillside. Unburdened by the white bricks, he could have climbed these stairs all day.

"We receive plenty of rainwater," one of the infrastructure designers said, pausing to catch his breath. "All we have to do is use gravity to feed the rainwater from a collection point down into each of the buildings in town. I thought we might do best to put a rainwater barrel at the top of the mountain, so it will rest securely on level ground,

but Don here thinks it would be better to set up multiple collection points to make use of any drainage collected along the side of the mountain."

"Can you actually walk to the top?"

"Sure," Don said. "Want to take a look?"

"Wouldn't miss it," Conard said.

At the top of the staircase, they paused again to survey the city from above. Standing up here, Conard was more acutely aware than ever of how precarious the city was.

"How securely have the foundations been built?" Conard stepped to the edge of the half-finished patio and leaned over its makeshift rail; from here he could watch hundreds upon hundreds of builders scurrying below like so many flies on a drying carcass. He could even recognize the balding architect at the nearly-finished house to which he had hauled mountain after mountain of bricks.

"Couple paces deep," the second man said. "Deeper than most. But it's hard getting far when you're working at such an angle."

"Hmm." Conard leaned farther still, peering at a site that was nothing but thin ropes marking the perimeter of a partly-dug rectangle. "These hills aren't very stable. We should be careful to divert any rainwater around the sides of the city, or the whole thing might slide away."

"There's a good foundation of bedrock on this mountain," Don said. "We've been drilling a ways into that, so it won't come uprooted as easily as that."

Conard shrugged. Everyone in Lostport knew that the bedrock was brittle at best. He would be very surprised if these men had drilled their way deep enough to compensate for that. "Well, you'll still need to be very careful with the plumbing. When it rains, entire hillsides turn into waterfalls. You won't want to let any overflow spill into the city."

"Maybe we should put the rain-barrel on the top of the

mountain, then," Don said. "That way we can keep a constant small flow for plumbing, and divert the overflow down the other side of the mountain."

"What if people start using more water all at once?" Conard said. "Are they going to run out?"

"No. It's gravity-powered, so as soon as someone below turns on a faucet, water from the storage basin will flow down to replace what is lost."

"Ah." Conard decided to reserve his judgment until they reached the top of the mountain. It all sounded very controlled and straightforward, yet he knew how much mayhem the weather could cause here. Even the best-laid roads were easily washed out when the floods came.

Reaching the top of the peak was easier said than done. Where the stairs ended, the terraced city gave way to gnarled underbrush and near-vertical rock faces that had to be skirted around. Conard followed the two engineers on all fours, gripping the coarse shrubs and stunted trees wherever he could to pull himself up.

At last he dragged himself onto the rocky summit. It was no more than six paces wide, a tangle of windswept trees and boulders, though the opposite side was far gentler than the one they had climbed.

"We would clear all that, of course," Don said, sweeping his arm around to indicate the trees and brush crowding the summit. "We'd use the rocks to anchor the water barrel in place, and dig a channel partway down the opposite face so the water doesn't change direction halfway down."

"I would keep as many trees as possible in place," Conard said. "Those rocks are enormous, and they don't look too stable. If they're held in place by roots right now, you don't want the roots going all brittle and dry. You'll have boulders careening straight through town if that

happens."

"We'll clear the center, then," the other builder said. "We can't build the rainwater barrel in the air!"

"True." Conard walked to the far side of the peak and stepped around a bushy pidgeonwood tree, trying to get a proper view of the mountains beyond. When he tugged a half-dead branch aside, he was at last able to see the entire range.

The opposite slope of this mountain descended gradually for a ways before dropping away steeply into an utterly untouched valley. This valley was carpeted with lush grass and edged by towering cliffs that eventually gave way to dagger-sharp peaks. Patches of snow still clung to these, including a layered shelf of delicate blue glacier. Waterfalls wept from the base of the glacier, cascading in a fine mist down to the floor of the valley, where they fed a turquoise river.

The valley looked entirely sealed off from the world, though there had to be a coastal access point somewhere, perhaps the next fjord after Port Emerald. Conard yearned to explore the untouched wilderness, to tread where no human had gone before, to stand in the glacial mist and let the bitter cold shock him back to life.

"Catches you off guard the first time, doesn't it?" Don said.

Conard gave a start and let the branch go suddenly; it whacked him in the chin. He had forgotten himself.

Don chuckled. "It's crazy to think that no one really knows what's out there. All those mountains, and they're all empty. There could be a whole separate race of people living in the mountains, and no one would have the least idea."

"My father was an explorer," Conard said. "I always dreamed of venturing into unknown lands like these."

"Should we get going?" the other builder asked, shuffling his feet about in the dry underbrush. "We've got lots of the city still to see. Don't want to be late to dinner."

"It's hardly past noon!" Don shook his head, though he turned around and retraced his steps to the southern end of the peak. Conard took one last look at the breathtaking valley before trudging away. If he never accomplished anything else in his life, he would see that valley someday. He could tramp along the turquoise river and forget himself in its depths—forget that he would never get a chance to win Laina's hand, forget that he was exiled from the only home he had ever known.

The descent was much harder than the climb. Conard could not see where he was placing his feet, so he trusted most of his weight to his grip on the bushes and lowered himself down hand over hand. When they reached the sloppy balcony that marked the top of Port Emerald, Conard's head was still filled with dreams of visiting the untouched valley. He had a hard time caring about the plumbing. Besides, he was working against Laina's plan by giving the builders sound advice. If he really wanted to serve Laina, he would tell them to build a big channel in the center of town from which everyone could collect their water. That would inevitably flood and cause no small amount of mayhem.

"What do you think about a central stream that feeds the terraced gardens?" Don asked.

Conard struggled not to laugh. It was very tempting to give the terrible advice—yes, of course you should have a central stream! Just think how picturesque it would look!—but he disguised his amusement with a cough and said, "I think you should keep as much water out of the city as possible. You'll have runoff from any rain that actually falls within the city, but you don't want any extra streams adding

to that. You'd be best to build a wall around the city and restrict water as much as possible to channels. Maybe even build some very narrow drainage channels alongside each path, so you don't have water spilling everywhere."

"Right," Don said. "We'll get onto that straightaway. And now that you've seen the basic plan, would you like to see the bathhouse?"

The bathhouse was a lavish white building with arched windows and a multicolored ceiling. It perched on an outcropping overlooking Port Emerald, secluded and private, with the beginnings of a flower garden encircling the front entrance.

"One of the first buildings put in place, this was," Don said. "Here, though, it'll be open to everyone. No one without a bit of money can afford a home here, so there's no use restricting it."

Conard had a feeling he was missing something. Were bathhouses a typical luxury for the rich in Whitland?

"We're hoping to arrange a special plumbing system just to feed the bathhouse." Don stood at the edge of one of the deep rectangular basins and peered in. "It'll have to be a spigot higher up the rainwater barrel, so it doesn't deplete our water supply when we're running low."

Conard stepped to one of the arched windows and looked out, past the city and the harbor, to where he could see the faintest glimmer of the open sea beyond the fjords. "Are any of you planning to settle here once this is all over?" he asked. "It's stunning. I can't think of a more beautiful place in all the Kinship Thrones."

"True enough," the second builder said. "Some of us could probably afford it, too. Not the common builders, but blokes like me and Captain Drail and the proper architects."

"Not many would want it, though," Don said. He

scuffed his foot against the edge of the tub. "As beautiful as this place looks, we're a good couple spans' travel from Whitland, which means we'd have no hope of seeing our families or loved ones again. And we've all heard the story of the queen of Lostport who couldn't stand the place and fled back to Whitland. Lots of us have wives back home who'd do the same."

"It's only the real adventurous sort who'd settle down here," the other builder said. "Plenty of them, to be sure, but most of us builders are simple folk. Not suited for a life here."

"I'd live here, if I could," Conard said. "I don't have any family tying me down back home, so I can go where I please. It would be nice to start over, don't you think? I'll never afford it, though."

Don shrugged. "Just snag yourself a Lostport girl with a tidy inheritance, and it's all yours."

## Chapter 21

Laina was halfway through lunch when an emissary on behalf of the village arrived and begged her attendance.

Laina dropped her fork immediately and summoned the man into the entrance hall, where they could speak in private.

"Has something happened?"

The man shook his head. "Everyone is worried, though. We've organized the entire village—the safe-boxes are finished, and we're ready to hide our valuables now."

Laina beamed at the man. "Perfect. Will you summon Swick from the Seal's Roost? You can be in charge of sending the villagers here one by one. We'll use this house as our entry point to the forest, so none of the Whitlanders see what we're doing."

When the man hurried off to fetch Swick, Laina ran upstairs and collected an armful of parchment for Swick's maps. She wished the villagers would allow her to keep the maps in her own manor, which was far more carefully guarded than any other point in the village, but she was more concerned with getting the villagers to follow her suggestion than with keeping every detail exactly as she had imagined it.

Swick returned much sooner than she expected, accompanied by two couples, one young, one old. Swick embraced Jairus roughly when Jairus appeared from his

temporary bedroom, and the first smile Laina had seen in days flickered across Jairus's face.

"Who is first?" Laina asked, shaking hands with each of the villagers. The old couple had a very small box of valuables, no larger than a jewelry box, while the young couple had two boxes, each so large they struggled to wrap their arms around them.

"We are exhausted from the climb," the old woman said. "If you would like to take the others first, we would greatly enjoy a sit-down by the kitchen fire."

"Certainly," Laina said. "Ask Mylo for a pot of tea while you're at it. I'm sure he would be happy to hear the village gossip."

"Thank you, Milady." The old man leaned on his wife's elbow and followed her to the kitchen.

"Are you sure you don't want us to take those boxes?" Swick asked, clearly suppressing an amused smile.

"We're fine," the young woman said.

The man nodded, tight-lipped. Laina had a feeling he had been about to say the opposite.

As the day went on, Laina, Jairus, and Swick helped villager after villager relocate their small hordes of valuables. Hundreds came, some alone, some as an entire family, teenage sons enlisted to carry the largest loads.

The first ten-odd families were a struggle, since Laina was unfamiliar with the woods above her home and the mapping process was tedious. After a while, though, she began to recognize a pair of intertwining stream-beds that led past a number of sheltered depressions in the ground and even a few small caves. When Swick had ruined his second map after placing it on the soggy ground, and the line of waiting villagers was beginning to spill out of the entrance hall, Swick and Jairus devised a system where

Jairus would jot down the exact coordinates of each location and Swick would sit at the dining table drawing accurate maps while Laina and Jairus were away with the next group.

The blacksmith had clearly been busy. Some families had ten boxes between them, while others had rigged up wooden braces to support a sizeable box between four people. Among the families, a few brought boxes no bigger than their hands. The population of Lostport was not large—only a little over six thousand people—and it pained Laina to know there was such poverty within their ranks.

When the sun began to set, the hall was still filled with families who had not yet had a chance to hide their valuables. Laina asked Mylo to prepare a big pot of soup for them all and requested that they return the following day.

Once the villagers had eaten and returned to their homes, most leaving their safe-boxes behind, Laina joined Swick, Jairus, and her household for a late dinner.

"Bad weather is coming in," Swick said quietly, passing the salt to Harrow. "We should try to get the boxes out as quickly as possible tomorrow morning."

"It's not soon enough for the proper winter rains, though," Laina whispered. "Will you be able to finish filling the gemstone cave before they hit?"

"Most of the stones are done. As soon as the villagers are satisfied that their belongings are safe, I'll move the rest." Swick cleared his throat and sat up straighter, noticing the curious expressions of the rest of the household.

"Care to share your covert plans?" Harrow asked with a raised eyebrow. "I have a feeling your father wouldn't approve of whatever you are up to."

Laina shrugged. "If he knew how bad things have gotten in Lostport, he would be doing more than I ever

could. But he's recovering quickly. He may be able to resume his duties tomorrow or the next day."

Mylo applauded at this, and he was soon joined by the rest of the household.

Laina did not dare speak any further to Jairus or Swick while they were dining with the staff, but when the kitchen hands began clearing plates, Laina drew them both aside for a quiet word.

"How are you coping?" Swick asked Jairus. "Laina's not being too harsh on you, is she?" He winked at Laina.

"Everyone here has been very welcoming," Jairus said. "I am entirely grateful to you for protecting me, Laina."

She squeezed his shoulder. "You must have enjoyed getting out of the house today, though. I can't stand being cooped up for long in here."

He nodded. "I wish I could be more useful." He frowned at Swick. "How will you manage the gemstones alone?"

"Not easily," Swick admitted. "But I've been taking it upon myself to become familiar with the townsfolk, so I'll be able to enlist a few more of them to help. They won't tell."

"And you'll tell Conard that they're ready in a few days?" Laina asked.

Swick crossed his suntanned arms over his chest. "I wanted to talk to you about that, as a matter of fact. See, after Jairus's incident, I'm not sure the Whitlanders would allow any strangers into their camp. I couldn't pass for Whitish, not among Whitlanders. Someone else will have to go."

"Me?" Laina shook her head. "I can't just march into camp and ask to speak to Conard! Everyone would be suspicious. Besides, he's probably taken on a different name while he's there."

"You're the only one," Swick said. "The villagers would be harassed if they went in your stead; you're the only person with a good excuse to visit. Come up with some reason, like a safety inspection, and when Conard sees you I'm sure he'll follow you later to speak with you."

"How am I supposed to do a safety inspection?" Laina kicked her heel against the wall. "I don't know a thing about construction."

"Fine, say you're there to collect any paperwork the builders still have to submit," Swick said. "I'm sure they'll produce something."

Laina bit her lip. There was so much potential for their plans to go awry; surely it would be better if someone with a lower profile visited the camp, so no one would suspect Laina or her father of involvement with the gemstone scheme. But she could not see any way around it.

"Okay. I'll do it." She frowned at Swick. "If I visit in two days, will the stones be ready?"

"You have my word."

Once Swick had vanished into the deepening night, Laina sagged against the wall. "I wish you could come with me."

Jairus snorted. "Conard would hate to see me. He is already dying of jealousy, I think."

"Oh!" Laina wished she could be there now, to throw her arms around Conard and reassure him that her affection for him had not dimmed in the slightest. If anything, Conard had proved himself by following Laina's orders without hesitation, regardless of the danger. If only Laina could convince her father that Conard was a worthy partner for the future queen of Lostport.

And if only Laina could convince herself that she deserved the throne.

A messenger came late at night, when Faolan was lying on the precipice between sleep and wakefulness, a path he had trod many nights in his convalescence. When the quiet knock sounded at his door, he rasped out, "Come in!"

It was Harrow, accompanied by a man Faolan had never seen before. The man wore well-cut clothes, though Faolan could not see the color in the flickering light of Harrow's candle. His hair was longer than was fashionable in Lostport, falling below his shoulders, and he had a small sword at his belt.

"I have come from Ferrydown," the man said. "I rode ahead of a recent ferry, hoping to bring the news in time for preparations to be made."

Faolan sat up so quickly his head spun. "What is it? Is my son returning?"

The man shook his head with a quickly-hidden smile. "Better still. Your wife has come home."

Faolan gripped the bedclothes and attempted to surge to his feet. Harrow restrained him with a hand on his shoulder, though he was grinning unrestrainedly. "Steady, my lord."

"Of course." How could it be true? Words failed him. For years he had expected to hear word of his wife's remarriage, or worse still, her death. And now, without any warning whatsoever, she was nearly at his doorstep. "Can I trust you?" he asked hoarsely. "How can you prove you have seen my Katrien?"

"I had never seen her before six days past, and she will undoubtedly look far older than you remember, but her bearing was regal. She is a very humble woman, not one to put on airs, yet as soon as she announced herself, I had no doubts. Her hair is beginning to show grey now, though she walks like a much younger woman."

"Thank you," Faolan said. He was inclined to trust the man, though he had little reason to; perhaps it was because his wife's return would not aid him strategically in any way.

Once the stranger had bowed and exited, leaving behind the fragrance of wildflowers, Harrow took a seat beside Faolan. "Are you not excited?"

Faolan shrugged. "I suspect something. I hardly know what." He looked out the window into the darkness, nervous, as though he would see Katrien striding up the lawn any moment now. "Do you think she has been seduced to the Whitish cause? Is she acting on behalf of a new paramour, perhaps King Luistan himself?"

Harrow gripped Faolan's shoulders. "I can say nothing for certain, but I do not suspect a fabrication. Decide for yourself whether your wife is true once she stands before you. Until then, do not tire yourself with perhapses."

"I'm sick of lying in this bed like an invalid. My wife will despise me. Help me get up, Harrow." Faolan pushed himself off the bed at last and swayed on his feet. His knees buckled, but he managed to catch himself and straighten. Lit by the single dim candle, the room seemed to shrink and expand before his eyes, the walls letting out a deep, stale breath. Again the black haze swam before him, try as he might to blink it away; at last he was forced to sit heavily on his bed before he collapsed.

"Go to bed, Harrow," he mumbled. "I'll be fine. Return to me in the morning."

"Sleep well, sir."

When the light vanished, Faolan heaved himself against the headboard and slumped with his back on a pair of pillows. He felt empty and worthless. He had never given Katrien enough attention; he had vastly underestimated her innocence when she first arrived in

Lostport, and had expected her to adapt more easily to living at the ends of the earth. He had been a worthless excuse for a husband, and had been unable to help when she hinted that she would rather die than remain here. He could still remember the ill-fated day when he had seen her from afar, standing atop a cliff near the mouth of the river, staring down at the sea as she was wont to do. He had thought little of it, until he glanced away and looked back to find her gone. He had sprinted down the last stretch of path to the waterfront and seen a dark shape bobbing on the waves once, twice before it sank into the darkness. He had flung himself from the cliff, fully clothed, and dragged Katrien back from the depths. He could still remember the way the steely clouds sagged against the horizon, mirroring the stormy sea below.

To this day, he was half-convinced that if he had just made more time for his wife, he could have saved her from such heartbreak. If he had listened to her sorrow instead of brushing it off, he could have kept her here. Instead he had ordered her to return to Whitland, where she would be safe and happy once again.

By all the gods, why would she return now?

Faolan did not realize he was crying until he felt something warm drip from his chin. He could not face Katrien. Not like this, crippled and slobbering.

Faolan dug his fists into his forehead. Oh, my dear sweet Katrien. I thought I had lost you forever. You will hate the man I have become. It would be better to die than to see the disappointment on her face—at his decaying flesh, at his weakness, at the mess his kingdom had become.

He did not sleep that night. In the morning, Harrow returned with Mylo, both bleary-eyed and yawning. Something was going on without his knowledge—it was Laina's doing, it had to be.

"I heard the news, Milord," Mylo said, beaming. "Couldn't believe it! I never would've thought I'd see that pretty face again. Your wife is made of tougher stuff than I guessed."

Faolan grunted. "Would you do me a favor and just kill me now? A quick knife to the throat, or a dram of poison, if you don't mind. I can't face her. She'll hate me. I'm an ugly old wretch. Maybe she just came back to finish me off. That's an idea."

"Nonsense," Harrow said, sitting heavily on Faolan's bed. "You've aged much better than most folk."

Faolan shook his head. "I can't even walk, Harrow! Give me a pair of new legs, and send those blasted Whitlanders home, and then I can greet my wife properly."

"I'm sure you can stand," Harrow said. "Here, I won't even help you. Just get on those feet, exactly like you've been doing since you were in nappies. You're not an old man yet. You just have to mend."

If only the town healer could hear Harrow—the man would put his advisor in chains! Shaking his head, Faolan gripped the headboard and raised himself laboriously to his feet. It was less unerring this time; his head was not spinning quite so much, and the room was bright enough that he could focus on the door. He released the headboard with great reluctance and took one, two, three steps to the door. He gripped the door handle as though it was a liferaft and pulled himself forward to lean on the door-jamb.

"That was disgraceful," he said. "I'm lucky you were the only ones to see that."

"She's a sweet thing, your Katrien," Mylo said. "She would never shame you."

Harrow took Faolan by the elbow. "Now, let's get you back into bed before that healer skins me alive."

"I can smell the sea," Amadi said. She had been very quiet for the past two days, hardly speaking even to Kurjan, her eyes trained on the river ahead. Katrien wondered if her future had finally sunk in—Lostport would be Amadi's home now, unless she chose to leave Katrien behind.

Katrien took a deep breath of the restless air and caught the smell of salt. More than anything, that scent could evoke her dearest memories of Lostport. Rowing along the shore by the light of the full moon, when she and Faolan were newly wed and the whole world seemed a bit brighter. Plucking fragrant oranges and plums before the approaching monsoon ripped the fruit from its branches. Walking along the beach in loose skirts, marveling at the precious stones Faolan dug from the sand.

"We will arrive before nightfall," the barge-master said. "Lucky, that. There's a storm brewing to the south."

Katrien gripped her skirts. "Will our followers be stranded?"

The barge-master gave her a sideways shrug. "We'll advise them on the safest course of action. We can't stop them from taking the ferries, but we can keep them as safe as possible."

"What's it like?" Amadi asked. "Lostport, I mean. It's not all jungle, is it?"

Katrien rose and joined her at the front of the boat. She could feel the motion more acutely from here, the front of the ferry soaring and dropping over each wavelet. "Lostport is beautiful. More than any city in Whitland, I would say."

Amadi stared at her, something like desperation in her eyes, bare toes trailing in the water.

"Lostport is a small town, nothing you could get lost in, but there are still inns and taverns and general stores and even a fine restaurant. There are flowers everywhere, in the trees and up the hills and along the roads. Every neglected space is bursting with life. And the mountains—oh, Amadi, when you see the fjords, you'll know that nothing us humans build could ever rival those."

Amadi glanced at Kurjan, who gave her a reassuring smile.

"Maybe I'll like it there," she said dubiously. "At least I won't be so boring now that I've seen most of the world." She shot Kurjan a look of playful challenge.

"It's not how much of the world you see," he said. "It's how much you take in. You would've learned nothing if you had sailed comfortably the entire way south."

"Too right you are," Katrien said.

That final day stretched on forever. Katrien was so anxious she could not settle; she longed for a distraction, though there was none to be found. Even Tenori tapped his feet restlessly against the barge rail, straightening sharply from time to time as though he had seen something.

"There will be a rather lot of Whitlanders there, don't you think?" he asked Katrien at one point.

She nodded. "That is the whole point of this endeavor, is it not?"

"Humph. I just feel as though I'm walking headfirst into a pit of snakes."

"We'll be fine," Kurjan said. "Katrien's husband will protect us."

Tenori crossed his arms. "You only say that because you haven't seen the Whitish at their most venomous."

"Katrien's Whitish," Kurjan pointed out. "You shouldn't offend her."

"I know exactly how venomous the Whitish can be,"

Katrien said firmly. She did not wish this conversation to continue—bored and seeking distraction, her companions could easily pick a fight just when it was most critical they remain calm.

As they rounded the bend, the cliff gave way on the left, and—

There it was. The ocean.

A heartbeat after Katrien spotted the glimmer of afternoon sunlight reflecting off the sea, Amadi gave a shriek. "Look! There!"

"Welcome home, your majesty," the barge-master said. He got to his feet and gave Katrien a bow, face lit up with pride.

"I can't wait to see the fjords," Kurjan said, grinning.

They were whisked through the river's mouth and out to sea just as the sun touched the horizon.

"Give me a hand, if you don't mind," the barge-master said, indicating a stack of short oars that had gone unnoticed before now. Everyone took an oar except Katrien and Tenori, who crossed to the front of the ferry to keep an eye on the shore. They were fast approaching the pier, where six sailing vessels and a river barge were already moored, and as they drew up alongside a towering three-masted ship, Katrien could make out the familiar shop-fronts of Lostport. It was such a giddy, unreal sensation, this long-awaited homecoming. Everything seemed so familiar and yet so foreign, as though she recognized snatches of a dream.

With a jolt, they nudged against the steps of the pier. The barge-master threw a rope over a metal bolt and held the ferry in place while Katrien, Tenori, Amadi, and Kurjan clambered out. The warriors helped the barge-master secure the ferry before following.

"Will you stay the night?" Katrien asked the barge-

master. "I'm sure King Faolan would be happy to give you a bed."

"I would be most grateful," he said.

Amadi clutched Kurjan's hand and dragged him ahead, staring wide-eyed at the town. Katrien held back, uncertain. Though it was not yet dark, the town looked far quieter than she remembered. The houses were locked, the curtains drawn, and she could see no one about aside from two white-uniformed Whitish patrolling the main street.

"Has something happened?" she whispered to Tenori.

"It's as I expected," he said. "No one feels comfortable with this many soldiers around. Whether they're enforcing a curfew or not, I would be surprised if anyone voluntarily left their homes past sundown."

To Katrien's dismay, the soldiers turned at the end of the street and noticed Katrien and her companions. With a shout, they came running back toward the pier; before they reached the waterfront, nearly fifteen more had materialized from the forest.

"Who goes there?" the first soldier shouted.

"Visitors," Katrien said firmly. "This town is not under military control, unless it has become so in the past day. My companions and I are free to come and go as we please. I am a citizen of Lostport, returning home after many years away."

"Show yourselves," the soldier barked.

Tenori, Amadi, and Kurjan stepped out from behind Katrien, flanking her as though they could protect her.

"Varrilans!" the second soldier yelled. "They've come to destroy us!"

The Whitish soldiers converged on Katrien's party, surrounding them and holding swords to Tenori and Kurjan's throats.

"Don't you lay a finger on those men," Katrien

warned.

"Filth." One of the soldiers spat at Tenori's boot. "Come to slit our throats as we sleep."

"Damn you," Kurjan snapped. He tried to shove his way through the circle of soldiers, but the men were too fast for him. One soldier grabbed his shoulder while the other stabbed his sword deep into Kurjan's gut.

Amadi screamed.

Kurjan grunted dully and fell to his knees. Katrien couldn't be sure in the growing dark, but she thought that was a puddle of blood dripping from his midsection. She wanted to help, yet shock had immobilized her. She clutched Tenori's arm, her legs shaking, while Amadi and the warriors supported Kurjan and pushed the Whitish soldiers back. Now that the first blood had been spilled, the soldiers looked much less sure of themselves.

Taking advantage of the lull, Katrien straightened. "Get out of here," she said coldly. Her voice sounded much stronger than she felt. "If you know what is good for you, get out of my sight immediately."

The soldiers looked around at each other for a moment. When one of the Darden warriors drew his sword and feinted at a young Whitish soldier, the entire group scattered.

"Nine plagues!" Katrien hissed. "What is going on here?"

"Kurjan's going to die!" Amadi wailed.

"Not if we see to him straight away," one of the warriors said. "It's not a mortal wound."

Groaning, Kurjan raised his head and looked around blearily until he found Amadi. "I'll be fine. It doesn't hurt much."

"Hah!" Amadi said shrilly. "Get him to a medic right now. Now!"

Tenori looked down the street, clearly searching for a healer's shop.

"Not here," Katrien said. "I hardly know what has happened to this town. He won't be safe down here. We have to take him up to the manor. My husband has a healer who can look after him." If the man was still there. For all she knew, the healer had moved away or died.

Feeling utterly useless, Katrien led the way to the end of town, the two warriors carrying Kurjan between them and Amadi holding his head. The hill to Faolan's manor looked steeper than she remembered; now that they were here, she wished she had agreed to find the town medic.

"Very carefully," she said. "It is a long climb. The king's house is at the top."

Night had truly fallen by the time they reached the grassy lawn outside Faolan's manor. The clouds had drawn closer about Lostport, shrouding the stars, and a light mist began to fall. Katrien could make out the hulking outline of Faolan's manor, though she could not tell whether anyone was posted outside. She hoped no Whitish soldiers were lurking nearby.

As they drew close, Katrien realized there were two young men standing guard by the door—Lostporters, by the look of them, and armed more thoroughly than anyone she had ever seen in these parts. Katrien took the lead, expecting to be stopped and questioned before she reached the front step.

"This is not quite how I imagined returning," she said, by way of greeting. "As it happens, my young companion is gravely injured and needs immediate attention."

The taller of the two guards dropped to one knee. "Your majesty. Welcome home."

"You knew I was coming?" Katrien stepped back as the second guard drew open the double doors, releasing a flood of light onto the lawn. When Katrien glanced back and saw the extent of Kurjan's wound, she wobbled slightly, fighting a ripple of nausea.

"A boatman from Ferrymead brought word yesterday," the tall guard said, rising. "We've been cleaning and tidying as much as we can since then."

"Thank you," Katrien said. "I will be sure to greet everyone in due time. Is the healer still in residence?"

"There's a new healer," the tall guard said. "He lives in town, but he's been up here for the past quarter looking after King Faolan."

Katrien's chest tightened. Was it that bad? She could not seek answers now, though. "Come, Amadi, Tenori. Let us find a bed for Kurjan." Heart pounding, she led the way into the familiar entrance hall.

Despite its status as a royal residence, Faolan's manor was smaller than Katrien's estate back in Whitland. Yet after nearly two spans of traveling hard, it seemed the grandest place she had ever seen. Her shoes clicked on the marble tiles, the straps still tight and uncomfortable after ten days barefoot on the ferry, and her eyes were slow to adjust to the gleam cast by a row of dazzling lamps.

There he was. Faolan sat in his chair at the far end of the hall, the chair he used as a throne, and Katrien had never seen his face brightened by such a triumphant smile. As Katrien quickened her pace, Faolan opened his arms to receive her. For a moment she thought he would not stand—was he paralyzed just like his son?—but when Katrien reached the end of the hall, Faolan rose shakily and enfolded her in a desperate embrace.

It had been so long since Katrien had been held. With Faolan's arms tight around her, she could not tell whose tears were dampening her cheeks.

"You look more beautiful than ever," Faolan

whispered, his lips against her ear.

Katrien blinked back tears and kissed his cheek lightly, feeling the rough stubble beneath her lips. "And you haven't aged a day." Hands on his shoulders, she stepped back and composed herself. "My companion is injured. Could we give him the spare bedroom?"

"Someone is staying there at the moment, but—"

"It's fine." This was from a young Varrilan man with keen eyes and a sour disposition. "I am happy to move out. This man clearly needs the room more than me."

At Faolan's nod, the two warriors carried Kurjan to the spare bedroom and sent one of the guards in search of the healer. Katrien was left more or less alone with Faolan. After all this time, she hardly knew what to say.

"I had no idea, until yesterday, that you were close," Faolan said at last, resuming his seat. "I have been unwell. Things have been going badly, I'm afraid."

Katrien squeezed his hand. "I doubt we can do anything to help Kurjan now. May I join you for dinner? I have much to tell you. Where is our daughter?"

Faolan glanced at the door. "I haven't kept as tight a rein on Laina as I should have. I believe she is visiting a friend in town, but to be completely truthful, I have no idea where she is. She didn't hear the news of your approach, or she would be here to greet you now."

Katrien held out her arm, and Faolan leaned his weight on her as he stood once more and walked slowly to the dining hall. The aroma of roasting meat filled the room, accompanied by a muffled chorus of crackling logs and knives chopping in the kitchen.

"Is Mylo still here?" Katrien asked, settling into her customary seat at Faolan's right hand. He drew his chair away from the table so he could face her directly, his features still caught somewhere between shock and

overwhelming joy.

"Of course." Faolan took both of Katrien's hands in his own, his grip as strong as ever. "Mylo won't leave until the day he dies, and nor will Harrow."

"Oh!" Katrien remembered sitting in on long council meetings with Faolan's adviser, wishing to be involved in affairs yet too uncertain of herself to contribute any useful suggestions. "Has Harrow settled down at last?"

Faolan chuckled. "You'd be surprised. He has two young children now, and he's very much devoted to his wife."

Once dinner had arrived and Katrien had embraced Mylo and exclaimed over his unsurpassable cooking, she and Faolan turned to the matters that each had been longing to ask—what had come to pass in the years since they had last been together. Twenty-two years had elapsed, so long it could have been a lifetime. Katrien had been eighteen when she first arrived in Lostport, naïve and unprepared for the world she had been thrust into, and she was twenty-two when she returned to Whitland. Laina was twenty-two now; Katrien was curious to see whether her daughter had come to resemble her in any manner.

"I've never forgiven myself for leaving, you know," Katrien said, unable to meet Faolan's eyes.

He took her chin in his hand and leaned forward to kiss her cheek. "I never blamed you. Do you remember what it was like back then? You were miserable. If I hadn't found you that day..." He drew in a heavy breath. "When I first proposed marriage to you, I thought I could make you happy here. I thought you would be overjoyed to be elevated from an heiress to a queen. But my power and wealth are nothing compared to the lowest of noblemen in Whitland."

"I was foolish to think that mattered," Katrien said. "I've learned much since leaving you. Now I know the world is a harsh, uncaring place, and I should have been grateful for your love back when it could have been enough."

"What happened?" Faolan asked urgently. "Why have you come back?"

Katrien did not want him to know the full truth—that she had been assaulted and forced to flee from her own home—at least not yet. "I've known for years that I made a terrible mistake in leaving you," she said. "I was so lonely back in Whitland. Everyone I knew had such a limited view of the world, and I realized I could never return to that happy ignorance. But I was afraid to act. It was only recently, once King Luistan started to worry that you were scheming against the throne, that I saw how bad things had become. I was put under house arrest, and I knew I had to warn you before King Luistan destroyed Lostport."

"Do you think the builders are here to take back Lostport?" Faolan asked, sitting up in alarm.

Katrien shook her head. "I have no idea. But they frighten me. They're the ones who put a sword through Kurjan. I think they're afraid of some covert attack from Varrival."

"It's true," Faolan said, surprising her. "That is why the young man you met earlier—Jairus—is staying with us. His life would be forfeit if he stayed in town."

"It's worse than I feared," Katrien said, rubbing her forehead with her knuckles. She wished her followers were with her now, ready to confront the Whitlanders and drive them back. "My friend Tenori is from the Twin Cities, and he is one of many Varrilans who have been harassed to the point where they no longer feel safe living in the city. It sounds as though things are just as bad here."

Faolan sighed. "I don't know what to do. I've been blocked at every turn by King Luistan. Even matters that were supposed to be left to my discretion have been divided into so many pieces that I can't keep track of them any longer."

Katrien leaned closer, memorizing the lines on his forehead that had not been there before. "What do you want? Is our son's recovery worth giving Lostport back to King Luistan? Is it worth funding an unjust war with Varrival?"

"A span ago, I would have said I would give anything for Doran to be well. But he seems perfectly happy where he is. Maybe I misjudged him. Maybe he was never suited for the role." Faolan pinched the bridge of his nose between his thumb and forefinger. "I wish he was here. Then we would know."

"He might not be happy."

Katrien whirled to see Amadi standing in the doorway, her sweaty hair pushed behind her ears, riding clothes looking grimier than ever in the gleaming hall.

"Your son. Kurjan knows things about him, your majesty." Now that Katrien and Faolan were watching her, Amadi did not look so sure of herself. "He's awake. Do you want to hear for yourself?"

Katrien was not sure this was the right time to bring up Kurjan's suspicions. She had just begun to reacquaint herself with Faolan, and Kurjan was gravely injured, yet at Amadi's words Faolan leapt to his feet with a grave look.

"What's happened?" he said fiercely. "Is my son well?"

Amadi shrugged. "I don't know everything. Kurjan just heard rumors, that's all." She turned and led the way to Kurjan's room, where Tenori and the two warriors kept guard at the foot of his bed. Kurjan was awake and watching everything blearily, a hefty bandage fastened at his side.

"You should tell them about Prince Doran," Amadi said, sitting delicately by Kurjan's shoulder. "They ought to know, don't you think? Before they decide anything, I mean."

Kurjan blinked at her. "Suppose so." He struggled to pull himself upright, squinting until he focused on Faolan's face.

One of the guards immediately fetched Faolan a chair, which he sank into gratefully. The two men backed out of the room, closing the door with a click behind them.

"It's just guesses, your majesty. I've heard more than my share of rumors, since I've been living in the Whitish borderlands for years now. I've been close to Varrival, Ruunas, and Cashabree, so I've met plenty of people from every race and every political persuasion. Anyway, this part I know for certain: someone's been putting your son up very nicely in Chelt. He's been living in a seaside mansion far nicer than this manor—begging your pardon, sir—and the money is coming from an unknown Whitish donor." He gave Faolan a significant look, his pain apparently forgotten. "That makes me think someone wants him kept far away from Lostport. Someone wants this kingdom to end up without an heir."

"But couldn't your daughter rule?" Amadi asked.

Faolan shook his head. "I'm afraid not. Under Whitish decree, no woman may inherit the throne unless she weds someone of a royal line. If Doran does not return home, I will be forced to marry Laina to someone she despises—or give King Luistan free reign to select a new king of Lostport."

"That's worse than I thought," Kurjan said, sitting up straighter. He winced and clutched at his side as the bandages shifted. "This next part is nothing more than rumor, but it sounds very convincing. I can't see how this is a coincidence." He glanced from Katrien back to Faolan. "Lots of people think Doran's accident wasn't an accident at all. It was much too convenient. People are saying this is all part of a conspiracy to return Lostport to full Whitish control, now that Whitland knows how valuable this place is. They're saying King Luistan sent an assassin to finish off Prince Doran, only he failed, and now King Luistan's doing his best to keep the prince out of the way."

"Conard," Faolan muttered. Then, louder, "That bastard! He's been plotting against us all along. I'll kill the lying son of a bitch myself!" He surged to his feet and pushed Tenori out of his way.

"Wait!" Katrien put a hand on his shoulder, and the light pressure was enough to stop him.

Breathing hard, Faolan rounded on her. She did not like the naked hatred in his eyes, nor did she like the fear that lay beneath.

"Please explain. Who is this man, and what has he done to our son?"

"I took him in. I raised him like a son! I cannot believe I was so blind." Faolan gripped Katrien's shoulders so fiercely her shoulders ached. "Conard appeared out of nowhere, claiming he was the son of the man who discovered Port Emerald. I did not know him, but he was left fatherless after the man disappeared into the forest and never returned. Laina took a fancy to him, so I took him in and raised him in my own home. Laina and Conard were inseparable, they were. Always up to mischief, always disappearing in town or into the woods. I should have kept a tighter rein on Laina, I know, and I should have taught her the proper way to behave. She will never be fit to rule, husband or no. But Conard—" Faolan's voice broke on the name. "He was racing against Doran and Laina when his

boat smashed headlong into Doran's. He was the one at the helm, the one who threw my son into the sea. I could never forgive him for taking my son's future from him."

"Where is he now?" Katrien asked. She hoped Faolan had locked the man up; she wanted to speak to him herself and judge whether Kurjan spoke the truth.

"He could be sitting by King Luistan's side now, for all I know, basking in the triumph of his plot," Faolan said. "I could not bear to punish him, Laina's dearest friend and a boy I have known for close to twenty years now. I exiled him. He is marked with an exile's band, but has seen no suffering for his crime."

"He wouldn't be back in Whitland," Kurjan said. "Not if he valued his life." The flickering lamplight cast a hundred dancing shadows on Kurjan's chestnut skin; illuminated against the white sheets, he looked far older than the boy Katrien had known. "I would bet you my life he's either in Lostport or Chelt. He's either keeping an eye on things here, reporting any changes to his king, or ensuring your son doesn't get any ideas about returning home."

Faolan stiffened. "He's here. I'm certain of it." Again he turned for the door, but this time Katrien did not stop him. "Nort! Barrik!" he called down the hall.

The two guards bounded out of the dining hall and skidded to a halt before Faolan. "Yes, milord?"

"Conard is still somewhere in Lostport. We must find him now. He is accused of conspiracy and attempted murder. Go into town and spread the word—whoever brings me a man with an exile's band around his left wrist will be rewarded handsomely."

"Should we tell the Whitish?" the taller guard asked.

"Of course!" Faolan said impatiently. "They might well be hiding him in their ranks. Let them know they will be chained in the convict's caves if they are caught lying."

Once the guards had fetched their coats and vanished into the night, Katrien folded her arms across her stomach, frightened of this world she had chosen to return to. "And if he is abroad?" she said softly.

"We'll send soldiers after him, if this fails," Faolan said, gripping the doorframe. "He must be found."

## Chapter 22

Laina arrived at the builders' camp just after sunset, her hood turned up against the light rain. She felt guilty for leaving her father and her people when they needed her most, which in itself was an odd sensation, but if this scheme could send the builders home quickly, it would be worth every sacrifice. Until now, she had never realized just how careless and unthinking her actions had been.

She had spent the long walk casting about for explanations as to why she would have come here on such short notice, devoid of any guard, and the only answer that came to her was tied to the many streams she crossed along the way. With the rainy season looming, the documents concerning water rights had become more than a passing annoyance—the matter of who would rebuild a floodwrecked bridge could mean life or death. And with dark clouds hanging low over Lostport and rain already spitting down, she hoped they would believe her urgency.

The tents sprawled across the valley in a patchwork mess of canvas and flickering campfires, laundry lines hanging from the few remaining trees. She could not see Port Emerald in the clouded darkness, but she knew it was nearing completion. It made her skin crawl to think that something so majestic could be built for so vile a purpose.

Slowing as she neared the river, she dropped her hood. She carried a lantern, which she held high, hoping the builders would catch sight of her before someone put an arrow through her. When no movement came from the shadows, she called, "Greetings, builders! It is I, Laina, daughter of King Faolan, come to speak with your leader."

Immediately the bushes began rustling, and ten guards emerged from the trees, two on her side of the river and eight across the bank.

"Can you prove your identity?" the nearest guard asked.

"Hang on," a guard across the river shouted. "I recognize her. I saw her in the king's manor when we were staying there during the rains."

So he had sat there for days, barking out orders and draining their stores away. If he had not been on the opposite bank of the river, Laina would have had difficulty restraining herself from punching him in his arrogant mouth.

"Welcome, then, milady," the first guard said with a hint of sarcasm. He and another guard fell into step beside Laina as she crossed the river and headed into camp; she was not sure if they were intended as escorts or as a precaution.

Most of the camp appeared deserted, though a loud babble came from within a long tent in the center of a welltrimmed meadow. Now that she looked closer, there were men sitting around individual campfires, most talking quietly or eating in silence.

Inside the dining tent, she could see a line jostling to reach the vast platters and bowls of food laid out before them. One of the guards remained with Laina while the other ducked inside, and while she stood idly waiting for the man to return, she saw him. Conard. Her heart seemed to flip over with terror. He did not see her at first, but when the man beside him turned to stare at her, Conard

followed his gaze.

When he saw Laina, he caught his heel on a root and tripped backward, spilling his bowl all over his chest.

"You all right?" his companion asked.

"Course," Conard muttered. Though he kept his chin down, his eyes flickered up for a moment and locked onto Laina's.

*Find me*, she mouthed.

He gave the barest of nods and stumbled to his feet.

"Who is that?" Conard asked his companion, clearly trying to disguise his unease.

The two men moved out of earshot, so Laina missed his reply.

"Here's Captain Drail," one of the guards told Laina. "Should we leave you in private?"

"Yes, please." Now that she was here, she was afraid Captain Drail would laugh at her explanation for her unexpected appearance. Surrounded as she was by thousands of hostile Whitlanders, it seemed a feeble excuse.

Captain Drail had a hardened face and cold eyes, but he spoke politely to Laina.

"To what do we owe the pleasure of your company?" he asked, seating himself on a log and waiting for Laina to take a seat across from him.

"Urgent matters, or I would have sent someone in my stead." This part was dangerous. She had to tell him more than she wished to disclose, or he would never believe her. "The rainy season is approaching, and my father still hasn't signed the river-stewardship documents. He and King Luistan are at an impasse. I don't think the high king thought to tell you this, but management of the rivers is very important when the rains come. If you allowed some of our local architects to have a look at the land, they could

let you know which bridges should be removed before any avalanches can crush them, and which rivers will be in danger of flooding their banks now that they've been overlogged."

"And why did you have to come now, of all times, to tell me this?"

Laina held up a hand. "Don't you feel that? This could be a brief shower, or it could be the first storm of winter. Since we haven't agreed on anything yet, we don't know whose responsibility it is to replace the road or bridges when they are washed out, or who to turn to for extra supplies if the roads are impassable."

Captain Drail scratched at his stubble. "Let me be completely honest with you. I'm inclined to mistrust you. This doesn't seem the sort of charity King Faolan would endorse. He's been far too unhelpful through this whole mission. But if you're here on genuine business, I'd love to have a good talk with you about river rights."

"I'm trying to help," Laina said. "That's all."

As Captain Drail led her to a private tent set off to the side in a circle of trees, Laina did feel a twinge of pity for the builders. This was King Luistan's scheme, King Luistan's war; they were doing this for the money and the job, not because they believed in the High King's cause. And they'd had no idea what conditions they would be facing in Lostport. It was wrong for King Luistan to send them here with no guarantee of supplies or housing, wrong to begin the project without the essential details settled.

She felt no pity for Captain Drail, however, as he pushed aside the entrance to his lavishly outfitted tent. He seemed the sort of person who would see to his own comfort long before ensuring his workers were properly looked after.

Settling himself in a finely-wrought chair more

imposing than her father's throne, Captain Drail handed Laina a quill and parchment. "Which rivers are we dealing with?"

Laina took the parchment. "Most of them are unnamed. But aside from the Samiread River, we have one wide stream just past Lostport—Ashfall Creek—and after that, seven smaller streams between there and the river just before Port Emerald."

"Do you have water rights to the Samiread, or is that King Luistan's domain?"

Laina had never thought about that. "I would assume it's King Luistan's, but the whole river could belong to Dardensfell, for all I know."

"And you say we haven't even settled on rights for our river? We've taken to calling it Stony Creek."

How original, Laina thought. "No. Which means, according to law, you have no rights to fish in it or build bridges over it."

"And if it were up to you?"

"I would give you—not King Luistan, just you and your builders—rights to the river for as long as the construction continues. That way, if the river floods, it will be your responsibility to rebuild the bridge, and you would face the consequences of over-logging if the bank began to slip. If the river was still my father's property, you could blame him for the failing of the bridge and charge him for the rebuild."

"Ah," Captain Drail said. "So it might be clever of us to leave the ownership with you. Aside from the fact that we've been fishing this place to death since we arrived."

Laina pursed her lips. "Perhaps. But if Lostport claimed full ownership, we would have the right to fine you for each tree cut within three paces of the river's edge. It's one of our building laws." She had been surprised to

discover this document at the top of the less-urgent drawer—if her father had the power to carry out this decree, Lostport would be rolling in wealth at the moment.

"Then give us Stony Creek, and we'll deal with the bridge if anything goes wrong."

"Right." Laina wrote Samiread River at the top of the page, followed by Ashfall Creek and streams one through seven. Stony Creek went at the bottom. By Stony Creek, she wrote Captain Drail—water rights until project completion. By Samiread River, she added, King Luistan.

"We certainly don't plan on relinquishing the rights to Ashfall Creek," Laina said. "It powers our windmills and waters our crops, and we have three bridges spanning it."

Captain Drail gave a curt nod, so she wrote *King Faolan* beside Ashfall Creek.

"As for the streams between here and Lostport, I think your men have built all of the bridges, but I don't know if you want to be responsible for maintaining them all."

"It almost seems like a burden to be saddled with the water rights," Captain Drail said. "Could we take everything from here to the gypsy camp, and you can have the rest?"

"Under the same terms we discussed for Stony Creek," Laina said. She wrote Captain Drail's name beside three of the seven remaining streams. Privately she was grateful that the sulfur stream leading past her secret hot spring was among her father's four.

"And are we to pay for trees that we've cut from the banks of the other four?"

Laina wished she could extract some payment from him for the troubles he had caused her people, but it would not be just. "No," she said. "The bridges were necessary. The people of Lostport will benefit from them as much as you will."

"And as to what happens if the rivers flood and we're

trapped out here? Your father made sure we had no ships in our possession."

Laina wished he would stop asking questions and let her join Conard. She was itching to see him. "If you wish, you can pay us a small insurance to guarantee supplies in case of an emergency. If not, you're on your own."

"How much?"

Laina did a quick calculation and came up with an amount that would compensate for both the ship that had been stolen and the trading post the builders had raided.

Captain Drail blinked at the number but said, "Right. We'll do it." He drew up a quick slip of parchment with the terms of the agreement, and Laina told him the supplies would last for a quarter, after which he would need to call upon Whitland for aid. Once they had each signed both documents, and Captain Drail had handed her a bulging pouch of gemstones, Laina was finally free to go.

"Thank you for this," he said, holding the tent flap aside for her. "You're a decent woman, milady. I think you might make a decent queen as well."

Laina ducked her head in gratitude and hurried into the darkness. It was a moment before she found the path and recognized the way back to Stony Creek, during which she expected a soldier to spring from the darkness and attack her. She felt very uneasy with what had just transpired. When she told her father the terms she had agreed to, he would be furious. She knew he would never knowingly relinquish the rights to his rivers, though she hoped she had lessened the damage by granting water rights to Captain Drail rather than King Luistan. She also hoped he would somehow be able to come up with enough food to supply the camp for ten days. The likelihood of the forest road washing away was greater by the day; kings had built roads through those parts before, and had abandoned each

attempt after a catastrophic landslide took away the majority of the hillside where the road was perched.

As soon as she cleared the river, she began running up the hill toward the pass, the soft rain mixing with sweat on her forehead. She hoped Conard had understood her, and hoped he had managed to slip away unnoticed. If only she could come up with an excuse to keep him in Lostport when the rains came. She did not want him trapped in Port Emerald without supplies.

At the pass, she turned and raised her lantern, gazing back at the twinkling fires spread through the valley below. It looked almost like an army readying itself to march on Lostport.

A pair of arms shot out from the trees and dragged Laina into the brush. Though she had expected something of the sort, she shrieked softly and struggled against her captor.

"I thought you'd never come!" Conard whispered in her ear. He lost his balance and toppled backward, sending them both plunging into a dense, springy bush.

Laina wriggled free of his grasp and stared at him for a long moment, lantern raised, ensuring he was unharmed. Every day she feared the builders would discover his subterfuge. When he gave her a cheeky grin, she wrapped him in a fierce embrace and buried her face in his shoulder.

"I've missed you so much," she said, her voice muffled.

Conard held her tight, cheek against her head. "Here I've been imagining you having romantic candlelit dinners with Jairus and turning into a queen so far above me you'd never look my way."

Laina snorted. "I think Jairus likes me, but he's so grim and silent I never know what's going through his head. And no one could ever replace you." "What about that Whitish prince?"

Laina sat up and smiled at Conard. "You mean stupid Prince Ronnick? Father sent him off on a mission more than a span ago, and he's never come back. I wouldn't be surprised if he crawled back home begging his father for forgiveness and asking never to be sent to Lostport again."

"What does that mean for you, then?" Conard asked, his light tone belying what Laina knew was a serious question.

"I have no idea. I can't inherit the throne unless I marry someone of royal blood, and my father doesn't have any better choice for an heir." She took Conard's hands. "And if I don't inherit, or if Doran doesn't return, King Luistan gets to choose the next heir. Probably his own son."

"It's true, then," Conard muttered.

"What?"

"I haven't got any hope of being with you. Lostport is more important than one stupid person."

Laina took his face in her hands and met his eyes, willing herself not to cry. "Nothing is certain," she whispered. "If I don't have you, what reason do I have to love this land? I may as well leave and travel the world."

"Abandoning Lostport to fall to pieces."

Laina hung her head. "I don't know what to do. I don't know anything anymore. I've been trying to keep things in order while my father's been ill, but everything is wrong. I've only made things worse."

Conard ducked his head and kissed her until she met his eyes again. His lips were warm even in the bitter night, and she could taste wood-smoke and honey in his mouth.

At last he released her. "What are you talking about? What's happened to your father?"

He didn't know? "That day I went off to the gypsy's

camp—he came after me. He was worried. It was dark, and he fell halfway to the camp. I think he must have had a stroke. He's been lying in bed ever since, dizzy and unable to stand."

"It's not your fault," Conard said.

"Yes it is," Laina said vehemently. Just because she was a woman and the daughter of the king, no one dared to blame her for anything. "I should never have left home, not without telling him. He's been paranoid ever since Doran's accident. He no longer trusts me to look after myself."

"He'll recover," Conard said. "He's strong and young enough still."

"And as soon as he does, he'll see how much of a mess I've made of this place. I've gotten the townspeople paranoid and thinking the builders will attack them at every turn; I've as good as admitted we have no power whatsoever against King Luistan; I've promised supplies to your building captain in case of disaster; and I've relinquished the rights to half the rivers in the kingdom."

"What would your father have done differently?" Conard asked.

Laina shook her head disconsolately. "I have no idea. That's the real problem—he's never told me how to rule a country. It was always Doran watching him and following his lead and practicing policymaking. I have no idea how a country runs, except from the outside. My father's office is buried in paperwork that needs to be signed or refuted, and I can't even understand half the wording. I'm hopeless."

"Do you want to rule? Do you want that burden?" Conard's expression was serious. "Because I know you would be a fantastic queen. And if that's what you really want, I'll stay with you and support you for the rest of my life, even if I can never be with you. Or I'll leave, if that would be easier."

"No! I want you here." Laina kissed him lightly. "But I couldn't bear to see this kingdom handed over to King Luistan. He doesn't care for the place; he just wants to make a profit. He'd turn it into a full-scale mining operation, and ruin the mountains forever."

"I could be your secret lover," Conard said, his lips twitching. "I could hide in a cave in the forest and you could visit me whenever you wanted. I'd probably grow a massive beard."

"Ugh!" Laina kissed his nose. "I'd shear it straight off."

"Speaking of caves, are you going to tell me what you're here for? I think I know, but I want to make sure. After all, you didn't come all this way just to tell me you missed me."

"Maybe I did." Laina tugged at Conard's ear. "But you're right. I'm officially here to tell you the cave is ready. You've got to pretend you discovered the gemstone hoard tonight, and tomorrow morning return to camp to tell your friends what you've found."

"I'll pretend my gypsy sweetheart showed it to me," Conard said. "They thought I'd been visiting the gypsies back when Jairus showed me the cave and nearly got himself killed." He grinned. "If I don't have to return until morning, does that mean I get to steal you for the night?"

Laina bit her lip, considering. "I have to be back by sunrise. Things are going badly at home, and I'm trying to organize the townsfolk to hide their valuables before the Whitish burn the village to the ground. But I might have a wee while before then..."

"You should see the cave," Conard said. He jumped to his feet and helped Laina up, wrapping an arm around her waist. "It's a bit hard to find, but I'll trust your sense of direction to get us back if we lose our way."

"I'll just head downhill," Laina said. "No trouble."

Before long Conard had to take the lead as the forest closed in around them. He wove back and forth for a while, as though searching for a familiar trail, and eventually they stumbled across a dry streambed that they began to follow. Skirting around a large, drooping tree, they emerged at the mouth of a cave fringed with moss and dripping lightly from the rain.

"See if you can find the hoard," Conard teased, stepping aside for Laina and bowing with a flourish.

"Hah!" She raised her lantern and stepped into the cave, which sloped away from her and opened wider and wider the deeper it went. Her lantern cast a wide enough glow that it illuminated the walls on either side, though it seemed to have no end.

Ten steps in, Laina froze, her foot in the air. The ground vanished directly before her. Lowering her lantern, she realized the cave dropped away in a hole that went deeper than she could see. Quickly she scrambled back two paces.

"Were you trying to make me fall down there?" she demanded, punching Conard in the arm. "Is that your solution to keep me from taking the throne? Trap me down there with you forever?"

"Right in one." He grinned at her. "Try over to the left."

Picking her way more carefully now, Laina sidled along the wall of the cavern until she saw a small opening leading into what looked like a second chamber beyond. When she ducked through the gap, her lantern threw dancing light on a hundred half-buried gemstones.

"That's incredible."

Conard slipped in behind her and drew her against him, chin on her shoulder. "Pretty convincing, right?"

Laina nudged at a gemstone with her toe, the uneven

facets catching the light and sending color rippling across the ceiling. "I'm half-tempted to dig these up and take them home."

Conard's lips were against her neck now, soft and urgent, and Laina could not resist arching against the warm length of his body. She turned in his arms and caught his mouth with her own, the lantern falling forgotten to her side.

When she felt Conard stiffening, he pulled away. "I can't do this to you. You'll never be able to rule."

"I might not anyway, at the rate Whitland is going," she murmured. "King Luistan will take this place by force if he can't do it more subtly." She could see the longing in his eyes, suppressed for so long. "Besides, I'm feeling reckless. Screw Lostport."

Conard stared at her for a long time, as though trying to read her mind. She could see the thoughts warring in his head—if he got what he yearned for, she could turn around and blame him for losing the throne. But if he didn't, he might never get another chance.

At last he kissed her almost violently and lowered her to the ground. A glass gemstone bit into her thigh, but she hardly noticed.

"You have no idea how long I've loved you," Conard said. "Sweet seducer, Laina. I—"

She silenced him with a kiss. With Port Emerald nearly finished and the gemstone scheme ready and herself making deals with Captain Drail behind her father's back, Conard was the only thing she was certain of. She wanted him with a desperation that overrode all sense.

His lips teasing at Laina's ear, Conard tugged up her skirts. She wasn't wearing stockings, which her father often reminded her would have scandalized her mother if she had still been in Lostport. She fumbled at his belt, warmth flooding her body. She could feel every place where their skin met, and when Conard traced his finger along the inside of her thigh, she shuddered.

His body went still. Hands lingering by her side, knees tight around Laina's hips, he paused and stared into her hungry eyes.

"Are you certain?" he whispered.

"Yes!"

Afterward, they lay tangled together in the gemstone cave, their naked bodies pillowed on Laina's dress. Laina played with Conard's fair hair, which had grown long and untidy in his spans of exile. He just watched her, a look of purest contentment softening his features.

"What have they done to your back?" Laina asked softly. She had noticed it as soon as Conard took off his shirt—a gnarled mass of scars and lines running across his formerly smooth skin.

"It's nothing," he said quickly.

Laina raised an eyebrow at him. "You've been whipped, haven't you? I should never have sent you there."

Conard shrugged. "It wasn't so bad. I'm still alive, aren't I?"

Laina rolled him onto his stomach and examined his back, kissing the raised scars. They looked recent; some had barely begun to heal.

At last Conard turned and gave her a kiss. "You ought to head off now, if you want to be home by dawn."

"I should've left ages ago," Laina said.

Conard shrugged and pulled on his breeches. He traced a finger from her neck down to her breast before standing. "Here, I'll give you a hand."

He helped fasten the buttons all down Laina's dress, face buried in her hair as he worked, and finally bent to fetch the lantern. "Now run home and look after the kingdom, will you? I don't want anything going wrong while you're dawdling out here."

The rain was coming down harder now, a glistening curtain across the cave mouth. They held hands as they walked down the now-flowing streambed in silence, and when at last they reached the forest road, Conard swept Laina into a painful embrace.

"Take care of yourself," she whispered. "I couldn't bear if anything happened to you."

"You too."

Then she tore herself from his grasp and turned down the long, lonely road home.

When she rounded the bend and came in sight of Lostport, drenched and shivering, Laina was immediately stopped by two Whitish soldiers.

"What is your business?" one demanded.

"I am the daughter of King Faolan," she said wearily. "I have just returned from negotiating a deal with Captain Drail. Please let me pass." She hoped they would believe her, despite her muddy skirts and disheveled hair.

The guards shared a look before stepping aside. Whether they trusted her word or not, they probably thought it was safer not to risk offending the king.

"Why the increased security?" she asked lightly, pausing just past the guards.

"Trouble tonight," one said. "The Varrilans are planning an attack on Lostport, and when we tried to apprehend one of them, the townsfolk came after us and killed two of our number. We've decided that the next person who sets foot in the streets will die."

"I hope I won't be shot at," Laina said sternly. "You would have a great deal of explaining to do if the princess

of Lostport ended up with an arrow through her skull."

"If you allow us to escort you to the end of town, you won't be harmed," one of the soldiers said.

"One of you can accompany me," Laina said. "The other can tell the rest of your men to calm down. We're not at war!"

"Easy enough for you to say," the second soldier grumbled. When Laina strode off toward the village, one soldier quickly fell into step behind her, his boots sloshing in the muddy string of puddles. Their caution had been well-merited, it seemed—the usual patrol of Lostporters had vanished, replaced by Whitish soldiers attempting unsuccessfully to hide in the shadows. Had their uniforms been anything other than white, they would have vanished in the gloom.

At the end of town, Laina said, "That's enough. Leave me be."

The soldier gave her a quick bow and marched back the way he had come, his white pants caked with mud. As soon as he was out of sight, Laina hurried to the step of the closest home and rapped on the door. It was a long time before anyone answered, though at last the door opened a crack and a voice whispered, "Princess Laina?"

"Yes," she hissed. "Can I speak to you?"

The door opened just wide enough for Laina to slip through. She stayed on the doormat, loath to track mud through someone's tidy home. Inside, candles were lit throughout the room, though the lanterns were extinguished. The entire family—three children, their parents, and one old man—sat together around a table, one writing in a journal, the others staring at Laina.

"What's happened?" she asked softly. "The soldiers said there was an attack."

The man who had let Laina into the house nodded. "A

young Varrilan man was attacked earlier today, and a pair of rash village boys retaliated. Now the Whitish are all up in arms, and our patrols have retreated to their homes. Everyone is scared we'll be attacked before the night is up."

"They've sent for reinforcements," the man's wife said. "They've threatened to bring the entire building crew into town and subdue us."

"That might have been an empty boast," Laina said. "I have just returned from the builders' camp, and I met no one on the road." She hoped she spoke the truth; there was a chance the men had stopped at the gypsy's camp to escape the rain.

"What should we do?" the old man asked. "We're all just sitting here uselessly, waiting to be killed."

"As soon as the sun rises, go around town and tell everyone to double the village guard. If the Whitish use force against you, send someone to my father's manor to beg for assistance. They can't attack you outright without destroying their chances at receiving payment for Port Emerald."

If reinforcements came from Port Emerald, the villagers would be hopeless against the Whitish. Laina did not dare say this, though, for fear she would destroy any courage the villagers had mustered.

"Has everyone in town secured their valuables in the forest?"

"Yes, milady," the woman said. "If the rain doesn't send them all out to sea, we'll be forever grateful to you."

Laina nodded. This very thought had been nagging at her, though she believed the safe-boxes were heavy enough to withstand a decent current.

"Take care of yourselves," she said. "I must return home and see if I can sort out this mess."

"Best of luck, milady. Our thoughts go with you."

## Chapter 23

On the long crossing down the coast to Varrival, Doran had ample time to contemplate everything he was leaving behind in Chelt. It had overall been a much more pleasant experience than he could have imagined, and it had given him purpose once again. Though he still felt humiliated at the way he was carried around, he no longer felt like an abomination simply for existing. His time in Chelt had shaken off the gloomy fog that had hung over him after the accident.

He was going to miss the books at his seaside manor; he had barely made his way through a tenth of them. If he had never learned that Lostport was in trouble, he would have happily stayed there for years—provided that Duffrey didn't drive him mad first.

More than anything, he mourned the loss of what could have been his first true friend. He could imagine spending long, rainy days with Fabrian, happily discussing the intricacies of political structures and the economics that kept each kingdom afloat.

He had grown up with Laina and Conard, true, but Conard had always been Laina's friend, not his. He could hardly keep up with the two of them—tireless and foolhardy, they were game for anything, no matter who tried to talk them out of it. That job had usually fallen to Doran, and he had usually failed at it.

It was a calm summer's day when they set out, very different than the storm he had first rode through, and they made swift progress down the coast. Eight mornings later they lay anchor in the same Varrilan port as before, and already the air felt heavy, laden with heat.

Doran's horse was still stabled near the port, and the innkeeper who had taken over her care was able to dig up the saddle Doran had ridden across the desert on.

"The Varrilans have no use for a horse," she explained as she handed the beast over. "It would die out in the desert if it stayed too long. And most sailors don't want something with hooves that could kick holes in their decks if a storm was stirred up."

Doran's entire household had chosen to accompany him—the cook, the two servers, Iole, and Duffrey—and they hired a guide in the port town. The guide was not Varrilan, but he claimed he had spent his life traveling through the desert and knew it better than anyone.

As they started out after a night spent in the harbor town, the air still blessedly cool, Doran pondered everything that would change now he had chosen to return home. He hoped Odessa would adjust to life in Lostport—if she despised the place, he knew that he would do as his father had done and let her go. Such isolation did not suit many.

As the day began to warm up, all thoughts fled except hatred for the suffocating heat, the sun that beat mercilessly down. The desert had seemed unforgiving before; now it was deadly, bent on killing anyone who braved its endless dunes.

He fell into a miserable stupor as they rode, gulping at water so frequently that his waterskin was dry by midday, and though they did not complain, he could tell his companions suffered as much as he did. Only their guide appeared unperturbed by the heat.

It was too hot to eat, too hot to ask if anyone had more water. When they stopped at midday, their guide took pity on them and suggested they should sleep the rest of the day and walk through the night.

"Please, that would be wonderful," Doran said hoarsely.

"Your grace, do you need more water?" the guide asked.

Wordlessly, Doran held out his waterskin.

"This once, you can have a refill," the guide said. "But after this, we're rationing. Only one skin a day until we reach the first oasis."

Doran remained on his horse while the guide erected a domed tent. At last Duffrey could ignore him no longer, and he helped Doran down from the horse with one of the servers lending a hand. They all piled into the tent, which was still hot inside but at least sheltered from the sun.

It was nearly impossible to sleep. Doran dozed fitfully, waking each time with a start to find his entire torso drenched in sweat. After the second time that happened, he struggled out of his shirt, though even unclothed he felt as though his skin itself was melting off him.

By the time night fell, Doran felt drained and feverish. He was so relieved when the sun went down and he could hear the crackling fire that meant dinner was on its way that he nearly cried.

The others were somehow still asleep, so Doran rolled onto his elbows and dragged himself out of the tent onto the still-fiery sand.

"Your grace," the guide greeted him, not appearing to notice the undignified way Doran hauled himself to the fireside and struggled to sit up. He was cooking strips of meat over a fire that burned from a twisted braid of grass. It should not have kept going as long as it did—the grass should have disintegrated to ash within moments. For a brief instant, Doran wondered if the man was a Makhori. Then he realized that if anything was enchanted, it was probably the braid of grass itself.

"It's from Baylore," the guide said, nodding at the braid. "Varrival trades with them openly."

He had been right, then. Baylore was the last refuge of magic.

"And how did you end up living in that desolate little port?" Doran asked, hauling his legs in front of him and clasping his hands over his knees. "Surely a guide could do something better with his days than travel the desert."

The man shook his head with a smile. "I don't look it, but I'm half-Varrilan. My father was Varrilan, my mother Cheltish. After my father died, my mother left the desert, but she could never shake her loyalty to the Varrilan people. I grew up half in the Varrilan capital and half in the Whitish cities, and finally decided I had to belong to both. This is the best compromise I've come up with."

"It's true, then?" Doran asked. "That they have three great cities fed by three rivers flowing off a volcano?"

"Aye," the guide said, the corners of his eyes crinkling as his smile deepened. "So you know more about us than you let on."

Doran shook his head. "One of my guards on the journey to Chelt was a translator, and she told me stories about the Varrilan cities. It's hard to imagine something like that, out in the desert, but I took her at her word. If circumstances were different, I might be journeying to that mountain now."

"You're different than I expected, being royalty and all," the guide said. "I like it."

Doran gestured at his legs. "I can hardly be arrogant

when I can't even walk. I feel below the lowest servant, at times."

They were just starting on their supper when Duffrey joined them, followed quickly by Iole and the cook. Doran and his guide lapsed into silence, but he could tell the guide thought more favorably of him than before.

Once they had finished their supper, they packed up camp while Doran waited beside the remains of the fire. Then they set off into the darkness, following the stars that their guide could presumably read.

The breeze quickly drew warmth from the air, and soon Doran was wrapped in all the layers he had brought. Yet after the suffocating heat of the day, it was a pleasant sort of chill.

They reached an oasis just as the grey predawn light was beginning to spread; Doran was impressed that their guide had managed to find it in the dark. Camp was set once more, and they all drank deeply from the sour-tasting spring.

After the long night of riding, Doran slept deeply, only waking occasionally to drink more water or throw off another layer of blankets as the day heated up.

When he woke in the afternoon, unable to stand the stifling heaviness of the inside of the tent any longer, he dragged himself out to see if he could find a patch of shade to rest in. Duffrey, Iole, and one of the servers were already sitting outside, backs against a rock, faces shaded by the tent.

Doran was unwilling to join in their conversation, so he had to make do with the half-shade cast by a scrubby bush just behind their tent. Now that the sun was beginning to go down, birds and other small critters were emerging as if from nowhere and scurrying about the oasis. Birdsong lifted above their meager camp, and the hulking shape of an ashikornte lumbered closer over a distant dune.

Again their guide brought dinner, this time soup cooked with a generous helping of water, but once they were finished, Doran was baffled to see that no one was making any effort to pack away camp.

"Why are we delaying? Shouldn't we press on, now that we have water?" A niggling feeling of uneasiness warned him something was wrong.

"I think we should stop another day," Duffrey said. "Iole is faring poorly. We don't want her to expire in the desert."

The serving girl did indeed look flushed, but they all did with this relentless heat and cruel sun. Doran's original trip through the desert had seemed like a pleasant stroll compared to this—how quickly summer had set in.

He wondered if they were deliberately trying to prolong his journey back to Lostport. Was there some important decision being made that would change the future of his kingdom if he was absent for it? Or was Whitland poised to take over Lostport even now, as he sat here staring uselessly at the sand?

"We will stay the night," Doran agreed reluctantly. "But we must leave at dawn tomorrow."

At dawn, they made swift work of packing away their camp. Every waterskin was filled to the brim, and several tin cups were carried as well—this would be a long stretch without replenishment. Doran's horse still had an emergency supply of water strapped to its saddlebags, but they would not touch this until the final day before they reached the next oasis.

It was pleasant setting out in the cool of early day, the pale light of dawn throwing dramatic shadows across the dunes, and they made quick progress. The ashikornte was sleeping in the shadow of a nearby dune, kneeling down with its head flat across the sand, and all other forms of life had already fled the approaching heat.

Their party was unusually quiet as they forged onward—Doran began to wonder if there truly was something wrong, something Duffrey did not want to burden him with. Or perhaps they were merely tired, and he was overreacting.

As the sun appeared above the dune ahead of them, splitting beams of light through the sand to sear their eyes, the silence was broken by a whistling sound and a dull thud.

Iole screamed.

"What's happening?" Doran asked wildly, looking all around. It took him a moment to realize there was an arrow protruding from Iole's ribs, blood already beginning to seep through her plain tunic.

"Iole!" Duffrey shouted. He grabbed the girl as she crumpled to the ground, and held her head on his knees.

"You promised!" she cried weakly.

Before Doran could try to puzzle out what she meant, he felt a powerful impact in his chest, almost as though he had been punched.

The force sent him reeling off his horse, his legs only reluctantly sliding out of the strapped saddle, and he landed on his shoulder in the sand.

He had been hit as well. The agony only came once his horse had stomped aside and he tried to sit up—suddenly it felt as though he had been ripped in half, the raw wound grinding against his organs until everything was shredded and bloodied. He yelled blindly, as though it would drown out the pain.

The others were down as well, including the guide.

"Why are they attacking?" Doran choked out, the movement of his lungs grating against his wound.

"Varrilan warriors," Duffrey spat. "They're about to launch an attack on Whitland. They're killing anyone who sets foot in their land, I imagine."

"That's not—not true," the guide gasped. "Must be a rogue band. War hasn't broken out—yet."

Doran let his head drop back on the sand, his strength failing. An arrow lay beside his hand, so he grasped it and glared at the agent of his demise. Then he realized suddenly that the arrows littering the ground around him were fletched with feathers, not the fronded plant that his Varrilan escort had used.

These were Whitish arrows.

His household had led him knowingly into an ambush.

There was nothing he could do with that revelation. Anyone he could have warned was hundreds of leagues away, and he was going to die here. In fact, he was moments away. The world was beginning to waver, as though he saw it through water, and the heat of the sand felt like his mother's long-forgotten embrace.

The irrational thought crossed his mind that it was a shame he had not drank more water. If he had known it would end like this, he would have gulped water until he could drink no more.

Then everything began to fade before his eyes, and he could fight it no longer. Memories of Laina and Conard and his father replaced the harsh early-morning sun, and he imagined walking up to them again, cured at last, and telling them of his adventures. He had sailed to Baylore, he would say, and tracked down a healer among the skilled folk.

The last thing he felt was a gentle hand on his forehead.

And the desert took him.

Faolan had lain awake most of the night, painfully aware that Katrien slept in Doran's room next door yet unable to summon up the courage to visit her. Rain pounded on the roof, sending a waterfall tumbling from the eaves, and mingled with his awareness of Katrien was the fear that Laina had finally gone too far and would not return home. Perhaps she had even run off, unable to face the burden of governing a kingdom near collapse.

As soon as the sky outside turned from black to steely grey, Faolan rose and dressed himself. Now that his beloved wife was home, he was determined to prove himself worthy; no longer would he lie uselessly in his bed while his untrained daughter governed the kingdom. He fought back a wave of dizziness and was relieved to find himself steadier and stronger than before.

His wife had changed immeasurably. She was as beautiful as the day he had first met her, and for the first time ever she had the bearing of a queen. Her face was sharper and more angular than ever, her eyes guarded and full of wisdom. The journey home had altered her almost beyond recognition. Faolan was no longer sure he was worthy of the striking leader his Katrien had become.

Harrow was waiting for him at the foot of the stairs, standing at attention despite the dark circles beneath his eyes.

"I heard word that Conard has returned," Harrow said. "And rumors that you have placed a price on his head."

"Aye," Faolan said, leaning heavily on the banister. "I suspect he never left Lostport. He was planted here by King Luistan, charged with ridding me of an heir. He meant to kill Doran; that crash was no accident."

"How are you so sure?" Harrow asked. "I thought I knew Conard. I've watched him since he was a lad, getting

up to all sorts of mischief with Laina and Doran. He always seemed the honest type, a bit troublesome at times but never deceitful. Who told you otherwise?"

"The man who arrived with my wife. He says someone is paying for Prince Doran's accommodations in Chelt, ensuring he never wishes to return to Lostport. There has been a conspiracy in place against me from the moment those blasted gemstones were uncovered."

"What do you want me to do?" Harrow asked, rubbing his eyes wearily. "Should we spread the word? Go after the boy ourselves? Offer our meager wealth in exchange for his capture?"

"Yes, spread the word," Faolan said. "I want him captured now, before he can do anything to Laina. She would trust him with anything, and he knows that."

"Yessir," Harrow said. He trudged off, his spine stiff.

At that moment, the door swung open to admit a very wet, bedraggled Laina.

"Laina!" Faolan called, at the same moment Laina cried,

"Father! You're well!"

Faolan marched toward Laina, weakness forgotten. "You should be ashamed of yourself. I don't know how you could think to call yourself queen. No one as irresponsible and rash as you should ever be allowed to rule."

Laina opened her mouth to argue, but something at the top of the stairs stopped her.

Faolan looked back to see Katrien standing on the second step down, staring at Laina as though she was seeing an apparition. Slowly she descended the staircase, eyes locked on Laina's. Laina stepped cautiously forward, unaware of the muddy trail she left on the marble.

"You must be Laina," Katrien said softly. "My

beautiful daughter, all grown up."

"Mother?" Laina whispered.

Their expressions were so alike. Faolan had never seen Katrien in his daughter before; the Katrien he had married had been soft and girlish and timid, fragile as a wisp of smoke. But this new Katrien was the mirror image of his daughter. Despite his anger, Faolan's heart ached at the sight.

When Katrien reached the foot of the stairs, she strode forward and enfolded Laina in her arms. She did not seem to care that her daughter was coated in mud head to foot.

"Why've you come back?" Laina sobbed.

"I was a stupid child," Katrien said. "I should never have abandoned you. I should have stayed to raise you properly."

"I'm not a very good daughter," Laina sniffed. "I'm sorry."

"I never asked for a proper lady," Katrien said. "I wanted a daughter who was strong enough to know what she wanted, and intelligent enough to lead her country. Your father tells me you are a born leader."

Laina turned to give her father an incredulous look. Her eyes were red; whether from crying or lack of sleep, he could not tell.

"Why have you returned?" Laina asked again, releasing her mother.

"I should have returned sooner," Katrien said, "but I was afraid. Afraid your father would despise me, and afraid of the hardships of the journey. I have come now because Lostport needs my aid. Your land is in graver danger than you know."

"Is Whitland planning to take us back?" Laina asked swiftly.

Faolan and Katrien exchanged a surprised look.

"That is exactly what we feared," Katrien said. "I was put under house arrest because King Luistan feared I would send word of his plans. He hopes to bring the Kinship Thrones back under his rule, beginning with Lostport and continuing with Varrival. He believes—mistakenly, I hope—that Dardensfell and Kohlmarsh will fight by his side."

"The Whitish builders are getting too strong," Laina said. "The whole town is cowering indoors, afraid they'll be murdered in their beds."

"It wouldn't surprise me if they were," Katrien said. "Everywhere I have traveled, the Whitish are making their presence known. They have attacked Varrilans throughout the Twin Cities, burning shops and murdering families. They are taking over the ports and controlling all traffic on the Samiread River."

Laina swallowed visibly. "And what are we supposed to do about it?"

"First," Faolan said, "we have to eliminate our most intimate threat. Conard. He was sent here on orders to murder Doran, and has been conspiring against us all along. We fear he will take measures to prevent your rule before long."

"No!" Laina yelped. "What are you talking about?"

"I've ordered his arrest," Faolan said firmly. "His captor will be rewarded with more wealth than he can imagine."

"You're insane!" Laina cried. "Someone has been deceiving you. Conard cared deeply for us both. He would never turn on us."

"It's too late," Faolan said. "The orders are being carried out as we speak. I just hope they can retrieve him before the bridges wash out."

Laina gave him a cold smile, and Faolan blanched. He

should have waited to give Conard a proper trial. But he had been afraid of becoming ensnared in the boy's lies once more. He had cared for Conard like a son, Varos help him.

"The builders will be stuck there, that means," Laina said, a savage tone creeping into her voice. "Someone reclaimed that ship they stole—they don't have any other boats. You're legally bound to provide them food and other essential supplies for the rest of the quarter, or until the rains clear up."

"You have no idea of these matters," Faolan said, coughing. "I have taught you nothing of ruling Lostport."

"I know what I'm talking about," Laina said. "I made the deal myself. Captain Drail—the project director for Port Emerald—paid me enough to repair the damage his men have done to Lostport. In exchange, I promised emergency supplies if the road washed out." She thrust a leather satchel at Faolan, which he just barely managed to catch. It was heavier than he had anticipated.

Taking a step back, Faolan collided with the bottom stair. "You cannot be serious. You will bleed Lostport dry to ensure the builders are well cared-for. King Luistan is responsible for his builders, not I!"

"You'd let thousands of men die because King Luistan can't send aid fast enough?" Laina asked sternly.

"This is not a kindness you have done," Faolan said angrily. "You have only given the Whitish the upper hand. King Luistan will take Lostport for his own, and he will send his men to kill any who disobey the new law. You are too headstrong, Laina. You will never be fit to rule. If I had another heir, I would disown you now."

"I don't care," Laina said. "I don't want anything more to do with this blasted place."

Brushing past her father, Laina hurried down the hall and toward the entrance doors. With the household in

disarray, no one had gotten around to cleaning the hall, and a thick layer of mud coated the doorstep.

"Laina!" Faolan called. "Someone stop her!"

Belatedly, the two guards jumped to attention and bounded after her. Faolan and Katrien stood in silence, watching the open doorway, until Nort sloped back inside.

"She's taken the horse. She's gone."

\* \* \*

Though he was exhausted, Conard was happier than he could remember being as he slunk back into the builders' camp. He could not hide his smug pleasure, yet it worked in his favor. At breakfast, Ian and Quentin asked what he was so delighted about, which gave him the perfect excuse to share his news.

"Don't tell anyone else," he whispered.

At his words, all seven failures drew closer around him, heads bent to hear his secret.

"You know how we were talking about going home to Whitland and leaving this wretched war behind?"

Ian nodded vigorously. Conard suspected the men would be more willing than ever to say their farewells to Port Emerald now that they were anticipating a day's labor in the drenching rain.

"I visited the gypsies' camp last night," he said, which elicited a whistle from Justain. "One of the girls there was trying to win my favor, so she decided to show me a secret place she'd stumbled across in the woods."

The men were all grinning now, certain they were about to hear a dirty joke.

"It's not what you think," Conard whispered. "She took me to a cave hidden in the trees, and showed me a secret cavern that she'd found there. It was chock-full of

gemstones. Someone must have hoarded them there in the past, but they're just lying in the dirt now, completely abandoned."

"Piss off," Emerett said. "You're just having a go at us."

Conard shook his head. "On my life, I swear it. There's a king's hoard of gemstones there for the taking."

"Why didn't you just take them for yourself?" Justain hissed.

"I can't carry them all," Conard said, grinning. "I call first pick of the lot, but we'll all be rich men if we fill our pockets and leave. But don't breathe a *word* to the others."

He hoped some of the less-trustworthy men among them—Justain, for instance, who liked cozying up to the more influential men—would disobey him and share the secret.

"Tanner's head," Quentin said. "I'm going now. Who's coming with me?"

"We have to wait till tonight," Conard said. "They'll skin us alive if we bugger off now."

"No shit," Justain said.

Just then, the whistle sounded, summoning the men to work. Conard's friends parted ways with matching smug grins on their faces, while Conard tried his best to hide his own triumph at the previous night's conquest. He should have felt guilty for destroying Laina's chances at the throne, but the memory of Laina's touch and her reckless love filled him with joy.

Conard pitied his friends that day, knowing they would be slogging up an increasingly muddy hillside with the interminable stone bricks, while he retreated to a warm tent to join the infrastructure architects in logistical planning.

They were bent over a series of maps of Port Emerald, each one detailing a different aspect of the city, when

Captain Drail thrust aside the tent flap and poked his head in. "Kellar. A word with you, if you don't mind."

Conard stood and joined Captain Drail in the rain, wondering with a sinking feeling whether one of his friends had reported the story of the cave straight to the captain.

"Does the name 'Conard' mean anything to you?" Captain Drail said sharply.

Conard went cold. "No," he said, far too quickly.

"Men!" he shouted.

Three builders appeared from behind the tent; two grabbed Conard by the shoulders, while the third wrenched his left sleeve up.

"It's him," Captain Drail said. "There's a warrant for your arrest, *Conard*. These men will take you straight into town. You're wanted for conspiracy and attempted murder."

"What?" Conard yelped. He had broken the terms of his exile, nothing more. He had never conspired against anyone. Had King Faolan accused him of plotting to murder Doran?

A fourth builder appeared from the woods with a pair of shackles. He bolted them roughly to Conard's wrists and handed the key to Captain Drail.

"Get moving!" one of the men demanded. He towered more than a head taller than Conard, with a beefy neck and wide shoulders. He could crush Conard if he tried.

Conard staggered forward, trying to keep his balance as the man shoved him along the path. Flanked by two soldiers and held in the unrelenting grip of the massive guard, Conard was marched across the river, up the pass, and along the forest road. He wanted to tear his shackled hands free of his captor, but the soldiers kept a hand on their swords—he might be gutted if he tried anything. His only hope was that someone in town would recognize him

and tell the guards they had been mistaken. None of his friends had seen him leave; no one would know the peril he was in.

Lost in dread of what was to come, Conard did not notice the hoof-beats until the rider drew into sight. They had just started down from the high point of the road, and the rain was turning the ground to sludge.

It was Laina, still in the same clothes she had worn in the cave the night before, her skirts drenched with mud and her face alit with fiery vengeance.

She reined in just short of trampling Conard's guards, looking every bit a queen. "Let this man go!" she demanded. "I am the daughter of King Faolan, and I insist you release him. The order for his arrest was given in error, and I have come to correct it before you put yourselves on the wrong side of the law."

"Is that so?" One of the soldiers stepped up to Laina and gave her a bow, flawlessly courteous. "Beg pardon, milady. I did not know." He took her hand as if to kiss it. Then, at the last second, he yanked on her arm and dragged Laina from her horse.

She fell in a tangle of skirts, sprawled in the mud; to Conard's surprise, she made no sound.

"Onto the horse," bellowed the guard behind Conard. "Let's get this over with."

When Conard tried to fight his captors, afraid Laina had been harmed terribly, the three soldiers took hold of his arms and dragged him over the horse's saddle like a sack of wheat. As they broke into a jog, slapping the horse's flanks to get it moving, Conard caught an upside-down view of Laina stirring and rising to her knees. He hoped she would be safe. If he had inadvertently led her into danger...

The ride to town seemed interminable. Before long Conard was soaked to the skin and shivering uncontrollably; he had removed his coat in the warmth of the architects' tent. He counted the streams as they crossed, certain he was being marched to his death.

At the gypsies' camp, Conard stared desperately through the trees, searching for a familiar face. The camp was quiet, though, most of its residents sleeping or perhaps hiding from the rain. Afraid this could be his only chance at salvation, Conard shouted, "Grandfather! Silversmite! Ebony!"

The guard who had been gripping his shoulders yanked Conard around to face him. "What's that?" he demanded. Drawing back his fist, he slammed it into Conard's mouth.

Conard howled and tried to bring his hands up to his mouth, forgetting they were bound. Something warm was trickling down his chin; gagging, he spat up two fragmented teeth. His lip began to swell, throbbing dully, and he was afraid to probe his teeth with his tongue and discover the extent of the damage.

"Want to lose the rest of your teeth?" the guard said, drawing back his fist.

Blinking, Conard, turned his head against the horse's saddle and allowed the rain to wash away the cooling tracks of blood.

He didn't notice until they were nearly past the gypsies' camp that faces were beginning to emerge from the tents. Some merely stuck their heads out to watch the commotion, while others came closer, whispering among themselves. Before long a lone figure jostled his way to the front of the assembly, head bowed against the rain.

Silversmite.

Conard's heart pounded at the familiar face.

"What's happening?" Silversmite yelled, skidding to a halt just in front of Conard's escort. "Where are you taking

him?"

"This man is under arrest for murder and treason, pretty-boy. If you don't get outta my way right now, I've got permission to carve you up like a pheasant."

That order must have come from Captain Drail, Conard thought. Even deranged by grief, King Faolan had never made such an unreasonable decision.

"They're going to kill me," Conard said, mouth aching. "I don't know why."

"We'll save you," Silversmite promised in a low voice, stepping off the path. "I'll get the others to help. We haven't forgotten you."

The guard kicked the horse into motion once more.

"Wait!" Conard yelled. "Laina's—"

The guard pounded him on the back, knocking the breath out of him, and by the time he had recovered, the camp had disappeared amongst the trees. He hoped Laina was uninjured. She would know to seek refuge in the gypsy camp if these rains continued—he had to imagine she was capable of doing so.

Conard's options had dwindled to nothing. If he was lucky, he would be tried by the king; after that, he would either be tossed to the sea or chained in the Convict's Caves. Either way, the outcome would be the same. The Convict's Caves filled with water each high tide, forcing the unluckiest of criminals to watch their fate coming for them without a hope of rescue, certain every wave would be their last. And with this rain drenching Lostport, even low tide was likely to be deadly.

As the road grew more familiar still, Conard's dread of what lay at the end mounted. He was terrified of death. He should have escaped Lostport while he still had the chance, remained on that ship until it carried him far beyond King Faolan's reach. He had returned here to chase a nonexistent

future with Laina, to continue the delusion that he had a chance with her. And that fool's dream would cost him his life.

When they reached the town at last, Conard was taken immediately to the Lostport pier, witnessed by close to a hundred Whitish soldiers and a few brave Lostporters. The streets were slick with mud, and every rooftop added to the percussive drone of the rain. Harrow was waiting in the shelter of the town's finest tavern, and when Conard arrived, he sent a messenger up to fetch King Faolan. The guards dragged Conard off the horse and kept a firm grip on him—Conard didn't know why they bothered, with hundreds of people around waiting to catch him if tried to flee.

Before long, the king came striding down the stairway into town, his rich clothes drenched, his hair slicked against his face.

"Fine work, men," King Faolan told the three Whitish soldiers as he strode up to the pier. The guards stepped back to allow the king to confront Conard directly. "I thought I knew you, Conard. But I have learned recently that you were planted here by King Luistan himself, with the sole purpose of ensuring I was left without an heir. You attempted to murder my son, and have no doubt attempted to arrange something similar for my daughter. Unless you have taken the subtler route of rendering her unfit to marry by robbing her honor."

Conard held King Faolan's gaze stoically, though he could feel his face growing hot. "I never meant to harm your son, Majesty," he said weakly.

"Whether you are guilty of these charges or not, I did sentence you to death should you disobey the terms of your exile. And this much is obvious beyond a doubt. Before witnesses from both Lostport and Whitland, I sentence you to imprisonment in the Convict's Caves."

A cheer rose from the crowd of soldiers. Conard's throat tightened—he had hoped he still had support within Lostport. As much as Silversmite and the other gypsies might wish to save him, they simply would not have enough time. In this weather, he would not have to wait for high tide before a wave snapped his neck against the rocks.

Conard scanned the faces, spotting a few vaguely familiar townsfolk. Surely someone would shout that this was all a Whitish hoax, and he would be given a fair trial. But the handful of Lostporters had shrunk back, away from the waterfront, as though afraid the Whitish hoard would turn on them next. The only voices that rose from the crowd were jeers from the soldiers.

Down in the seething grey water, a rowboat was waiting for Conard. The man who sat at the tiller was an old fisherman from the village, whom Conard had tagged along with on fishing trips time after time. Though Conard had not seen the man in years now, something had unmistakably changed in his visage. Sadness was etched into the lines of his face, his shoulders slumping beneath a burden he struggled to bear.

If he was going to die, at least he wanted to be seen facing his end bravely. So Conard straightened his shoulders and held his head high as he crossed the pier toward the waiting boat. No one offered to unlock Conard's shackles, so he was forced to climb backward down the ladder to the rowboat, feet slipping to and fro on each algae-slicked rung.

"You didn't volunteer for this, did you?" Conard asked softly as the fisherman caught and stowed his rope before pushing back from the pier.

The man did not answer. He began his rhythmic stroking, sitting still and unperturbed despite the heaving

waves. Faint wreaths of froth were beginning to trace the top of each wave, while the air hung heavy with mist from the sea breaking against the rocky shore. This was quickly turning into a proper storm. They skirted around the shore, staying well away from the treacherous rocks, until they had passed beyond the village and the mouth of Ashfall Creek. When Mount Taleon rose to their left, its head wrapped tight in fog, the fisherman veered toward the cliffs, making for a dark cavern just above the waves.

Conard had been here before, on a dare, and that fact did nothing to ease his fear. As soon as the rowboat crashed against the cave floor, the hull buckling at the impact, he recognized the dank, slippery confines of the cave and the three sets of manacles designed to tether prisoners to the wall. As this was a somewhat lawless land, true criminals were few and far between. Conard doubted all three sets of chains had ever been simultaneously put to use.

Leaning out to grasp a knob of rock, the fisherman waited for Conard to step out of his boat. "Sorry about this, lad." It was the first sound he had made all through the long ride, and he did not meet Conard's eyes. "If it was just King Faolan's orders, I would've argued. But them Whitish... Don't want to get on their bad side, I don't. And you wearing their uniform and all—hardly know what to think."

"I was plotting to save Lostport," Conard said urgently. "I was born here, and I love this land dearly. I would do anything to stop the Whitish from destroying it."

"I'm sure of that," the fisherman said. "Seeing as how you're off to your death now."

Conard hung his head.

"Get in there," the fisherman said. "I'd best be getting home before the storm upends me."

"Aren't you going to chain me to the wall?"

He shook his head. "Nay, lad. I'm not so cruel as that." With a splash, the fisherman dipped his oars back into the water and floated away from the rocks. A swell rose behind him, and when it had passed, he was gone.

Conard stood in the mouth of the cave, assessing his options. He had three, as far as he could tell: he could try to climb the cliffs and sidle around the mountain until he reached land; he could try to swim for shore; or he could sit in the cave and wait for rescue. The first two were virtually impossible, given that his hands were still bound behind his back—he might have risked swimming on a calm day, but these waves would quickly send him to the depths of the sea, if they did not first smash him upon an exposed rock. And even with two hands free, he could see no way up the cliffs.

The weak daylight, hidden behind billowing clouds, seemed already to be fading. Conard paced to the back of the cave, where at least he had some shelter from the rain, and then measured its size with his feet as he circled the floor over and over and over. A deep split in the floor let a sliver of water in to the back of the cave, while the rest of the cavern remained damp and cold from the last high tide. The cave had a permanent reek of rotting seaweed, a salty, moldy smell that overwhelmed Conard's senses, and the wind gusted against its mouth in a ceaseless roar. How absurd that he had been in a different cave just the night before, thinking himself the luckiest man alive.

Before long the darkness of the cave grew claustrophobic, and Conard retreated to the entrance, where he sat with his feet hanging over the cliff. Each wave licked his boots, some slapping up against his knees. Spray flew in his face, stinging his eyes, but it was quickly washed away by the pounding rain. If he was to die here, he wanted to see the end coming. He would not cower in the dark.

## Chapter 24

Despite the rain and the cold and the approaching night, Faolan remained on the pier, waiting for the fisherman to return. He hoped he had not sent the poor man to his death. Beyond the docks, both Whitlanders and Lostporters alike had gathered to witness Conard's sentence; gradually the spectators dispersed, some retreating into quiet bars, others returning home, while those who remained kept a wary eye out for trouble. A shabby group of villagers patrolling the streets had not been scared indoors by the rain, and they put their hands to their swords every time they passed a disgruntled knot of Whitish builders.

Faolan half-expected Laina to run to the docks and confront him, though she failed to appear. He hoped this was because she saw the truth in his verdict, and had recognized Conard for the traitor he was. Instead of Laina, he was joined by her sullen friend Jairus. The man kept his hood low until he had passed the Whitish guards, clearly afraid he would be attacked.

"Evening," Faolan said when Jairus drew near.

Jairus gave him a curt nod.

"What is your business here, on such a foul night?"

Jairus scowled at the sea. "I have no place in Lostport. I am no help to anyone when I must hide. I am leaving."

"So soon? Have you finished your work with Master Swick?"

Jairus jerked a shoulder in a half-hearted shrug. "It does not matter."

Tossing a sack into the belly of a small sailboat, Jairus clambered down the ladder and stepped into the heaving boat. His hair was glossy from the rain, and he squinted into the wind as he untied the rope from its cleat.

"Do you have permission to take that ship?" Faolan asked sternly.

"No," Jairus said. "Goodbye, King of Lostport." Bending to fetch a set of oars, he pushed the boat away from the pier and rode a wave to its crest. In another instant he had vanished behind the veil of rain.

Faolan felt nothing but hollow acceptance at the man's departure. Jairus was no boatman; he would be flung from his flimsy sailboat and devoured by the stormy sea. It was such a pity to see a young man throw his life away like that.

When a dark shape reared to the top of a swell and careened toward the pier, Faolan thought at first that Jairus had changed his mind. But this was no sailboat—it was the fisherman's tiny rowboat.

"Do you need help, sir?" Faolan called.

The fisherman tried to grab the pier ladder. The first time he was swept straight under the pier, and the second time he caught hold of a piling and clung fast.

"Throw me your rope!" Faolan shouted.

The fisherman obliged, and Faolan looped it around a cleat until he thought the boat would hold. Paddling backward, the fisherman managed to grab hold of the ladder and lift himself from the water.

"I should not have sent you out in such a storm," Faolan said, taking the man's hand to help him onto the pier.

"Twas but a small gale," the fisherman grunted. "Pardon me, but my wife will be fretting." He hurried past

Faolan without even bowing and broke into a trot when he reached the muddy street.

Faolan put his hands in his sealskin coat pockets, which had mercifully remained dry, and trudged back to the end of the pier. He was exhausted, yet he still felt stronger than he had in days. At the end of the dock, Nort and Barrik joined him, both shivering and blue-lipped. Before they reached the end of town, Faolan heard two pairs of feet slapping through the puddles behind him. He turned, expecting a confrontation, and saw two gypsy men skidding to a halt before him. One was an old man dressed in a colorful patchwork robe that was oozing water; the other was a young, boyishly handsome man in black leather and silver jewelry.

"Where's Conard?" the young man gasped.

Faolan frowned at him. How did he know Conard? "The traitor is dead."

When the young man opened his mouth to protest, the patchworked old man put a cautionary hand on his shoulder.

"We were sent with urgent news," the old man said. Though his breath was short, he did not seem to be terribly affected by the long run. "The bridge to Port Emerald was washed away earlier today, and a wave took out the Ashfall Creek bridge just moments after we crossed. Our camp is cut off from supplies, as is the building site."

Faolan barely restrained himself from saying *thank goodness!* "And is there something you wish me to do about this?"

"We had word from the builders' camp that their captain wishes for emergency supplies. Our people at the midway camp will not be inconvenienced in the slightest, unless the floods last a full span, but the Whitish builders will not make it to the end of the quarter."

"After ransacking Lostport and stealing our ships and bleeding our manor dry, those rats expect us to save them from the grief they have caused?" Faolan straightened. "You can go straight back to Port Emerald and tell the builders I want nothing more to do with them."

"Sire, the rivers are both bridgeless," the young man said, thumbs in his pockets.

"Furthermore, I fail to see how these rains were brought on by the Whitish builders," said the old man.

Faolan shook his head, weary to death of these selfentitled gypsies. "Not the rains. The flooding. If the bridge had not been constructed so flimsily, nor the area logged so heavily, they might have escaped any damage."

"And what of the bridge over that river just back there?" The old man jabbed his thumb toward Ashfall Creek. "It hardly looks as though the area was extensively logged. I just think we ought to provide some aid to the Whitlanders."

At that moment, Faolan wished very much that he was the sort of king who gave orders unquestioned and ruled his subjects with a healthy dose of fear.

"May we speak to Laina?" the young man asked.

Faolan narrowed his eyes. Was this yet another suitor? He was frightening, in the way one might find a female assassin frightening—unexpectedly fierce. "You ought to return to your camp and cease meddling. I have no use for gypsies here."

"We would, if we could," the old man said, with a slight dip of his chin. "Begging your pardon, sire, but the bridge is gone."

Faolan swallowed a curse. "Come with me, then," he said. "Laina is not home at the moment, but when she returns, she has a great deal of explaining to do."

Laina sat in the middle of the forest road, soaked through with mud and rain, her ankle throbbing. She still could not believe the Whitish builders had thrown her so roughly to the ground. Did they really think King Luistan's power extended far enough to protect them from her father's wrath?

When she had tried to stand, her ankle had nearly given way beneath her, and she had screamed into the empty woods. She hoped she had just sprained it, not broken it.

Now she could hardly bring herself to move. Every slight shift sent agony coursing through her leg. If only she could rely on someone to come after her. But Conard was bound for the Convict's Caves, and with the rains beginning to threaten flooding, no one else would be travelling this way. She felt like a worthless fool. If she had just remained in town, she could have argued against her father to reverse Conard's sentence before it was too late. Now she was helpless, and it was entirely her fault.

At last her teeth began to chatter, and she realized that she would die before long if she did not find shelter. It was too much to hope that one of the gypsies would happen upon her before the night was up—she had to summon up the strength to move.

She was still close to the top of the pass, so the nearest shelter was the cave where the gemstones were hidden. The light was already beginning to fade; she had to make haste.

Rolling onto her knees, she began to crawl along the road toward the pass. Her heavy skirts were both a blessing and a curse—though they protected her knees from the worst of the stones, they caught on every stray root and tangled themselves around her legs, until she was close to

ripping them off in frustration.

Each time her ankle juddered as it passed over an uneven patch of ground, she gasped in pain. Tears stung her eyes, and several times she yelled out in fear and agony.

Night had almost completely fallen by the time Laina spotted the tree marking the turnoff to the cave. It was lucky she reached it when she did; with the clouds blanketing the moon and stars, the approaching darkness would be impenetrable.

Laina's entire body ached. She had an inkling that this must be what Doran felt like every day, unable to walk, robbed of something that had once come as easily as breathing. Yet she had gotten herself into this mess, and she would damn well survive it. Drawing a shuddering breath, she continued her painstaking traverse into the thick of the woods.

The last stretch before she reached the cave was almost entirely in the dark. Thankfully she could follow the smoothed stones of the now-flowing streambed, and when she drew near the cavern, she could smell the cave before she could see it.

At last she crawled beneath the roof of the cave, beyond the reach of the relentless downpour, and collapsed on the dusty ground.

Rain thundered against the leaves outside. It seemed distant, muffled. Now that she was safe, the truth of Conard's sentence hit her anew.

He was gone.

Hours must have passed since he was chained in the Convict's Caves, and the high tide could have claimed him already. Not long ago, Laina had known the timing of every high and low tide, had strode the pebble-strewn beaches as though she were master of the ocean. But with Port Emerald claiming every waking moment, she had lost the

rhythm of the tides. She would not know when Conard drew his last breath.

She felt empty, hollowed out and fragile, as though nothing remained of her but wisps of sea-foam. She should never have asked Conard to sacrifice everything for Lostport. That should have been Laina's burden, not his. Only those who ruled Lostport should have to suffer the weight of their kingdom's demise.

When she truly could see no more, Laina crawled farther back into the cave and found a crevice that offered protection from the draft swirling about the main cavern. There she curled up, shivering and half-numb, waiting for morning.

Thoughts of Conard chased through her head, memories from their days as reckless children, ghosts of his touch. Tears pricked at her eyes, and she shook from cold and anguish.

Yet somehow, at long last, she slept.

## Chapter 25

Laina had not returned the following morning. Katrien had not expected her to, yet she was afraid of the lengths Laina was willing to go to in pursuit of her dearest friend. From the way Laina spoke of Conard, Katrien knew this childhood friendship had deepened into something more, and it saddened her to know that Laina would lose either Conard or her chance at the throne.

She wished Faolan had been more reasonable.

The rain still fell, relentless, from a granite sky. Ribbons of water were beginning to snake their way across the front lawn, tearing flowers from their beds and slicing a channel down the hillside.

On top of her fears that Laina would kill herself trying to find Conard, Katrien was terrified that her followers had braved the river and would be smashed to pieces against the canyon walls. When Faolan retreated to his study to see what damage Laina had done while he was ill, Katrien found Tenori in the kitchen and asked him to accompany her into town.

"Were you hoping for a swim?" Tenori asked, eyebrows raised. "We will be half-drowned by the time we reach the village."

Katrien lifted her chin. "I know. I need to see the Samiread River. I'm afraid our followers will never survive the trip here, especially in such flimsy rafts. I want to see if they have a chance."

"I can already answer that question," Tenori said grimly. "Fetch every piece of waterproof clothing you can find. If you want, we'll go at once."

Katrien nodded. Mylo helped them track down an assortment of sealskin cloaks and boots and trousers, and before long Katrien and Tenori were so heavily bundled they looked like seals themselves.

"I have not told Faolan about them," Katrien said softly. "After seeing how angry he was at Laina's interference, I was afraid he might consider my actions to be treason."

"I don't know Faolan," Tenori said, "but his anger at Laina appears to be born more of fear for her safety than of true ire. And he has more than enough reason to be afraid for her."

Swallowing, Katrien drew back the front door and followed Tenori into the garden. The rain was like a waterfall, so loud it put a stop to any further exchange. They had to tread carefully on the stairs, for slick mud had accumulated on every step, and Katrien held the sealskin cloak tight about her, grateful for its protection each time she was buffeted by a gust of rain. Instead of continuing on the main road into town, Katrien turned right at the base of the stairs onto a narrow dirt walkway that was close to becoming a river in its own right. Just past a narrow band of rainforest, she and Tenori came to the overlook beside the Samiread River.

The short cliffs that usually guarded this section of the river had been swallowed up by the murky, raging torrent. The water nearly threatened to spill onto the forest floor; in fact, on the far bank, a section of rapids sent water sloshing through a clump of ferns with each wave.

"How much higher can it get?" Tenori had to shout to

be heard over the combined roar of river and rain.

"I've never seen it this flooded before," Katrien called back. "But I was only here for three years. Faolan always spoke of the rains washing out roads and buildings."

"Your followers won't have braved these storms," Tenori said. "They are more intelligent than that. They are probably sitting in Ferrydown, waiting for the rains to clear."

"Unless they left before the storm hit," Katrien said. "They weren't far behind us. The rains might have caught them halfway to Lostport."

Tenori had no reply for this. Katrien took this to mean he feared the same.

"I have sent thousands of courageous people to die."

Tenori took Katrien's hand and gave it a brief squeeze. Then he stepped forward to the banks of the river. He stood for a long time, staring upstream at the turbulent brown waters, shoulders hunched. At last he turned. "Nothing remains for us but hope. Come, milady. Let us return before your husband fears you lost as well."

\* \* \*

When Faolan heard the howling wind sweep through his entrance hall, signaling that the front doors had just swung open, he abandoned his paperwork and made haste for the stairs, hoping beyond hope that Laina had returned home.

It was Katrien. He had not even noticed her disappearance.

"Where have you been?" he asked, hurrying down the stairs as quickly as his stiff knees would allow. "Are you quite well?"

At the foot of the stairs, he noticed that Katrien was accompanied by the proud Varrilan who had brought her

back to Lostport. The sight comforted him—unlike Laina, his wife had not simply run off alone and unguarded.

"I must speak to you," Katrien said gently, removing her sealskin cloak. The ends of her hair were soaked, and her nose was red from the cold. Tenori took the cloak from Katrien and retreated to the storeroom that now belonged to the Varrilan boy, Kurjan, leaving a trail of water on the filthy tiles.

"Come," Faolan said, taking Katrien's arm and leading her to the dining hall. "You must warm up first." He called for Mylo, who appeared at once. "Tell our useless staff to do something about the mess in that hall," he said. "And bring my wife a pot of cinnamon tea."

"At once, sire." Mylo bowed and hurried off.

Faolan watched the man go, frowning. He was not accustomed to such formality from his staff—then again, he had been treating them ill of late. His own fears for Laina and the fate of Lostport had translated to a harsh and unforgiving manner. He needed to tread carefully.

For a while, Faolan and Katrien sat in silence. Faolan held Katrien's hands, hoping to reassure her even if he could not find the words to do so, and around them the household staff busied themselves with cleaning the manor. He could hear the rain dripping down the chimney and onto the kitchen hearth while the fire continued to spit and crackle to itself.

When he had finally gathered enough courage to apologize for his manner, Faolan drew Katrien's hands to him and kissed her fingers. She glanced at him with a flickering smile before looking away.

"Are you angry with me?" he asked.

Katrien's eyes widened. "No! Certainly not. I am merely wrapped in my own fears. As are you, I can see."

"Do you blame me for chasing Laina away?"

Katrien pursed her lips in thought. "She would have gone regardless, I think. But you should not have condemned the boy so rashly. I never knew Conard, so I cannot judge for myself, but Laina is convinced he is innocent of any crime. I am inclined to trust her intuition."

Faolan sighed. "The fact that Conard did not leave Lostport is what convinced me of his guilt. Without completing his mission, he could not return to Whitland. If he had been a free agent, he would have taken the chance I gave him and escaped to a different kingdom."

"Unless it was something stronger than fear that chained him here," Katrien said.

Faolan did not know what she spoke of. When he shook his head, she leaned forward.

"Love. He loved Laina, I am certain of it."

"Well, it no longer matters," Faolan said darkly. He released Katrien's hands, feeling himself unworthy to claim her. "Conard is dead, and so is Laina, for all I know. I would happily give Conard all the wealth in the world if it meant my daughter was returned safe to me."

"As would I."

"Now," Faolan said, casting about for a less grim subject. "As you know, our daughter, in all the foolishness of youth, has promised aid to the Whitish builders should they encounter circumstances exactly like these. It is an intelligent move, strategically, but we simply do not have the means to provide for several thousand builders. As my wife, what would you recommend we do?"

"Give them what supplies you can," Katrien said urgently. "They may be a nuisance and a threat to Lostport, but it is not the builders who have declared war on Varrival or attempted to overtake Lostport once more. They are men, at the end of the day. Some of them are vile, to be sure, but for the most part they are honest folk who simply

need a way to feed themselves."

Faolan knew this was true, yet he had trouble convincing himself that the brutes who had ransacked Lostport and made off with whatever they wanted were deserving of sympathy. "And in return? Is there any benefit for us, or will we simply be ensuring the Whitish soldiers are well-fed before they slaughter us all in our beds?"

"I cannot predict the future," Katrien said. "But if they have seen kindness from you, the Whitlanders will be more likely to negotiate with Lostport after the floods have cleared. Otherwise they might be driven to attack in retaliation for their discomfort."

Faolan could no longer deny the sense of her argument. "You win, my dear, sensible wife. I may as well step aside and leave the throne to you."

"Oh!" Katrien said. "I didn't mean to question your judgment."

Again Faolan reached for her hands. "I did not intend to mock you. Your decision is sound, and for that I applaud you. You have changed beyond recognition from the girl I once knew."

Faolan summoned Harrow from his office—his friend had been sitting with Faolan all day, digging through every document that pertained to disasters or unforeseeable circumstances on the building site—and bade Harrow visit town to arrange a small ship sent to Port Emerald. Though he did not tell Katrien what supplies he would send, he gave Harrow explicit instructions.

"The ship must be small enough that it does not encourage evacuation. And do not send it until the seas have calmed. No one will question safety measures such as these."

"No, of course not," Harrow said, hiding a yawn behind his hand. "And the supplies?"

"Send bulk foods, anything the townsfolk can bear to part with. And sealskin blankets. It won't do any good to feed the men if they freeze to death straight afterward."

"Right. Wish me luck, Faolan. I'm likely to slip down those stairs and break my neck, you know. I'm putting myself in mortal danger for you."

Faolan grunted. If Laina had not been missing still, he might have found that amusing.

\* \* \*

Laina woke with a start the next morning to find herself surrounded by three men in muddy Whitish uniforms. She scrambled to sit up, forgetting momentarily that her ankle was still sprained, and yelped in pain. A dull grey light streamed in from the cave mouth, and the rhythmic cacophony of rain on the trees beyond the cavern had become, if anything, even louder than the previous day.

"You're the princess Laina, aren't you?" one of the Whitish men asked, stepping back to get a better look at her. "I hardly recognized you, except for the fact that it seems you're the only person foolish enough to travel these roads in the dark and the rain."

Laina brushed back the still-damp strands of hair that had fallen loose from her braid. "Who are you?"

"We're friends of Kellar," said a blonde, almost feminine man. "Conard, rather. The man who was just arrested and taken to Lostport. Do you know his fate?"

Laina bit back a sob. "He's drowned. He was taken to the Convict's Caves and chained there until the high tide filled them with water."

"What are you doing here, then?" the first builder asked. He was short and serious.

"I was trying to rescue him," Laina choked. She could

say nothing more.

"Let's get a fire going," the blond builder said. "You look half-frozen. My name is Ian, and this is Quentin and Emerett. Conard told us about a cave filled with gemstones, and we were looking for it when the bridge was washed out. I'm guessing this is it."

Laina nodded. "Has anyone else heard about it?"

"About fifty other builders passed by us in the night while we were searching. I'm guessing they're about to ask the gypsies for directions."

Laina smiled grimly. She hoped that it would be enough—that by dividing up the builders into disorganized contingents, they would not have enough coordinated force to attack Lostport.

As the three men built a fire from a bundle of sticks one of them drew from his rucksack, Laina tried to edge closer without jostling her ankle too painfully. Until she had determined whether she ought to trust these men, she did not want them knowing how weak she was.

Before long, flames were catching on the dry kindling, and Laina carefully sat with her legs to one side so she did not put any pressure on her ankle. Her stomach was beginning to growl, but she hardly cared.

"Ah, that's better," Ian said, wringing water out of his long hair. "You should tell us how you ended up here."

At first Laina wanted to refuse. "How do I know I can trust you?" she asked carefully.

"You don't," said the man Ian had introduced as Quentin. "But if we had been planning to violate you, we would have done so already. And we've come here for the money, not out of any sense of loyalty toward Whitland."

Quentin had a gleam of humor in his eye; Laina could see why Conard would get along with someone like him.

"Fine," she said at last. "I'll trust you. As soon as I

heard of Conard's sentence, I rode out to save him. But the guards who had captured him threw me off my horse and left me lying on the road. I've injured my ankle, so I can't walk back."

"So you're bloody lucky we're here," Quentin said with a grin. "What were you planning to do if no one found you?"

"I was waiting for the rain to let up," Laina said. "Then I was planning to use a pair of sticks as crutches and make my way to the gypsy camp. It doesn't matter what happens now. Conard is long since gone."

Ian raised his hand as if to rub Laina's shoulder in reassurance, though he thought better of it. It was probably easy to forget she was the heir to Lostport, bedraggled as she was.

"Did you know Conard was from Lostport all along?" Laina asked, stretching her hands over the fire.

"I didn't," Emerett said.

"I suspected as much," Ian said. "We never mentioned it to him, though. I thought he would feel threatened if someone knew."

"Captain Drail must've guessed," Quentin said. "They asked Conard to help with the plumbing design in Port Emerald. He doesn't have the slightest knowledge of plumbing, so they must've suspected he knew something about the land here."

"They probably recognized that band on his wrist," Ian said. "I didn't know it was an exile's band until Conard was arrested, but Captain Drail might have known."

"When he was whipped?" Laina guessed.

Ian nodded grimly.

Once the fire was going steadily, Emerett produced two dead wood pigeons from his bag and began roasting them over the flames. The delicious smell quickly filled the cave, and Laina's stomach rumbled louder than ever.

After they shared the meat between them, Quentin paced to the front of the cave and stood looking out with his arms folded across his chest. The clouds had lifted somewhat, though the rain had not eased.

"Don't like the looks of that," Emerett said, stumping over to join Quentin. "Blasted rain might never end."

"We've had worse flooding," Laina said. "When I left Lostport, the river hadn't overflowed its banks yet. We had storms one year that flooded the entire town. A couple houses washed right away, and everyone's floors were left caked in mud after the waters receded."

"It amazes me that anyone chooses to live here," Ian said, prodding at the dying fire. "Truly settle down and live here, I mean. The miners I can understand—there's more wealth in a couple gemstones than most of us have seen in our entire lives. But who would wish to start a family in such an unforgiving place?"

"I love it," Laina said. "Call me naïve—it's true, I've never left Lostport—but it's the wildness and unpredictability of this place that I like best. It's as though the land itself wishes to keep people away. And it's true that there aren't many families here. Something like three-quarters of the population is comprised of men. Your building crew certainly doesn't help matters."

"Why was Conard pretending to be Whitish?" Ian asked. "At first I thought it was just a way for him to remain in Lostport, but he could have chosen a much less obvious place to hide."

"It's because of those gemstones," Laina said, nodding in the direction of the hidden chamber. "They're all fake, every one of them. My friends and I put them there."

The men traded dismayed looks.

"There are so many Whitish soldiers in Lostport right

now that we began to fear King Luistan was hoping to reclaim Lostport on his way to Varrival. Now I'm almost certain that's true. We thought if we could tempt enough men to take the riches and return home, they would leave Lostport and Varrival in peace and undermine King Luistan's scheme."

"That's almost brilliant," Emerett said, his voice gravelly. "Except you underestimate men's greed. Someone would bribe a gypsy to rig up their ship and carry off the whole lot, I guarantee it. You'd have one very wealthy man and a whole lot of others still ready to swarm Lostport."

"So we were right?" Laina said quickly. "King Luistan does plan to take over Lostport?"

Emerett shrugged. "We signed up for this thing without much in the way of explanation. I haven't the least idea what schemes the High King likes to dream up. But it sounds likely enough. I don't know why he sent so many soldiers if he wasn't planning something to do with Lostport."

Laina turned a pebble over in her hand, thinking. Despite her resolution to leave Lostport and its troubles behind, she could not shake her hatred of King Luistan and his underhanded dealings. If the gemstone trick had no hope of working, she had few options remaining. Lostport could never best Whitland in a contest of strength, and they did not have the wealth to buy Captain Drail's loyalty.

"And what about you three?" she asked. "Are you staying for the long war or heading back home once the project is done?"

Quentin scuffed his toe in the dirt. "I'm leaving as soon as Port Emerald is finished. I don't want anything to do with a war, especially not one in Varrival. The desert claims plenty of lives without any help from the Varrilan army."

"Same," Ian said. "I thought I could fight and win honor, but it's—" He broke off, standing up straighter. "What was that?"

It took Laina a moment before she heard the slow rumble, building in the distance like a ceaseless roll of thunder.

"It sounds like a glacier calving," she said. "Are there any glaciers near Port Emerald?"

"No," Ian said.

Ian and Quentin each put an arm around Laina's shoulders and helped her to her feet, and she hobbled as quickly as she could back along the streambed and toward the forest road. Emerett ran ahead, splashing muddy water with each footfall, his coat abandoned by the fire. The roar grew louder and louder until it sounded as though the sky might rip in two and swallow them whole.

When they stumbled onto the forest road and raced the last stretch to the pass, they were greeted with chaos.

The thunderous roar came from Port Emerald.

Before their eyes, the stone building at the top of the city was buckling. At last it caved—mud and rain exploded from the wreckage.

Then the entire slope began sliding away. Trees were uprooted and crushed beneath a volley of mud and stones. When the mudslide reached the city, entire buildings caved beneath the weight of the mountain and were swept away. White stone bricks tumbled from their edifices and rolled down the hillside like children's toys, and carefully staked-out foundations were engulfed in sludge and rubble.

The mud tore its way down the mountain, ripping apart everything it touched, destabilizing the entire hillside so even the buildings that escaped its wrath began to sag. Two exquisite stone structures collapsed in a cloud of dust, raining white blocks onto the slopes below.

At last the mudslide reached the base of the mountain in an eruption of mud and water and wreckage from Port Emerald. Only then did Laina notice the tents at the foot of the mountain, many of them crushed beneath the weight of half the mountainside. She choked back a gasp.

Then, as quickly as it had begun, the mudslide ended. The rocks and dirt and water settled, leaving behind a silence so laden it hurt. Port Emerald was demolished, its white structures erased from the landscape as though they had never been. Nothing was left behind but a shifting expanse of mud.

That was it, Laina thought, dazed. Port Emerald was gone. Whitland would reap no wealth from this project, this fool's mission that had seemed liable to succeed against all odds. King Luistan would not have the funds to send his soldiers to Varrival. Jairus had won.

It was that simple.

And yet, nothing was simple any longer. The soldiers were still trapped in Lostport, and no matter how many had died in the mudslide, they would still outnumber the locals. Rage might spur them to act without orders from King Luistan, to destroy Lostport and all its people. They could take control of the kingdom for themselves and amass the wealth of the rivers until they were practically kings themselves. King Luistan had no true power over them here, two spans' travel from Whitland and temporarily isolated by the floods.

"You're a lucky bastard," Quentin said shakily to Emerett, breaking the terrible stillness at last.

He shook his head. "I almost stayed behind," he told Laina. "Didn't want too many of us missing at once. Nine plagues, I think my tent was one of the first to be crushed."

"Now what?" Ian stepped onto a rock, unable to tear his eyes from the wreckage of Port Emerald. "I don't know," Laina said. "I really don't know."

"I'm definitely not going back down there now," Emerett said. "Should we stay here?"

Laina shook her head. "Do what you like. I have to go back to Lostport."

"We're coming with you," Quentin said.

## Chapter 26

For the second time in his life, Conard woke from a disoriented sleep to find himself aboard a ship. A lump on his head was throbbing fiercely. The first thing he noticed was the rain—though he was wrapped in a waterproof blanket, the ceaseless deluge had soaked into his boots and puddled around him. Rain pounded against his face; his cheeks were numb and his jaw ached from the cold.

As soon as he came to himself, he began to shiver.

"Drink this." Conard recognized the voice as belonging to Jairus, who pressed a thermos of something hot into his hands.

With trembling hands, he opened the thermos and gulped down what tasted like weak hot cocoa spiked with whiskey. His hands were no longer shackled.

Coughing, Conard set the thermos aside. "I'm not dead?"

"Not yet," Jairus said. When Conard dragged himself around to slump against the bow, he saw Jairus sitting at the tiller of their tiny sailboat. Despite the storm, Jairus had not furled the sail. Each gust of wind threatened to heel them over, and several waves did manage to lap over the sides and swamp the boat. Conard spotted a bucket beside Jairus's feet—clearly he had been bailing them out. The sail was reefed as far as it could go, though it was hardly enough in this storm. Conard could tell Jairus had little

experience with handling boats, or he would have chosen a hardier vessel with a storm jib.

"You saved me," Conard said, sitting up straighter. "Why?"

"I wished to repay my debt. You did the same."

Conard groaned and wrapped the blanket tighter around his shoulders. "Did you hit me over the head first?"

"Of course not! This would have been much easier with someone to help with the sails. No, you were already unconscious when I found you. I think a wave might have knocked you over."

"Where are we going, then?"

"Away."

For the first time, Conard looked past the tiny boat and realized where they were. Jairus had managed to steer them onto the Samiread River, where they were being buffeted by a fierce current. The canyon walls, far shorter than Conard remembered, had diminished the wind's ferocity, which explained why their sail had not been ripped to shreds. They were making very little headway against the current, though they certainly were moving upstream little by little.

"We will both be killed if we return to Lostport," Jairus said. "I will return to Varrival, and you can travel to the Twin Cities. We are young enough that we can find work without trouble."

"And neither of us can have Laina," Conard said. "She won't be able to give up her chances at the throne. She'll marry a prince as soon as one appears."

Jairus nodded grimly.

"I would still rather go back and help." Conard took another gulp of the spiked cocoa, this time wishing the alcohol would numb the cold and the emptiness he felt.

"You would die."

"I know."

Conard did not wish to say anything yet, but he knew the canyon walls would narrow before long and they would hit a section of the river that gave ships trouble even in clear weather. They would never make it past that stretch, unless they walked and dragged the sailboat behind them.

The clouds had at least lifted, teasing them with the faintest hint of sunlight; Conard suspected the storm would clear before the next day was up. That hardly meant the waters would recede, though. It could be another five days before the river changed noticeably. Branches and logs and one or two entire trees went floating past their sailboat; Jairus fought to steer the boat away from these, struggling to position the tiller against the current.

When the winds began to change, blowing from the southeast instead of the south, Conard took up the sails, lengthening the sheets to catch the new gale.

"Why did you *actually* save me?" he asked, settling onto the narrow bar running across the center of the boat.

Jairus stared straight ahead, unblinking, and for a moment Conard thought he would not answer. Then, softly, he said, "Because I did not want Laina to give up."

Before long, a massive tree forced Jairus to steer nearly into the cliffs to avoid getting tangled in its roots. The rapids were approaching now, and Conard could not remember if there was any break in the canyon walls before they hit.

"We need to get off the river," he said. "We won't make it much farther. If we get caught in the rapids ahead, we'll be thrown against the rocks."

"There is nowhere to stop," Jairus said.

"Look for something. Otherwise we have to turn around."

Jairus nodded tersely.

The short banks of the river had grown to unrelenting walls of rock and mud, sloping away so steeply that some parts had been gouged into the ground at a concave slant.

"There!" Conard shouted, pointing at a tree that had collapsed into the river but still clung to the banks by its roots. "Make for that. If we can grab it, we can climb up from the river."

"You are mad," Jairus said. Still, he turned the boat toward the tree, angling so they could approach just downstream of it. If they collided head-on into the tree, they could very well tear it free of its tenuous hold.

The first time they neared the tree, Jairus undershot it, clearly afraid of doing just that. They whisked past one of its more spindly branches and collided into the riverbank, which was thankfully no more than soft mud. Conard hurried to adjust the sails as Jairus sent them in a spiraling arc before approaching the tree once more.

This time their bow knocked lightly against the main trunk. Abandoning the sails, Conard threw himself over the port side of the boat and wrapped his arms around the tree. The trunk shifted beneath his weight but did not wrench free.

"Grab that branch!" he shouted at Jairus.

As soon as Jairus caught hold of one of the fat upper branches, Conard dragged himself out of the boat and onto the trunk. Arms around the trunk, he shimmied his way up toward the riverbank, locking his feet onto each solid branch he reached for reassurance. The tree was bobbing lightly in the current; with each movement, Conard was certain it would roll over and dump him into the river.

"Careful!" Jairus yelled.

Conard gripped the tree fiercely, and a heartbeat later, a solid log collided with the branches. He was flung sideways and nearly lost his hold on the water-slicked trunk. He squeezed his eyes shut, praying the tree would hold. It was swaying more than ever, buffeted back and forth with each wave.

It held.

Slower now, Conard continued to climb. The riverbank was close now, but he could not see how to clamber over the roots without dislodging the entire tree. When he reached the top and got a sturdy hold on two gnarled roots, he turned to see whether Jairus was still afloat.

"I'm afraid I'll knock the tree off," Conard called.

"Just go!"

Gingerly, Conard hauled himself up until he was standing on the trunk, braced against the netting of roots. He used the roots like a stepladder and climbed slowly over the tree and onto the sagging banks of the Samiread.

"I made it," he called back. Circling around the tree, he watched Jairus fumble for a good handhold on the tree.

"Maybe I should toss up a rope," Jairus said. "I am not so good at climbing trees."

"Do you have one that's long enough?"

One hand still on the tree, Jairus knelt and rummaged beneath the one seat on the sailboat. "Will this work?" He held up an algae-encrusted rope.

"Give it a try." Conard held out his arms to catch the rope. He no longer trusted the tree to remain in place.

Jairus's first throw missed the cliff by more than two paces. He wound the rope under one arm before trying again. This time he put his entire body into the throw, releasing the tree and leaning back to build up a bit of momentum. As soon as he let go of the branch, his sailboat began drifting quickly downstream. Conard edged along the shore to keep pace with the boat, hoping desperately that it would not catch on a rock.

Jairus hurled the rope at the cliff. Conard thought it was going to fall short once more, but the very end of the rope whipped against the top of the cliff. Conard dove for the frayed end, landing on his stomach and sending a clot of dirt careening over the cliff.

"Hold tight," he yelled. Quickly, before the sailboat could drag him downriver too far, Conard lashed the rope to a tree and tied it firmly. "Now climb!"

Below, the boat was being yanked downstream so fiercely that Jairus was doubled forward to keep ahold of the rope.

"Leave the boat and climb!" Conard bellowed.

Jairus stepped over the side of the boat and plunged into the water, so deep the waves slapped at his chin. Then he began to climb the rope, slowly and awkwardly making his way out of the river. When he reached the clifftop at last, Conard grabbed his arm and pulled him over. Jairus collapsed on the mud, panting, his face pale.

"I'm guessing you haven't climbed much," Conard said, trying to appear sympathetic rather than mocking. "I suppose there aren't many trees in Varrival."

Jairus shook his head. "I do not like heights. And I never was very strong. I am a scholar, not a warrior."

Conard took Jairus's hand and pulled him to his feet. "I'm not a warrior either. I just got up to lots of trouble when I was a kid."

This elicited a brief smile from Jairus.

"And now?" Conard asked. "I hope your supplies haven't all floated downstream with that boat."

Jairus turned to show Conard the rucksack he wore. "This is enough to last us at least a quarter. It is the same simple food the Darden horse-warriors take on long expeditions."

"And now we walk?" Conard asked, peering through

the dense forest.

"And now we walk."

They trudged along the riverbank for all of that day and half of the next. At times, the forest grew so dense that they lost sight of the river, though the thunderous rapids were easy enough to find. The rain slowed on the morning of the second day, leaving the forest dripping as heavily as the rain had fallen. Birdsong began to ring through the trees once more, and occasionally Conard caught sight of a fantail or a bellbird flitting among the leaves.

When midday drew near on the second day, the sun was so close to breaking through the clouds that Conard had to squint when he looked into the sky.

"How do you stand this weather?" Jairus asked, shaking an especially large drop of water from his forehead.

"It's only part of the year," Conard said. "The rest of the time it's warm and sunny. We spend our summer by the ocean, swimming or sailing or exploring. This place wouldn't be half so alive without the rains."

"There is beauty in emptiness, too," Jairus said. "But I find Varrival too harsh. Lostport is too closed in for me, so I prefer Dardensfell. Enough life and enough emptiness for me."

"I never thought about it that way, I guess," Conard said. "If I ever want to be somewhere vast, I just go out to sea. No one knows what lies beyond Lostport and Varrival, so it's fun to imagine where you might end up."

"I never liked the sea much, either," Jairus admitted.

Conard grinned. "Fair enough. After what we just went through, I'll be waiting a while before I set foot on another boat."

Just then, he heard something large rustling in the bush.

"What is that?" Jairus whispered.

Conard backed away and shrank behind a tree, waiting for whatever was lurking in the bush to reveal itself. A moment later, two women and a boy stumbled out of the underbrush and caught sight of Conard and Jairus.

"You didn't come with us, did you?" one of the women asked. She was dressed as a Darden warrior, while her companion wore a more conservative dress and cloak.

"No, we've just come up from Lostport," Conard said, stepping out from behind the tree. On closer inspection, the women both looked a bit worse for wear—the Darden warrior had a long scratch down one cheek, and the other woman's dress was torn in several places. "What are you doing in the middle of the rainforest?"

"Are you from Whitland or Lostport?" the Darden warrior asked suspiciously.

Looking down, Conard realized he still wore his Whitish uniform, though it was stained almost beyond recognition. "Lostport," he said. "Long story—I've been passing as a Whitish soldier in an attempt to persuade the soldiers to head back home, until I was sentenced to drown."

Jairus stood and circled to the front of the bushes where he had remained hidden until that moment. At the sight of him, both women relaxed fractionally. "The Whitish have become too strong," he said. "If we return, we will both die at their hands."

"You still haven't answered my question," Conard said lightly. "Why are you stumbling through the middle of the forest in this weather?"

The women shared a glance, and the warrior nodded. "We have traveled south with Queen Katrien. She rode ahead of us, and we tried to follow. There are many of us. We joined her to help free Lostport from King Luistan's

grip. Two days after we set off from Ferrydown, the storm hit. We tried to continue on, but many of our boats were smashed against the cliffs, and those of us who survived managed to climb up the riverbanks. For three days we have been wandering the forest, trying to regroup, and now we have gathered everyone who remains."

"You should go back," Jairus said. "Lostport is a very dangerous place now. There are ten thousand Whitish builders living there, and they hate Varrilans."

"Fewer than half of our followers are Varrilan," the second woman said. "We have Dardens and Kohls and even a few from Ruunas within our ranks."

"Still. I will not return to Lostport again." Jairus folded his arms, his intelligent face fiercer than Conard had ever seen it.

"Will you show us the way, then, good sir?" the second woman asked Conard.

"It's simple," Conard said. "If you follow the river until it hits the sea, you'll be right at the town docks."

"And what can we scavenge for food?" the warrior asked. "All of our supplies were washed downstream."

Conard sighed. "I suppose I could accompany you, just to the edge of the forest. I can't show my face in town again. I've been accused of treason, and I have no way of proving my innocence."

"Please do," the second woman said. She gave Conard a smile that lit her plain face with hope. "We would be forever in your debt."

Conard looked back at Jairus. "And you? Will you join me?"

Jairus shook his head. "I made my choice. I will travel north and leave this place behind. I am sorry, Conard. You are a good man." He picked his way over a clump of ferns to Conard's side and gave him a brief embrace. "Thank you for saving me twice."

Conard gripped his hand. "And thank you for doing the same for me."

Just past the two women, Jairus stopped and unhooked his rucksack from his shoulders. He tossed it to Conard, who barely managed to catch it. "Take this. It is not much, but it might keep those people alive."

"What about you?" Conard said. He made to throw the pack back to Jairus, who ducked behind a tree. "You'll starve!"

"I have traveled these parts before," Jairus said. "I will make do."

"You must go to Ferrydown," the second woman said. "Give them this." She pressed an elaborately-detailed compass into Jairus's hand. "Tell them your story, and beg for food. The people of Ferrydown support Lostport fiercely, and they will honor you for what you have done."

"I cannot accept this," Jairus said.

"You must."

"Thank you, Milady." With a last glance at Conard, Jairus turned and disappeared into the woods.

\* \* \*

Faolan and Katrien were sitting at dinner when a runner came from Lostport with the news.

It was a young man whom Faolan recognized from one of the patrols on the night of Conard's execution. "They're burning our houses! We need help. The soldiers are ransacking the village!"

"Has the rain stopped?" Faolan asked, getting to his feet.

"Yes, it has. And they're lighting our houses from the inside. Half the village is on fire!"

"Mylo!" Faolan called. "Gather our household and send down whoever is willing to assist!"

The cook hurried from the kitchen and broke into a run as he left the dining hall.

Katrien had gone pale, though she did not betray any sense of alarm.

"I bloody well should have denied them supplies," Faolan snapped. "Ill-bred scoundrels, the lot of them."

"These are not the men camped at Port Emerald," Katrien said stiffly. "It is possible their captain has not sanctioned such violence. These men may have simply run amok."

"Perhaps," Faolan said skeptically. "You should keep yourself safe, and be wary in case the soldiers decide to pay a visit to our manor. I must visit the town and see if our men can be organized."

"I would rather accompany you," Katrien said.

Faolan almost smiled at that. She was every bit as daring and headstrong as Laina. "We must leave someone here. I admit that I would like to keep you within my sight, but there has to be someone at home to protect our manor. Please remain here. I cannot trust anyone else to negotiate with the soldiers should they advance on this place."

"I will obey your wishes," Katrien said reluctantly. She followed Faolan into the entrance hall and stood to the side while he hurried upstairs to fetch his sword and chainmail vest. Both had been decorative gifts from Katrien's family, never before used in conflict. There had never been a need in Lostport. The chainmail vest was a bit tight over his stomach, though it did not restrict him too much. He donned his coat over the vest, not wishing to frighten anyone with the notion that this revolt called for proper arms. If this was to become a war, Lostport was doomed from the start.

Back downstairs, Faolan joined his household in frantic preparation. Mylo and his assistants were strapping kitchen knives to their belts; even his youngest new assistant was slipping knives into every loop of her great overcoat. She finished with a slim dagger in her boot. They were joined by Nort, Barrik, Harrow, both gardeners, and the tailor. Of Faolan's staff, only the housekeeper would remain behind.

Katrien's companions from Dardensfell were hurrying about in similar preparations—the two Darden warriors strapped hardened leather braces about their arms and legs, with chainmail shirts beneath it all, while the young Whitish girl and her Varrilan friend donned what Faolan recognized as old plate armor Katrien must have dug up from the storage room where Kurjan had lain while his wounds healed.

"No!" Katrien called, hurrying over to the Varrilan youth's side. "Kurjan, you must remain behind. Your wound will never heal if you go running off now!"

"I won't let Amadi face the Whitish alone," Kurjan said. He stood tall and proud.

"Neither of you have to face the Whitish soldiers," Katrien said. "Remain behind with me. This is a small conflict, not the true fight to come. Save yourselves for the moment when it truly matters."

"Why else have we come all this way?" the girl asked stubbornly. "We came here to fight for you. To help you win back Lostport. We didn't come back to cower inside while all the fun happened down in the village."

Faolan turned to speak to Mylo and missed the rest of that exchange. Clearly Katrien had been overridden, though, because both Kurjan and Amadi joined Faolan's group as they bustled out the doors and onto the ruined front lawn. Katrien followed them to the door,

accompanied by her Varrilan friend Tenori, whom Faolan had convinced to remain behind as her bodyguard. The man had not required much persuasion.

The two Darden warriors led their motley procession down the stairs, with Nort and Barrik taking up the rear. Faolan could see the damage long before they reached Lostport—the houses were obscured beneath a wide plume of smoke, through which flames occasionally leapt.

At the base of the stairs, Faolan's company drew closer together for protection and surveyed the scene. For the moment, no Whitish soldiers were in sight; a cluster of nervous-looking villagers huddled at the base of the hill, mostly children and a few women keeping them from running off, while the rest of the town appeared deserted. It looked as though the sturdier log homes belonging to Lostport's wealthiest residents had escaped unscathed, since the flames could not penetrate the dense wood. But the flimsy cottages shared by most villagers had caught fire easily, the flames leaping higher than the nearby trees. The air was thick and oily with smoke, and Faolan had to suppress the urge to cover his mouth with a handkerchief.

"Forward now, carefully," he said. Maintaining their protective huddle, Faolan and his company moved forward until they reached the cobbled streets of town. Most of the shops were burning; the general store was nothing but a smoldering ruin, and brilliant flames leapt from every window of the finest tavern. Even the ships were alight. Spitefully, Faolan hoped the ship bearing supplies for Port Emerald had been torched as well.

As they neared the end of town, Faolan suddenly caught sight of the Whitish soldiers. They had rounded up most of the townsfolk who had thought to arm themselves, men and women bearing shovels and blacksmith's irons and hatchets, and they appeared to be picking the villagers

off one by one. Most of the Whitish soldiers had bows nocked at the Lostporters, while the villagers had nothing but their rudimentary weapons to defend themselves with.

When the owner of the Seal's Roost stepped forward and opened his mouth, presumably to call out to Faolan, one of the soldiers put an arrow through his gut. The man fell to his knees, gurgling and choking. He gripped the arrow's shaft and tried to pull it free, but the barbed end brought up a mess of blood and flesh, and he collapsed onto his side, howling.

"I command you to desist!" Faolan bellowed. "I am the king of Lostport, and I will see you put to death if this continues."

The Whitish soldiers turned to Faolan, some looking nervous, others sneering. There had to be more than two hundred, pitted against nearly a thousand villagers. The others must have fled into the forest.

"You're no king," one of the soldiers said, turning his bow on Faolan now. "You're no more than a dirt-blooded pretender. You answer to High King Luistan, lord of the nine Kinship Thrones, and he will see *you* hung for your insolence."

"He did not authorize this," Faolan said, stepping past his companions to face the soldier directly. "If you continue to terrorize my countrymen and burn this village, you will have no help from Whitland. You are very alone, just two hundred men stranded on the ends of the earth, and no one will hear you cry out for mercy."

"That doesn't matter," the soldier said. "King Luistan did not dictate the means, but he did instruct us to take hold of Lostport. This kingdom has been deviant for far too long. He wants you back under Whitish rule, so he can discipline the murderers and thieves you're harboring."

"King Luistan has grown overconfident if he thinks his

rule extends to Lostport," Faolan said.

"Oh, but it does," the soldier said. "We have ten thousand men at Port Emerald ready to strengthen our numbers. What are the odds, *King* Faolan? Ten thousand armed soldiers against a few frightened villagers? Should we kill the children first to put an end to the decay of this place?"

"And they are trapped in Port Emerald," Faolan said. "The rivers will not recede for many days. You will be dead by the time your fellows return."

"Unless we kill you first." The soldier looked over his shoulder at the solid wall of Whitlanders who flanked him. "Should we dispose of the townsfolk first, or start with the king and his beloved household?"

"Kill the king!" a man shouted from the center of the crowd.

A roar of agreement rose from the soldiers.

"Archers!" their leader shouted, aiming his own bow straight at Faolan's chest. "Ready?"

At the rustle of bows, Faolan's household dispersed. The Darden warriors charged forward, swords unsheathed, clearly aiming to press their advantage before the soldiers fired. Mylo and his kitchen hands fled into the trees, while the rest of Faolan's household and Katrien's young companions stood their ground.

"Release!" the soldier bellowed.

The warriors barreled into the knot of Whitish soldiers, disemboweling two men just as the arrows flew. The soldiers cleared a path around them, fleeing the warriors' powerful sword-strokes. Two hundred arrows sailed through the air.

Faolan and his companions dropped to the ground, avoiding the arrows, but his tailor was not so lucky. He took an arrow in the chest and staggered backward,

collapsing against a tree.

"Now!" Mylo shouted from the trees. He and his kitchen hands dashed into the melee, unnoticed by the soldiers, and thrust knife after knife into the Whitish men's exposed throats and stomachs. They disappeared into the fray before long, though Faolan thought he saw one of the young kitchen hands cut down from behind.

As Faolan and his fellows regained their feet and charged forward, the Lostporters took courage from the offensive and regrouped for a charge at the rear of the Whitish line.

After that, Faolan could no longer keep track of what went on around him. He was conscious of Nort and Barrik remaining beside him, deflecting most blows before they came close, but when he had a chance to look up from the mess of fighting about him, he could not find any of his household. He thanked every god he could remember that Katrien had stayed safely behind.

Holding his blade in readiness, Faolan advanced through the knot of fighting, striking and parrying whenever a sword came uncomfortably close. He was by no means a skilled swordsman, yet with the help of his guards, he could keep the Whitish at bay. Mud flew all around him, and the air was thick with smoke and the sound of men shouting. There were women among the villagers as well, fighting with just as much untrained ferocity as the men.

Though Faolan could not keep track of who fought on which side, he sensed before long that his side was quickly losing strength. He and his guards were forced back, step by step, until they were standing on the cobbled street once more with ash raining around them. Wiping sweat from his forehead with the back of his hand, Faolan turned to see the wreckage behind him. The tavern fire had mostly burned itself out; half of the roof was gone, and the other

half continued to smoke ominously.

As Faolan paused to take stock of his surroundings, a shout rang over the soldiers. "Regroup!"

It was one of the Darden warriors, parrying blows from three soldiers at once. He was being forced down the pier, his leg stained with blood.

"To me!" Faolan shouted. The flames rising from a storage shed were leaping forth uncomfortably close to Faolan's left shoulder, so he edged toward the pier, Nort and Barrik clearing the way before him. The muddy road was strewn with bodies, mostly villagers. If they did not change their tactics soon, the Whitish would overwhelm them entirely.

"We can hold the pier," Nort said in Faolan's ear. "We should retreat and narrow the men's attack."

"Right." Faolan raised his voice. "Retreat!"

As the Darden warrior flung the last soldier from the pier, Faolan jogged over to the docks and waited, flanked by his strongest fighters, while the disheartened villagers fled the fight. Miraculously, Mylo's youngest kitchen hand had escaped the fight unscathed, though the other two failed to appear from the battlefield. When at last Faolan's household and the villagers had joined ranks on the pier, the fiercest fighters assembled at the front, forming a line three men deep that separated the Lostporters from the Whitish. Several villagers behind Faolan passed forward a set of makeshift shields—wooden boards and crates and the like—which the Darden warriors stacked before them to form a barrier against the Whitish arrows.

The Whitish men took advantage of the respite to gather their forces and tend to their wounded. A pair of men coordinated the removal of injured soldiers from the battlefield into the fully-intact sanctuary of the Seal's Roost. The rest of the soldiers advanced on the pier, their leader

kicking at the bodies of fallen Lostporters as he passed them by.

"You think you're clever, do you?" the leader taunted, stepping so close to the pier that his boots left muddy prints on the wooden boards. At the snap of his fingers, a pair of men with flaming torches came down the cobbled street of Lostport and advanced on the pier. "Archers!"

Again the men raised their bows.

"Volley!"

From behind the leader, arrows began to rain down on Faolan's company. One of the Darden warriors toppled from the pier, four arrows protruding from his unprotected stomach and legs, and the rest of the Lostporters were forced to retreat still farther down the pier.

This gave the torch-bearers a chance to approach and hold their torches to the sagging boards of the pier. After being soaked for days, Faolan dared to hope it might resist lighting entirely. But eventually the wood caught afire, a smoldering circle appearing in the first board and slowly widening. Before long flames were ringing the hole, forcing the fire along the pier.

How long did they have? Though the fire was slow to spread, the pier began to creak and groan as its hold on the shore weakened. The pilings were not sturdy enough to hold the pier in place without being anchored to solid land.

"Stand still!" Harrow yelled.

The nervous shuffling behind Faolan ceased as five hundred Lostporters held their breath, praying the supports would hold.

With a creak and a snap, the fire ate its way through the last boards that held the pier to the shore. There was now a smoldering gap between the road and the dock.

"Now we'll just wait for the fire to do its job," the Whitish leader said with a nasty smile.

His men sent up a cheer.

Faolan could feel the pier shifting beneath his feet. It would not hold. It could not.

One of the pilings gave an almighty crack and buckled beneath the weight of the pier. Two young men—boys, in truth—slipped from the pier and fell, howling, into the water.

Then the entire pier was swaying to the side. The villagers screamed, and many began jumping from the dock to escape the collapsing boards. Two boards near the end of the pier cracked in two, flinging a man onto the bracing below the pier; he screamed as the pier continued to fall. All at once, his screams ended.

Suddenly the pier buckled, hurling its entire load into the churning ocean below. Faolan plunged beneath the surf, his chainmail vest dragging him down.

He fumbled at his coat with icy fingers, unable to find the buttons in the murky water. Panic caught in his throat.

At last he struggled free of the coat and slipped the chainmail vest over his head. He was beginning to grow dizzy as his feet settled onto the muddy ocean floor. Released from the weight, he kicked off with as much force as he could manage and shot for the surface.

When he broke the surface, he was thrown into a scene of chaos. Lostporters fought to stay afloat, churning the water up more than the waves did. Kicking to keep his face above the water, Faolan turned in a circle to take in the turmoil. The Whitish soldiers had lined the shore, standing at ease, just waiting for the Lostporters to drown. If that failed, they could pick Faolan's people off one by one as they struggled to shore.

With a faint surge of pride, Faolan saw that his people were faring better than he could have hoped. They were a nation of sea-folk, men and women who had learned to swim before they could walk. They were stronger than they seemed.

But their strength was flagging. One elderly man slipped between the waves and did not re-emerge. Nearby, Amadi was flailing to keep her head up, gasping for air as though she was half-drowned already.

"What will it take for you to let us come safely to shore?" Faolan gasped.

"You can plead as much as you want, but nothing you can offer us will suffice," the leader said. "Swim to shore and die on our swords, or stay in the sea and drown. It is your choice."

Faolan struggled to stay afloat as the next wave broke over his head. His legs were numb, his chest burning from the exertion.

Three more men slipped beneath the water, leaving behind eerie pockets of stillness.

In the distance, the fires burned on, leeching smoke into the air as though the rains had never come.

## Chapter 27

Most of the day passed without a word from Lostport. Katrien was growing more and more frightened as the sun sank lower in the sky. What could hold Faolan in the village for so long except death or capture?

Finally Katrien could stand it no longer. She rose from her seat by the kitchen fire, which the housekeeper had deemed the safest place in the manor, and fetched her cloak from the back of a chair.

"Tenori, will you join me or remain behind? I must see what has become of Lostport."

"I'm coming."

They emerged from the house to find the setting sun just beginning to streak the fringes of dark cloud with violet. Down the stairs they flew, Katrien unable to tear her eyes from the billowing smoke that was all she could see of Lostport. No flames escaped the dark cloud, but it seemed the entire village had been reduced to ash.

At the foot of the stairs, she caught sight of a few lone houses that had escaped damage. The streets were empty and silent. Where had everyone gone?

As they approached the start of the cobbled main road, Katrien heard footsteps behind her. She whirled, fearing attack.

From the forest stepped a young, sandy-haired man. Behind him came a silent flood of people—Varrilans and

Dardens and Kohls.

Her followers were here.

"Thank the Nine," Katrien gasped.

Tenori grabbed her hand, a fierce smile breaking across his face.

"We haven't made it here unscathed," said a Darden warrior-woman, stepping up beside the young man. "This is all that remains of our ranks. We were caught in the storm halfway down the river, and our boats were smashed against the rocks."

"The river-folk came with us," said a woman in a badly-torn dress, joining the warrior. "They lashed the remaining boats to the trees until we had climbed ashore. Without them, all of us would have perished."

"Once this violence has blown past, we will give them a proper send-off," Katrien said. "Now, though, you have come without a moment to spare. The Whitish soldiers have mounted an attack on Lostport, and I cannot see a single villager around. I fear they have been burned alive."

"We smelled the smoke from a league away," the sandy-haired man said. "Is your manor unharmed?"

Katrien nodded. "But Faolan has gone into the village. I have not seen him since morning."

"Then let's go."

The sandy-haired man and the warrior broke into a run down the main street of Lostport. Katrien and Tenori followed, keeping to the side until the fighters had passed. Soon they were surrounded by the very young and the very old, people who had come to Lostport because they had no other choice, not because they meant to go to war.

Still Katrien saw no one.

It was not until they neared the end of town that she discerned the Whitish soldiers. They had formed a solid line just below the rise leading to the beach, most with bows nocked and arrows pointing into the waves.

In an instant, Katrien realized what they stood guard over.

The entire population of Lostport was thrashing about in the ocean, fighting to stay above the waves. It did not look like many people; some must have drowned already.

Katrien's followers slowed as they neared the Whitish soldiers, treading more carefully now, their footsteps quiet on the cobblestones. They drew weapons as they came close, swords and daggers and axes flashing in the last light of day.

For an instant, her followers paused just behind the Whitish line. Then, with a sudden brutality that stunned her, the warriors plunged their steel into the Whitlanders' backs. Hundreds of Whitish soldiers crumpled all at once, and those who survived the first onslaught whirled to face their attackers, only to be cut down just as swiftly. Shouts rose above the crowd, but they were quickly silenced.

In mere moments, the entire Whitish army was gone.

Katrien and the rest of her followers dashed forward as her fighters raced to the water to pull the Lostporters to shore. Her heart leapt as she spotted Faolan, stripped of his coat and chainmail and treading water more easily than most of the villagers. And there was Amadi, clinging to the shoulders of a local man who had the grizzled look of a sailor.

Kurjan was nowhere in sight. Nor was Laina.

When the sailor crawled onto the stony beach and deposited Amadi on dry land, Katrien ran forward and gathered the girl into her arms. Amadi was crying silently, her face red from cold and fear. Though it pained her to know this, Katrien saw that Amadi was more of a daughter to her than Laina would ever be.

"Where's Kurjan?" Amadi sniffed, rubbing her eyes

with her fists. "I don't know where he went." Her whole body shook, whether from cold or misery, Katrien could not tell.

"Don't give up hope yet," Katrien urged. "We must gather everyone to Faolan's home and take stock of who has gone missing."

With help from Katrien's followers, the villagers limped or were carried up the hill to Faolan's manor. The housekeeper was already waiting for them, front doors flung wide, and she accompanied Nort and Barrik in clearing out space in every bedroom. The most gravely injured townsfolk were lain gently on beds in Laina and Faolan's rooms, as well as in the spare room, and some of the younger boys were given space in the servants' quarters.

Before long, a new string of arrivals appeared at the top of the hill—these were the elderly women and children who had escaped the fighting and hid in the forest. There were more of them than Katrien had expected, near two hundred, and she let out a quiet sigh of relief as she watched them rejoin their families among the fighters.

Yet many of them searched the house in vain. A tight knot of children passed from room to room, wide-eyed and desperate, only to return to the main hall alone. Three of the children were sobbing, and one ran off and disappeared into the garden. The eldest of the group, a girl with mud streaked through her hair, held the hands of the two youngest children and stared sightlessly at the wall. At last the entire population of Lostport was gathered in the house and on the lawn, clustered in tight groups as though through solidarity alone they could right the wrongs that had been done. Once everyone was accounted for, Katrien caught Faolan's eye and threaded her way through the crowd until she stood by his side. She grasped his hand fiercely, trying not to betray her hopelessness.

"How is this possible?" Faolan asked quietly, watching Katrien's followers tending to the Lostporters. "Who are these people?"

"I did not tell you the circumstances of my departure from Whitland," Katrien said delicately. Even now she would not reveal the brutal treatment she had received. "I was placed under house arrest, and thought myself in danger of assassination. King Luistan was frightened that I had been acting as an informant and revealing his schemes. Only then did I realize he had planned more than simply sending aid to Lostport." She looked over at Amadi and Tenori, who were passing around blankets to the oldest of the townsfolk who had been a part of the fight. "I fled Whitland, intending to make for Lostport with all haste, but on the way I met a group of incredible people in the Twin Cities who showed me how terrible Whitland's power had grown."

She caught Tenori's eye for a moment and quickly looked away.

"They were Varrilans living in the Twin Cities, men and women who had spent a lifetime in Dardensfell and who were now threatened daily by the Whitish soldiers. They wanted to do something to stop Whitland, but they were powerless in the Twin Cities. So I gathered together everyone who wished to overthrow the oppressive military presence, Varrilans and Dardens and even a few from farther afield, and brought them down to Lostport. I hoped that with their help we could throw off Whitland's influence."

"Why haven't you told me this?" Faolan looked hurt.

"I didn't wish to give you false hope. I thought my followers would be stranded in Ferrydown when the rains came, and I knew it would be too late for them to help."

"You were born a queen, milady," Faolan said. He

took Katrien's hand and kissed it tenderly, eyes locked on hers. "Will you join me in the long, painful journey to rebuild Lostport?"

"I would be honored," Katrien said. "I am yours to command, my king."

Faolan chuckled. "I believe you have more followers than I have people. You might be the one doing the commanding around here."

Katrien shrugged, trying not to smile.

As the villagers gathered themselves into a more orderly assemblage, a pair of men approached Katrien and Faolan.

"Your majesties?" said the older of the two, a man with a bushy beard just beginning to flush grey. "Most of us would be happy to sleep on the lawn, unless it rains tonight, but we'd go back down to the village if you wanted."

"Could we have a word with Lady Laina?" the second man asked.

"I don't know where she's gone," Faolan said heavily. "When she returns, I will send her straight to you."

The man's shoulders sagged. "We only wanted to thank her. All of our valuables are hidden away safe in the forest. If we hadn't listened to her, we'd bloody well be broke now."

"What?" Faolan frowned at him. "Laina never spoke to me of this." He shot Katrien a look of irritation, as though he suspected her of conspiring with Laina.

"It was when you were sick, Milord," the young man said. "She wanted to do something to help us, and she didn't think we'd be much use against the Whitish." He shrugged. "She was dead right."

Faolan's jaw tightened. "How very decent of her."

"We will pass on your thanks as soon as Laina returns," Katrien said. "Now, I believe we can hunt down a

bit of spare bedding. If someone is willing to collect blankets and tents from town, we might be able to find enough shelter for everyone. I would hardly like to take our chances with the rain. Besides, the ground is soaked! You would freeze if you slept out here."

When the two men left, Katrien and Faolan turned to each other.

"Laina doesn't know a thing about ruling," Faolan said.

"But she has a good heart. And she gave these people a better chance at recovering their lives than either of us could have managed."

Faolan shook his head. "She won't listen. She never has. No matter how grave her responsibility, she will not stop running off and taking matters into her own hands. She will kill herself before long, if she's not already dead."

"Faolan! How could you?"

He pinched the bridge of his nose. "I'm sorry. I have not been myself lately. Everything is going wrong, and most of it is my fault."

Katrien took his shoulders and forced him to look at her. "No. Whatever decisions you had made, King Luistan would have countered them by the sheer force of his military presence. This isn't over yet. We must deal with the builders stranded at Port Emerald, and this time the power lies with us."

At dawn the next morning, Katrien gathered nearly half of her followers and led the solemn procession down to the docks. She had spent most of the night convincing Faolan to agree to her plan; still terrified that Laina had met some ill fate, he wanted to kill the entire crew of Whitish builders. But Katrien knew that nothing good would come of yet more death and ruin. Kurjan was gone, lost to the waves, and Amadi had withdrawn into herself.

Four of the remaining captains had gone ahead to ready the four largest ships in Lostport, which greeted Katrien and her followers with billowing sails half-raised. Katrien had asked for volunteers only, and forbade any Varrilans from joining her in her mission. If the Whitish builders saw shiploads of Varrilans descending on them, they would assume the worst and attack with their full strength.

"Perfect wind for sailing," one of the captains said, giving Katrien a quick bow as she stepped aboard his ship. "D'you know how many builders will be waiting for us?"

"Faolan wasn't certain," Katrien said. "Though he said there could easily be ten thousand still in Port Emerald."

The captain whistled. "They might do better to wait for the floods to clear! It'll take us days to get that many men back to Lostport."

"We will do our best," Katrien said. "Have you loaded the supplies?"

"There wasn't much, but I've got a bit."

She nodded. "I think they will be willing to negotiate terms. If the first supply ship made it through the storm, they will have been dependent on our generosity for some days now."

As the last of her followers stepped aboard the ship, the gangplanks were raised and the anchors drawn up. Katrien caught sight of Amadi standing at the prow of the largest ship—she had not noticed the girl join her ranks, and she was frightened by how pale and lost Amadi appeared.

Tenori joined her at the rail as their ship cut through the grey waters toward the open sea. From here they had an uninterrupted view of the steep mountains guarding the fjords; Katrien had never come out so far before, had never realized this claustrophobic little kingdom was in truth so vast.

"Is it what you expected?" Tenori asked.

"Hardly." Katrien ground her toe against the side of the boat. "It is exactly as I remembered, yet everything has changed. I don't know whether I should laugh or weep."

"This kingdom wouldn't have survived without you," Tenori said. "It is yours now, whether you would embrace it or not."

Katrien frowned at the waves far below. "I wish we were still on the road. Everything was so simple back then."

"So do I," Tenori muttered. When Katrien looked at him, he had turned away.

After rounding the skirts of Mount Taleon, they drew up to the mouth of an inlet where the harsh waves stilled and the mountainsides were embroidered with silver waterfalls. Only once they had passed into the protected waters of the inlet did Katrien realize how far back the fjord stretched. She could not see the end, nor could she see which mountains cradled the faraway Port Emerald. The captain drew their boat closer to the mountains, the ocean depths still fathomless even as they passed so near to the rocky cliffs that Katrien could feel the mist from a waterfall scatter across her cheeks. She lifted her head to the spray, eyes closed, and imagined the pure water could wash away the memory of every villager whose body had been given to the sea.

"There it is," Tenori said, his voice nearly muffled beneath the churning roar of the waterfall.

Katrien opened her eyes and saw a rough pier guarded by a makeshift hut on each side. Above that, she saw the edge of a white stone city rising up the mountainside, its walls gleaming in the sun.

But something was not right. As they rounded the mountainside and came in full view of Port Emerald,

Katrien realized that a wide brown streak ran straight through the place where the city should have been. Had the builders neglected to work on that section? No—closer still, she could see that buildings were torn in half, stairways hanging into the empty space. A vast mudslide had torn the city in two, taking away every foundation and every building in its path.

Tenori cursed in Varrilan and strode to the front of the ship. Katrien gripped the rail, unable to believe what she saw. As much hatred and anger as this port had inspired in her followers, it would have been stunning. The remaining buildings were elegant and airy, the windows arched in the style of Chelt, the roofs a charming shade of green.

So much toil and expense had been poured into this gem of a city.

And it had all gone to waste.

Closer still, Katrien could make out thousands of figures standing on the beach, clustered so close they had hidden the sand. Their white uniforms had been streaked with mud until the color was nearly unrecognizable, and several were jostling to gain a better vantage point. A cacophony of voices rose above the crowd, most indistinguishable, though Katrien picked up a few cries for mercy mixed with shouts of hatred toward Lostport.

The other three ships slowed, lowering their sails, while the captain of Katrien's ship took the lead and glided smoothly up to the end of the pier. As a pair of men jumped down to secure the boat to the pier, one of the Whitish men from the beach paced down to the end of the pier and bowed to the captain.

"Do you speak on behalf of these men?" Katrien asked.

"I do." The man bowed again. "My name is Captain Drail, and I am—that is to say, I was—the building director

for this project." His mouth tightened. The crowd had gone quiet.

"I am Queen Katrien, wife of King Faolan, returned at last to Lostport," Katrien said. Unlike Lostporters, Whitlanders were conditioned to show respect only to those who had the title to warrant it. "We have come to make a deal with you. If you agree to leave Lostport, abandon your war with Varrival, and return to Whitland, we will transport you safely back to our town. If not, we will eliminate you." She gave him a harsh look. "You are outnumbered and stranded. Will you take our offer, or would you prefer to cling to your pride and perish?"

Captain Drail did not even stop to consider her words. "We have no strength to fight," he said. "Your supplies have saved us, but there isn't nearly enough for our numbers. Besides, we've already lost half our men to the rockslide, and a few more chasing after some fool's dream of riches hidden in the hills. We will happily surrender, if you free us from this cursed place."

"Very good," Katrien said. "If you are willing to remain behind until the last of your men have been evacuated, you should organize your builders. We can take two hundred men on our first trip, and five hundred on each trip thereafter. Any injured builders should come first."

With a second bow, Captain Drail turned and marched off the pier. He must have given orders to his men as soon as he reached the shore, because the crowd descended into chaos. A pair of stretchers appeared from the trees, their bearers parting the crowd with shouts and much shoving, while a group of what must have been higher-ranking soldiers began forcing men away from the water's edge to allow the first two hundred passengers to congregate.

Another ship approached and made berth on the

opposite side of the pier, and the captain began directing the offloading of food and blankets for those who would remain behind. Just twenty men were allowed onto Katrien's ship, numbering far fewer than her followers; orders had clearly been given to protect the queen. If she could have, she would have stayed behind to help tend to the men—in Dardensfell, that would have been expected of her. Yet she knew Faolan was right to mistrust these builders, who might or might not have sanctioned the attack on Lostport.

The sun had reached its apex by the time the first four ships were readied. As they set sail once again for the mouth of the fjord, the men on the beach shouted curses and blessings after them, many invoking Aurum, god of sunrise and hope.

It was fitting. Even after they made it safely to Lostport, they had a long, arduous journey back to Whitland ahead of them, devoid of supplies and barges. And they would have no hero's welcome awaiting them in Whitland. They would need a hearty supply of hope to guide them home.

\* \* \*

As soon as Conard had seen King Faolan amongst the men treading water below the shattered pier, he knew he could not remain in Lostport. He sought out Queen Katrien, knowing she would not recognize him, and learned that Laina had vanished some two days prior. She must not have returned home since Conard's guards had thrown her from her horse. If Laina had braved the sea in an attempt to rescue him, she could not possibly have survived.

Heart pounding in equal measures of hope and fear, Conard ran down to the forest path. The bridges over Ashfall Creek were down, but he stole a plank from a halfburned house and made himself a bridge so shaky he did not trust himself to survive the return journey.

Now, after a hurried reunion with the gypsies, he was back on the road, hoping to beat the darkness. The gypsies had heard no word from Laina, which meant she was farther afield, either adrift at sea or somewhere near Port Emerald.

The road was growing more treacherous by the moment, the lengthening shadows hiding deep puddles and muddy trenches, and Conard was considering huddling in his coat to sleep when he caught a whiff of campfire smoke ahead. Whoever had chosen to spend the night on the road, they were certainly not making any effort to hide; as Conard drew nearer, he discerned the glow of embers directly in the middle of the road. Just as he opened his mouth to call a greeting, he stopped short, his foot sunk nearly to the knee in water.

"Tanner's balls!" he cried in surprise, jumping backward.

The person at the other side of the puddle—rather, the four people—jumped to their feet. "Who goes there?" one bellowed.

That voice sounded vaguely familiar. Taking a chance, Conard said, "Emerett?" If he was wrong, he could be arrested once more and dragged straight back to Lostport.

"Conard!" This time it was Ian who called out, his voice high in excitement.

"No. I can't believe it." The last voice belonged, unmistakably, to Laina.

Conard stumbled backward in relief. For a moment he could not speak. At last he recovered himself and said, "Can I get across this blasted puddle without a boat?"

"I tried earlier," Quentin said. "Got up to my waist

before I turned 'round."

"Humph." Conard stepped into the puddle again, trying to acclimate himself to the cold. "Well, I'm more likely to survive the night sitting by your fire than huddling out here in the cold. I guess there's no hope for it. I'll have to swim."

Thankfully the moon had risen high enough to cast a pale reflection across the surface of the muddy pool, so Conard could be sure he would not collide with any trees. The water spread out as far as he could see into the forest, filling a wide basin that refused to drain. Though the water was nowhere near as cold as the ocean, it was still a shock, and Conard held his breath as he took a step that plunged him from waist to chest. Goosebumps rippled up his arms, which he refused to lower into the muck.

Another step forward did not take him any deeper. Holding his arms up beside his ears, treading delicately lest he slip in the thick layer of sludge, Conard made his way forward. Once he grew accustomed to the numbing cold, the stench was the worst part of the crossing. He hoped the water would recede by morning, though he did not expect the forest to be so accommodating.

When he neared the opposite edge and the water began to slide back, first to his waist and then to his knees, he realized that Laina had one arm around Ian as if for support. She did not step forward to meet him, and did not relinquish her grip on Ian until Conard stood before her. Then she flung her arms around him, muck and all, and pulled him into a desperate embrace.

"You're safe?" Conard whispered, brushing Laina's hair back from her face. "I was terrified you had come after me."

"Not as frightened as I was," Laina said. "I would've done exactly that, if not for my blasted ankle. I think I've

sprained it. How did you escape?"

Conard drew back and gave her a fierce kiss. "Oh no! You're soaked. Let's dry ourselves by the fire, and I'll tell you the full story. But first, how did you four end up here?"

After waiting for Conard and Laina to settle themselves on logs by the fire, Ian, Quentin, and Emerett knelt on the still-muddy ground.

"We headed for that cave you told us about," Ian said. "We meant to find it and memorize its location, but when we tried to return to camp, the river had washed away the bridge. We headed back to the cave, and we've been sheltering there for the past day or so. I think someone let the story slip back at camp, because we saw about fifty other builders pass by just before we tried to head back to camp. They must be sheltering at the midway camp now."

"And I couldn't make it all the way to the midway camp after those guards threw me off Feather," Laina said. "I crawled to the cave and spent the night keeping out of the rain."

Conard squeezed her hand, grateful that she had been unable to risk her life for him.

"It's lucky we came here," Quentin said. "Might have saved our lives, in truth. Just yesterday, a mudslide tore Port Emerald off the hillside. Half the tents were crushed."

A thrill of adrenaline ran through Conard. After all their scheming and manipulation, Lostport itself had stepped in and saved its people from Whitland. The triumph was quickly followed by dismay as Conard realized that his endless days of hauling bricks up the mountainside had been for naught.

"Now tell us how you escaped," Laina commanded.

He grinned sideways at her. "Can you guess?"

"I haven't a bloody clue."

Conard laughed. "Fine. I give in. It was Jairus who

rescued me, the Varos-damned lunatic. For all that he looks sour and grumpy, he's the most honorable man I've ever met."

"Your life in exchange for his life," Laina said in wonder. "And where is he now?"

"On the road. He was planning to accompany me to the Twin Cities, but now he might just head to Varrival. He said he can't do anything here, with the Whitish hounding him and all."

"I'll miss him," Laina said, staring into the fire.

"Are you wishing I'd left and he'd stayed?" Conard tried not to let the bitterness creep into his tone.

"No! Never." Laina put her chin in her hands. "He was a dear friend, and a man who had never quite found his place in the world. Nothing more. I had hoped Lostport might become a home for him."

Ian, Quentin, and Emerett were determinedly not staring at Laina. Quentin poked at the fire, digging an ember from the ashes, and Ian rustled in his pack for more food.

"Are you warm enough?" Laina asked.

Conard shrugged. "I won't die, if that's what you're wondering."

She smiled mischievously. "Help me up. I don't want these ruffians listening in."

"Hey!" Ian said. "I consider myself an intellectual."

"Conard's the one who might or might not be a traitor," Quentin said, elbowing Conard in the ribs.

Conard groaned as he stood, all of his muscles protesting at once. He grabbed Laina's hand and pulled her to her feet, and she used him as a crutch to hobble a short distance from the fire.

"He was jealous of me," Conard whispered as he supported Laina away from the firelight. "I was afraid you'd

sent me to the builders' camp just to keep me out of the way."

"What?" Laina stopped so abruptly Conard nearly overbalanced. "You're mad. I would have hidden you under my bed for the entire span, if I could have gotten away with it."

Conard took her shoulders and turned her to face him.

"I know he was jealous," Laina admitted after a pause. She put her hands on Conard's waist and studied him. "But it was never a question for me. You have always been the only one. Always."

"Even though you're the future queen of Lostport?"

"I'm not." Laina drew Conard closer; he was conscious of her every finger against his sodden shirt. "I made my choice, that night in the cave. I was never meant to be queen."

Conard held Laina close and kissed her forehead. "Well, then, my not-queen, we have a right mess to sort out once we get home."

"Do we ever."

For a long time they stood in the dark, wrapped in one another's arms, the wind hissing through the forest. As cold and hungry and sore as he was, Conard wished the moment would last forever. This could be his last simple day before everything changed.

"I nearly got you and Jairus killed," Laina said. "And I've probably beggared this kingdom by promising supplies to Captain Drail. I'll be surprised if my own father doesn't send me to the Convict's Caves the moment we return to Lostport."

"He'll be worried sick," Conard said. "And if he does send you to the caves, I'm coming too."

Laina kissed him and turned back to the fire, her arm tight about his shoulders.

## Chapter 28

Day stretched into night as Faolan settled the displaced Lostporters in his garden and his home. Many had retreated into the woods around the settlement, some no doubt sheltering in structures that had escaped damaged, yet there were still far too many with nowhere to spend the night.

He was beginning to worry that something dire had befallen Laina, but now was not the time to search for her. Thousands of lives depended on his aid. He had to trust that Laina knew enough to keep herself from harm—that she was somewhere in the forest, cut off by the flooded rivers, rather than shipwrecked on a rock in a misguided attempt to save Conard.

A few intrepid villagers had already returned to the town, hoping to take stock of what remained and salvage what they could from the wreckage. Two had since returned with sacks of sweet potatoes and beans, which Mylo had cooked into a hearty stew. As the aroma wafted through the halls and onto the lawn, villagers began gathering close, silent and hopeful.

At last, Mylo sent his two remaining kitchen hands into the crowd of villagers to collect every cup, bowl, and plate they could produce. Then the food began appearing from the kitchen. It was passed down the hall, first to the invalids and the elders, and next to the youngest of the children. Mylo had concocted some sort of rich, filling stew, using the sweet potatoes and beans and every vegetable he must have found in his own stores.

So intently was Faolan watching the villagers receive their meal that he did not at first notice the young couple who approached him.

"Your majesty."

Faolan blinked and realized a pair of muddy villagers was kneeling before him.

"You were lying abed when this was arranged, so it might have escaped your attention." The young man stood and clasped his hands behind his back. "Your daughter suggested we hide our valuables in the woods, so we would be prepared if the Whitlanders attacked our village. Well, we just went around checking the safe boxes she arranged, and every one is still secure. Also, she was the one who prodded us into starting the patrol. We would've been burned in our beds if not for her. We owe the princess Laina our lives."

When Faolan tried to respond, his throat tightened. Laina may have blundered her way through this political mess, yet she had done more good than she could know. He would have to thank her.

If she was still alive.

As the last red glow of sunset faded beyond the mountains, a group of muddy, limping Whitish builders appeared at the top of the stairs.

"We surrender to you," their leader muttered, stumbling to his knees before Faolan. "We'll go home as soon as possible, and we won't trouble you ever again. Do you think you could spare us a bite to eat?"

"How many have accompanied you?"

Before the man could answer, a long string of Whitish men began clambering onto Faolan's lawn, some collapsing as soon as they reached flat ground. "A hundred, milord. More are returning later."

"And has Queen Katrien remained in Port Emerald?"

The builder shook his head. "She's down in Lostport, organizing folks. Says she wants us gone as quick as she can manage."

"I will speak with the cook," Faolan said. "As much as I wish to feed every man who arrives, I will not starve my own people in favor of yours."

The man bowed his head, still on his knees. Faolan wondered if he had the strength to stand.

In the kitchen, Mylo was standing at a pot by the fire, furiously directing his own kitchen staff and ten volunteers from town in dishing out the stew.

"How goes the work?" Faolan asked. Every eye in the room turned to him; he sidled along the wall, not wishing to disturb their labor.

Mylo wiped sweat from his eyes with a stained sleeve. "We don't have near enough bowls. The village-folk have been eating off rocks with their hands."

"Will there be leftover stew?"

Mylo froze. "The Whitlanders have arrived, haven't they?"

Faolan smiled grimly.

"I presume that means they've surrendered."

"So they say. I have not spoken to Katrien yet, so I do not know the exact terms."

Tapping his spoon against the side of the cauldron, Mylo said, "Well. Hmph. We won't have enough of this stew, but I could dig up a few old potatoes and some dried beans. That'll have to be enough."

"We are all indebted to you," Faolan said. He gave Mylo a half-bow, surprised at how strange the gesture felt, and retreated from the kitchen.

Passing unseen behind the lines of waiting villagers, he

slipped into the darkened lawn to await Katrien's return. Surrounded though he was by his people, Faolan had never felt more alone. While High King Luistan had spun his web and made a mockery of Lostport, Faolan had lain useless in his bedchamber, afraid even to watch as his kingdom crumbled around him. His people had no cause to thank him. Katrien and Laina were the true monarchs of Lostport, the heroes who had never given up hope.

If he had not been king, he would have abandoned the manor and sought his dear wife. She was the one remaining certainty in his world.

The extent of the damage would not become clear for days, yet Faolan knew Lostport had suffered a blow that could cripple the kingdom. He would almost be happy to step aside and hand the throne to King Luistan in exchange for aid.

This could spell the end for Lostport.

\* \* \*

"The bridges are all down," Quentin called, jogging back into sight. He had run ahead to assess any dangers in Lostport while Laina hobbled along with her arms around Conard and Ian's shoulders, Emerett leading the way with his slope-shouldered stride.

Laina had spent the night in Conard's arms. Though she could have faked her innocence and married a royal suitor still, she was beyond caring for propriety. With half the mountainside of Port Emerald swept away before her eyes and Conard so recently returned from the dead, her priorities had reshuffled themselves entirely. She would happily leave Lostport with Conard and settle for a simpler life; she had never been suited for the throne.

Then again, who was?

"Any people around?" Conard asked.

"There's a couple hundred builders camped on the street, but half the buildings have burned down."

"What?" Laina limped forward as quickly as she could. He was mistaken, surely....

Even before she rounded the last bend and came upon the flooded riverbank, Laina caught the stench of ash on the breeze. The two mills that had been perched alongside the river were gone, though one of the two mill-wheels remained intact, snagged by a low-hanging bush and lying sideways in the water. From where she stood, she could see only four buildings still standing. Three were stone structures, the fourth a solid log house whose thatch roof lay in charred fragments, littering what had once been a well-tended garden.

"Nine plagues," Laina muttered. "Who did that?"

"Our own men," Emerett said bitterly. "No doubt about that."

"But on whose orders?"

The three builders looked at one another.

"Captain Drail was entirely, ruthlessly committed to finishing Port Emerald," Ian said, his pale eyes narrowed. "Burning Lostport would have disabled his supply lines and forced him to forsake the project. He would not have done such a thing."

"We need to get across this river," Laina said. "Something has gone terribly wrong."

"Everything's gone wrong in this whole bloody world," Conard said. "It's taken you this long to notice?"

Laina swallowed a laugh. This was not the time for jokes, not when the builders might have marched on Lostport and killed everyone they found. Her safe-boxes in the woods seemed a joke now, with thousands of Whitlanders arrayed against her people and not one military

defense in place.

The river looked tame now, sluggish and swollen with pasty brown water; Laina knew it well enough, knew it to be deep yet grassy this close to town. She had swam across this river and jumped from its bridges more times than she could count.

"I don't know about you, but I'm swimming over," she said. "This can't be any worse than the ocean."

"I'm coming," Conard said. "My clothes are still wet from that puddle."

This time Laina did laugh. Conard had offered to carry her over the puddle that morning, an offer she had refused as a matter of principle, only to discover that the water had subsided so it barely reached her knees.

"I hate water," Ian fretted.

"You can stay by yourself, then," Quentin said. "I want to see what's happened."

Blowing out a breath that hissed between his teeth, Ian shifted his weight from one foot to another. Though he held back and made no effort to remove his shoes, he eventually followed Emerett and Quentin into the water, yelping at the cold with each step. Though it ached, Laina trusted her full weight to her damaged ankle, afraid of getting swept away if she overbalanced.

The river was flowing deceptively fast, and before long Laina could no longer touch the bottom. At least she knew she would no longer catch herself on a hidden rock. With smooth strokes, she swam toward the far bank, her wet skirts trailing behind her. She was the first to grab hold of a knob of root that overhung the grassy bank, and she pulled herself in closer until she could drag herself out of the water. The river ran deeper on this side, too deep to stand, and when Conard joined her he struggled for a moment before lifting his knee onto the bank and hauling himself

up.

Ian was not faring so well. His version of swimming was more thrashing than moving forward, and his face had gone bright red from the exertion. Quentin was patiently paddling along behind him, waiting to rescue him before the current swept him out to sea.

"Get a branch," Conard said, fighting to untangle his foot from the roots.

Laina crawled farther up the bank and fetched a sturdy, twiggy branch, which she prodded into the river in Ian's direction. Once he raised his head high enough to register the branch before his nose, he threw himself at it so suddenly Laina nearly pitched forward into the water at his weight. Conard, who had freed himself from the roots, grabbed her shoulder to steady her.

"No more swimming," Ian gasped, sliding onto the bank and flopping onto his back.

Laina could not wait for him. Quentin and Emerett remained with Ian while she picked her way cautiously through the trees to the edge of town, leaning heavily on Conard. The closer she came, the worse the destruction appeared. Several groups of Whitlanders even had the nerve to pitch tents in the ruins of houses and shops, their tidy cook-fires making a mockery of the recent conflagration.

"We shouldn't let them see us," Laina whispered.

"Too late." Conard nodded at a cluster of men nearby. "I recognize them, but I couldn't tell you their names."

"Friendly or dangerous?" Laina stepped forward and held up her hands, making it very obvious she was unarmed.

"I don't know." A twig cracked under Conard's boot. "Shit. That's the man who whipped me."

Laina bit her lip. It was too late to turn around now.

"Is Captain Drail nearby?" Laina called with far more confidence than she felt.

One of the men gave Laina a lewd whistle, but his companion punched him in the ribs and bowed to Laina.

"That's the one who got us them blankets and rations."

"Ye sure? She looks a bit young for a wee ambassa-dress."

"I saw her walking into camp, you imbecile."

That shut the other men up. Laina cautiously approached the men, her wet skirts clinging to her legs. "Who is responsible for this? I hope this town was not ransacked on Captain Drail's orders."

"Nay, was naught but a few men run amok."

"Few hundred, more like."

The first man spat. "Either way, they're all dead now."

"The queen's down somewhere in town, organizing the new arrivals. She's been evacuating us from Port Emerald, bless the dear lady. We've given our word to leave, soon as the ships are readied."

Laina stumbled in surprise. After so many spans of intimidation and relentless demands, were the Whitlanders leaving as quickly as that? The townsfolk would not have stood a chance against thousands of trained soldiers. Some greater force was at play here, she was certain of it.

"We have to see my father," Laina said, turning away from the first cluster of men.

"Didn't they say your mother was in town, too?"

"I'll talk to her if I see her."

Conard tightened his grip around Laina's waist. "I can guess what happened here," he said slowly. "I witnessed part of it."

Laina whirled. "Explain."

"At first I was planning to follow Jairus to the Twin

Cities. But our sailboat was wrecked in the river, and we climbed up on the bank. That's when we ran into your mother's followers. She had thousands of people from every corner of the Kinship Thrones behind her, men and women whose lives were in danger from the Whitish military. They reached Lostport in time to save the villagers, though I thought it prudent to vanish before I saw what happened next. I'm guessing your mother used them to intimidate the builders. That's why they're leaving. Half the kingdoms have turned against them."

At first Laina could think of nothing to say. "Right. Now I really want to find my father."

She quickened her pace, Whitlanders ducking to the side as she passed. Near the end of the village, she caught a glimpse of what was probably her mother, sitting at a flimsy table and negotiating with three men. Her companion, Tenori, stood at her shoulder, his keen stare interrogating each builder in turn. Though Conard nudged her and pointed out her mother, Laina refused to slow her pace. Her father would have long since presumed her dead. She could not bear to cause him any further heartache.

At the top of the steps, her mother's followers were immediately obvious, thronging the lawn and interspersed with some of the more gravely injured Whitlanders. There were Varrilans and Ruunans among them, and Laina recognized a few of Conard's gypsy friends lingering near the mud-slicked garden border.

She had hardly begun searching for her father when she was enveloped in a crushing embrace. Her first instinct was to tense, yet soon she recognized the smell of her father—musty old parchment and his favorite rum-laced chocolate.

"You came home." His voice trembled as he released Laina.

"Father." It was not until she spoke that Laina realized she was crying too. "I'm so, so sorry. I've made such a mistake."

"No. You have saved our people. Without you and your rash, impetuous ways, every one of these villagers would be dead." He gave her a very scratchy kiss on the cheek.

Laina scrubbed at her eyes with her wrist. "Will you forgive me for one more rash, impetuous decision, then?"

Her father frowned, and only then seemed to notice who was supporting Laina.

"Conard is the most honorable man I have ever known. Every accusation thrown against him is false."

Though her father's frown deepened, Laina released her grip on Conard and pushed him forward. Immediately he knelt before his king, refusing to meet his eyes.

"How did you survive?" her father demanded.

"Jairus. He has a good heart." Still Conard studied the ground. "After he rescued me, we tried to flee, but instead I found Queen Katrien's followers and led them back to Lostport. If you wish, I'll leave and never return."

"But if you send him away, I'm going as well," Laina said.

Her father crossed his arms and studied Conard, his frown lessening marginally. "I must admit, I take greater stock in your judgment than ever before," he told Laina. "Despite the fact that this man nearly killed my only son and heir, and that he blatantly disobeyed the terms of his exile, I may be persuaded to choose lenience."

Laina opened her mouth to thank him.

"However! He will have to earn my trust. Stand, Conard. I want you to look me in the eyes and swear that you will obey my word."

Conard rose and clasped his hands behind his back,

meeting her father's eyes with reluctance.

"First, you will help the villagers rebuild this town. Second, you will ensure the bridges over Ashfall Creek and Stony Creek are replaced. Every one of them. And finally, you will spend five years laboring in my home before you can be considered a free citizen of Lostport once more."

"Agreed," Conard said at once. "Thank you, Milord. I will gladly serve you."

Though Laina tried to suppress the urge, she found herself grinning. "Thank you, Father. You won't regret this."

His father shook his head in acknowledgment of his defeat. "Have you seen your mother, Laina?"

"Just down in town. She looks very busy, but it looks as though the men are heeding her word. She's doing just fine."

Again her father shook his head. "If I had known what a brilliant leader your mother would make, I would have chained her here and forced her to stay by my side."

Laina snorted. She knew her father would have done nothing of the sort.

## Chapter 29

The next quarter passed in a daze. Katrien found she did not have a free moment to sit down or to speak with Faolan or Laina, as much as she desired both.

As arrangements were made for the departure of the builders—barges assembled, a letter penned in Captain Drail's own hand sent to King Luistan, and meager provisions packed—the crowds of disparate races grew increasingly restless. There were small spots of violence between her Varrilan followers and the Whitish builders, quickly subdued; surprisingly, these incidents were sidelined by equal displays of friendship and cooperation. Builders shared fires with Darden warriors and Varrilans; the denizens of the gypsy camp, who had arrived in a dense, laden group one night, offered tents and motley clothes to anyone in need; and a few strict builders tried to prevent the complete trampling of the village gardens.

In this last pursuit the builders failed entirely, yet their willingness to try impressed Katrien. In the end, these were all men, none so bound to the high king's ideal that they would sacrifice their humanity to see it through.

Though she had no chance to speak with her in private, Katrien kept a watchful eye on Amadi. After Kurjan's death, the girl remained quiet and withdrawn, quick to offer a hand but unwilling to ask for help in return. Katrien was afraid that she would be driven to some

reckless decision, born of her restless youth. The isolated, rough kingdom did not suit Amadi in the slightest.

Finally the day came when the first barges were scheduled to depart. The flooded river had receded to its usual docile flow, easy enough for crews to row upstream, and the men's tolerance for their overcrowded camp was wearing thin.

When Katrien noticed Amadi in the corner of the entrance hall, furtively stuffing a sack with her few belongings, she called the girl to her.

Amadi slung the pack over one shoulder and slouched over to Katrien, not meeting her eyes.

"I want to have a word with you," Katrien said. "Come, join me in the garden. We could both use a respite from these smelly old men."

Amadi's lips twitched. Without a word, she followed Katrien to the edge of the garden and a short ways into the woods, where Katrien chose a gnarled log for a seat.

"I wish I could read your mind, Amadi. I don't mean to pry, but I care for you a great deal. I'm concerned."

"I'm all right," Amadi mumbled.

"What are your plans?" Katrien took Amadi's chill hand in both of her own. "You intend to leave Lostport, do you not?"

After a pause, Amadi nodded. "I'm going back to the Twin Cities. It's nicer there. I could make something of myself that way."

"True," Katrien said. "You're a clever girl. I know you will succeed. But have you thought of what you'll do when you first arrive? You cannot slip into the city and expect to get by with no money."

"Tenori offered to look after me," Amadi said.

Katrien felt a pang. Tenori had not mentioned he was leaving; somehow Katrien had imagined him settling down

in Lostport.

As though she read Katrien's thoughts, Amadi said, "He wanted to stay in Lostport. But he told me he's a merchant, not a frontiersman. He'd be less than useless here, he said."

Though she hated to admit it, Katrien knew Amadi was right. "You look after him as well," she said softly. She would miss Tenori more than she had guessed. "And look after yourself. You cannot spend the rest of your life in mourning."

Amadi sniffed. "I know. That doesn't make it any better, though."

Katrien stood and pulled Amadi to her feet. "Remember, Amadi. You are still loved." She swept the girl into an embrace; after a moment of stiff reluctance, Amadi sagged against Katrien and broke into ragged, noisy tears. "No matter where you go, you will always be like a daughter to me. And someday I'll visit you in the Twin Cities. It's not so far, truly."

Amadi snuffled and pressed her face into Katrien's shoulder. "I should've died, not Kurjan!"

"No one is lucky enough to choose these things," Katrien said softly. "He would have wanted you to move on, to show the world what you are capable of. Death waits for us all. It does not do to rush the end."

Amadi nodded and wiped her face, her cheeks ruddy and wet.

"Now, do you wish to join me in seeing off the first ferries?"

"I guess."

It took all that day and most of the next for the Whitish builders to pack themselves aboard ferries and small sailboats and make their way up the river. Some of them chose to remain in Lostport, though most had families and obligations to return to. Meanwhile, Katrien's followers waited another two quarters for the return of the ferries.

To Katrien's utter shock, more than half of her followers elected to remain behind and rebuild Lostport.

"We lost our homes in Dardensfell," one Varrilan family told her. "That place has dark memories for us. We would rather begin our lives anew in a place that has rejected Whitland's influence."

Even a good number of the Darden warriors remained behind, though they never pretended they meant to stay longer than it took to repair the damage. They were honorable men and women, and Katrien was grateful for it.

The greatest shock of all came with a small canoe from Ferrydown. Its sole passenger bore word from King Luistan, carried south as swiftly as horses could travel. Though Katrien had guessed the messenger to be a man in the king's employ, Faolan and Laina recognized him at once. Laina took one glance at him and vanished into the forest, while King Faolan approached him with his hands fisted on his hips.

"I hope you have not come to beg my daughter's hand once more. Your father's devoted men have laid ruin to my entire kingdom."

The man dropped to one knee. Could this be Prince Ronnick, youngest son of the high king? "Your grace, I come bearing word from my father. He sent me because he knew you might distrust the word of a mere messenger."

"Stand," Faolan said, his mouth set in a grim line. Katrien crossed the hall to his side, adding her authority to his.

The prince rose unsteadily. "Under the terms of his rule as High King, my father is obliged to pay for the damage done to Lostport. He is responsible for maintaining

each of the Kinship Thrones. If he fails to do so, the other thrones are free to declare war on Whitland."

Katrien opened her mouth to thank the prince for the offer, but he was not finished.

"However, my father finds himself in dire financial straits. He cannot afford to send aid to Lostport. He sent me to offer a compromise—he is willing to grant Lostport its independence in exchange for his release from any financial obligations to Lostport."

"Is this true?" Faolan asked roughly.

Prince Ronnick bowed. "I swear it on my life. This is the reason my father sent me in place of a servant."

Standing at the top of the steps and looking down upon the ruin of Lostport, Katrien could see the logic in High King Luistan's decision. Lostport was an utter wreck, nothing but a king's manor looming over a junkyard. There was nothing of worth left in this kingdom. It had been reduced to rubble.

Yet its future was full of breathtaking possibility. No more would Faolan pay taxes to a king who offered him nothing in return; no more would his ships be subjected to searches and strict regulations.

Faolan joined her at the edge of his lawn and laced his fingers through hers. She smiled at him, enthralled by the wonder in his eyes.

Together they had created the first truly independent land in all of the Kinship Thrones, a haven for those who stood against Whitland. Cashabree and Varrival were separated from Whitland by geography but not by political designation; Lostport had won its freedom in every way.

For a tiny kingdom, Lostport was the greatest of them all.

When it came time for Amadi and Tenori to depart,

Katrien had to fight to suppress tears. She waited at the end of town, grim-faced and silent, as the barges approached.

Tenori grabbed her shoulders from behind, startling her, and suggested they take a brief walk to the river. Katrien agreed at once.

"I am going to miss you terribly, my queen," Tenori said, so quietly Katrien barely caught his words. They had rounded the first cluster of trees, leaving Lostport and its people behind.

"And I you," she whispered. This time her eyes stung with tears that she could not blink away. "It wounds me to say this, but Faolan is still a stranger to me. I am not the girl he once married; I have lived my entire life alone, and I am not accustomed to having a man look after me. It is not something I enjoy."

"I suppose it was optimistic to hope for a love-filled marriage when it had been arranged from afar," Tenori said.

Katrien nodded. "I know it can never be, yet I wish I could remain with you forever, Tenori. You have given me the courage to lead these people to victory over Whitland. I would never have become who I am without you. You have never doubted me."

"If you were anyone but the queen of Lostport, I would urge you to come away with me," Tenori muttered. He reached impulsively for Katrien's hand, and she clung to his as though it would keep her from drifting out to sea. "The world beckons, does it not? But Lostport needs you, and I can think of no better person to lead this country in its first moments of independence. You know I have to leave, Katrien. Your husband has seen us spending every spare moment together. He is a good man, but before long he will begin to suspect you of unfaithfulness."

Katrien sighed and gripped his hand tighter still.

"What will you have me do? I can return to the Twin Cities, or I can accompany your Varrilan followers home."

"Amadi wishes to return to the Twin Cities. You are as much a father to her as I am a mother. Will you bring her safely there?"

Tenori stopped at the edge of the cliff overlooking the river. The water was sluggish and grey-green today. He swallowed visibly. "I will do anything you ask of me, dear Katrien. I've already spoken to Amadi about this." He brought Katrien's hand to his lips.

Blinking furiously, Katrien turned away from the river. "We should return. Your ship awaits."

She released his hand, and together they walked back to the village, neither one speaking.

If she delved too far into what could have been, she might lose her resolve.

A great cheer went up as the first of her followers loosed their ropes and floated away from the newly-built pier. Those departing waved and blew kisses to those still on shore, shouting words of encouragement in every language. Katrien waved along with them all, dabbing discretely at her eyes.

As she watched the ship bearing Tenori and Amadi round the mouth of the river and vanish into the forest, she felt her heart breaking. But in the balance of things, her own feelings did not matter. Lostport mattered; her people mattered. She could not be so selfish as to forget that.

\* \* \*

Doran struggled gradually into awareness, a pitiless red light boring into his eyes. He ought to be dead. He could not remember exactly what had happened—there had been arrows, and shouts, and Iole's look of horrified betrayaland he had been ready to die.

Yet someone had stitched his twice-broken body back together, and now he was aware of an excruciating pain made worse by a jolting movement that set his teeth rattling.

Eventually he made enough sense of his surroundings to realize that the red light was filtering through a damp cloth someone had laid over his eyes, so he reached up and dragged it clumsily off.

A shout in Varrilan came from behind. At once the lurching movement stopped, and faces crowded around to peer curiously at Doran.

Squinting against the sunlight, which was more painful than ever without the cloth to mute its fury, Doran saw a cluster of silhouettes without faces. At last someone moved in front of the sun, blocking out its glare, and Doran recognized Nejeela standing directly over him.

His breath caught in his throat. "Wh—" Days of disuse had coated his throat with sand, and his voice came as a whisper. Hands raised a waterskin to his lips, and he gulped eagerly before choking half of the precious water up again. Coughing, he rolled onto his side and took several deep breaths.

"What happened?" he managed at last. "Why are you here?" In his confusion, he wondered if he had dreamed the long spans in Chelt, and had never left the desert to begin with.

"Assassins ambushed your company," Nejeela said. She picked up the discarded red cloth and placed it carefully across Doran's forehead. "It looked almost as if it the ambush had been planned. I had been traveling in Chelt when word came of your departure, and I raced down the coast to see if I could intercept you. Something did not seem right. Your Varrilan escort should have been notified,

especially in times like these, but it seems someone else has been making decisions for you."

Doran grunted. "And what are you doing with me now?"

"The arrows were poisoned," Nejeela said, an odd look of urgency in her eyes. "We are taking you back to the capital for treatment. Lostport does not have the knowledge to treat such a dire wound. Already the heat is making it fester."

"Why do you care about what happens to me?" Doran asked flatly. "I'm worthless."

She shook her head. "No. You may be the single most important person in the Kinship Thrones right now."

Doran almost laughed. "You cannot be serious."

Again she shook her head. "Whitland may be weakening at last. If you can help forge an alliance between Lostport and Varrival, the entire balance of power may shift."

Reaching up, Doran put a hand to the side of his face. He felt feverish, and he could not tell whether the pain in his muscles was real or simply caused by his illness. "Don't put too much stock in me," he said. "I don't think I will live much longer."

"Have faith." Nejeela took his hand, her expression softening. "You have made it this far, though every element has conspired against you. We need you."

Doran closed his eyes, feeling the sun baking his flesh and the dry air grating at his throat. Maybe he would live. It was a precious thing, to be valued once more. Perhaps it would be enough.

\* \* \*

Before long everyone who had been planning to leave was

gone—the Whitlanders and the Varrilans and the Darden warriors and every representative of the disparate races of the Kinship Thrones. Though hundreds of tents remained scattered throughout Lostport, housing the villagers and followers who were to help with the rebuild, Laina was surprised by how empty and stark the village had become in the absence of the builders. It was a very subdued household that came together for breakfast the morning after the last departure of the barges. Her father's staff had joined Laina's family, though they were short one kitchen hand and one guard—Nort was battling for his life against an infection born from a grisly shoulder wound.

Still, it lifted Laina's spirits to see Conard at the table again, for the first time since her brother's accident. No matter that he sat among the servants, between the youngest kitchen hand and the tailor. Laina could still catch his eye and smile whenever her parents were distracted.

As the meal neared an end, Laina's father tapped his mug twice on the table for attention. He did not have to rap loudly; silence already filled the room.

"I have no gifts to offer you that would come close to repaying you for what you have done," he told his household. "So you must accept my heartfelt thanks. You have fed thousands of desperate people, tolerated their presence for a very long quarter, and tended their wounds. You have shown Lostport to possess the truest sense of hospitality and goodwill, impoverished though it may be. I am king of this land in name only. It is you—my beloved people—to whom I owe everything."

Laina caught her mother's eye and beamed at her father. Had she truly imagined she would leave home and never return? This was her place. It had always been.

When the household gave him a smattering of applause, her father cleared his throat, reddening. "In light

of recent events," he continued, "I feel this announcement is overdue. Laina, could you please stand?"

Laina sat up straight as every head turned to her. Warily she pushed back her chair and stood, wishing she had taken more care with her appearance this morning. Her ankle was healing at last, though it was still tender.

"May I introduce you to the future queen of Lostport? No longer are we bound to Whitland's rule of male inheritance. Married or not, Laina is my rightful heir. She has always been the one best suited for the throne. I cannot believe it took us twenty-two years to acknowledge this."

The applause this time rang off the walls of the dining hall. Face burning, Laina sat down quickly and sank down in her chair, wishing she could hide.

"And what about Doran?" her mother asked quietly, hand on her father's arm.

"If he is happy and well provided-for in Chelt, I will not force him to return home. But if he does wish to return someday, he will be welcomed like a king." He gave Laina a significant look. "However, even if he does return, you will remain the heir to Lostport. Doran never wished to rule. I refused to admit as much before, because I had no better choice. Yet now—"

Laina slid still lower in her chair.

Afterward, her parents went into town to survey the progress of the rebuild while their household dispersed. Only then did the truth sink in.

When her father was gone, she would be the one responsible for the fate of her beloved kingdom. She would guide Lostport through whatever challenges came its way.

And she could marry whomever she liked.

Laina did not know where Conard had gone, so she wandered into town herself, dressed in simple trousers and a tunic in an attempt to pass unnoticed. Near the docks, Conard caught up with her and wrestled her to the ground.

Gasping, Laina struggled from his grip and gave his ear a good tug. "That's entirely undignified!"

Conard laughed. "You're not the queen yet. I've got to take my chances while I still can." He stood and offered a hand to Laina, who stood without his help and frowned at him. "Oh, don't be angry. Will you come for a ride with me?" He offered her a hand again, his smile turning sly. "I have a very important question I want to ask you."

The boat they borrowed was a small sailboat, fifteen paces long, one of the few that had escaped the fighting intact. It was a clear day, the sky streaked with a few thin clouds, and the breeze that fingered Conard's hair, sloppy from spans of neglect, held the last warmth of summer. Conard took the helm, Laina the sails, and they plowed across the waves in companionable silence, occasionally meeting one another's eyes and smiling.

Before long they were passing beyond the entrance to Port Emerald, following the vertical shoreline around two snow-dusted mountains and out of sight of anything familiar.

"Where are we going? Not Port Emerald?"

Conard lashed the rudder in place and knelt beside Laina. When he slipped an arm around her waist, she leaned into his shoulder, grateful that nothing had changed between them. "We're going somewhere even better," Conard said. "It's a secret valley where no human has ever set foot before. It has waterfalls dropping off sheer cliffs, and glaciers tucked right beneath the peaks. It's our very own."

And as they rounded the next mountain and passed into a deep, still fjord, it seemed the entire world stretched before them.

the end

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\* \* \*

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## About the Author



R.J. Vickers is the author of the Natural Order series, as well as *Beauty's Songbook*, a Beauty and the Beast retelling, and *College Can Wait!*, a gap year guidebook for reluctant students.

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