THE RIVER KINGS' ROAD
For Mom and Dad, who took me to the library week after week, year after year, and (almost) never complained about the late fees;
and Peter, who keeps me something close to sane.
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Brys Tarnell was not a pious man. It saved his life that day.

The attack came at highsun, when Sir Galefrid of Bulls’ March and most of his men were in the tiny chapel of a tiny hamlet observing their daily prayers. Ever since Galefrid had married his pious young wife out of Seawatch, he’d become much more religious; all through their journey, she’d insisted that they stop at the nearest chapel for noon prayers, and he had obliged. By now their custom was well known, and the village solaros usually had the chapel ready for them before they arrived.

Brys, alone among the knights in Galefrid’s retinue, was not anointed to the sun, and so was permitted—even expected—to avoid that daily bit of nonsense. He had just stepped out of the village inn to answer nature’s call when he heard the thrum of bowstrings and saw the first flight of fire-arrows, trailing dark smoke against the bright sky, arch in through the chapel’s open windows.

There were a dozen men waiting outside the chapel doors. Hard-faced men, armored in oiled leather and chain, who carried swords better than any bandit could afford. They stood to either side of the doors, hidden from the view of those inside but plain to any other eyes. Yet none of the villagers had called a warning.

Ambush.

It shouldn’t have surprised him. They’d been fools to venture across the border, chasing a half-real hope of peace into Langmyr. But, then, Sir Galefrid had never been the wisest of men. Brave, but not wise. He’d walked right into their trap, and he’d brought his wife and infant son with him.

The men outside the chapel wore no colors, but Brys was a veteran of a thousand fights on field and in alley, and he needed no herald’s signs to tell him that he was looking at castle-trained soldiers. These were not cowherds driven to desperation. These were killers, and the killing started when Galefrid’s men staggered from the chapel, coughing and red-eyed from smoke.

Young Caedric Alsarring was the first one out. Doubled over, wiping at his streaming eyes, he never had a chance to see his death before it took him. The men at the door said nothing. No threats, no questions, no demands for ransom. One swung his sword in a hissing arc, and Caedric stumbled, clutching his throat, as his life spilled red between his fingers. The man behind him tripped over the fallen youth and into the assassins’ reach. A sword swept his knees and another chopped the back of his neck. He fell and did not get up. Cries of confusion, and then of fear, rose through the smoke behind them.

Brys had seen enough. He eased away from the inn’s rough plaster, sliding a hand to the hilt of his sword as he edged toward the back of the building. There was nothing he could do to stop the slaughter, or at least nothing he was inclined to try. He was one man, with one sword; there were a dozen by the doors, and he had not yet spotted the archers. Neither Sir Galefrid nor his men were armed, for custom forbade bringing steel into Celestia’s holy sanctuaries except during vigils. Whoever had planned this assassination had done it well. Lambs had a better chance of escaping the butcher’s block.

The stables looked clear. He lingered in the inn’s shadow a moment longer, scanning roofs and alleys for signs of danger, then hurried across the open yard until he reached the safety of the stables. Inside, the horses were nervous, stamping at the scent of smoke and blood in the air, but not yet in a panic. Brys took his saddlebags down from their peg and quietly unlatched his bay gelding’s stall.

“Steady now,” he murmured, stroking the horse’s nose. The gelding looked at him with dark, liquid eyes. It was a good horse. It had been with him a long time. He had never bothered to name it, and briefly regretted that; it would have been nice to have a name to whisper as he led the animal from its stall.

He took Caedric’s gray mare as well. That one had a name: Ellyria, after a legendary dancer in the Ardasi Empire of old. The boy liked to say that his gray had such a graceful step that she deserved a dancer’s name.

Caedric was dead, now, and Brys could use a horse with a quick step.

He left the other animals in their stalls. Two horses might help him make better time on the road, but more than that would be difficult to manage, and too conspicuous besides. And though Brys would have bitten off his tongue before admitting it aloud, he was reluctant to steal from companions who might yet survive. True, there was only the thinnest thread of hope that anyone might escape the ambush in the chapel, but he wasn’t eager to snap it off himself. Not when he already had the two horses he needed.
Tightening his grip on the reins, Brys eased open the stable doors. Smoke shrouded the chapel in a gray veil and rose from several other buildings nearby. None were burning in earnest, but the fires were spreading.

The sound of approaching steps snapped his attention back to the street. He readied his sword for a killing blow and crouched behind the half-open door.

It was neither an archer nor a swordsman who shuffled through the smoky pall, however, but a woman carrying a lump of blankets in her arms. Her face was white and drawn tight with pain; red showed on her lip where she’d bitten it through. The shaft of an arrow jutted up from her back, just over the hip, and blood darkened the skirts of her plain servant’s dress in a wide wet stripe spilling down from the wound.

As she came to the doors Brys took her elbow and yanked her inside, out of sight. She didn’t resist, didn’t make a sound. There wasn’t a shout left in her.

He knew her, vaguely. She was one of the maidservants who had bustled around Sir Galefrid’s wife and their newborn son throughout the journey from Bulls’ March. Brys, who preferred to avoid domestic concerns whenever possible, had never spoken to the woman. He could not recall her name.

She, apparently, suffered from no such difficulty.

“Brys Tarnell?” she whispered, and managed the wan shadow of a smile at his nod. It did not reach her eyes.

Nothing but pain reached her eyes.

She thrust the knotted blankets at him, stumbling under the strain of the motion. Instinctively Brys stepped forward and caught the bundle before it fell. Then he glimpsed what lay inside, and nearly dropped it himself.

There was a baby in the blankets. A baby with a tear-swollen face red and round as a midsummer plum. A baby he knew, even without the lacquered medallion tucked into the swaddling—a medallion far too heavy, on a chain far too cold, for an infant who had not yet seen a year.

“Wistan?” he asked, stupidly.

The woman nodded. Her chin sagged toward her chest; each nod seemed a little heavier than the last. “I carried him out. He was crying in the chapel … I took him out to hush him, poor impious thing, and it saved him. There’s no one else. No one.” She wiped tears from her chin; the effort left her leaning against the wall for support. Blood smeared onto the rough wood where her hip rested against it. “I was hoping for a horse, but I haven’t the strength to ride. He’ll be safe in Bulls’ March. Only there. Please. Keep him safe.”

“I will.” The words were out before Brys realized he’d opened his mouth. He paused, but saw no need to take them back. He shifted the bundle of blankets and looked down at the baby, whose hiccupsing sobs were quiet but constant. A great danger, but a great opportunity. The heir to Bulls’ March—his dead liege lord’s son—had just fallen into his arms.

Yes, he would keep the child.

Brys walked toward the horses. As he reached them he stopped, realizing something, and turned back to face the woman again. He could read the unasked question, and the hope, on her face.

He shook his head, as gently as he could. “I can’t. That’s a bad wound. Looks like a gut shot. I can’t tend to a child and an invalid both, and you need more healing than I can offer. There’s nothing I can do.”

She said nothing. After a moment her eyes closed and she slumped to the manure-specked ground, still breathing but too weak to stand. Brys checked the courtyard—still empty—and set the baby on a pile of clean straw for a moment. He grabbed the half-dead servant by the shoulders and pulled her into an empty stall, where she’d be out of view if anyone should glance into the stable.

“Sorry,” he muttered as he left her.

The next question was how to carry the baby. He didn’t have an arm to spare for Wistan, and he didn’t have a carrier to hold the child on his back. A coarse hemp feed bag, hanging among the tack on the wall, caught his gaze. Brys took it down, let the straps out as far as they would go and stuffed Wistan inside. The straps wouldn’t fit over his shoulders, so he knotted both ends of a quirt to the feed bag and used that as a strap instead. He fitted the makeshift carrier across his body, settling the baby against his chest, and fastened his cloak over the whole thing to hide the child and secure him more firmly.

Shouts, muffled and dim, still came from the chapel. Brys was grimly relieved to hear them. As long as there was killing to be done, the killers would be distracted.

He led the horses toward the village’s western gate and the forest that stretched beyond. A dead man, dressed in a farmer’s undyed wool, lay in the road. A goose-feathered arrow pinned him facedown to the earth. The shaft was well made, the fletchings unpainted; it was as deadly, and anonymous, as the killers by the chapel.

Across the way he saw another pair of arrow-struck corpses, these smaller. Children, a boy and a girl, both with the flaxen hair of the very young. They might have been the innkeeper’s get. The boy had been carrying a basket of grain when he died. Bright kernels spilled around his body like a shattered halo.

He passed more of the dead on his way to the gate. Probably some living, too, though they had the sense to stay
hidden without knowing whether he was friend or foe. Of the archers there was no sign, though their handiwork
littered the streets, and that troubled Brys in a way he could not quite grasp.

If the villagers had helped in the ambush, why had the archers killed them? If they meant to slaughter the village,
why had they left the job half-done? There weren’t nearly enough bodies to account for all the people here. The
answer tickled at his memory, but refused to come.

As he reached the end of the village road, he saw a knot of armed men by the gate. One wore a cuirass and sat
 astride a magnificent red stallion. His armor was as plain as the others’, and a full helm masked his face, but
something about the cant of his head and the way that he sat his horse was familiar. The other men were on foot, and
though no helms covered their faces, he did not know them.

Several had bows. Brys swore inwardly on seeing them, irritated but not surprised. Archers made it impossible for
him to charge at them or flee past them. They’d have him quilled like a hedgehog before he closed half the distance.
His own bow was cased for traveling and would have been useless even if it wasn’t. He was a swordsman, not an
archer, and trying to outshoot four or five trained bowmen at once was a fool’s dream.

He crouched behind the cover of a low-roofed house, keeping the horses as quiet as he could. Wistan was making
little noise, and for that Brys was grateful; the last thing he needed was the distraction of a baby crying under his
chin.

The men hadn’t seen him yet, or didn’t seem to care if they had. That perplexed him. They didn’t appear to be
watching the streets for stragglers at all. Instead their eyes were trained upward, toward the roofs of the village, as if
they expected some sign to come down from the sky.

Brys risked a glance backwards and up. The smoke above the village had thickened enough to sting his eyes and
dim the sun. Flickers of sooty-edged flame licked up from the thatched roofs nearest the chapel. Two ravens circled
through the haze, signaling a bounty to come for their kind. He could see nothing to warrant the archers’ interest.

Then a scream shivered through the smoky stillness behind him. It was a high, unearthly sound, one that hardly
seemed to come from any human throat. The men at the gate stirred and sighed, as if something long dreaded had
finally come to pass; the red stallion danced uneasily beneath its rider. The archers fitted arrows to their bows, but
kept them down.

More screams pierced the air. The raw terror in them made Brys bite his tongue to keep still. He suddenly
wondered if he was being very stupid by remaining where he was instead of braving a hail of arrows. But he could
see no danger behind him, and certain death ahead, and so he kept a tight grip on the reins and stayed huddled by the
wall.

The village solaros burst out of a crooked street to his left and ran down the hill toward the gate, moving with a
speed that Brys would never have guessed the old man could manage. The priest’s yellow robes were sodden with
blood and clung to his side, though no wound seemed to slow him. He raised his skinny arms in supplication and fell
to his knees as he came to the rider, who looked down on the solaros through the bars of his helm.

Whether the priest begged as a father of the faith or a conspirator to the massacre, Brys could not say; he caught
only the anguished words “—you promised!” carried back on the wind.

Whatever the rider had promised, he answered with cold steel. He swung his morningstar smoothly, brutality
down. Its spiked ball caught the priest full in the face, smashing him backwards on his knees and leaving him a
twitching corpse with a mask of blood and shattered bone.

Brys felt a glint of hard satisfaction at the traitor’s death—but it barely had time to register before more villagers
came streaming past him and down the side streets, their eyes wide and unseeing with panic. A little girl ran into
Ellyria from behind. The nervous gray kicked back, striking a glancing blow on the girl’s shoulder and knocking her
hard to the dirt. Before Brys could reach out a hand in comfort, the child scrabbled back to her feet and ran on.

He heard the twang of a bowstring. Then another. A scream, a body falling, the whistling of arrows through air.
He looked the other way, less concerned about the falling arrows than what had driven the villagers into that deadly
rain.

Behind the wave of fleeing humanity, the smoke had taken on a reddish tint. No—it wasn’t the smoke that was
red. A crimson mist was rising over the burning roofs. Tendrils of red fog crept through the streets, stretching
through doors and windows and gaps in poorly caulked walls. The scent of warm copper drifted before it.

Brys’ throat closed with fear.

Bloodmist.

He understood now why the archers had not lingered to look for survivors, why they had shot down just enough to
keep the others frightened in their homes. There was no need for them to do their killing by arrow or sword.

There was a Thorn in the village.

A raven, tempted down too early by its greed, swooped into the bloodmist’s reach. Wisps of fog reached toward
the bird, coiling around its prey as if a living mind guided its grasp. At once the raven shrieked and fought to escape
the crimson mist, but it was too late. Each frantic beat of its wings flung drops of blood from its feathers, spattering the walls on both sides. Blood rose from its smaller feathers as well, hissing off its body in curls of red steam and evaporating into the scarlet fog that had seized it.

The raven managed three flaps of its wings before the mist sucked the last of the blood from its body. Then it fell, strangely slow through the fog, and hit the ground as a limp, wet-feathered rag.

Brys shuddered. No one survived bloodmist. No one survived the Thorns.

Behind him was the creeping red fog. Ahead, the bowstrings sang. And that was no choice. No choice at all.

He climbed onto his nameless horse, sliding low to the left like a Jenje trick-rider and pulling Ellyria’s reins so that the gray stayed close on that side. He tried to keep from crushing Wistan between himself and the horse, but that wasn’t easy and he had other concerns. Brys listened for the bowstrings, straining his ears, and when he heard three of them snap in quick succession, he kicked his bay gelding to go.

The horses came down the slope with all the speed they could muster, dodging or trampling the wounded and dead. An arrow sheared along Brys’ jaw, sketching a line of hot pain and stinging his ear with its fletchings. He felt Ellyria stumble as another arrow buried itself in the gray, and dropped the reins lest the mare pull down his own horse if she fell.

At the gate the archers scattered. They had no pikes to stop him, and they had already seen that Brys was willing to trample men to make good his escape. The rider with the morningstar drew back to meet him, but Brys had no intention of getting dragged into a fight here. The gate was low, made to corral wandering sheep, not keep armed men out—or in. He thought he could clear it. Hoped he could, anyway. He shifted his weight back to center, flattened himself against the bay gelding’s back, and sent a silent prayer to Celestia to guard his unworthy soul.

Then his horse bunched its muscles and leaped, and there was no more time to pray.

The landing rattled the teeth in his skull. He had to use both arms to keep himself from slamming into the saddle and crushing Wistan; the baby wailed in panic. Brys tasted blood and realized he must have bitten his cheek. He heard a thundering crack of bone or wood behind him and the scream of an injured horse, but he kept his eyes on the road ahead.

Another arrow punched into the saddle an inch from Brys’ thigh. And then he was to the tree line, and then he was screened by the forest, and then he was safe.

Panting for breath, Brys unsheathed his sword and listened for signs of pursuit. Only when minutes had passed, and he was satisfied that no one was chasing, did he climb down from the gelding’s saddle to assess the damage. The horse was breathing hard but unwounded save for a long, shallow scratch on its left shoulder.

“At this rate, I might have to name you,” he said to the horse.

The gelding flicked its ears, eyeing him.

Brys snorted, patted the horse’s neck with rough affection, and then checked over his saddlebags. He had a half-full waterskin and enough food for a fortnight. Autumn was a good season for foraging, so he should be able to stretch that out longer. A few knives, a dicing cup, a traveling solaros’ prayerbook—all things that he could use to get money, or sell if he had to. Spare clothes, and a cloak if the weather turned cold. And, most importantly, his weapons.

Not bad. He’d survived worse with less.

A small voice in the back of his mind asked if that was altogether true. His liege lord was dead, a Thornlord was likely responsible for the killing, and he was caught without friends in enemy territory. Not much cause for cheer in any of that.

Brys pushed his doubts away. He had survived worse with less, and he would survive this too. But he had to believe it to make it true.

He unfastened his cloak and shrugged off Wistan’s carrier. The child wasn’t hurt, as best he could tell, and had quieted down considerably. Brys had expected more crying, but Wistan was only making the little hiccuping sobs that he’d heard in the stables.

Good. Another small blessing. He strapped the carrier back on again and started down the road, leading his gelding by the reins.

A long while later, as the sun cast red shadows across the west sky, Brys permitted himself—for a short time, until dusk fell—the small bitter luxury of guilt. And grief. He’d had friends back there, as much as he’d ever had friends, and he’d done nothing to save them. There’d been nothing he could do, but that truth never went down easy no matter how many times he had to swallow it.

Night descended. Brys kept walking. There was a long road ahead.
There had never been a lovelier day in the world, Odosse decided as she walked back to Willowfield. The autumn afternoon was crisp but pleasant. Sunlight lancing through the leaves of ash and maple turned the forest into a cathedral of gold and crimson; she felt grand as a queen beneath such glory. And soon, she promised herself, soon she would be beautiful as one too.

Her fingers closed around the little bottle that the charm-crafter had sold her that morning. Its dark blue glass was warm to the touch, promising power that she could only imagine. Even the ingredients that the charm-crafter listed sounded like secrets: mulberry and musk, amber and myrrh. The Tears of the Empress, from faraway Ardashir, and a drop of red wine to arouse the blood.

As she would arouse it, once she was beautiful.

“And then I’ll marry a rich man,” she told the baby strapped to her back, “and you’ll have a new cradle, and a room of your own, and you’ll learn your letters and numbers and someday you’ll be a great man too.”

Aubry burbled and Odosse laughed, taking her child’s coos for agreement.

She had just reached the last waystone when she heard something large crashing through the brush. Wary, but not yet afraid, Odosse readied her iron-capped walking stick and moved to the center of the road, where she’d have more room to swing.

Every child old enough to walk knew the dangers of the road. Wolves, bears, and great tawny hunting cats roamed Bayarn Wood, and sometimes hunger drove them to attack. Bandits terrorized the lonelier stretches of the River Kings’ Road, preying on travelers who strayed too far from the protection of the Wayfarer’s riders.

And, of course, this close to the river there was always the risk of raiders. The rival kingdoms of Langmyr and Oakharne stared hard at each other across the Seivern River. There was no love lost on either side; there hadn’t been for a hundred years, since Uvarric’s Folly. Both lands traced their heritage back to the ruined glory of Rhaelyand, both worshipped under the Bright Lady’s pillared domes, and yet Langmyrne and Oakharne hated each other with the ferocity of estranged brothers. One could never be sure when a group from one side might cross over to visit bloody horror on the other. It was that way when Odosse’s grandmother was a girl, and she expected it would still be the same when Aubry’s children grew gray. People held their hatreds dearer than their loves.

Today, however, she was not worried about Oakharne raiders. It was the wrong time of year: professional soldiers would be hard in training for the Swordsday matches, and farmers would be busy with the harvest. More importantly, it sounded like only one person was rustling through the leaves, and no raider in his right mind crossed the border alone.

“Who’s there?” Odosse called, keeping her walking stick raised.

The rustling stopped. A man’s voice answered, sounding tired and, she thought, a little angry. His accent marked him as a stranger; from where, she could not say. Not from the border lands. She knew all the local village dialects, and he had none of those. “I should ask you the same.”

“I have a stick,” she said, “and I don’t have any money, so if you’re looking for a traveler to rob, you’d best look elsewhere.”

“I’m not.” The rustling picked up again, becoming louder as the man came nearer. Before long he stepped out onto the road, shaking yellow leaves from his cloak.

He was a big man, broad-shouldered, with a face that could not have been harder if it had been hewn from stone. His bright green eyes were sharp and pitiless as a hunting cat’s, and he moved with that great predator’s grace. An angry red line scarred his jaw; it looked like the wound was freshly inflicted. A pair of dead rabbits dangled from his belt, and long knives in well-worn sheaths hung on each of his hips.

Another woman, meeting him in another place, might have thought this man handsome. But Odosse was alone on the River Kings’ Road with her baby on her back and nothing but a stick in her hands, and she felt only fear.

“Where are you going?” he asked.

“I don’t see how that’s your concern.”

“I’d say it is, if you plan to get there.”

She lowered her stick slowly, looking for a reason to avoid answering and finding none. He already had her on the open road; it was not as though she had to worry about an ambush ahead. “Willowfield,” she said, reluctantly.

“That the little village about two leagues west?”

“Yes.”
“Is that where you’re from?”

“Yes.”

He nodded, and for an instant it seemed that he looked through her, as if his thoughts had gone somewhere beyond their meeting in the wood. Then his eyes fixed back on her, unsettlingly bright, and she felt pinned like a mouse beneath a snake’s gaze. “You can’t go back there.”

Odosse stiffened. Aubry, sensing her tension, made little plaintive noises and waved his fists in the air. Her hands tightened on the iron-capped stick and she brought it up defensively, though the man had not moved. “Why not?”

He didn’t answer. Instead his eyes flicked to the baby carrier on her back, and, more slowly, back to her. The man looked her over carefully, appraising, as if he were considering a goat at the market.

Odosse felt herself reddening against her will. She knew what he saw. It was the same thing every man saw: a thick-legged, plain-faced baker’s girl with hair and eyes the color of mud. Her nose was too broad, her mouth too wide, her hands coarse with calluses. She had a strong back and good arms and she could haul water or chop wood all day without tiring, but she was not beautiful and she never had been and she never would be. The dreams of the morning crumbled to ashes under the reality of his gaze.

“Is that your baby?” the man asked.

“Yes.”

“Who’s his father?”

“I don’t see how that’s your concern either,” she snapped, her cheeks hot.

“No,” he agreed, smiling faintly, “I don’t suppose that one is. Are you still giving milk?”

The indecency of the question shocked her. “What?”

He ignored her outrage. “Listen,” he said, as if he had decided something, “because I will only explain this once. You can’t go back to Willowfield. Your village is dead. A Thornlady and a company of armsmen killed everyone there. Everyone, do you understand me? They used bloodmist. No one survives that. Even the barn mice are dead. I don’t know who sent them or why, and I don’t know what they wanted in Willowfield. I intend to find out. But first I need to get somewhere safe, and I need to get my lord’s child safe too.”

He paused, looking hard at her, but Odosse was too astonished to respond. After a moment the man went on. “I don’t know how to care for a baby. I don’t have milk and I don’t know what else he needs. I trust that you do. I will take you to the nearest town and see that you reach it safely. In return you will tend to the baby. Do we have an agreement?”

Still Odosse said nothing. Mistaking her stunned silence for hesitation, the man added more kindly: “I don’t mean to make light of your loss. My friends died there too. But your village is dead, and the border roads are dangerous enough without Thorns on the hunt. I am your best—your only—hope of safety.”

Odosse nodded, not trusting herself to speak. Aubry began to whimper behind her.

The man gave her another brief half smile and started down the road. After a few steps he paused and looked back over his shoulder. “Do you have any questions?”

Yes, Odosse wanted to shout, yes. What is a Thorn and who are you and how can Willowfield be dead? How can an entire village die? Mother and Father and little Aileth with her new twins, and Vostun the ostler who told japes to his horses, and the skinny old solaros who drank himself stupid after every funeral—how could they be dead? They were all well this morning.

She said none of these things. Instead she clamped her lips shut until the urge to laugh or sob or scream at the stranger had passed, and then—proud that her voice barely shook—she asked: “What is your name?”

“Brys Tarnell,” he said, and there was the beginning of respect in his eyes.

His horse was waiting by a small, crooked stream that Odosse had never seen before, though she knew Bayarn Wood as well as the palm of her hand. He’d left the animal saddled while he hunted his rabbits, and as Odosse came nearer, she was horrified to see that Brys had stuffed the baby into one of his saddlebags. The child had been bundled up in blankets until he was fat as a dumpling, dropped into the bag, and left hanging with his head poking out from the top. Miraculously, by the Bright Lady’s mercy, he appeared to be peacefully asleep.

Brys shrugged at her scandalized look. “I couldn’t take him with me, and I couldn’t leave him lying on the ground either. He seemed comfortable enough in there. Besides, he needed the sleep. He was crying all day.”

“Small wonder why,” she said darkly, and pushed past him to pull the child out.

Something was wrong with the baby. Odosse recognized that even before she had unwrapped his swaddling. The child barely moved as she pulled him from the saddlebag. His head lolled limply against her arm, and he made no sound beyond the soft whimpering shudders of his breath. Her own son was a quiet child, but Aubry had never been this still, and he had never failed to open his eyes and demand a breast when she lifted him from slumber.

“What’s his name?” she asked.
Brys raised a black brow at the worry in her voice. “Wistan.”

She made a cradle of her arms, rocking the infant to rouse him. “Wistan? Wake up, dearling, you must be hungry.”

The baby did not stir. Gently, fearfully, Odosse pried open his eyelids with the tips of her fingers. His pupils were dark and so enormous that they swallowed up the pale blue of his irises. A thin line of red stained the white of his right eye like a blood trail crossing fresh snow.

She let go of the baby’s lids. Dread thundered in her chest.

She’d only seen one infant with blood in its eyes like that: Erisse, the swineherd’s daughter, who had been laid to rest by the chapel when Odosse was a girl. Everyone knew that the swineherd beat his wife and children when he was drunk, so it was no surprise when his baby daughter suffered the same. Odosse and her mother had been paying their respects to the village solaros when the swineherd’s wife burst into the chapel, her baby barely breathing and clutched tight in her arms. The solaros had been powerless to help her, and Erisse had died before nightfall. Odosse still remembered the mother’s wailing and the baby staring blankly at the darkening sky, her eyes filling slowly with blood.

Wistan had the same emptiness in his eyes. The sight of it sent a chill through her bones.

“He’s not well,” she told Brys, carrying the infant over to the big man. She handed the baby to him while she unslung Aubry’s wicker carrier from her back and took her own son out, surreptitiously studying Brys’ handling of the infant Wistan as she did so.

Brys held the child awkwardly but competently, supporting the baby’s heavy head against his arm and keeping the body secure. He looked as uncomfortable as a man handed a jar of lit clingfire, but she didn’t think he was responsible for the baby’s condition.

That was a relief, if only a small one. She still had no idea how to help the child.

Odosse untied the straps of her nursing blouse and gave Aubry a breast. She took Wistan back to offer him the other, but the baby showed no interest. When she tried to help him suckle, he turned his head away weakly as if disturbed in some deep and unpleasant dream. Seeing nothing else she could do, Odosse simply held him and crooned a soft, wordless song while Aubry fed.

After her son had finished, she took both babies down to clean and change them by the stream. Aubry shrieked and flung his fists in protest at the splash of cold water on his skin. Wistan only rolled his head from side to side and hiccuped little sobs. He never opened his eyes.

A medallion glinted from the tangled folds of Wistan’s blankets. She hadn’t noticed it while preoccupied with his condition, but when she unraveled them to dry off the babies and wrap Wistan up again, it fell loose from the cloth. The medallion showed a black bull rearing on a disc of blood-red enamel set in gold. A noble’s sign, and one she knew: the emblem of Lord Ossaric of Bulls’ March, a border lord from hostile Oakharn.

That was a knight’s medallion. Why would a child have such a thing?

Brys had gutted his rabbits and gone upstream to refill his waterskin while Odosse tended to the infants. She was waiting with the medallion cold and heavy in her hand when he came back. “Who is this baby?”

His lips thinned in annoyance when he saw the medallion, but he brushed it off with a shrug. “Thought I’d taken that out. Must’ve been more distracted than I realized.”

“Well?”

“I didn’t lie. Wistan is his name. Wistan Galefring of Bulls’ March, if you’re feeling formal.”

Lord Ossaric’s grandson. Odosse felt faint. She didn’t recognize the child’s name, but his father’s … “Oh.”

“Does it change anything?”

“No.” It didn’t, truly. Whoever he was, the baby was a baby, and he needed her help. “You said he was crying earlier. What did it sound like?”

He shrugged. “Quiet. Like what he’s doing now, that little hiccupy noise. That’s not normal? I thought he just knew we might be followed.”

“He’s a baby. He can’t know that.” Odosse shook her head in wonderment at the idea. Did the man know anything about children? “No, it’s not normal. The child needs a healer. A good one, and quickly. He won’t eat, he doesn’t cry, and there’s blood in his eyes. I’ve only seen one baby like this before. She was crying too loudly, and her father grew angry. She died within hours.”

Perhaps he had suspected the same, or perhaps he had already come to trust her judgment that far, because Brys did not question her. He nodded, taking Wistan from her, and strapped the child into a makeshift carrier that looked like it had been pieced together out of a horse’s nosebag and a whip. “How good?”

“One of the Blessed,” she said quietly, knowing what an impossible thing that was to ask. “I don’t believe anyone else has the power to help him.”

Brys nodded again. He did not seem surprised. “East, then. Tarne Crossing.”
That day he led her farther east than she had ever been. East was Oakharn; east was danger. The charm-crafter’s
cottage was as far as any of the village girls dared go, and that was considered a journey for the foolish and
desperate. But Brys Tarnell seemed utterly unconcerned by the possibility of crossing paths with armsmen from
Oakharn, so Odosse tried to ignore the tension knotting her shoulders and her nervousness at every snapped twig. If
he wasn’t worried, then she shouldn’t be—but it was easier to say than to believe it. Her stick was scant
protection against arrows.

The sun slid to the horizon behind them, reddening the autumn leaves and filling the trees’ boughs with fire. The
slanting light drew out the faded, timeworn runes etched into the waystones they passed, heightening the starkness
of that ancient and angular script. Not for the first time, Odosse wondered who had planted the waystones by the
road, and what they had written on their markers. Rhaelyand, people said, speaking the name like a veneration: the
old empire had laid them there. But could that be true? How could an empire capable of building a road that would
last a thousand years vanish so completely? No one in her world could even read the marks anymore; no one knew
what warnings or blessings they held. The stones were simply there, old as the road, strange as the bends that it took
toward cities long gone.

A chill wind picked up as the day waned, bearing a hint of smoke from the west. The road curved up a high bald
hill, bringing them above the forest. A broken tower crowned the hill, the weathered gray of its stones flecked with
luminous white like droplets of moonlight trapped in the rock. That was no local stone; it was the same curious rock
as the waystones and the half-buried blocks that paved the River Kings’ Road. The stones seemed to glow with
reflected radiance, holding warmth and the memory of light a little while longer into the dark.

“We’ll stop here,” Brys said when they reached the hilltop and its jagged tower. A crow perched among the stones
at its top looked down on them with a black, unfriendly eye. “We’ll find no better shelter tonight, and the walls will
hide our fire.”

“They say these ruins are haunted,” Odosse said.

“So they do. Its ghosts are welcome to haunt me as much as they like, so long as they haven’t got swords.” Brys
took Wistan down from his carrier and handed the baby to Odosse. He watered his horse and tethered it on the lee
side of the tower, where there was grass for it to graze and some shelter from the wind. Afterward he went down to
the forest to gather deadwood while Odosse saw to the babies and threaded Brys’ rabbits onto sharp sticks for
roasting.

The scent of smoke was stronger up here. A foulness seemed to taint the far-off smells of woodsmoke and burnt
meat. Odosse was a country girl; she was no stranger to slaughter, and she knew the smells of blood and offal and
rot. There was something worse on the wind, though it was so faint that she half-thought she imagined it.

In the distance to the west she could see tiny black specks circling over the trees. Ravens, or crows, or mere
figments of her imagination drifting in the blue dusk. A hazy grayness seemed to cling to the wood there, melting
into shadow so that it was difficult to separate one from the other. She could see none of the tiny lights that should
have burned in Willowfield after dark: none of the fires of home or hearth or temple, however hard she strained her
eyes to find them.

She was still standing there, staring into the night, when Brys came back with an armload of wood. She thought
he gave her an odd look as he passed, but the darkness made it hard to tell.

A few minutes later a spark of firelight warmed the hollow tower. Odosse turned her back on the night and went
in.

Brys took the rabbits from her and set them to roasting over a small fire. Wordlessly, Odosse took out the bread
and hard cheese that she’d packed for herself that morning—it seemed a lifetime ago—and handed half of each to
the big man. She sat on the opposite side of the fire, and they ate in silence broken only by the crackle of the flames.

He added another few chunks of deadwood to the fire after they had eaten, choosing thick, heavy pieces that
would burn slowly into the night.

“You were hoping it wasn’t true,” he said. “About the village.”

She nodded, although she had not fully grasped the truth of that thought until that moment. “I hoped.”

“And now?”

Odosse didn’t answer. The enormity of the question was too great for words. It was like wondering how many
mouthfuls it would take to empty the sea: she knew that her grief was there, vast as that endless, never-seen water,
but it did not seem possible that she would ever be able to make it small enough to swallow.

This morning she’d had a home and a hearth and a family who loved her. Now it was night, and if she believed
Brys, she had nothing outside this tower. Her family, her entire world, was gone as surely as the vanished empire
that had built the roads she’d walked today. In a handful of seasons, no one would remember where they had been.
The forests would reclaim their stump-fringed fields, the foxes and sparrows would make nests in their houses, and
no one would remember their names.
If she believed him. She didn’t want to. But there’d been no lights in the dark. Not a candle for her village. And that left her here, wondering how long it would take to drink down the sea.

She picked up Aubry and rocked him slowly to sleep, watching the firelight on his round, peaceful face. In that moment she loved him with a fierceness that threatened to bring tears to her eyes. At the same time she knew that her love was a fragile thing, no greater than their tiny fire holding back the dark. Love hadn’t stopped her village from dying.

No matter. While she was there, the night would not have him.

“Who would kill Willowfield?” she asked.

“I don’t know.” Brys drew one of his knives, honing its blade by the flames. After every few strokes he ran it against his thumbnail to test its edge. “Whoever they were, they had a Thorn.”

“What’s a Thorn?”

“A Maimed Witch. I’m surprised you haven’t heard of them, though perhaps you’re too far west to have seen many of them yet. They come out of Ang’arta, where they are trained in the Tower of Thorns by her bloody highness Avele diar Aurellyn, wife to the Golden Scourge and whore to the world.” Distracted, Brys cut himself too deeply with the razor-sharp knife; he sucked blood from his thumb and spit it into the fire. “They’re sadists and killers and very, very dangerous. And not human anymore, not when they come out of that tower. The Thorns worship Kliasta, the Maiden of Pain, and the ones who survive their training have no more mercy than their mistress.”

“You know them.”

“I know of them,” he corrected, sheathing the first knife and sharpening another. “When I was younger I sold my sword around Thelyand. We had our troubles with Ang’arta’s ironlords and their pet witches there. I’ve fought them three times and those were the worst campaigns of my life, but I know they can die.”

Odosse stared at the flames, trying to make sense of what she was hearing. She knew the name of Ang’arta, but only as a distant, unreal danger, like a monster in some childhood tale. The Iron Fortress lay hundreds of leagues south and east, all the way past the Sunfallen Kingdoms. She had never laid eyes on any of its reavers, nor did she know of anyone who had.

She knew the stories, though. Everyone knew the stories. The reavers of Ang’arta went blood-mad in war, fighting past wounds that would kill ordinary men. After battles they spitied their victims on their own broken swords, so that they could die on the weapons that had failed them, and carried children back to their fortress to become reavers in turn.

Religion united them, not birthplace or language. The soldiers of Ang’arta could, and did, come from anywhere in the world. They went into the Iron Fortress as children, and they came out as the hardest soldiers in the world—fanatics willing to fight and die for Baoz, their iron-fisted god, who accepted no sacrament but war.

Those were the stories, at least, and the stories were all she knew of them. The stories made no mention of Thorns. “What would they want in Willowfield?”

“I don’t know. Thorns will kill villages, sometimes, if they need that many deaths for a spell. But there’s no reason they’d have come all the way to Langmyr for that. They’ve plenty of slaves in Ang’arta to use, and plenty of villages in what they conquered of Thelyand. Something else must have brought them here. Someone else.

“As for what that person wanted … my lord’s life, I presume. And his wife’s, and his son’s.” Brys nodded toward the tower wall, where Wistan lay quiet in his swaddling. Whether the baby slept, or languished in some fevered delirium brought on by his ailment, Odosse could not say. But his eye had been half red when she laid him there, and every time she glanced in the baby’s direction she was afraid that he might have stopped breathing. “They haven’t had that last one. Yet.”

“Why?” she murmured, as much to herself as to him. She knew the name of Sir Galefrid Ossaring of Bulls’ March. Everyone on the borders did, even in a hamlet as tiny as Willowfield. Lord Ossaric of Bulls’ March held one of the most important castles on the Oakharne side of the Seivern River, and Galefrid was his eldest son. Together with his grandson Wistan, he represented the succession of a crucial domain.

And, perhaps, a turning in the politics of this part of the world. It had been rumored for weeks that Sir Galefrid might pay a visit to Langmyr. Some claimed he intended to go all the way to High King Theodemar’s castle at Craghail. Others said that he was only going to Lord Eduin Inguilar’s stronghold at Thistlestone for the Swordsday matches—not so deep into Langmyr, but still enough to show a wish for reconciliation between the two nations. The details remained a mystery to Odosse, but like everyone else in her village, she had heard the rumors and understood, vaguely, that Sir Galefrid’s visit meant a small step toward peace.

If he was dead, and dead on Langmyrne soil, those hopes would wither on the vine. More: the deaths could be taken as a provocation toward war, not just on the border but all the way to King Raharic’s seat in Isencras. The murder of a new mother, and her baby, and an entire village on the border … the atrocities could easily inflame
either side. Or both.

“Who profits by war?” she asked.

Brys looked up from his blade and gave her a half smile, grimly pleased she had worked it out so far. “I do. So do all my kind. Little call for sellswords in peaceful times. Nor for arms out of Ironfell, or horses from Mihain, or any of a thousand other needs of war. Ang’arta will sell you companies of the cruelest mercenaries in Ithelas, and SeaWatch will loan you coin to pay them. Everyone profits save the lands being fought upon, so we’ve no shortage of suspects there—and that supposes the killings were done to plunge the border into war. Might just be that a Langmyrne lord with money to match his resentments saw an opportunity and hired a Thorn to seize it.”

“No,” Odosse whispered, shaking her head.

“No?” Brys echoed, his green eyes glittering with mockery. “You grew up on the border. Can you truly tell me the old hatreds don’t run that deep?”

She could not. There wasn’t a family in Willowfield that hadn’t been scarred by the enmity between Oakharn and Langmyr; there wasn’t a soul she knew who couldn’t tell a story about a crippled relative, or a dead friend, or a proudly held ancestor who’d done worse to the Oakharne in revenge. But it was still impossible that anyone could hate so fiercely that he would kill a village of his countrymen to get at a baby from the wrong side of the border.

“No,” she said again, but this time she could barely hear the word.

Brys didn’t seem to hear her at all. He yawned and stretched out by his side of the fire, wrapping himself in his dark green cloak. “Get some sleep,” he advised, pulling a saddlebag under his head as a pillow. “It’ll be a longer day tomorrow.”

Odosse tried to follow his lead, making herself as comfortable as she could with what she had. She kept Aubry cradled to her chest, and brought Wistan close to share the warmth of her body. Sleep eluded her, though. She watched the fireshadows dance on the tower walls, and looked up at the moon shining bright through wind-tattered clouds, and wondered how her world had changed so much in a day.

Again her thoughts brushed against the vastness of loss and recoiled from it. She wasn’t ready to grapple with that yet. Instead she found herself thinking of smaller things, simpler ones, something closer to routine in a life where that word no longer had meaning.

Tomorrow.

Tomorrow would find her on the road, one day closer to Tarne Crossing. Odosse wasn’t sure how far that was, exactly; it lay across the river, in enemy land, and she had never been there. But others in her village had, and she had heard their tales.

In good years, when there hadn’t been any killings to stir up tempers, people from Willowfield sometimes went to Tarne Crossing to trade. They said it wasn’t as bad as the little villages where the people had a lifetime of grievances to nurse, or the towns deeper in Oakharn where they’d never seen a Langmyrne except when their lords called them to war. In Tarne Crossing were travelers and traders and people who lived on the border but didn’t have roots in its blood-soaked soil.

She was a fool for going to Oakharn at all, though. Odosse shook her head at the thought. Aubry burbled sleepily, and she chided herself for disturbing the babies’ rest.

Still. It was foolish. Outside of Willowfield she had neither kin nor friends, but at least in a Langmyrne village she didn’t have to worry about being thrown into the river with a millstone necklace for having the wrong accent. Brys seemed competent, but she barely knew the man and she could hardly rely on him. He would take her to the next town; that was the extent of their bargain. So why had she agreed to go?

Because of Wistan.

It was that simple, Odosse realized as she lay awake in the night. She was willing to travel with Brys, to go into the kingdom of her enemies at a time when they would be calling for Langmyrne heads, because a baby needed her help. Unwise as it was, she looked at Wistan and saw a child like her son. She couldn’t refuse his need.

That he was the child of her enemies didn’t matter. That her people might be blamed for the death of his family didn’t matter. Wistan was a baby; he had no part in such things. He needed her—and, like her, like Aubry, he had no one else to help.

She would go to Oakharn for that.

A small lump poked into her side. Odosse reached down, expecting to find a pebble under her cloak, but it was the charm-crafter’s bottle instead. She pulled out the tiny blue bottle, almost black in the firelight, and tilted it so that the liquid sloshed inside. A whisper of fragrance, rich as a king’s incense, stole out into the night.

She had wanted so badly to be beautiful. She had been so happy to hand the wrinkled old charm-crafter her hard-earned pennies, so happy to listen with a heart full of hopes to her promises … but all along she had known, in the secret depths of her soul, that what she was buying was more wish than truth. There was no magic in the world. Not for someone like her. Still, it had been nice to hold that dream, to tell herself that story while walking with her baby
through an autumn wood.

Odosse squeezed the bottle tighter, feeling her heartbeat against the glass, and pushed it deep to the bottom of her pocket. Autumn was failing, and Aubry didn’t need her to be beautiful. He needed her to be clever and careful and strong.

And that she would have to do on her own, without any potions to help.
Bitharn hid a sigh as the squat cone-topped towers of Thistlestone came into view ahead, rising above the red lace of the autumn wood. Her idyll would end when they reached the town and the heavy weight of responsibility settled back onto Kelland’s shoulders.

Out on the open road, far from the demands of the commonfolk and their lords, she could pretend that the two of them were carefree as summer larks. Kelland could smile, even laugh, without worrying about the dignity of his office. They had no one to impress on the road.

In Thistlestone that would change. He would become a Blessed again, losing himself in his duty without realizing what had happened. And he would need her more than ever, whether he recognized that or not.

The two of them had grown up together as cloister children: babies abandoned on the steps of the Dome of the Sun by mothers who did not want them or could not care for them. It happened every year in Cailan, regular as rain. Girls found themselves pregnant but unmarried, or birthing a baby that too obviously wasn’t the husband’s, or faced with another mouth in a home already hollowed by hunger. The sickly and deformed were left out for alley dogs; no one would take those. The others, if they couldn’t be placed with kin, were left on the doorsteps of guilds or craftsmen. Someplace a child might find mercy, shelter, maybe a chance at learning a trade.

Once in a while a baby went to the steps of honey-gold marble that led to the Dome of the Sun. That was a rare choice, however. The commonfolk said that whoever gave a child to the Bright Lady sacrificed all the rest of their family’s favor, ever after, to buy the goddess’ mercy for that baby. Celestia saw every grief and sin under the sun; daily she was assailed by the prayers of the needy, crying to her from Calantyr to the Sunfallen Kingdoms. But even a goddess couldn’t heal all the world’s ills. There were limits. By asking her to help their children, the parents gave up any further claim to her intercession for themselves. Only the most desperate mothers, or the most devout, left their babies at Celestia’s door.

Bitharn’s mother had made that choice. So had Kelland’s. And so the two of them had grown up closer than siblings, sharing their secrets and wishes and dreams, for neither had anyone else in the world.

Then, early in the spring of their twelfth year, Kelland had heard the Call and Bitharn had not, and the paths of their lives split as neatly as that.

The Blessed were Called. The ordinary were not. That was how the goddess made her will known in the world. Those she chose went to the pillared halls of the Dome for training. There they became yellow-robed Illuminers, tasked with shedding the light of truth across the land, or Sun Knights who protected the weak and dealt justice to outlaws. Those she ignored went . . . elsewhere. Out into the world, mostly. Many chose to take priestly vows and bring Celestia’s word to the people that way, with the authority of a solaros if not the power of a Blessed.

Bitharn had no desire to become a solaros. Instead she stayed at the Dome of the Sun, playing along with whatever lessons the knights would let her share and spending long hours in the bowyard when they shooed her off. She became an oddity: a girl who could outshoot any of the boys and, in time, most of the knights as well. But that was fine, that was better than fine; that made her eccentric, as strange in her way as Kelland was in his.

Even then, when she was barely more than a child, Bitharn had recognized how lonely Kelland’s path would become, and how direly he would need a friend. The Knights of the Sun were respected, revered, a little feared—but they were not befriended. They took the sorrows of others into themselves, but they could admit to none of their own. They stayed neutral in the conflicts of the secular world, and keeping neutral meant keeping a distance. They had no lovers, no confidants, no shoulders to cry on; they were always, always alone.

It was a heavy burden to bear. Perhaps that was why so few were Called.

So she stayed with him. Because he needed her, and because somewhere along the way, while she was playing with her arrows and he was learning the gravity of a graybeard three times his age, her love had changed from that of a child for a friend to that of a woman for a man.

She loved him. And that was an impossible thing. Bitharn would sooner have swallowed her tongue than tell him, and doubted that he knew; but the truth of it was, she’d never leave him. Not back in Calantyr, not in the Sunfallen Kingdoms, not ever.

A fluttering in the air caught her attention. A bird, winging toward the distant castle.

“Pigeon,” Bitharn said, shading her eyes against the glare. Something winked on the pigeon’s leg as it descended toward the castle: a marking band, or a message cylinder, glittering briefly in the sun. It was too far for her to be sure. An instant later the plump gray bird vanished into one of the small round holes that ringed the eastern tower,
where, presumably, Lord Eduin Inguilar kept a dovecote to receive it.

“...didn’t see it,” Kelland admitted.

Of course he hadn’t. Bitharn hid her smile. For all his skill at swordplay and prayer, the knight didn’t have her eyes. “It went into a tower,” she told him. “Carrying a message, most likely. It looked like it had something on its leg.”

“...where did it come from?’” she asked doubtfully. “I’d guess east if I had to guess something, but it’s hard to tell with the trees.”

“...there isn’t much to the east.”

He was right; there wasn’t. Not within a pigeon’s flight, at least. Pigeons were short-range birds, seldom used for carrying messages more than a hundred leagues. Messages that had to go further were entrusted to whitemauks, larger and fiercer birds whose ancestors had been taken from the sea centuries before the Godslayer’s War.

A message on a whitemauk would not have been strange. But a pigeon?

East of Thistlestone was the hostile kingdom of Oakharn. Northeast was proud Mirhain and the trackless shadows of Delverness Wood; southeast, beleaguered and bankrupt Thelyand, followed by the cruel ironlords of Ang’arta and the bloodmages they called Thorns. None of those seemed likely sources for a pigeon, and only Oakharn was close enough to send one. Most probably, the bird had come from somewhere inside Lord Inguilar’s own holding.

“Why wouldn’t they just send a rider?” Bitharn wondered aloud. Thistlestone, like most of these border holds, was a small fief. A rider could reach Lord Inguilar’s castle from any point on its periphery within a day or two.

Kelland shrugged. “Maybe they didn’t have one to spare. Maybe the message was so urgent it couldn’t wait for a rider to deliver it.”

“No doubt,” Bitharn agreed, and they rode on.

Ahead the castle town greeted them with a rush of noise and color. Freeriders and hireswords had converged on Thistlestone for the impending Swordsday celebrations. The farmers were in from their fields, the shepherds in from their pastures. Boys with dreams of glory rubbed shoulders with hard-bitten veterans who had long ago lost theirs. Girls with flowers in their hair and embroidered sashes around their waists watched them, giggling and blushing at the ones they favored.

By the standards of Calantyr or Mirhain, the Swordsday festivities at Thistlestone were small and drab. Eastern Langmyr was not a wealthy region, and the constant low-burning war with Oakharn had further depleted the border holds’ treasuries. No golden purses or immortalizing songs waited for the winners here. The hireswords who came to Thistlestone were the sweepings of the Sunfallen Kingdoms: men who were too poor to ride in Mirhain’s great tourneys, too new or unskilled to have a berth with one of the mercenary companies who sold their services year-by-year to kings. They were men for whom victory meant a better horse or a good steel sword, not a thousand silver solis.

Even so, there were far too many people for the castle town to hold them all. Their tents poured out of its gates in a swirl of canvas and leather and the occasional bright blossom of silk. The scent of roasting meat rose from the firepits that dotted the earth between them, and the clamor of a hundred conversations in the Rhaellan trade-tongue. A brindle dog came from somewhere among the tents and trotted after Bitharn’s and Kelland’s horses, yapping.

The dog was their most obvious follower, but it was hardly the only one. Everywhere the Celestians went, heads turned.

They were not looking at her, Bitharn knew. However odd it was to see a woman dressed in huntsman’s clothes and carrying a yew bow across her back, she was perfectly unremarkable next to her companion.

Kelland had the blood of Nebaioth. He had no idea who his parents were, any more than Bitharn did, but they had left him with the legacy of that land. Nebaioth, far to the south, where it was said the sun never set and the heat of endless days baked its people black as charcoal. Nebaioth, land of pearl-strewn beaches and red-quilled lions, where sailors from the northern realms were permitted to enter only a single walled city and were slain on sight if they left it.

It was a strange, exotic place, more legend than land. Kelland had never seen it. He had spent his entire life within the sheltering walls of Cailan’s Dome, praying in its golden cathedral and practicing swordwork in its marbled yards. Yet Nebaioth marked him from half a world away. His skin was the deep brown of vehrwood, his hair pitch-black and tough as wire. He wore it in a mass of tight, sleek braids, each one capped by a white cowrie shell. Bitharn had found a book that said Nebaithene warriors wore their hair in such braids, and books were all either of them knew about that land.

Books and superstitions. Everywhere they went, people believed Kelland’s blood made his magic stronger. They
called him the Burnt Knight. It was not a name Kelland ever used for himself, but neither was it one he could escape. The power of the sun was part of his heritage, the commonfolk claimed; of course he was one of Celestia’s Blessed. They begged for his blessings and deferred to his wisdom, even when he had no inkling what the correct answer might be.

At first the commonfolk’s reactions had surprised and embarrassed him—in Cailan he was only another Knight of the Sun, talented but not extraordinary—but over the years Kelland had become resigned to it. His appearance was another tool he could use to serve his goddess. No more, no less.

The Burnt Knight’s unique appearance was part of the reason they had been sent to Langmyr, Bitharn suspected. The High Solaros had never said as much, but it was not hard to read the signs.

For decades the Celestian faith had been trying to end the cycle of bloodletting between Oakharn and Langmyr. The task had taken on greater urgency with the rise of Ang’arta and its Tower of Thorns; kingdoms weakened by internal feuding were easy prey for the ironlords. Yet it was not easy weaning men off their old hatreds, even with a new foe at the door. The Illuminers could cite history’s bloody lessons all they wanted, and Knights of the Sun could talk themselves blue in the face about the tactical futility of conquests across the river, but they could not make anyone listen. The temple had no real right to intervene in the border lords’ affairs, and favoring one side would alienate the other.

All they could do, really, was soothe immediate conflicts and hope that time cooled both sides’ bloodlust. That, Bitharn thought, was why they were here. Celestia’s Blessed acted as a living reminder of her moral and magical force, and the Burnt Knight was more visible than most.

He was a symbol. It was not a role he enjoyed—Kelland had always shied away from the adoration of the commons, to Bitharn’s amused incomprehension—but duty had thrust him into it, and he was never one to shirk duty.

Bitharn, however, was not a symbol, and that meant she was free to do as she liked. Some things, at least.

Thistlestone’s Swordside competitions were well within her grasp. Not the melee, of course; she was a poor swordsfighter at best, and the others would make short work of her once they recovered from the surprise of seeing a woman in the ring. Nor did she have the strength to compete at the stone toss or shield races.

Archery, though … archery was hers.

She scanned the names on the scroll pinned to a post outside the archers’ field. The scribe had a good hand; he had written large and clear, and by the time her horse ambled past she had read all the names and recognized none of them. Smiling to herself, Bitharn settled back in her saddle.

“You planning on entering?” Kelland asked. Amusement warmed his eyes. He could seem forbidding, even dangerous, to strangers who saw him only as one of Celestia’s Blessed. The knight had the grave features of the old kings’ statues: high cheekbones, a wide brow, a mouth more given to frowns than joy. But when he smiled, all the weight of his duties fell away, and he was purely beautiful to her sight.

Bitharn wanted to keep him smiling this last little while. She winked. “Bet on me.”

“You know we aren’t allowed to gamble.”

“It won’t be a gamble,” she assured him, and was rewarded with a laugh.

The memory of that laughter warmed her as she washed off the travel dust in their inn that afternoon. The match would take place in a few hours, shortly before sunset. First she had a little spying to do. Kelland gathered information in the course of his work as a Blessed; Bitharn listened for the rumors and grievances that commonfolk muttered among themselves. Between them, they learned far more than either could alone.

Surreptitious listening required hiding who she was, at least for a while. Bitharn wove her long honey-gold hair into a tight braid and knotted it beneath a cap, bound her breasts tightly to her chest, and pulled on a loose-fitting leather jerkin to cover what the bindings couldn’t hide. A few smudges of dirt on her cheeks disguised their smoothness. She’d never pass for a hard-bitten mercenary, but a fresh-faced boy just off his father’s farm . . . that, with the right cast of voice and clumsy attempts at swagger, she could do.

She hoped so, anyway. The Langymryne spoke Rhaellan, as did all the people of the Sunfallen Kingdoms. Before the Godslayer’s War, when Rhaelyand was a grand empire, the western kingdoms had been united as its provinces: Langmyr, Oakharn, and all the others, each with its own Prince and crowning castle.

The flower of Rhaelyand died on the Field of Sorrows, over a thousand years ago, in the last battle of the Godslayer’s War. The empire, mortally wounded, fell soon after. The princes became kings, the provinces kingdoms, each one claiming to be the true heir to Rhaelyand’s crown-and-sun. All that truly remained of the old empire, however, were a few fading maps, the hollow name of the Sunfallen Kingdoms, and the two languages it left in this part of the world. Rhaellan, the trade-tongue, which had splintered and diffused so many times that its dialects were near languages in their own right, and High Rhaelic, the tongue of priests and scholars, which was the nearest echo of what Rhaelyand’s original language had been.
Bitharn, like all the children educated at the Dome of the Sun, could speak and read High Rhaelic. She knew a few dialects of Rhaellan, too, but her teachers had hailed from Mirhain and Thelyand, not Langmyr. Here, her accent would mark her as a foreigner at once.

Still, at this time of year, that wouldn’t be so odd. In any other season, the commonfolk might bite their tongues if an outlander came near. But Swordseyday brought a flood of glory-hunting foreigners, and there’d be nothing strange about one listening to local gossip today.

By the time she went downstairs, the common room was crowded with competitors, proving her guess correct. Bitharn slipped past a pair of soldiers in well-worn leather armor blazoned with the thorny wreath of Thistlestone. She pressed against the plaster wall, making herself small in the shadows while she gauged the room’s mood.

A trio of archers sat around the smoky fire, cursing and laughing over mugs of sour ale. They wore no lord’s colors, and the mismatched scraps of leather and chain that served as their armor suggested that if they were hireswords, they were not good ones. Next to them was a table of farmers, and next to that four old wives sharing black beer and gossip.

The long bar was more promising. There she saw two men wearing the white blossom of the Brotherhood of the Rose: mercenaries, but ones who claimed to fight for principle as much as coin. They looked well-off, and likely were; Brotherhood mercenaries commanded high prices from employers who valued their gloss of legitimacy along with their skills. Lesser hireswords and locals clustered around them, vying for a moment’s attention. The mercenaries were here to look for promising young talent on the field, but that never stopped anyone from trying to impress them off of it.

They would do nicely. Bitharn pulled down her cap and pushed off the wall, adopting an awkward swagger. She bellied up to the bar and ordered a mug of ale, putting a crack in her voice as she did. The nearest man sniggered, but beyond that no one paid her much mind; a boy getting drunk was nothing worth notice.

“We could use you lot around here,” one of the farmers was saying to the Brotherhood’s men. “Always a need for good swords on the border.”

The Brotherhood mercenary didn’t reply at once, so Bitharn took the opportunity to interrupt. “Isn’t there a peace now?” She took a swig of her ale, too fast on purpose, and coughed on the thick foam.

The farmer gave her a glance and dismissed whatever he saw. “By the sound of your tongue you’re not from here, so I’ll forgive your asking. There’s no peace. Oh, the lords might put on smiles when they meet, and that prancing twit from Oakharn might call Lord Eduins ‘cousin,’ but we who’ve our feet on the ground and our heads out of the clouds know better. We haven’t forgot what they did. My own father marched for revenge against Owlsgrove, and I’d have gone after the Slaver Knight’s friends myself if I hadn’t been cursed with a bad leg.”

“The Slaver Knight?”

The farmer spat on the floor. “Aye. Must’ve been … four years ago, now? Five? The year the rain ruined the harvest.”

“Five years back, that was,” one of the other locals put in.

“Five years, then. That was a long hard winter, no denying, but we Langmyrne came together and shared what we had and made do. The Oakharne, on the other hand …” He spat again. “That for them. The Slaver Knight, he was one of them, one of their brave anointed swords. You can see what those oaths are worth to an Oakharne.

“When they got hungry, they didn’t scrape and struggle to get by. Oh, no. They took their prisoners, their petty thieves and poachers, and sold them to the ironlords for food. All the border lords did it: Owlsgrove, Bulls’ March, even pious Lady Vanegild of Breakwall, who hands out pennies to her peasants at Midwinter. Those pennies came at a dear cost that year. When they’d emptied their dungeons, they took to kidnapping commonfolk—commonfolk from our side of the river. Good, honest men and women whose only sin was living too close to the border, hauled off at swordpoint to face blood sacrifice or the breaking pits or some other horror in Ang’arta.

“Couldn’t keep that secret for long, of course. But when our lords came asking, the Oakharne claimed it was one rogue knight who did it all. Just the Slaver Knight, all on his own. You’d have to be dimmer than old Bollos to believe that, but that’s what they said, straight-faced.”

“The lords believed it, didn’t they?” Bitharn ventured. “If there was no war.”

“Lord Eduin’s too trusting,” the farmer said. “He’s a fair lord, and I’ll not speak ill of him, but he let them off too gently. The Oakharne handed over the Slaver Knight, and Lord Eduin hanged him in the square, aye … but we knew he didn’t act alone. Plenty more out there needing necklaces of their own. There’ll be no peace for the likes of them, whatever the lords say.”

“Seems to me your real grievance is with the ironlords,” Bitharn said. “This Slaver Knight might have handed them the victims, but they’re the ones did the torturing. Am I wrong?”

The farmer hesitated. He glanced at the door, then back at Bitharn, chewing at the corner of his lip. “No. They’ve got no grievance with us, and we’ve none with them, far off as they are. No reason to go looking for more trouble.
when we’ve got enough on our doorstep. That sort of thing … that’s for the lords to decide, anyway. Not the likes of you or I.”

“Not afraid of them, are you?” one of the Brotherhood mercenaries asked, amused. He was a rangy man, no longer a youth but not quite grown into the fullness of his body. About her age, Bitharn guessed: a year or two past twenty. “The Iron Crown’s soldiers are only men. They die like any other, and deserve it more than most.”

“Not afraid,” the farmer said stubbornly. “But I don’t see no need to go stirring up a hornets’ nest neither. Let them lie, I say. We’ve enemies enough here.”

The wrong ones, Bitharn thought, but she stayed quiet. She sipped her ale and listened while the others talked.

Most of the talk centered around the upcoming competitions: who was likely to win, lose, break an arm or lose a tooth. One of the Brotherhood mercenaries had entered the melee, she gathered, and any man who met and bested him in the fray was welcome to ride with them back to Craghail, where he might find a berth with their company. The Brotherhood was looking for new blood, having filled its coffers and thinned its ranks after two seasons’ fighting the ironlords among the war-wrecked ruins of Thelyand.

There was a local boy favored to win the stone toss, as he had the past three years. Vosric the Northborn, they called him, though he had been birthed in Thistlestone and lived in the castle’s shadow all his life. He had the blood of the White Seas through his father—the boy was a bastard born the summer after another Swordsday long ago—and it showed in his height, his white-blond hair, and strength that made the town blacksmith look like a stripling boy. He’d do well as an armsman, all agreed, though he’d never shown any interest in the arts of war. The Brotherhood mercenaries looked disappointed to hear that; White Seas men made prized warriors, and even a half blood had promise.

The last bit of gossip concerned an Oakharne knight who had come across the border with his retinue to pay his respects at Thistlestone. Sir Galefrid was the eldest son of the lord of Bulls’ March, evidently, and was said to be eager to establish a peace. The locals gathered around the bar scoffed at this notion, and scoffed harder still when one boy suggested timorously that perhaps Sir Galefrid intended to pay reparations for what the Slaver Knight had done.

“He’ll not pay,” the first farmer said. “They’ll never pay. Not like they deserve.”

Bitharn listened to his grumblings with half an ear. A hooded figure at the periphery of the crowd had drawn her attention. A woman, she guessed; the figure wore a muffling cloak, too heavy for the weather, but its loose folds failed to hide a certain litheness of body, or the hip-swaying grace of her walk. The hooded woman had been sitting alone at first, but when the conversation around the bar shifted to Sir Galefrid’s visit, she’d drained her wine and sidled forward, lingering at the crowd’s edge.

Eventually the talk turned to the archery competition. Bitharn listened just long enough to learn that the previously favored contender had recently lost a hand for poaching Lord Isarach’s black-antlered stags, and that a mercenary calling himself Anslak Bluefire claimed to have magic arrows that would deliver him victory. The discussion swiftly devolved into an argument over whether Bluefire’s magic arrows were real, and whether it would be a fair match if they were, so Bitharn finished her ale and stepped back from the bar.

All things were possible in the world, if the Bright Lady willed, so magic arrows might exist somewhere … but she had never seen any, and no one would waste such treasures on a minor Swordsday contest. This Bluefire was a fool or a fraud, and nothing to worry her either way.

As she slipped through the commons back to the stairs, Bitharn heard soft footfalls behind her and glanced back. The hooded woman was following her. She hesitated, touching the hilt of her belt knife, then chided herself for a fool and kept walking. There was no reason for anyone here to wish her harm. Most likely the woman was going to her own room. At worst, she might have seen through Bitharn’s disguise and hoped to reach Kelland through her. Whatever she wanted, it was unlikely to put anyone in danger.

But she kept her hand on the knife hilt, and nearly drew it when the hooded woman approached in the shadowed hall upstairs.

“I would speak to you,” she said. “In private.” Her voice was soft, little more than a whisper, and carried the melodic accent of Ardasi nobility. It was faint, as if she’d had decades to adapt her speech to the northern courts, but there was no mistaking it.

Bitharn nodded, cautious but curious, and unlocked her door.

Once inside, the other woman lowered her cowl. She was an older woman, petite and quick-moving as a bird, with the honey-colored complexion common to the southern Empire. Strands of silver shimmered in her soft black curls, and fine lines netted the corners of her dark eyes, but age had refined her beauty rather than diminishing it.

She was dressed in simple linen and wore not a single jewel, but she needed no ornaments to tell who she was. There was only one Ardasi noblewoman in Thistlestone: Lady Isavela Inguilar, Lord Eduin’s wife.

“My lady.” Bitharn curtseyed. How may I serve? she almost asked, but caught the words on the tip of her tongue.
She might not want—or be able—to serve at all. She certainly could not promise that Kelland would, and the lady’s request would doubtless be of the Blessed, not his companion. Skilled as she was, Bitharn did not flatter herself that Lady Isavela had come to talk to an archer. “To what do I owe this honor?” she asked instead.

“Do you hope for peace?” Lady Isavela said bluntly, holding her gaze.

Bitharn blinked. She looked away, uneasy despite herself. “Of course.”

The lady nodded. “So do we. It is a hope that we have nurtured longer than you have been alive, child. You heard the men talking about Vosric downstairs?”

_Technically, it was still the next day._

“Child?” Bitharn bit her tongue and nodded.

“His mother was Oakharne. She fled her family when she learned she was pregnant; they had never been kind, and she feared their wrath if she bore a bastard under their roof. She was so afraid that she crossed the river and came here. I took her in as a washerwoman and told the town that she was part of my retinue. It explained her accent, her unfamiliarity with local custom. If anyone suspected the lie, they did not challenge it.

“In time Vosric was born, and when he was old enough, his mother gave him the truth. Because of it, he shunned the sword and refused to join my lord’s army. He could have been a great warrior; you saw how quickly the Brotherhood of the Rose realized that. In another life he might have worn the thistle-wreath and slaughtered his cousins, or signed with one of the mercenary Companies and ravaged our lands. Instead he turned toward peace. He has a way with animals; he will make a fine huntsman or stablemaster someday.

“We have a thousand stories like that. Little seeds that my husband and I planted over the years, hoping that in our lifetimes we might see an end to this pointless enmity. I would never have agreed to live here, would never have married him, if Eduin hadn’t convinced me it was possible.” Lady Isavela smiled sadly. “I’m sorry to be so long-winded. The reason I tell you this is because a storm is coming that threatens to tear away all our little seeds. If we do not avert it, everything we’ve spent our lives building will be lost. People’s lives will be destroyed. Not just the ones who die fighting, but lives like Vosric’s. The ones who could have been—who want to be—something else.”

“What do you want from me?” Bitharn asked.

“You’re close to the Burnt Knight. Tell him … ask him to visit us tonight. Please. I know the Bright Lady’s faith takes no sides in the disputes between Langmyr and Oakharn, but what we would ask is nothing like that. All we want is your help avoiding war.”

“How?”

Lady Isavela shook her head, lifting the hood over her face as she backed to the door. “There is no short answer to that question. Come to us this evening, and I will explain.”

The door closed. After a while Bitharn stirred from her thoughts and glanced out the tiny, bubbled-glass window. The day had moved on without her; it was nearly time for the match. She collected her bow from the room’s corner and made her way down to the field.

Most of the competitors were already there. They traded jests and insults while spectators gathered around the bundles of hay that set out the limits of the field. A vendor in a robin-red cloak strolled around the crowd, hawking roast chickens on a long steel spit. His young son trotted after him, carrying a cloth-covered bread basket. For an extra penny, the chickens came on a thick slice of bread; otherwise the vendor simply dropped his birds into his buyers’ hands. Bitharn’s stomach rumbled, reminding her that she hadn’t eaten since her last bowl of porridge after dawn prayers. Too late: she could hardly get her fingers covered in chicken grease now.

Hay-stuffed dummies stood at the far end of the field. Each was painted with a series of concentric circles to measure the archers’ scores. The largest ring was the width of a whitemelon, the smallest the size of a plum. In Ang’arta, it was said, they used live captives for targets, and aimed for the groin before the heart. From what she’d heard of the ironlords, that might even be true.

Most of the competitors used the maple and elm flatbows common to this part of the Sunfallen Kingdoms. The three archers she’d seen at the inn had heavy yew longbows; their weapons looked strong enough to send an arrow through Mirhaine plate, and probably had pulls to match. Bitharn’s bow was yew as well, but far lighter; she hadn’t the strength to manage a shoulder-breaker like those. Speed and accuracy would have to serve instead.

The mercenary who called himself Anslak Bluefire was the last to take the field. He strode out in a cloak of fluttering blue patches cut to resemble dancing flames. Silver coins glinted in the center of each flame. His bow and arrows were dyed to match, and when he drew an arrow to take his first shot, Bitharn saw that the head was grooved and filled with gray-blue powder.

She hid a smile, readying her own shot.

“Nock and loose!” the herald cried, and Bitharn let her arrow fly. A gasp came from the crowd as the rush of air ignited the smokepowder hidden in Anslak’s arrow, turning his shot into a bright blue comet that trailed sparks halfway across the field. The man’s accuracy matched his showmanship; his arrow thudded squarely into the black, still smoking. Bitharn sank hers into the center of her own target, while the other competitors struck yellow or
grazed red.

Three times the herald cried, and three times Bitharn hit the black. Anslak matched her shot for shot, loosing arrows that flew in arcs of green and gold and teal-blue fire, thrumming into the center every time. One by one the other competitors dropped out, until only Bitharn and the blue-cloaked mercenary were left on the field.

Two boys ran out and grabbed the targets, moving them still farther back. The last round counted speed as much as precision. It required three shots, not one, and taking too long to aim counted the same as missing altogether.

There was no wind. That helped. Bitharn drew a long breath, tucked loose strands of hair behind her ears, and let her focus narrow to her bow, the row of arrows plunged into the earth by her feet, and the black ring on the distant target. Nothing else existed: not the roar of the crowd, not Anslak Bluefire with his absurd cloak and theatrics, not the westering sun that threw sideways shadows across the field and played tricks on her eyes.

The boys cleared the field.

“Nock and loose!”

Even before the last word ended, all three of her arrows were in flight … and so, too, were Bluefire’s, weaving across one another in a hissing braid of fire. Her arrows landed in a tight, precise cluster. So did his.

The boys ran down the field. One wrapped his hand around Bitharn’s clustered arrows; the other did the same for Anslak’s. The boys conferred, changed places, conferred again. Then one of them pulled Bitharn’s arrows from the target and held them aloft in a steel-tipped bouquet, signifying that she had won.

A roar came from the crowd. Anslak sketched a performer’s bow, sweeping his cloak out in a glittering wave as he conceded defeat, and strode over to clasp Bitharn’s hand.

Up close he was older than she’d thought; he could have been her father. The corners of his mouth were creased by the tracks of countless smiles, and his gray-blue eyes shone with mirth, making him handsome despite a crooked nose. “Congratulations,” he told her, clasping her hand and forearm in an old-fashioned soldier’s greeting.

“You would have won if you’d used plain arrows,” Bitharn said.

She’d only noticed it on the longer arcs, but his fiery arrows wavered as they flew. Bitharn couldn’t tell whether it was due to a change in the bodkins’ weight as the smokepowder burned away, or was caused by the streaming sparks somehow interfering with the arrows’ flight, but it was clear that something about the smokepowder arrows hampered their accuracy. If not for that, Anslak might well have bested her.

“No.” The mercenary grinned. His teeth were good and very white. “I would have lost anyway. But I don’t regret it. The commonfolk like a show, and I can’t be too sorry about defeat at the hands of the Burnt Knight’s companion. It was a worthy match, my lady.” He bowed again and walked away, leaving her momentarily flustered. Was everyone going to see through her disguise today?

“Tharn of Cailan!” the herald shouted, announcing her false name as the victor.

That was her signal. Bitharn turned to the crowd, lifted her cap, and shook her hair free of its braid. At the same time she wiped the smudges from her cheeks, showing herself to be the girl she was. “Bitharn of Cailan, good sir!” she called back. “Late of the Dome of the Sun!”

Another roar came from the crowd, this time followed by a sea of whispers as people asked their neighbors what had happened and those more knowledgeable explained who she was. As the recognition spread, a final wave of applause went through the commons. Bitharn held her hands out to her sides and bowed.

Kelland was walking toward her when she straightened. She hadn’t seen him in the crowd; he must have arrived as the match ended. The dying sun struck fire from his gilded mail and made his snowy tabard glow, but his smile outshone it all.

Her heart beat faster at the sight of him. It always did. Bitharn busied herself pulling up her unused arrows and knocking the dirt from their heads. She stole glances at him with every step. By the time he reached her, the last arrow was long in her quiver.

“Congratulations,” Kelland said, clasping her shoulders.

Heat rose in her cheeks at his touch. It only lasted a moment before he let go, but that was long enough to set her skin burning. Bitharn ducked her head to hide it, wondering if he could hear her heart thundering through her leather jerkin. “Did you bet on me?” she asked, when she thought her voice could be trusted.

“I did.” He held out a handful of silver solis to show her.

Bitharn whistled. She’d seen the odds. They’d been generous, but not that generous. He must have bet half his money. “I thought that was a sin.”

“You told me it wouldn’t be a gamble. If there was no gamble, there was no sin.”

“I was wrong about that,” she admitted. “The fellow in the blue cloak nearly outshot me.” She glanced over her shoulder, but Anslak was already gone.

“Then I shall make penance in my prayers,” Kelland said gravely, though his dark eyes twinkled. “Come. It’s nearly sunset.”
She walked with him to the clearing’s end. Downfield, town boys carried away the hay-stuffed dummies and searched for stray arrows. The crowd gradually dispersed, recounting the day’s entertainment and looking forward to the morrow’s.

Together, Bitharn and Kelland prayed on the trampled grass. Most Celestians prayed in silence, their knees bent and their hands clasped. Parishioners might chant responses to a solaros’ liturgy, or sing with the choir in chapel, but when they prayed alone in the sunlight, they simply knelt without words.

For the Knights of the Sun it was different. Dawn, highsun, and dusk prayers each had their own ancient, ritualized sequences of movements and poses designed to strengthen the body while centering the soul. All were performed with solemn grace, almost as dances meant to honor the goddess. The Illuminers had similar rites, but theirs were not as demanding as the Sun Knights’. The Bright Lady’s warriors had to be strong, physically as well as spiritually, and their prayers were designed to make them so.

Bitharn was not a Knight of the Sun, but she had learned their practices while living at the Dome, and she was always glad to pray with Kelland. The stances and precise, demanding transitions required all her concentration, freeing her thoughts from the day’s worries. Afterward she always felt at peace, serene in her goddess and herself.

She bent double, brushed her fingertips along the grass, and straightened at the waist, bringing her hands up in a wide arc and over her head. Slowly she let them sink to her chest, folding them over her heart for a moment of meditative prayer. Beside her Kelland mirrored the movements with the same practiced fluidity. They stood there for a while, neither willing to break the calm, until finally Bitharn made herself speak.

“The Lady of Thistlestone requested a private audience,” she said. “Tonight.”

“Why?”

“She wouldn’t tell me. Only that she needed our help to avert war.”

He considered it. “It cannot hurt to listen. Let us see what Lady Inguilar might say.”

The castle guards must have been expecting them, for they found Thistlestone’s postern gate open. A serving girl in a green wool dress waited between the two guards at the door. As Kelland and Bitharn drew near, she greeted them with a curtsy.

“You honor this house with your presence,” the girl said. “Please, follow me.”

She led them up a spiral of cramped and winding stairs, down a narrow hallway, and through a scarred oak door thicker than the length of Bitharn’s hand. Broad iron nails glinted where past attackers had battered at the door with swords and axes, beating through the wooden facade only to dull their weapons on the crisscrossed studs underneath. It did not seem any had broken through.

There was nothing threatening about their guide, yet Bitharn was acutely conscious of the murder holes that pocked the walls, the irregular stumble steps on the stairs, and the sharp teeth of the recessed iron gates that hung overhead, waiting to come crashing down at every bend. Thistlestone was a squat, ugly, practical fortification, built so that every foot of its halls would have to be wrested from its defenders.

Unlike the castles of Calantyr or Mirhain, which sometimes let their gates rust open, Thistlestone was immaculate. Not a speck of corrosion softened the spikes of its killing gates. Bitharn shivered as she walked beneath them, and afterward kept her eyes straight ahead.

Past a second nail-studded door, the halls widened and grew smoother. Iron sconces lined the walls; above them, pillars of soot striped the walls. Tiny windows offered glimpses of blue twilight between the torches’ smoky flames.

The girl turned down one last corridor, knocked on a door, and announced: “Sir Kelland and Bitharn of Cailan, my lord.”

“Marvelous. Please, come in,” said a voice from inside.

The girl opened the door, curtsied again, and closed it behind them as the two Celestians entered.

They found themselves in a solar. Tapestries hung on the walls, depicting scenes of carnage from some battle Bitharn did not know. The bloody images were jarring against the rest of the room, which showed a gentler, more cultivated touch. Glassed windows overlooked the castle’s inner courtyard. Dwarf lemon trees and glossy-leaved peppers grew in ceramic pots, filling the air with subtle fragrance and speaking of a southern touch. Those plants were not native to Langmyr, and likely couldn’t survive its winters. They had to have been imported from the south, and Bitharn thought it spoke well of Lord Inguilar that he was willing to bear the cost of bringing plants from Ardashir to comfort his wife with the scents of her homeland. She wouldn’t have expected a lord living in this castle to be so indulgent.

A table was set with tea, fruit, bread and cheese near the center of the room. No wine or meat, Bitharn noted approvingly; their hosts knew, and respected, that such things were forbidden to the Blessed.

Lady Isavela Inguilar and an older man, richly dressed in fine green wool and gray foxfur, sat near the table. The man would be Lord Eduin, she supposed; no one else was likely to be wearing a gold circlet in his castle. He was thin and smooth-faced, carrying himself with a reserved courtesy only partly undercut by the sharpness of his gray-
green eyes. There were no servants in the room.

“Be welcome,” the Lady said, standing and lifting her hands to her guests. “I know you must be hungry.”

“Thank you,” Kelland said. The Celestians filled their plates and took the empty chairs, and for a while they talked of pleasant and inconsequential things. The Lord and Lady of Thistlestone were gracious hosts, and endlessly interested in the details of the Burnt Knight’s past travels. To Bitharn’s surprise, they seemed as curious about her exploits as his, and their interest was never merely polite. They genuinely wanted to know about everything, and though Bitharn tried to avoid subjects that touched too close to her temple’s interests, she was uneasily certain that she gave away more than she meant to.

Finally, when the food was eaten and the conversation at a lull, Lord Eduin cleared his throat. “We did not invite you purely out of politeness,” he said, exchanging a glance with his wife. “In fact, I’m about to be very rude. We have a favor to ask of you.”

“We need your help.” Lady Isavela clasped her jeweled hands in her lap. “This morning we had a bird from the border. One of our villages, Willowfield, has been … extinguished.”

“Extinguished?” Kelland leaned forward.

“The village itself stands, if our information is accurate,” Lord Eduin said. “But every man, woman and child who lived there is a corpse. The people of Willowfield were not the only ones to die. Sir Galefrid of Bulls’ March—Lord Ossaric’s heir—and his entire retinue died with them.”

“How?” Bitharn asked.

“Some by arrows, but most by sorcery. The same sorcery that killed hundreds at Thelyand Ford and holds King Merovas in terror still.”

“Thorns.” The word escaped as a hiss through Kelland’s teeth. Bitharn tensed, glancing at him uneasily, but the knight was focused on Lady Isavela’s story and did not notice her look. Brooding, Bitharn sipped her tea.

She didn’t know much about the Thorns. No one did. They were blessed by Kliasta, the Pale Maiden, as the Sun Knights and Illuminers were blessed by Celestia, and they were an ancient enemy of the faith. But the details of their beliefs, and the magics at their command, had long ago fallen from history into myth. Their religion had been extirpated in the west nearly a thousand years before, and had only recently returned under the protection of Ang’arta’s armies. The new Lord Commander of Ang’arta, the one called the Golden Scourge, had brought the Pale Maiden’s faith back with his wife from the east. Thelyand Ford was the first time in centuries that anyone in this part of the world had seen the Thorns unleashed, and it had been a slaughter.

That was virtually everything Bitharn knew about them, but it was enough. If there was a Thornlord in Langmyr, then Kelland was likely the only person within a hundred leagues who could hope to match him. Steel alone was a poor answer to magic, and there were no other Knights of the Sun closer than Thelyand.

But why would there be a Thorn in Langmyr?

Lady Isavela inclined her head to Kelland. “You begin to see our dilemma, and our danger. Sir Galefrid and his retinue were guests on our land. We had hoped, by inviting him, to build a friendship between our lords and thereby strengthen the peace between Oakharn and Langmyr. We believed he shared our goals. But now he is dead, and dead by bloodmagic worked on Langmyrne soil. His wife and infant son are dead with him. Once word escapes, there will be war, and all the little seeds we worked so long to nurture will go up in flame.” She gestured to the tapestries hanging on the walls. “Our world will go back to this.”

“What would you have us do?”

“Investigate,” the Lady answered. “Who committed the massacre in Willowfield? Why? The Thorns are the likeliest culprits, I agree, but … why would they bother? We are too far from their territory to be of interest, and Willowfield had no strategic importance. Why would Ang’arta send one of its Thornlords here?”

“If it was a Thornlord,” Lord Eduin cautioned her. “There are other dark powers in the world. It might have been one of Anvhad’s Blessed, or one of Maol’s trying to sow chaos. They might have spells similar to the Thorns’. Who can say? The immediate danger, regardless of who actually committed the murders, is that Lord Ossaric will seek vengeance before proof. He loved his son dearly, and the babe was his only grandchild.”

The white shells in Kelland’s hair clicked softly as he nodded. He looked pensive. “Why us? Because of who we are, or what we are?”

“Both,” Lord Eduin said frankly. “None of our men would be believed. Lord Ossaric would assume they were lying to hide our guilt. He knows that game well; he played it with the Slaver Knight. We need someone whose honesty and neutrality are above dispute. Celestia’s Blessed are famously impartial, and the Burnt Knight is already half a legend in Langmyr. I won’t deny we’re trying to make use of that. But we also want you. You’re clear-sighted, careful, sensible. Your account of your travels showed that—as did your companion’s observations on the archery field.”

Bitharn squinted at him. “Anslak Bluefire.”
“Was one of my men, yes,” Lord Eduin admitted. “Sir Taledain is the best archer in Thistlestone. I wanted to see if you were as good as the stories said. He sacrificed his beard to the cause, and used a gaudy cloak and smokepowder arrows to distract anyone who might have known him. He managed to prove that your eyes are very sharp indeed.”

“Thank you,” Bitharn said, at once flattered and vaguely unsettled. “But why?”

“For the same reason I watched you in the tavern,” Lady Isavela replied. “The same reason we had another trusted servant shadow Kelland as he tended to sick villagers in the square. We wanted to learn who you were. We’ve learned to be cautious in placing our trust, especially in matters this delicate.”

“Plan for the best, prepare for the worst,” Bitharn murmured, thinking of Thistlestone’s brutal, layered defenses.

“Precisely,” Lady Isavela said. “Will you help us?”

Kelland hesitated. He glanced at Bitharn, who nodded, and then back to the two nobles. “I am truthbound,” he told them. “Whatever I find—whoever it incriminates—must become known, if I do this.”

“We expect no less,” Lord Eduin said.

Kelland bowed his head. “Then our answer is yes.”
They called him Leferic the Mouse. Leferic Weakshanks, Leferic Booklouse. The kindest of their names for him, the one he had taken as his own, was Leferic the Scholar.

It was not, among the war-loving Oakharne, a compliment.

Leferic thought about that as he leaned out the narrow window of his turret and watched the castle guards carry his brother’s coffin across the courtyard to the shrine in the south tower. The work took fewer men than he’d expected: two for his brother’s coffin, two for his wife’s, and only one for the small, ornate casket that represented his little nephew Wistan.

Of course, there were no bodies inside. That did tend to lighten the load.

Leferic expected that, eventually, a messenger would arrive with the cleaned bones of his kin. Lord Eduin Inguilar was not said to be a complete barbarian, and the dead were highborn, so in a month or two some passing merchant or dignitary heading south to Seawatch or east to Calantyr would likely be given the grisly gift to deposit in Bulls’ March on the way. It would not be one of Lord Inguilar’s own men who brought Galefrid’s bones home, unless Eduin did not intend to get the man back.

In the meantime there were ceremonies to be observed and platitudes to be mouthed, and since Leferic’s lord father had taken to his bed immediately after hearing of his elder son’s death, that burden now fell to him. Leferic the Mouse.

He knew his father’s men did not love him. They had much preferred his elder brother, who could ride with the ease of a centaur and best any two of them in a fight. Galefrid’s choice of a pious wife out of Seawatch had seemed a strange one to them—marriages here, as elsewhere in Oakhm, were about alliances between houses, not hearts—but she was rich and pretty and, most importantly, had borne him a strong son within a year of the wedding, so they were prepared to accept Galefrid’s foreign wife for his sake.

That Galefrid was a free-spending fool who threw money away like grain to chickens did not seem to trouble the liegemen of Bulls’ March. That he had no skill in diplomacy and no grasp of war was likewise of little concern. It was enough that Galefrid could drink with them all night in the great hall and then go hunting in the morning and still hit his mark; in the minds of their men, no more was required of a lord.

Leferic disagreed. That was why he’d had his brother killed.

He wondered, as he watched the coffins disappear into the dark chapel door, whether he should feel guilt over that. There was a little, for the wife and child, but even that was distant, as if he were expressing regret over the death of a stranger in a far-off land. Which was precisely what they were, now that he thought on it: people he barely knew who had died in another country. Not gasping before him, not at his own hand. He had given the order and that had been the end of it.

For his brother he felt nothing. Perhaps he was numb because of the newness of the tidings. Or perhaps there was simply nothing to feel.

An interesting puzzle. He would think on it later.

Leferic drew up his fur-lined mantle to ward off the late autumn chill and went down the stairs to the chapel, following the coffins’ path. The charcoal and ash of mourning colors made him look sallow, but then he always looked that way.

Guards and servants averted their faces as he went by. Leferic was mildly surprised to note that many of them had reddened eyes and wet noses. Had they loved his brother that much? Or were they simply afraid, now that the succession of a border hold had fallen to a younger son who loved books more than horses?

Another puzzle. An easier solution to this one, though.

He ducked his head as he entered the shrine and paused to let his eyes adjust to its gloom. Candles were an expensive indulgence, and the chapel’s would not be lit until it was time to send the dead to Celestia’s ever-golden lands. In the meantime, the only light that entered the shrine was the cloudy gray sunshine that filtered through the chapel’s stained-glass sunbursts.

The shrine was cold, dim, and deserted. Men did not like to be alone with the dead, even when the dead were present only in effigy.

Leferic bowed over his brother’s coffin, pretending to pray over the empty wood. He stayed there until his knees began to ache and his fingers had gone stiff with cold inside their fine kidskin gloves. The light through the windows darkened and brightened as clouds passed over the sun.
Just as he was beginning to give up hope that the meeting would be kept, a large man muffled in a gray mourning robe shuffled over to the coffin beside him. The robed man was a few inches shorter than Leferic, who was unusually tall for the Oakharne, but his shoulders were a full two handspans wider and his arms were thick as young trees. A scabbard clanked against a mailed thigh beneath the gray wool of his robe.

By bowing his head still lower and casting his eyes to the side, Leferic could get a glimpse into the hood of the man beside him. He saw a long grizzled jaw marred by a scar that cut a second pale cleft in his chin, and caught a gleam of amusement in a deep-set gray eye. He knew that scar, and he knew that look.

Albric Urdaring, once the swordmaster of Bulls’ March, was Leferic’s one real friend in the world. Neither his father nor his elder brother had much time to spare for him, so when Leferic was a boy he had been given over to Albric’s care to learn reading and swordcraft. Leferic had little talent in the practice yard, and Albric had still less in the library, but they’d muddled through. It was Albric who’d helped him master his first warhorse, who had taken him hawking and given the boy his own pheasants so that Leferic would not be shamed by returning empty-handed from the hunt. Over the years each had learned the measure of the other, and there was no man in Oakharn that Leferic trusted more.

There was an irony in that, he knew. Albric was not from Bulls’ March, and some of his father’s liegemen distrusted him because of it. Albric had been captain of the honor guard that accompanied the Lady Indoiya, Leferic’s late mother, when she came to Bulls’ March to marry Lord Ossaric. To honor her arrival, Lord Ossaric appointed her captain as swordmaster, but after Lady Indoiya’s death Albric was demoted to a mere household knight and the post was given back to a native-born Bulls’ March man. Leferic had been a child then, not yet ten, but the injustice of it still rankled him. If it galled Albric, however, he could not tell. The knight never mentioned it. All his life Albric had served loyally, uncomplaining; he accepted reward or demotion with equal calm, striving simply to honor his lords’ trust.

It was Albric whom he had sent to ensure his brother’s death.

“Dedicated of you to pray over an empty casket,” the hooded man said.

“I pray for success in all my endeavors,” Leferic replied.

“You should.”

“Why is that?” Leferic asked, keeping his tone light and his voice hushed even as a prickle of apprehension ran down his spine. It was over Albric’s objections that he had hired a Thornlady to aid the assassinations. Though Albric had been adamantly against involving one of the Maimed Witches of Ang’arta, Leferic believed magic was necessary to seal their success, and had quietly made the arrangements. Since then he’d often wondered if he would have been wiser to heed the swordmaster. “Did she—”

Albric shook his hooded head curtly. “She has been . . . efficient. If bloody-minded. But the work may not be done.”

“How?”

Albric made the sign of the sun, superstitiously: thumbs and forefingers circled opposite one another, fingers fanned out as rays. He lowered his voice until Leferic, standing a scant two steps away, could barely make out the words. “Some lived.”

The prickle of anxiety that Leferic felt grew into a cold wave of fear. For an instant he felt that the floor had dropped away under his feet. The ghostly taste of metal tingled on his tongue. He put out a hand to steady himself against his brother’s coffin, and was reassured by its solidity. “Who?”

“Some of the villagers. A runaway horse crashed into the gate, and some fled through the gap it made. One rider. He might have been one of Gal—one of the targeted men. Hard to say. I couldn’t tell who all the dead were, not after she was done, so I can’t say for a certainty who’s missing. But I thought I knew the face as he went by.” Albric paused. It was a tiny hesitation, hardly long enough to blink, but from him that heartbeat of silence spoke volumes. “And the child.”

Leferic closed his eyes. His hand tightened on the coffin’s lid, curling halfway into a fist and flattening out as if he could draw strength from the wood. “Where is he now?”

“We aren’t sure. We ran down most of the villagers who escaped. The child was not with them.”

“He must be found.” He had to be. Had to be. Leferic was not unduly worried about the other survivors; none of the killers, save Albric, could easily be traced back to him, and Albric had been masked behind a full helm that day. No one who had seen the massacre and survived would be able to put the deaths on him.

But if Wistan lived …

The troubadours’ songs were filled with orphaned princes who grew up in secret and returned to reclaim their birthrights from tyranny. The histories were littered with the bloody wreckage of those who had tried it in fact.

If Wistan lived, he became a direct threat to Leferic’s rule, even if no one ever learned the truth of his parents’ death. The child would be an obstacle to the succession, a rallying point for his brother’s loyalists, even a cause for
civil war. Kingdoms had shattered over less. His father’s liegemen would accept Leferic as their rightful lord, if no other heir came forward, but he had no illusions about his popularity or how long their loyalty would last if an alternative appeared.

Albric’s jaw clenched under his hood. “I don’t know that I can find him.”

“But she can,” Leferic said.

“She can,” Albric agreed, grudgingly.

“Set up a meeting. Tomorrow night, after moonrise. We’ll have to renegotiate her services.”

His father’s chair, Leferic was discovering, was remarkably uncomfortable.

The throne of Bulls’ March was a great gnarled chair of red oak, stained dark and worn smooth by time. The troubadours claimed that the chair dated back to the day of Haelgric the Bold, first Lord of Bulls’ March, who’d won his lands and his title at the Second Battle of Seivern Ford. At that battle the King of Oakharn was driven back by Langmyrne armies and, trapped between his enemy and the river, would have died or been captured if not for the reinforcements that Haelgric led across the bridges of Tarne Crossing. Songs said that Haelgric’s last horse was shot beneath him as he fought to take the bridges, but he was so devoted to his duty that he seized a bull from a nearby farmer’s field and rode that beast to save his king. Haelgric’s stubbornness was greater than the bull’s: he forced it into the fray, winning the battle, his title and a legend.

The horns that crowned the back of the chair were supposedly from that first bull. The truth, Leferic suspected, was a good deal less thrilling. Certainly the throne was.

Curved horns marched down the sides of the chair’s back and jutted from the armrests, constantly snagging his sleeves. There was no cushion on the seat, so at the end of every audience Leferic was stiff-backed and sore-arsed. He was seriously considering the merits of stitching a hidden pillow into the backside of his ceremonial cloak. Carrying a pillow onto the chair would earn the ridicule of his liegemen, but the misery of going without was becoming too much to bear.

He wondered how his father had been able to sit on the gods-cursed chair for so long without complaining. Lord Ossaric never looked anything but stoic in his great hall. Perhaps he had passed the secret to Galefrid, but Leferic was the younger son and no one had ever thought to give him anything.

He was the ruler now, though. Comfortable or not, the throne of Bulls’ March was his to sit, for Lord Ossaric was indefinitely indisposed.

The last time anyone other than his own privy servants had seen the old lord was at the funeral pyre for Galefrid and his family. Leferic had been shocked to see how badly his father had aged. In the two days between the messenger’s arrival and the hastily arranged sunset ceremony, Lord Ossaric seemed to have endured twenty hard years. He had gone from a gray but strong old bear to a whispering husk of a man with a spirit drowned in sorrow. His father had lacked the voice to lead the prayers or the strength to lift his candle, so in the end it had been Leferic who asked the Bright Lady to guide the dead to her ever-golden lands, and Leferic who touched his candle to the pyre, igniting the stack of oiled herbs and sweetwood beneath the empty coffins.

That was three days ago. Since then Lord Ossaric had not emerged from his bedchamber, and the governance of Bulls’ March had fallen to his son.

To everyone’s surprise but his own, Leferic had proved quite adept at it. He had a natural head for figures and a keen ear for detail, which helped him sift truth from exaggeration when sitting as judge. He had plenty of opportunity to practice dealing justice in those first few days; Swordsday always brought an influx of strangers with weapons in one hand and ale horns in the other, and with them came a predictable flood of disputes. Thefts, tavern brawls, dice cheats, a mercenary who knifed one of his father’s soldiers in a fight over a whore … he heard all of it, and did what he thought was fair.

It did not, however, take the wisdom of Alyeta the Redeemer to pronounce guilt on a poacher caught bloody-handed as he cut arrows from his lord’s deer. Leferic had faced no real challenges, during his very short rule, until today.

Today he looked down on a murderer.

The man was stout and middle-aged, with a round ruddy face and a belly that strained at his belt. His wrists were not tied, and the castle guards did not force his forehead to the floor as they had the poacher’s before. He looked like someone’s stolid country uncle, not a killer of children.

But that, they said, was what he had done.

“Now comes before you Lusian the Fat of Littlewood, who stands accused of murder,” announced Heldric, gesith of Lord Ossaric’s liegemen and most experienced in the ways of court. In most cases Leferic had read subtle cues on the old warrior’s face and from him understood what was expected, but he could read nothing there now. Heldric’s expression betrayed nothing but grim determination, as if he faced an unknown enemy on a treacherous field and
was waiting to see what his foe revealed first.

Seeing no help there, Leferic straightened his back against the uncomfortable chair and recited his part in the ritual proceeding. “Who stands to accuse this man?”

For a moment there was no answer. The gathered courtiers and armsmen exchanged puzzled or uneasy glances; no other criminal had been called without receiving an immediate accusation. Then the far doors groaned open. A gust of wind laid the torches low and sent the tattered battle-flags flapping on the bare stone walls. A man stepped in, and spoke.

“I do,” he said gruffly. His voice was heavy with the guttural accents of the north. There was a murmuring among the assembled liegemen, who parted to let the speaker through.

The man who strode forward was tall, easily a head taller than any other in attendance, and had the fair coloring of the White Seas. When he crossed from sunlight into the hall’s smoky shadows, the light did not seem to leave his hair. It stayed bright, almost white, in the gloom. A deep black mark—one of the northerners’ runes, Leferic guessed—was scarred on his right cheek. He wore a snowy bear’s hide as a cloak, its head intact in the barbarians’ fashion, and his glacial blue eyes were hard with contempt as he looked over the audience. Little of that contempt left him when his gaze fell onto Leferic. “I am Cadarn, called Death’s-Debtor. I accuse this man of murder, and I accuse your court of cowardice and deceit.”

Leferic held up a hand to quell the outrage that ran through the hall. He raised his voice to be heard over the grumblings of his liegemen. Heldric was watching him now, but the gesith’s expression had not softened. If anything, the old warrior seemed even more intent as he watched the young man on the throne. “Tell me, Cadarn Death’s-Debtor, why you do so accuse.”

“I was drinking in a tavern in Littlewood when this man came in. He had blood on his shirt and his axe-handle, and he was in a mood to brag. My friend Ulvrar asked what ferocious rabbits had he been fighting, and this man laughed”—Cadarn turned his head and spat into the rushes—“laughed that it had been no rabbits, but Langmyrne that he slew. We thought it strange that this woodchopper should have killed men and taken no wounds himself, so I asked what Langmyrne he had slain. He said that they were children and they were back in the woods.

“Ulvrar and I, we followed this man’s tracks to where he had been. Two children we found dead in the woods. The older had not yet seen two hands of summer. The younger was a girl. This man, he killed a girl-child and a boy who was a hand or more from being a man, and both unarmed. They were picking mushrooms, these children. We found their basket, and the mushrooms all covered in blood.

“When we came back to the village no one would help us take this man as a murderer. They tried to stop us. I had to kill one before the rest would let us take him, and for that killing I apologize to you Leferic-lord, but I will pay no bloodprice.”

At this the blond giant paused, and waited for Leferic to acknowledge his refusal with a nod before he went on. “We brought this man here to face justice. If I had not had a knife, or if my friends were not with me, no one would have come. The villagers did not want us to take him, and your men of the court lied when they said what hour I should come to bear witness. They said to come at dark, and here it is not yet noon, and this man stands before you. For this I accuse your court of lies and cowardice, Leferic-lord.”

“Have you anything else to say?” Leferic asked. When Cadarn shook his head, Leferic turned to the round-faced man who stood unbowed before his chair. “You, Lusian of Littlewood. You stand before this court accused of murder. What have you to say?”

The stout man blinked, seeming surprised to hear himself addressed. “Begging your pardon, lord?”

“What have you to say?” Leferic repeated, steel in his tone. “Defend yourself if you will. Claim innocence if you can. Otherwise all the court need consider is the word, and the honor, of the man who has named you guilty of a crime.”

“But I never did a crime.” Lusian sounded genuinely bewildered. He rubbed his hands together, more perplexed than nervous. “They killed your brother, milord. His wife, and his little boy. They owe us blood. This big fellow here, talking about how shamed I should be to kill a girl and a boy who ain’t had his first sweetdream—begging pardon for my coarseness, lord—well, their people killed a baby wasn’t out of his swaddling. Where’s their shame? Where’s someone hauling them off for justice? And anyhow they were on our side of the river, and like as not they were spying, so I don’t see how what I done was a crime at all.”

“The court does not agree.” Leferic raised his voice to be heard over the second wave of muttering that swept his hall, this time with a darker current of discontent. “I loved my brother dearly. I mourn every hour for his death. But the murder of children will not soften that tragedy. Killing will not undo killing. We have no proof that my brother died at Langmyrne hands. We are mindful that they lost a village of their own. Until we have something more than suspicion—until we know that Langmyr spilled Galefrid’s blood—we must believe that their children are only children, and innocent of this sin. This court holds you guilty of murder, Lusian of Littlewood. Make your peace...
with the gods. In the morning you go to the block.”

The noise in the great hall swelled to an uproar, and abruptly Leferic could stand it no longer. He stood and stalked off the dais, leaving the pennons on the walls fluttering in his wake. He had no clear idea where he was going, only that it should be somewhere quiet, away from his liegemen’s hatreds and Lusian’s sins and the weapons that hung over the great hall’s torches, marking decades of bloodshed with grim trophies. It was no surprise when his feet turned toward his tower library, following the same unerring instinct that brought pigeons to their dovecotes and silverbacks to their streams. Home.

He hadn’t visited the library since learning of Galefrid’s death, and he returned to find the room cold and gray. A damp lingered in the air. Leferic struck a spark to the logs laid in the hearth, tending the tiny flame with twigs and dried thistledown until it was strong enough to take.

Straightening, he looked over the shelves of books that lined his tower walls. They were his oldest friends. Apart from Albric, they were his only friends. Some were ancient relics, crumbling where they stood; they had survived generations of neglectful lords who let mice gnaw their bindings and dust dull their covers until Leferic could hardly read the titles they had once borne so proudly. Others were his personal acquisitions, imported at great expense from Calantyr and Mirhain and, in one or two prized instances, the scriptoriums of the Ardasi Empire.

Most were bound in leather, dyed red or green and adorned with thin-beaten gold leaf. A few were made of stranger materials: thin-cut vehrwood, dark as bitter tea; pressed and woven leaves that still held a whisper of Nebaioth’s sunny fragrance; one covered in what the merchant had sworn was dragonhide, although Leferic suspected that the scales really came from one of the great golden crocodiles of the Bilewater.

The books held the collected wisdom of the world. Musings from scholars whose bones were long dust, though their thoughts lived on in the pages; histories from lands no longer to be found on any map outside their own covers; secrets of great religions and smaller, ferociously secretive cults. Leferic owned nearly three hundred books. He knew, without false pride, that a better library was not to be found closer than Craghail. It was his life’s glory. Yet there was nothing in any of them to help him now.

In all his library there was nothing to guide a usurper who’d murdered his brother and nephew for the throne. Not that it hadn’t been done—the histories were full of that bloody tale, retold across the ages in a dozen lands, a hundred castles—but it hadn’t been admitted. Not by anyone who kept his throne. Only the failures were recorded, properly condemned, and he had already committed those lessons to heart before taking the first step of his plan.

At that moment he missed Albric sorely. The laconic swordmaster would have listened patiently to Leferic’s doubts and helped him reason his way through the tangle to the right solution. Without him, Leferic was lost.

He did not want war. He knew that to a certainty.

War was a sickness in the border holds. From time to time it flared and the fever took all Oakharn and Langmyr, bringing great armies to clash against the river and stain its waters red. But lords further from the Seivern’s banks had the luxury of being able to pull back when their armies were exhausted. They didn’t have to fight on their own fields; they didn’t have to watch their peasants’ homes burn in enemy raids or their granaries empty into the locust mouths of visiting hordes. They could go home, and when they did, they could leave the violence behind.

They’d leave Bulls’ March with it, burned and trampled and festering with a thousand new wounds. They’d done it time and again, down a long road of years back to Uvarric’s Folly.

That was the root of the hatred. It had flowered in a hundred different branches since then, each one bearing noxious fruit, but all the enmity between Oakharn and Langmyr came back to Uvarric’s Folly. Power, and the lust for power. The same greed Leferic had … but Uvarric had never committed so grievous a sin as fratricide for his, and had paid a far higher price than Leferic meant to suffer.

Over a century ago, redspider plague swept through the Sunfallen Kingdoms, decimating its people. Noble and peasant alike fell to the disease, their deaths written in broken veins webbed red across their skin. Some said it was a scourge of the gods, sent down to punish sinners, but few really believed that. Redspider killed without distinction between young and old, innocent and murderer.

It had no respect for high birth, either. In a single season, the plague wiped out one of the largest and richest noble families in Langmyr. House Tallaine was second only to the High King’s line for wealth and power; the Tallaine had married into the palace so many times that their own blood was half-royal. Yet the disease carried them away just the same. Not a single heir was spared.

Two cousins were left with claims on Stonetage Castle, the ancestral home of the Tallaine. One, a ward of the High King in Craghail, was scarcely more than a child. The other was Uvarric Penarring, a powerful Oakharne lord whose claim came through his Langmyrne wife, a daughter of the Tallaine cadet line. Though two hundred leagues and the Seivern River stood between Uvarric and his wife’s inheritance, he was determined to have what he considered rightfully his.

Uvarric’s claim was much the stronger of the two, not only by law but by force. The Oakharne lord was a close
friend of his king’s, was rich in steel and horses, and commanded a considerable army. The rival claimant to the Tallaine lands was a child with no knights of his own. The plague had hit Langmyr harder than Oakharn, too, leaving that kingdom as a whole weaker. It was clear to everyone which way the matter had to be settled, and the High King of Langmyr saw that plainly. He accepted Uvarric’s claim. But not without conditions.

The people of Langmyr, the High King explained, did not want a foreigner as their lord. They knew and loved his wife well, but they did not know this Oakharne lord. If Uvarric was to rule in Stonegate, he would have to live there with his family and his retinue. Once he agreed to that, and swore oaths of fealty to Craghail, the keys to the castle would be his.

Uvarric agreed. He swore the oaths, kissed the High King’s sword, and took up residence in his new castle. A few hundred armsmen came with him, but most of his knights and lords stayed in their own lands. Some of Uvarric’s liegemen wedded Langmyrne wives from lesser families to seal their houses, and some took Langmyrne children as hostage wards, but after their lord was properly ensconced in Stonegate, they went home. Uvarric’s two eldest sons went with them, taking their father’s old lands to rule.

And when Uvarric was alone in his castle, and felt safe enough to drop his guard, the Langmyrne killed him as he slept. They speared his younger children to their beds and hacked his grandchildren to pieces so cruelly that the nursery walls ran red. Even the children’s lapdogs died.

Lady Penarring survived, only to be given “refuge” in a lonely tower of the High King’s castle where she could look down on the world but never touch it, nor be touched by it, again. Within a few years, grief and solitude did for her what the knives had for her husband, and she joined him on the pyres.

No one knew exactly who committed the murders. Most rumors put the blame on Lord Asoril Veltaine, who had close ties to the rival child-heir, but there was never any proof. What was swiftly proven, and what set the two kingdoms afire, was that the killers had the support of the Langmyrne throne.

The High King wasted scarcely a day before installing the child claimant on Stonegate’s throne and investing him with the Tallaine lands, with Lord Veltaine as guardian during his minority. Uvarric’s sons swore vengeance, most of the Langmyrne hostages died terribly, and the Oakharne gathered their swords to avenge the treachery in Stonegate. On the other side of the Seivern, the Langmyrne waited to meet them.

That first war raged for a decade. The Oakharne swiftly seized Seivern Ford and both sides of Tarne Crossing, then poured their armies through those two points to cut a bloody swath across Langmyr. They took a dozen castles and burned a hundred towns, and in every battle the two sides traded atrocities, each uglier than the last.

In places the Oakharne held their conquests for months, even years: time enough to try strengthening a weak hold by marriage, or to birth a few children and call them heirs. But it never lasted. Step by step, inexorably, they were beaten back to the Seivern, leaving a wake of broken hopes and broken bodies. And for a hundred years since, the cycle of grievances had ground on.

Old grudges, old claims, old wounds that never healed before the next raid ripped them raw … the repercussions of Uvarric’s Folly never ended. Its ripples never died out before someone threw a new stone to make more. Hundreds had died for Widows’ Castle alone. That was a worthless endeavor if ever there was one, but Leferic’s own brother had been too blind to see it.

Hardly anyone remembered the castle’s true name. Its fields were long reclaimed by pines and brambles. Its keep was nothing but a pile of rocks crowned by a drafty, bat-infested tower. Its only link to Oakharn was that one of the daughters of Breakwall had married a Langmyrne lord there, fifty years back during a rare lull of peace, and ruled the castle in her own name for a few years after her husband died. Then one of the husband’s brothers held a mockery of a trial, convicted her of treason, and executed her to take the castle himself. A few bards had written songs about it. One, a politically minded playwright from Seawatch, had made it a popular tragedy. That was all.

Yet not a decade went by without some fool lordling trying to retake Widows’ Castle, and there was never any lack of men willing to join up and die for no better reason than that their fathers had died there too.

_Galefrid_ had wanted to take Widows’ Castle. His _brother_ had been that foolish. They had a claim through some uncle of Lord Ossaric’s, and occasionally their father had mumbled about the castle when he was in his cups, but he’d never mentioned the precise nature of their claim or, more importantly, how anyone from Bulls’ March was supposed to take and hold the castle without an army sufficient to lay siege across the Seivern. Yet Galefrid dreamed of glory, and Widows’ Castle sang that siren promise, so he wanted it.

Even his visit to Thistlestone—the visit that was supposed to open a new door to peace—was meant as a subterfuge. Galefrid thought it would give him the chance to scout Lord Inguilar’s defenses, perhaps plan an attack later on. He couldn’t imagine any real peace, only a pretense that he could play for advantage in war. It was Leferic who’d spread most of the rumors that his brother was visiting Lord Inguilar to seek Langmyr’s friendship; he’d hoped his lies might sow the seeds of truth. Galefrid, however, hadn’t had any interest in seeing Thistlestone until he got it in his head that he could use the journey as a scouting trip. He was completely, willfully blind to any other
possibility.

That was what Uvarric’s Folly had done to them. It buried the future under a history of hate. It was madness and
stupidity and Leferic wanted no part of it.

It was, he assumed, what had driven Lusian the Fat to murder those children.

He had known, of course, that there was some risk of hotheads shedding blood over Galefrid’s death. When
Leferic designed the plan, that had seemed an acceptable loss. If Galefrid died in a hunting accident or fell off the
parapets and broke his neck, someone might get suspicious. Where would those suspicions fall, if not on the younger
son who stood to inherit upon his brother’s demise?

But if Galefrid died across the river, and by strange and terrifying sorcery rather than an arrow in the back, that
did not look like assassination—certainly not any assassination a bookish younger brother might plot. It looked like
an attack by Ang’arta. Who but the Spider could command the Thorns? Who but the Thorns could inflict such a
slaughter? Bloodmist was their weapon. Thousands had seen its grisly work on Thelyand Ford, laying waste to the
pride of the Sunfallen Kingdoms and bridging the river with corpses. No one wanted to make an enemy of the Iron
Fortress.

Some might mutter that there was another hand in the ambush, but there had been mutterings about the Slaver
Knight, too, and no one had gone to war over that. Lord Ingular of Thistlestone was not one to call his knights to
battle over a few lost peasants. Ingular wanted peace badly enough to swallow his suspicions for it; he’d shown that
five years ago, when they’d handed him the Slaver Knight and he’d asked for no other names. He’d reinforced it
with his eagerness to let Galefrid visit him under a peace-banner. The man had little stomach for war.

Leferic, in turn, had predicted that he should be able to keep his own people from blaming the Langmyrne for the
deaths. There might be a few isolated incidents, but the killing was so clearly a Thorn’s work that he didn’t think
anyone would truly believe Langmyr was to blame. A few fools might claim otherwise, might even kill a
Langmyrne peasant or two, but there would be no war over it. Anything less was a price he could pay.

Sitting on that chair, though, and listening to Cadarn make his accusations, Leferic had become uncomfortably
aware that accepting a loss in the abstract was one thing. Having it thrown in his face was another. He’d sent fat
Lusian to the headsman, but the guilt was his as much as the condemned man’s. More so, truly. Lusian had killed
two children, but how many had died in Willowfield? Leferic had never even thought to ask.

What did that make him?

A ruler, he decided. The people of Willowfield were necessary sacrifices to cover his tracks and divert suspicion.
If both sides suffered losses, neither would leap to accuse the other, and war could be averted. Their deaths,
therefore, were not wasted. Many more might have died otherwise.

Lusian’s killings, on the other hand, were wasteful, and so he had been justly punished.

It was a neat bit of sophistry. It did nothing to soften the corrosive knot that sat in the pit of his stomach.

The truth, Leferic thought, was that he was not as cold-blooded as he wanted to be. Needed to be. The truth was
that he was wracked with guilt over the needless deaths and desperately afraid of what he had set in motion. What
had been elegant and tidy in the controlled abstraction of his plans had to unfold in the living chaos of the world,
where the smallest mistake could cause catastrophe. It terrified him, and the fact of his fear frightened him anew.
Now more than ever, he needed to be flawlessly calculated.

The murder of those two children, left unpunished, could have been the spark that set the Seivern on fire. He’d
stamped it out, but there would be others. His fate rested on how he dealt with them.

Too soft, and the Langmyrne would be outraged. The massacre of Willowfield put them very near the edge; Leferic
was loath to test them any further. Lord Ingular had turned a blind eye to the Slaver Knight’s conspirators,
true, but his patience had to have limits. He wasn’t eager for war, but that didn’t mean he couldn’t be forced into it.
At some point—and Leferic feared he was very near that point, if not already past it—Eduin Ingular would have to
answer with fire and sword.

Too harsh, and his own knights would rebel against him. If that happened, it would hardly matter whether Albric
found and removed his infant nephew. Dozens of landless knights and petty lordlings could claim some distant
connection to the rulers of Bulls’ March, enough to take its throne if Leferic proved unfit. They wouldn’t need
Galefrid’s boy as a figurehead.

What Leferic needed was time. Time, calm, and swords he could trust.

With that thought in mind, he sent a servant to find Heldric.

By the time the old gesith climbed up the tower stairs, other servants had brought platters of cheese, smoked meat,
and black bread. The food tasted like dust, and the autumn ale that went with it might as well have been water, but
Leferic made himself eat while gazing through the windows at the castle courtyard. He’d need his strength.

At Heldric’s knock, he turned. “Come. There’s food if you’re hungry, ale if you’re thirsty.”

“Thank you, but I have no need.” The gesith stroked the snow-flecked gray of his beard. “That was a brave thing
you did. I hope the fates see fit to reward you.”

Leferic gave him a sardonic, disbelieving smile as he stepped back from the windowsill and returned to his favorite armchair. He left his half-eaten plate behind, but took his ale mug with him. “Was it?”

“Your lord father would not have done it. Nor would your brother. I pray that you were in the right, my lord.”

“I am not my father, or my brother. That man was a murderer. He deserves the block.”

“He was a murderer,” Heldric agreed. “But the victims were Langmyrne, and though we may not have proof, as you say, that the Langmyrne killed your brother, still most of your people believe it. Some will say you betrayed your brother’s honor and are unfit to sit your father’s chair. They will not like your decision today.”

Leferic looked at him hard, wondering if there was a threat hidden in those words. Heldric’s favorite nephew had been caught and killed on the other side of the river when Leferic was young. He had been a child then, and not privy to the details, but he remembered that Heldric’s nephew was hanged, and that the insult cut deep.

Beheading was the usual method of execution. It was still a condemned man’s fate, and therefore ignominious, but at least it was a death by the blade. There was no honor in hanging. Common criminals died that way: wretches who had forfeited their right to die like men. Even Lusian the Fat, killer of children, was granted a death on the block.

Some inkling of Leferic’s thoughts must have showed on his face, for Heldric turned away slightly and stroked his beard again. The firelight caught the shadows in his craggy cheeks and gilded the white in his beard. “Edoric was about your age. Seventeen. Seventeen, and certain he would be the one to restore the Sunjewel to our house.” He rubbed his knees as if soothing an old ache. “Instead he died. But you know that.”

“Only how,” Leferic said. “Not why.”

“The ‘why’ was a wild fancy,” Heldric said with a bare, bitter trace of a smile. “Family legend claims that long ago, when we were still House Edorrin, one of my ancestors rescued a prince of Khartoli from bandits while he was on pilgrimage. In gratitude he gave us the Sunjewel: a golden brooch set with a gem big as a quail’s egg and fiery as the Bright Lady’s heart. Supposedly it was enchanted so that no one could lie to its wearer, but without that it would still have been priceless. It was the one great treasure of our House.

“We kept the Sunjewel after we lost our title and our lands following Rhodric’s Disgrace, but in the end we lost that too. My grandfather was captured by the Langmyrne during the Fall of Widows’ Castle. His son, my uncle, carried the Sunjewel to the castle as ransom … but Lord Veltaine murdered them both and kept the stone. Later he had it taken from the brooch and set into the coronet of House Veltaine, and his grandssons wear it still.

“That is the grievance that cost my nephew’s life. They caught him trying to sneak into Veltaine Castle dressed as a serving boy, convicted him of thievery, and hanged him. I had not thought he was so foolish.” Heldric shook his head slowly. He glanced back at Leferic. “He would have done better to think the way you do. Forget the old legends, the old grudges. Forget what we’ve lost. Look to today. They murdered your brother and nephew, yet you had the forbearance to do justice by their slain children. I cannot say that I would have shown your patience, my lord, but I can admire it in another.”

“Thank you,” Leferic said, because he did not know what else to say. He set the gesith’s words aside to consider later. “But I summoned you to discuss another matter. The northerner in the great hall today. Cadarn, the one who brought Lusian to us. What do you know of him?”

“Little enough, my lord. He travels with perhaps ten of his fellows. All skar skraeli from the White Seas, all claiming to be exiles. Mercenaries, I believe. They were in Isencras for the Swordsday competitions, where I am told they placed highly in the melees, and were traveling east to seek employment in Thelyand when they were diverted by the … misfortune in Littlewood.”

“Thelyand’s battle is already lost,” Leferic said, “and King Merovas impoverished. The ironlords make hard enemies. Cadarn’s men might do better to spend the winter here. Find out where they are staying. If not in the castle town, arrange lodgings for them there. The Rose and Bull should suit. See if they make any trouble in the inn, whether they drink too much or fight with the patrons. If they are reasonably sober, and all like the man who came before me today, offer them posts in my guard. One season at good rates. Tell them that if they do not like my rule at the end of the winter, they are free to go; but I was impressed by Cadarn’s honor today, and I should like to have such courageous men at my side.”

Heldric cocked his head to the side, looking thoughtful. “Wisely played, my lord.”

“One can never have too many good swords at hand,” Leferic said, shrugging with feigned nonchalance. He doubted Heldric was fooled. Both of them knew it was not a routine matter of supplementing the castle guards.

If Leferic misjudged, and his liegemen began plotting treachery in earnest, he would need force to quell them. He dared not trust any of the armsmen in Bulls’ March that far. They’d been Galefrid’s men, not his. Outsiders, on the other hand, would have no ties that might compromise their loyalty to him, and a man who prized honor enough to personally drag a killer from Littlewood to Bulls’ March for justice was as trustworthy as anyone else Leferic could
imagine.

“Of course,” Heldric agreed smoothly. “Was there anything else?”

“No. Thank you.”

After the gesith had gone, Leferic sat alone in his library, rereading Inaglione’s *Thirteen Graces* for the thousandth time. A shrill wind rattled at the panes. He scarcely heard it, so deeply absorbed was he in the writings of that shrewd old courtier.

At last his lantern guttered low. Leferic rubbed his eyes, startled at the blackness in his windows. Night had fallen while he wasn’t watching. Morning waited, and with it the promise of another day in the uncomfortable chair.
They were seven days out of Willowfield when Odosse got her first glimpse of war.

It was a small thing, really: the burned-out skeleton of a crofter’s cottage. Its blackened timbers stood in a tiny clearing where dead leaves scattered gold over a ring of ashes. The branches of the trees nearby were singed; the fire had burned hot and high before it died.

There weren’t any bodies, or at least none they could find. A low circle of stones with a wooden cover marked the crofter’s well at the bottom of a nearby dip. Odosse smelled carrion when she lifted up the cover in hopes of filling their waterskins, but it was too dark to see what lay rotting in the well.

A skinny black-and-white dog skulked around the house’s charred bones, alternately snarling at and cringing away from them. It favored its left side when it walked, and between its jutting ribs Odosse could see the gnawed-off shaft of an arrow poking out. The dog’s fur was crusted brown in a ragged teardrop around the wound.

“Shouldn’t you shoot it?” she asked Brys the first time she saw the dog. She had Wistan on her back and Aubry in her arms, and the animal’s snarls frightened her. “It might attack the babies. The poor thing’s half-starved.”

Brys straightened long enough to shrug, then went back to breaking the cottage’s fallen beams into smaller chunks for their fire. His hands were soot-smeared to the elbows, but he’d found nothing else worth salvaging in the ashes. “If he’s lasted this long, he might live. Makes me like the little bastard. I don’t see a reason to shoot him unless he starts giving us trouble.”

“Liking him is fine, but I won’t have a hungry dog near my son,” Odosse said sharply, stepping away from the animal. It was the first time she’d raised her voice to him—the first time she’d argued with him at all, let alone angrily—but it was also the first time he’d suggested leaving Aubry or Wistan in danger.

Brys seemed to realize that too. He gave her a sardonic smile and a mocking half bow. Putting the hatchet aside, he went to his saddlebags and dug through them until he came up with a chunk of cold venison left over from last night’s dinner. He tossed the meat to the dog, who snapped it out of the air, and threw a second chunk after it. While the dog ate, Brys wiped his hands on his thighs and went back to chopping wood. “There. Now he’s not hungry.”

“Thank you,” Odosse said, although she kept her eyes on the gaunt animal and didn’t relax her grip on Aubry for a heartbeat. The dog was very thin. Two chunks might not be enough. Two babies, on the other hand …

“Where are its owners?” she asked, to take her mind from that thought.

“Dead, most likely. Maybe in that well. Not many people would shoot a man’s dog and burn down his house if they were looking to make friends.” He wiped ash off the hatchet’s blade. “These beams are cold. The leaves in the ashes have been beaten down by rain, probably the same drizzle that caught us on the road yesterday and the day before. This fire happened days ago. If whoever lived here ran away, I’d hope he’d at least have come back for the dog by now.”

“Why?”

“Dogs make better friends than people, generally.” Brys slung the hatchet into his belt and carried an armful of irregularly cut wood from the clearing. He built a pyramid of logs on a patch of ground he’d scuffed clear with his boot, set a handful of dry twigs in the center as tinder, and went back to his saddlebags for flint and steel.

“No,” Odosse said, flushing. “I mean, why would anyone kill the crofter?”

“Why does anyone kill anyone in this part of the world? Because he was from the wrong side of the river and whoever killed him was unhappy about something. Willowfield, probably. Doubt it was robbers. Not enough to interest robbers, and no reason for them to poison the well. This was done out of hate.” He struck the steel along the flint’s slanted surface as he spoke. On his third try a spark jumped into the tinder, and Brys blew gently to encourage it. Soon the light of a young fire warmed his face, and he sat back on his heels.

It was nearing dark. An owl hooted in the woods. Odosse shivered, drawing Aubry up to her chin and nestling her cheek against his warm blankets. “Do we have to stay here tonight?”

“As we have a better place in mind?”

“No. I just don’t like being so close to … to a place where someone died.” Odosse watched the dog warily. The animal raised its ears and circled around their fire, sniffing at the smoke but staying out of reach.

Brys snorted. He went back to the saddlebags, returning with a dented pot half full of venison chunks. After throwing another to the dog, he set the pot over the flames to fry the rest. “Met a man once while I was campaigning in Thelyand. He’d been to the far north, almost to the White Seas, and his company got caught out in a blizzard. Only a day from town, but that was a day too far. Half of them froze. He lived because he built a hut from the frozen
bodies of his friends, packed it over with snow, and waited inside until the storm passed. That’s uncomfortably close
to the dead. This is nothing.”

“It’s the worst I’ve seen,” Odosse said softly.

“Then harden fast, or what’s in the world will break you.” He shook the frying meat as if trying to see how high
he could throw it against the sides of the pot. “It takes strength to survive. The weak die.”

“That’s what they say in Ang’arta, isn’t it? The Baozites. That’s what they believe.”

His eyes flashed up from the fire to meet hers, and Odosse flinched back from what she saw there. For an instant
she thought he might actually strike her. “How would you know?”

“Our solaros gave a sermon on it. I think his answer to them was right, too.”

“What was that?”

“That they’re wrong. Their view is too narrow. Strength is more than force of arms. It’s compassion, courage,
wisdom. People are strong in different ways; few are truly weak. If they understood that, they’d be right—and a
good deal less cruel.”

“Pity his wisdom couldn’t protect him from the mace that smashed his face in.”

Odosse took Wistan gently down from his carrier, settling both babies on her lap as she sat on the far side of the
fire. “Is it so hard to believe that strength might take other forms?”

“What’s hard to believe is that people think compassion will save them when the wolves come howling at their
doors.” Brys speared a piece of meat on the end of a stick. He took up a length of rope and made a loop of one end.

Holding the meat out to the dog with one hand, he readied the rope in the other. When the animal thrust its head
forward to snap up the offered food, Brys snared the dog neatly in the loop and led it back to the charred cottage,
where he tethered its crude leash to a wall post.

“Thank you,” Odosse said when he came back. This time she meant it. She unlaced her blouse to feed the babies,
welcoming the fire’s warmth for them as well as herself.

He shrugged her thanks off ungraciously. After spearing half the chunks onto another stick and handing it to
Odosse, Brys sat back to eat the rest of the tough, twice-cooked meat with the same stick he’d used to lure the dog.

“Let’s say someone tries to kill those children you have at your breast. What do you do? Pray at them? Appeal to
their sense of decency? No. You fight. Hard. If you spend even a heartbeat thinking about anything else, odds are,
you die.”

“Maybe so,” Odosse said quietly, watching Aubry nuzzle against her, “but don’t you see? I’d fight for them. I’d
fight to protect them, because they’re weaker than I am and because I love them. Love protects them, and
strengthens me.”

“Pretty words from a pious heart. Best hope it’s never tested beyond that.”

“Why are you so hostile to the idea?”

“Because it isn’t true.” He jabbed his stick across the fire at her. The tip glistened with fat, hissing as it passed
through the flames. “Piety protects no one. Honor protects no one. Of all the brave and noble knights who rode with
Galefrid into Willowfield, do you know how many survived? One. Me. Because I wasn’t in the chapel. Everyone
else prayed and died, and the sinner came out alive. What does that tell you?”

“That you blame yourself for having good luck,” Odosse answered.

He stared at her for a long time after that. Then he laughed, even longer, in short harsh rasps that sounded more
like sobbing than mirth. But there were no tears, and when Brys was done laughing, he tossed his stick into the fire and
went to his bedroll without another word.

In the morning he untied the dog. They went on, and it did not follow.

Winter’s First Frost Found Them at Tarne Crossing.

To Odosse’s eyes, the town was very nearly a city. She had never seen a settlement so large. Walls of mounded
earth and sharpened stakes ringed Tarne Crossing, reinforced by wings of stone along the water. At the town’s
center, a tower of stone and wood rose from an earthen mound to overlook the surrounding land.

Two high bridges of pale stone arched over the wide slow waters of the Seivern River to meet the town, joining
Langmyr and Oakharn across the waves. The bridges were made of the same luminous stone as the River Kings’
Road, and they shone with captured light under the cloudy sun. They were ancient when the first townsman settled
at their feet; beside them the walls of Tarne Crossing looked like a child’s scattered toys.

Graceful towers of glimmering white stone framed the bridges, two at each end. Whoever controlled the towers
controlled the crossing, for it was impossible to cross the bridges without passing between the two towers at each
side, and archers from all four had a clear field of fire across their span.

The Kingsghost Towers, they were called in Langmyr; if they had another name Odosse did not know it. Two
kings and two princes had died in those towers, and countless others not blessed with crowns and so forgotten by the
singers. The tales that survived were grisly enough. She looked away as she walked past their lacy windows.

Brys and Odosse were not taking the bridges. They had, instead, traveled in a lopsided curve northward, crossing upstream at Seivern Ford and coming back south through Oakharn to approach Tarne Crossing’s north gate. Sometimes they had walked on the milk-glass smoothness of the River Kings’ Road and sometimes on winding game trails that took them deep beneath the branches of Bayarn Wood. For nearly a fortnight they had not seen another living soul. Perhaps that was the point of taking the game trails, but it left Odosse exhausted and more than a little lonely. She was glad when the town came into view, Oakharne though it was.

The bridges of Tarne Crossing were very old, but the town itself was not. The Empire of Rhaelyand had built the bridges to join Langmyr and Oakharn when the two kingdoms were provinces under the same crown-and-sun banner. In those days, Odosse imagined, there had probably been market towns on both sides of the towers, peaceful and prosperous.

Today there was only one town, on the Oakharne side of the river, and it crouched behind its walls and spike-fringed ditches in readiness for an enemy that might come at any moment. The Langmyrne side of the river was cut bare in a wide band facing the town. Past the weedy swath of stumps, the forest rose unbroken around the white thread of the River Kings’ Road.

The Oakharne had done that. They sent raiding parties out regularly to destroy any sign of Langmyrne settlement within a league of Tarne Crossing. Not a single charcoal-burner was allowed to live that close to the river. If Langmyr wanted to try retaking the crossing, they would have to do it through a thick barrier of unsettled forest, across a killing field cut bare around the water, and over the bridges and towers themselves. There were no towns nearby to serve as supply bases, only tiny villages that couldn’t begin to feed or field an army. Villages like her own. Defenseless.

The nearest Langmyrne castle, apart from the rattling ruin of Widows’ Castle, was Thistlestone, thirty or forty leagues to the west. Everything in between was hostile or helpless. Odosse had never felt so isolated in her life.

Pennants showing a black bull on a field of red snapped from the town’s gates and the high tower at its center. The sign of Bulls’ March, Odosse knew; in this part of the world, the black bull was as ubiquitous as Lord Eduin’s ring of thistles was in hers. She was on enemy land. The thought made her hold Aubry closer. Her son was in her arms, as he had been for most of the morning, while Wistan rode in the carrier on her back.

At the gate Brys pulled something from a leather thong around his neck and showed it to the guard, then tucked it back under his shirt. They exchanged a few words, too hushed for Odosse to follow, and the gate guard let them in. She thought there was a touch of respect in the young guardsman’s face, or at least something more than the bored sullenness that had been there before.

“What did you show him?” she asked Brys in a whisper, but he didn’t answer.

He led her to an inn near the town’s north wall. A battered wooden sign over the door showed a broken bull’s horn with a handful of letters at the bottom. Odosse could not read, and the writing was so weathered that she doubted she’d have been able to make out the name even if she could. But it looked clean, and the smells that drifted from the kitchen set her stomach to growling. She hadn’t had a real dinner since leaving Willowfield.

The inn was dim and already half-full, although it was only early afternoon. Brass sunburst emblems, their rays stained dark by smoke, hung from the pillars and dangled over the windows to invite the Bright Lady’s favor. Banked fires burned in the commons’ two hearths, offering just enough warmth to ease the chill in the late autumn air. A communal kettle of bitterpine tea steamed over one of the fires, filling the room with a pungent spiciness and masking the less pleasant scents of old rushes and hard travel. One of the patrons, a short, stoil-faced fellow in the plain brown wool and folded boots of a Seawatch man, ladled tea into a dented metal cup and went back to his chair, sipping the bitter draught.

While Brys made arrangements for them to stay at the inn, Odosse took a chair in the corner. She was bone-weary, and starved for the sights and sounds of human conversation, but she felt nervous as a cat clinging to a branch over a kennel yard. One misstep and she’d be sprawled among her enemies. She could expect no mercy there.

The Oakharne she saw hardly seemed capable of inflicting such horrors. Most of the inn’s patrons had the look of locals. Their dress and their manner were very like those of Willowfield’s people; the familiarity of it brought an ache of longing to her heart. Her father liked to spend his evenings in the village tavern at this time of year, when the harvest was safely stowed away and the first brush of winter sent men looking for a warm fire and friends.

Hastily she pushed the memory away, blinking rapidly before the tears could rise to her eyes. She couldn’t think about that now. Not here. The pain was still too raw. It would cripple her if she let it, and Aubry needed her strong.

She focused on the differences instead. The speech in the taproom was nothing like that in Willowfield. Odosse could barely follow the snatches of conversation she heard. Strange that dialects should change so greatly only a few days’ travel from her home. Or, perhaps, not so strange; Odosse had never been more than twenty leagues from
Willowfield in her life, and she supposed that the same might be true for many of the people here, even in a town as large as Tarne Crossing. Each village had its own voice in Langmyr, and she saw no reason that it should be otherwise in Oakharn.

A serving girl brought her an iron key. A wooden disc painted with a red-combed cockerel dangled from the end, showing which room the key opened. That, too, brought a lump to Odosse’s throat. In Willowfield they had the same custom of marking inns’ doors with pictures, since most visitors could not read.

She nodded gratefully to the serving girl, who patted her shoulder and returned a moment later with a bowl of chicken broth, speckled with onion and carrot, and a chunk of coarse bread. Odosse dipped the bread into her bowl and fed broth-soaked pieces to Aubry. She offered them to Wistan, too, but the baby ignored them as he ignored everything outside his own delirious dreams. He’d become dangerously thin, despite her forcing milk and water down his throat, and his fitful sobs grew weaker every night. She worried about that, but she had done all she could for it and the worry was not new. They’d reached Tarne Crossing. He’d get help soon enough.

“… money to be made there, and a bit of sport besides,” said a jowly man at the next table. He was already drunk, and leaned excitedly toward the two others sharing his table. All three carried the stale urine stench of the tanning vats; no doubt that was why they had been seated at the fringe of the commons.

“Where?” asked one of his companions. That one was so tall he looked like a grown man sitting at a child-sized table. His sleeves ended halfway between wrist and elbow, and he plucked at them constantly to stretch out the difference. The ends were greasy and frayed from it.

“Littlewood. Sir Gerbrand’s put out the word. Quietly, mind, quietly, with Weakshanks still sitting his father’s chair—may Celestia send a pox on his bloodless coward’s arse. Sir Gerbrand, now, he’s a proper man. He knows we ought to be taking vengeance on those traitors for doing in poor Galefrid and his boy. We join in with him, we’ll have revenge on those baby-killers and maybe more. They say Thistlestone’s rich, and Mauverrand’s ruled by an old woman. Win enough, who knows, Gerbrand might find himself sitting the Bullmarshals’ Chair.”

The third man stirred uneasily, casting glances from side to side. “Not so loud. Someone might hear.”

The square-faced tanner made a sun sign across his chest, then looked around and laughed. “No one’s listening, you old fool. What, you think Weakshanks has his white wolves sitting in on talk at the Broken Horn?” He hawked and spat, hitting the rushes near Odosse’s foot. She pulled away uncomfortably.

The tanner saw her move and gave her a smile that showed small, ferretlike teeth. Several were missing. “Nobody listening but this girl here, and I’ll wager she’d cheer us right on. Isn’t that so, sweetkiss? You’d give a smile for some brave lads going over the river to teach those murdering Langmyrne a lesson, wouldn’t you? Maybe a little more, eh?”

Odosse smiled shakily. She didn’t dare respond aloud. Her accent would mark her as an enemy with the first word. Brys had gone out while she ate; she had no friends here.

The ruins of the crofter’s cottage and the carrion stink of its well were vivid in her mind. She hoped they couldn’t sense her fear.

She made a show of smoothing Aubry’s blankets in feigned modesty, then—praying for Celestia’s forgiveness and her son’s at once—gave him a sharp, hidden pinch on the underside of his left thigh. At once Aubry started wailing and kicking, Odosse kissed him swiftly on the head, mumbled something apologetic to the tanners that was masked by her baby’s shrieks, and escaped up the stairs away from their crudeness and their hate.

The room with the cockerel on its door was just a few steps from the stairs. As soon as she was inside, Odosse laid the babies on the bed and locked the door. She pulled out the key and tested it; the lock held. Only then did the hammering of her heart begin to slow. She rested her forehead against the door, her palms trembling over the wood.

Of course she’d known that the Oakharne would be unfriendly. She just hadn’t expected to be confronted with such bald ugliness so soon. That was all. She’d be better prepared next time. She would.

Odosse took a deep breath, let go of her fear, and forced herself to look around.

She was comforted by what she saw. The servants had laid a kettled fire in the room, and its warmth filled the bedchamber. A pan of water bubbled atop the contained fire. Folding a cloth around her hands to protect them from the heat, Odosse lifted up the pan and emptied it into the bucket of cold water sitting by a basin in the middle of the room.

There was a bowl of cracked yellowish soap too. She’d missed that luxury. When the water was comfortably warm, she unwrapped the cloth from her hands and dipped it into the bucket, stepping into the basin to wash. She sponged the road’s dust off, then soaped her hair and sluiced the remaining bucket-water over herself and into the basin.

The bath made her whole again, as if she’d washed off the tanners’ hatreds along with the road’s filth, and tending to the children calmed her nerves. She cleaned and changed both babies, soothed and suckled Aubry, and forced milk down Wistan’s throat, burping him between each mouthful, until he would take no more. Then, exhausted, she
curled around the babies on the bed and let herself drift off to sleep. Aubry’s crying woke her around dusk. Brys was sitting on a straw pallet on the floor, changing his boots; his hair was wet and a second empty bucket stood by the basin, so she guessed that he had come in and washed while she slept.

“Where did you go?” Odosse asked while she checked over her son. Aubry seemed fine, just restless. She wished she could say the same for Wistan. His lips were dry and the skin under his eyes sagged like an old man’s. The soft spot on the top of his head was sunken, too; she could see faint shadows pooling there.

“Into town. Needed a new pair of boots.”

“Did you learn anything?”

“Not much. No one knows who did the killings at Willowfield, though most have as many theories as lice crawling through their heads. Worth about the same, too.”

“What about the Blessed? Did you get help for Wistan?”

Brys grunted, tying the laces on his new boots. He stamped them as he stood up. They were better than the old ones, with a band of tooled leather about the tops that looked peculiar against the plainness of his other clothes. “Blessed Andalya left Tarne Crossing. She’s gone to Bulls’ March to see to old Ossaric. They say he’s on his deathbed, so I suppose they want to see if the Blessed can save him. No one knows when she’ll be back. I doubt even Celestia’s Blessed can heal a heart broken by grief, so if he doesn’t get better or die soon, she may be gone for a while and for no good cause.”

“Then—then what will we do?”

“You can do whatever you like. Try to stay out of trouble.” He swept on his travel-stained green cloak and fastened it with a copper brooch that Odosse had not seen before. Gems glittered on the brooch, the same bright emerald as his eyes. “I am going to see if Mistress Merrygold’s whorehouse is as warm as I remember.”

IN THE END ODOSSÉ DID NOT go out at all. She had no stomach for facing anything like the tanners’ conversation again. She had the inn’s servants bring up a roast and fresh bread, then spent the evening telling stories from her own childhood to the babies. Aubry seemed to like the ones about Sir Auberand and the Winter Queen the best, perhaps because the knight’s name sounded like his own. Those were her favorites as well; she’d named her son for the knight of the tales. Watching him smile, Odosse promised silently that he would, someday, have the chance to reach greatness to match his name.

Eventually Aubry let himself be soothed back into slumber, and Odosse was left with nothing to do. She went to the window, hoping to watch the life of the town beneath her, but her window overlooked the stables and there was nothing to see.

Her eyes fell on Brys’ saddlebags, heaped carelessly by his pallet. She knew so little about her companion. He had barely spoken to her on the road. They’d spent days with no one else for company, and at the end of it she knew little more than she’d learned that first night in the broken tower.

It was not in Odosse’s nature to pry … but, she told herself, this near-stranger held her life and Aubry’s in his hands, and she owed it to her son to learn more about the man to whom she had trusted their safety. With that thought, and a wary glance at the door, she unlaced the first of his bags.

There wasn’t much in it. Dirty clothes, spare socks, a dice cup. A small leather-bound book that she recognized as a prayerbook by the sunburst etched on its cover. Knives and a sharpening steel. A ball of tough waxed thread with two needles stuck inside.

The second bag held more of the same. And, wrapped inside a torn shirt, a small pouch of red silk exquisitely embroidered with gold and ebony vines. The embroidery was stained and fraying, but the quality of the thread still shone through, and the fineness of the stitches bespoke a master’s hand. That pouch, Odosse thought, must have been stitched by a highborn lady. Who else could possess such skill?

Inside the pouch was a medallion of deep blue enamel edged and backed with gold. A proud black unicorn reared at the center of the emblem, and there were words in flowing script on the back. The medallion hung from the same leather thong that she had glimpsed around Brys’ neck when they passed through the gate.

That was a knight’s medallion, Odosse knew, although the mark was foreign to her. Knights received them from their lords when they swore their oaths of fealty and were anointed to the sun; they were noble gifts, passed from father to son or won by great valor. All the stories made mention of the emblems their heroes wore, and many tales concerned the grave dishonor that befell a knight who lost his medallion.

Brys didn’t seem terribly concerned about his, but then he didn’t seem to think himself much of a knight, either. Odosse put it back carefully, wondering whose sign the rearing unicorn was. Her fingers brushed something else beside it.

She drew out a silver locket adorned with filigree in the same design of vines and flowers as that on the pouch. A
tiny latch secured its cover. She eased it off with her fingernail and opened the locket to reveal a miniature portrait inside.

The portrait was that of a young woman. Candlelight distorted the painting’s colors, casting them all in a sheen of rich gold so that Odosse could not tell the true shade of her hair or skin. The woman in the picture wore jewels, and around her shoulders was a dress edged in lace fine and frothy as cream. She was beautiful, whoever she was, but unless the painter’s brush lied, there seemed to be a quiet sadness about her eyes.

Odosse did not think Brys would keep a portrait that lied. She snapped the locket shut and slipped it into the pouch, then wrapped the tattered shirt around it and stuffed it all back into the saddlebag.

The locket left her feeling vaguely melancholy. So he really was a knight. Presumably the woman in the painting was his lady-love; she was beautiful enough to be. As Odosse was not—but that was a ridiculous thought. She’d never expected anything like that anyway. Not of Brys.

Still, it stung a little to think no one would ever carry her portrait in a locket. Beautiful women inspired such devotion. Ugly ones did not. That was a simple truth of the world.

She kissed Aubry on his brow and lay beside her son on the bed, but sleep refused to come. The candles burned low and died one by one. Outside the moon rose, casting ripples of light through the poor glass. Wind rattled at the eaves and whistled through gaps in the panes, bringing a whisper of winter into the room.

Odosse lay restless under linen and thick wool and thought about Aubry’s father, the boy she’d once believed she loved. The boy she’d once believed loved her: Coumyn, the wheelwright’s second son. In the summer of her sixteenth year he had courted her with flowers and stolen kisses behind his father’s workshop. No one had ever given her flowers, or wanted to kiss her, before.

She thought about how sweetly shy he’d been when they crept into the hayloft together, his hands shaking as he undid the laces of her blouse and his breath smelling faintly of milk when he gasped atop her. And how cruel he’d been, after, when her belly began to swell and the entire village gossiped about who the father might be. Who could have been so desperate, so low-reaching, as to get a baby on the baker’s ugly daughter?

Odosse wondered which was the real boy: the one who whispered sweet promises in private, or the one who jeered her in public, telling his friends that her baby would surely be born half pig, because no man would have her.

She’d hated him for a long time after that. She’d never named the father, not to her parents or the village solaros or anyone, because it was better to raise the child alone in shame than be yoked to someone like Coumyn in marriage. Bastards were hardly unknown in the village, but a girl who found herself pregnant with no husband on the horizon could expect mockery, ostracism, maybe beatings from her angry parents. It hurt her marriage prospects, and Odosse’s prospects had never been good. But being alone was better than being with someone who didn’t want her.

The love her parents had shown her then, and the shame they hid, broke Odosse’s heart to remember. Her mother had dusted off her old cradle, and her father had whittled wooden toys in the scant slow moments at the bakery, and neither of them had ever asked her again, after the first time, what she intended to do about the father. They’d simply accepted, with a grace and generosity that few others in Willowfield would have shown, that their grandson would have none.

She’d hated Coumyn for that too: for putting such strain on her parents’ love because he had none of his own to give her.

Now, though, that hatred was gone. He was dead by no fault of his own, and it was a crueler fate than he deserved. Remembering Coumyn felt like probing at a sore tooth that had fallen out and finding only a gap where the pain had been: an instant of surprise, even though she’d known the hole was there, and a curious sense of desolation at missing the sting. Thoughtless and spiteful as he’d been, he’d given her moments of tenderness, too, and his death left her that much more alone in the world.

No, she couldn’t hate him. He was gone, and his sins were for the gods to judge. Odosse touched Aubry’s tiny hand; he stirred in his sleep, closing chubby fingers around her thumb. She whispered, kissing his head: “It doesn’t matter. I have a good son.”
That night Brys set out to get robbed.

He didn’t want it to happen too close to the Broken Horn. If he was lucky, his robber might know something about what had happened in Willowfield. If he was very lucky, the robber might actually have been there.

Though most of the killers were probably from Ang’arta—few except Baozites were willing to work with the Thorns—the ambush itself showed the touch of a local hand. How else could they have known exactly which tiny hamlet Galefrid would choose to pray in, or approached without alerting the knights? Someone local had to have helped them. It wasn’t too far-fetched to think that a man desperate enough to sell his village to Baozite reavers might seek refuge across the border in Oakharn for a while, and once there might waylay the odd traveler for money.

Brys didn’t expect to be that lucky. But if he was, he didn’t want to drag Odosse or the children into the firestorm that would surely follow. The girl was braver and tougher than she realized, but she wasn’t made for the kind of trouble he meant to find.

So he turned away from the Broken Horn and followed the river wall until he came to another knot of taverns in the shadow of Tarne Crossing’s shining bridges.

They looked vaguely familiar, though Brys wasn’t sure that he’d set foot in any of them before. After a while, one raucous pit of ruffians looked much the same as the next. What mattered was that they were raucous vice-pits, and therefore exactly what he was looking for. Brys sauntered through the nearest door, whistling an old war song and jangling a handful of dice.

He’d left his honest dice in his saddlebags. These dice were for cheating.

The tavern was a smoky den of laughter and curses, rank with the smell of soured dreams. He didn’t see many locals, which was a promising sign: this place was for strangers and those who preyed on them. Most of them were armed but not wealthy, outfitted in battered leather and the scroungings of a half-dozen battlefields. Brys’ good boots and the gleaming glass gems on his brooch immediately marked him as rich, at least compared to these men, but not enough to be high-born or otherwise troublesome.

He took a moment to gauge which of the dice games had the most money on the table, drew up a chair without asking, and tossed a silver sol into the pot to forestall any complaints. Then, methodically, Brys set about losing money.

While he gambled away copper threepence and silver solis on bad rolls, he listened to the talk at the table. Cross-eyed Ludd was bemoaning the loss of his father’s sword at the card table—an old complaint, judging by the groans that met his story—while baby-faced Renshil, gifted with a disarming smile and too-quick fingers, swore up and down that he’d never had such luck with the dice. Liars and fools, all of them, telling the same stories as liars and fools the world over.

When he asked about Willowfield, feigning an idle interest in finding mercenary work there, he got more lies and foolishness.

“Bloodmagic,” Renshil said, spitting into the rushes. “Who knew the Langmyrne were that depraved? They say it’s his wife, that Ardasi witch, she’s the one who practices the dark arts. Put Lord Inguilar under her spell and bent him to even blacker deeds than he’d have done on his own. She used her sorcery to murder Sir Galefrid and stole his baby to sacrifice on her altar … to Kliasta, or Maol, or some southern fiend-god.”

“If I had my father’s sword, I’d show them what for,” Ludd said.

“I thought it was the ironlords who used bloodmagic.” Brys tossed another sol into the pile of coins and watched Renshil short-roll the dice to take it. The man wasn’t even a subtle cheat. He was drunk, too, and getting sloppier as he drank.

“You think the Golden Scourge is the only one who can bring a witch over the sea?” Renshil snorted as he swept the coins into his pouch. He set a single sol back in the center to start the next round. “Anyway, you’ll find no work in Bulls’ March. You might be the best swordsman this side of Nhrin Wraithborn, but Weakshanks isn’t looking for local swords. Oh, no. Not good enough for him. He’s emptied his treasury on a pack of white wolves.”

“No good?” Brys asked.

“Exiles, I heard. Criminals, most likely. Makes you wonder why Weakshanks needs to put his trust in a lot like that instead of his own sworn knights, eh? Makes you wonder.”

“What I’m wondering,” Brys said, “is why my luck’s so bad at this table.”

Renshil squinted at him, but seemed to decide after a moment that the words weren’t an accusation. He shrugged
and tossed the dice, honestly this time. “The Gilded Lady’s a fickle love.”

“That she is.” As Brys had expected, the hint of a threat kept Renshil from cheating on the next few rounds. He took the opportunity to win back most of his silver, upping the stakes on each round as he set the dice between his fingers, angled them just so, and released them in quick, controlled spins. “Speaking of fickle loves, any places around here you might recommend?”

“Mistress Merrygold’s the one to see—if you can afford her prices. Ardasi training don’t come cheap. Lilli Redskirt runs a fine house for the rest of us.” Renshil squinted at the spinning dice. Plainly he suspected Brys of cheating, and just as plainly he couldn’t work out how.

Brys could almost pity the man. Instead he pushed the tavern’s dice aside and pulled out his own. “I don’t like these dice. They’ve been turning against me all night. Think I’d rather play with my own.”

Renshil licked his upper lip nervously when he saw the new dice. They were carved from soft golden copal, and they shone like burnished gemstones in the torches’ glow. Brys had sweated them under a sunlit glass to weight them to a winning hand, and he’d deliberately done so clumsily enough to make the fraud apparent. Any novice cheat would know to look for that trick, and even one who didn’t know about copal would suspect something amiss about the exotic, jewellike dice that always seemed to turn up lucky eights.

“Lost your stomach for the game?” Brys asked, staring steadily at the other man.

“No.” Renshil’s tongue darted out and touched his upper lip again. “No. Let’s play.”

They played three rounds, long enough to force out the handful of honest players at their table and for even dim-witted Ludd to realize that something was wrong. Renshil’s expression grew darker with each throw of Brys’ that came up lucky eights.

“Might accuse you of cheating,” the baby-faced man said after losing the last of his night’s winnings and half his own stake on yet another turn of eights.

“Might accuse you of the same,” Brys replied.

Silence fell over their table, tense as the stillness before the break of a storm. Ludd edged away, muttering apologies heard by no one but himself. Renshil looked Brys over sullenly, his hands clenched under the table.

Though Brys was unarmed—ostentatiously so, having left his hatchet and hunting knife at the Broken Horn as part of his plan to get robbed—he was still a head taller than Renshil and nearly half again the smaller man’s weight, all of it muscle. The calluses on his sword hand and the scars on his knuckles left little doubt as to how he used that muscle.

Beer hadn’t given Renshil that much courage. He sank back into his chair, deflated. “No need for that. But I won’t be playing with you no more, neither. Take your dice and go.”

Brys did. He took a short walk to clear his lungs of the tavern’s smoke and relieved his bladder in a dark alley, listening all the while for footsteps behind him. But Renshil never came out to take revenge for his humiliation and lost money, so Brys went to another tavern to cheat and be cheated again.

Twice he repeated the pattern, and twice more his victims failed to confront him after he took their money, loudly accused them of fraud, and lingered invitingly in shadowed alleys outside. Finally, disappointed, Brys took his winnings and started east through the sleeping town, heading for Merrygold’s brothel. He’d won more than enough for what he needed, so the night hadn’t been a complete waste.

It was well after midnight when he reached Mistress Merrygold’s gilded doors. Glossy-leaved camellias surrounded her house, long bereft of flowers but still fragrant. Supposedly Mistress Merrygold had brought the plants with her at great expense from her home city of Amrali, where they marked the Houses of the Camellias—not mere brothels, as in the north, but shrines to beauty and sensual delight where courtesans practiced music, dancing, and the carnal arts with same dedication that Blessed devoted to their prayers. In Ardashir, courtesans began their training in early childhood and were regarded as artists to be honored, not whores to be used. Even girls from noble families visited the Houses of the Camellias for training; the Ardasi regarded it as a normal and necessary aspect of refined femininity, and looked down on those who did not cultivate their appreciation of the senses.

Attitudes were considerably different in the Sunfallen Kingdoms, but Merrygold had done her best to armor herself in the symbols of her homeland. In places she’d resorted to minor frauds to accomplish that. The camellias looked exotic, but they were from southern Thelyand, brought to this place on rumbling wagons instead of Amrali’s white-prowed ships. The gilded fretwork on her door looked worthy of any Ardasi palace, but it had been carved by a local artisan following her drawings, not a wizened Khartoli master. Probably she’d faked a hundred other things Brys didn’t know about.

Even knowing what he did, he had to admit the effect was impressive. Every aspect of her house and her person was calculated to convey wealth and refinement, and it worked a peculiar intimidation on her visitors. Hardened killers, walking up to Merrygold’s door, shook the dust from their boots and combed their hair into order. Nobles courted her more avidly than they did their brides. Those who didn’t care to enter her charmed circle still treated her
with wary respect, because so many others did, and she exercised some degree of power through her patrons.

It was a long, strange road that had taken Mistress Merrygold from the perfumed pleasure houses of Ardashir to this rude northern kingdom. She was as out of place in Tarne Crossing as a swan in a pigpen, and he’d never thought she’d stay in Oakharn longer than a season, yet here she was, flourishing.

Despite the hour, music and laughter trickled through the diamond-paned windows of Mistress Merrygold’s house. A young guard wearing a red sash shivered outside her door. The red sash was another token of her origins; guards at the Houses of the Camellias wore them, and not much more. In deference to the northern climate, Merrygold let her guards have leathers and woolen cloaks to go with theirs, but she made them wear the sashes to signify that hers was no ordinary brothel.

“Merrygold in tonight?” Brys asked the guard.

The young man stiffened, then nodded. He was about twenty, very handsome, and obviously besotted with his mistress. Merrygold was shameless about taking good-looking young men in for “training,” and Brys couldn’t really begrudge her. It was cheaper than paying them wages, and there were worse ways for a man to spend a year or two of his youth.

“Good,” he said, shouldering past. Halfway through the door, he paused and glanced back. “If anyone comes looking for me, come in and get me. Don’t let them in. Wouldn’t want to ruin her nice carpets with blood.”

The young guard blinked and nodded again, plainly startled, but Brys was already inside.

Half a dozen young women in diaphanous silks and sparkling glass jewels lolled around Merrygold’s parlor. Two of them were teasing a pair of young knights wearing medallions marked with Lord Ossaric’s black bull. Another played a card game with a plump man old enough to be her father, while a fourth strummed lazy, rippling chords from a silver harp in the corner and cast dreamy glances at a dour Seawatch merchant covered from head to toe in drab black wool. The merchant never cracked a smile, despite the girl’s lovely dishabille, but he was scarlet to the ears.

Merrygold watched over her domain from her informal throne: an exotic chair that resembled a shallow, cushioned bowl perched atop a circular wicker frame. Its cushion was burgundy velvet with gold silk tassels dangling from its seams; the wicker frame was covered in gilt, and a great fan of iridescent peacock feathers rose up from its back. The chair, too, was supposed to have come from Amrali. It was one of the strangest pieces of furniture Brys had ever seen, but Merrygold managed to make it seem alluring rather than absurd.

“Jadhavi Merrygold,” he said, striding toward her with both hands open. “You’re lovelier than ever.”

“Brys Tarnell,” she replied, standing with sensuous, liquid grace. Her black hair tumbled behind her, falling in a mass of dark curls to the small of her back. “I thought you were dead.”

“Sorry to disappoint.”

“You never disappoint.” She smiled, taking his hands in a semi-formal clasp. Jadhavi Merrygold was tall for a woman; her head came up past his chin. Her eyes were green as new leaves, paler than his, and flecked with gold. She’d lined them with kohl to accentuate their slight slant and dusted mica on her eyelids to draw out the sparkle. A dagger-shaped pendant of peridot on a golden chain gleamed between her breasts.

“Glad to hear it. Then you won’t mind coming upstairs with me for a bit.” He saw her hesitate. “I have money. I’m sure your girls can handle themselves for half an hour.”

“Half an hour might be flattering yourself,” Merrygold murmured, but she led him up the stairs.

Screens of pierced sandalwood covered the doors on the second floor, lending an undercurrent of eastern spice to the mingled fragrances of women’s perfume that filled the brothel. The woodworking was very good, and very expensive.

“These are new,” Brys observed as they passed.

“Fortune has been good to us.” She slipped a silver key into a small, discreet lock concealed behind the sandalwood screen of a door at the end of the hall, opened it, and gestured for him to enter. After he did, she followed him in and locked the door again behind them.

It was an Ardasi tea room, not a bedroom. A lacquered parquetry table stood in the center, surrounded by colorful silk cushions. An alcove in one wall held a tea set in the deep sea-green shades of the finest Khartoli porcelain.

That porcelain was worth more than its weight in gold. Brys let out a low whistle. “Fortune has been good to you.”

Merrygold followed his glance to the tea set and shrugged. “It is a safer place to put my money. Any thief knows to take gold or jewels, but none here recognizes the worth of selas amat. All these barbarians see is a set of training tools for my girls.”

“Are you training them in selas dun?” His eyes crinkled in amusement.

“Of course. Most of these girls are poor and unlettered. They will never make true courtesans, I fear, but that is no reason to keep from teaching them a few graces. It gives them dignity and stokes men’s desire … so I can raise my
prices and do honor to my art at once.”

“Ever the romantic, that’s my Merrygold. Speaking of romance, I have something for you.” Brys held out the bag that contained most of his winnings for the night.

Merrygold took the bag deftly, weighed it in her palm, and slipped it into a hidden fold of her dress. She dropped the velvety allure from her voice, sounding simply tired and a little afraid. “What do you want? I don’t have any news about Veladi.”

“This isn’t about her. Did you have any odd clients these past weeks? You or any of the tavern girls?” There were three ways a mercenary could be counted on to waste his money: dicing, drinking, and whores. Neither dicing nor drinking had turned up any useful information, so that left Mistress Merrygold and her kind. If she hadn’t seen anything, then either Willowfield’s killers hadn’t come this way at all, or they weren’t mercenaries.

Brys didn’t like to think about that possibility. If it hadn’t been hireswords who carried out that massacre, but Ang’arta’s regular soldiers acting under their Lord Commander’s orders …

“Odd how?” Merrygold made a little laugh that didn’t touch her eyes. “They’re all odd. Some of the things those Seawatch men like …”

“Odd in a way I’d care about.”

She bit her lip, and for a moment Brys thought she would deny knowing anything, but after a long hesitation she nodded. “A full company of freeswords stopped here about ten days ago. They paid in good silver. Took all my girls for the entire night. Some of them … some were a little rough, but no lasting damage.”

“Nothing odd in any of that,” Brys said. “Right time of year for it. Can’t think of any better way to spend silver between Craghail and Blackbough.”

“You’re too kind,” Merrygold replied with just a hint of acerbity. “The peculiar thing is that none of them was injured. They barely had a scratch to share among the whole company.”

“Silver wasn’t from Swordsday winnings, then.” An individual fighter, if he was skilled, well armored, and lucky, might come out of a Swordsday melee unscathed … but a company, no matter how good, never escaped without half its men bruised and at least one of them hurt badly.

“No.” She hesitated again, longer this time. “They were branded too.”

A weight that Brys hadn’t known was on his shoulders seemed to lift. In its place settled something colder, more familiar: an urge to kill. “Iron Crown?”

“Iron Crown.”

“Did you see their Thorn?”

“They had a Thorn?” Merrygold’s artfully painted eyes widened. At his nod, she cursed vehemently and at length.

“No. No Thorn. Only the men came here. Just for a night; they left the next day.”

“Do you know where they went?”

“No. I thought you said this wasn’t about Veladi.”

“It isn’t.” Mostly true. He’d hated Baozites long before he met her. Veladi was just one more pebble on their mountain of sins. “It’s about Willowfield.”

“Willowfield?” She didn’t bother to hide her scornful disbelief. “Do you mean to tell me that Brys Tarnell cares about some dead lord’s son?”

Brys shrugged. “Galefrid was a good employer. He made me a knight.”

“Oh, he made you a knight. Of course. Naturally you should want to avenge his death on account of that.”

“They tried to kill me too. Didn’t take. Doesn’t mean I’m inclined to forgive the try.”

“I’m sure their being Baozites has nothing to do with that.” Merrygold grimaced. Somehow even that was beautiful on her. “No, don’t try to deny it. I hear enough lies from men already.” She ran a hand through her hair, careless of breaking the painstakingly arranged waves. “One of them … one of their friends stayed behind.”

Brys tensed. “Where? Here?”

“He doesn’t stay here. He visits from time to time.” She glanced at his face and winced. “I don’t want any killing near my house. No blood, no link to me. It’s bad for business. Promise me that, and I’ll point him out next time he comes.”

“Merrygold, I could kiss you.”

“You didn’t pay enough for that.” She unlocked the door and waved him out. “Go, go. Don’t get yourself killed. Veladi has become fond of you, for reasons I shall never fathom, and I’d hate to have to tell her how I let you come to harm.”

“No need to worry about that,” Brys told her, grinning wolfishly. “It’s not me I intend to see dead.”

His mood was vastly improved by the time he reached the street. Baozites had killed Willowfield and they’d been paid to do it. He still knew nothing about their Thorn, which was a problem, but one of the soldiers might soon fall into his grasp and then he’d learn more.
Even more pleasing than the prospect of blood was the knowledge that Veladi was well. Merrygold had quite sensibly refused to let anything else slip, but she’d given him that much. Veladi was alive and well and remembered him.

When last they’d talked, she had mentioned going to Cailan. Perhaps she was out there under the same starry sky, hunting her marks under the shimmering spire of Heaven’s Needle and wearing her own face at last. Free.

He might go to Cailan himself, Brys thought. Once he was finished here. There wasn’t much call for hireswords in Calantyr, but he could find something else to do.

He was so absorbed in the thought that he failed to notice the soft skitter of footsteps behind him until it was almost too late. Evidently one of his would-be cheaters had decided to confront him after all; the steps sounded too tentative and jerky to belong to an experienced footpad. Brys adjusted his course to pass by a rich man’s shopfront, one that had glass in the windows, and glanced at the reflection as he walked past.

The glass was lumpy and pitted, and the reflection was too small to show much, but Brys got a glimpse of a skinny figure with bad posture as his pursuer passed one of the town’s night torches. Renshil.

Flexing his fists, he walked into an alley, turned toward the wall as if taking a piss, and waited for Renshil to catch up.

The smaller man paused outside the alley, just behind the corner of the nearest house. Just out of view. Brys heard him hesitate, could almost see the doubts dancing through Renshil’s head. Was it worth it? Was it really worth going into a dark alley to confront a bigger man, alone, over a dice game?

Evidently it was. Renshil crept around the last building, saw Brys standing against the wall, and lunged.

He was as bad at fighting as he was at cheating. He came straight forward with the knife in his right hand, locking his elbow as he thrust. No subtlety, no finesse. His feet told Brys where he was going even before his arm moved. Brys grabbed Renshil’s forearm with his left hand, shoving the blow wide and sidestepping in toward him. At the same time he swung his right fist into the smaller man’s gut, pivoting to add force to the punch. Renshil’s breath left him in a rush and he folded neatly in half.

Still holding Renshil’s knife arm fully extended, Brys brought his right elbow down hard on the gambler’s forearm. Bones cracked. He dropped the man’s broken arm and let him slump to the ground, then stomped his knife hand under a boot. Renshil’s fingers shattered like twigs. He wouldn’t be short-rolling any more dice for a while.

The whole thing was over in the space of two breaths. Brys stooped to pick up the fallen knife. It was cheap and dull, and he’d bent the blade a little when he crushed Renshil’s hand, but it would do.

He grabbed Renshil’s greasy collar and shoved the man against the nearest wall, tickling the underside of his chin with the knife’s point. “Scream and I’ll pin your tongue to the roof of your mouth. Answer me nicely and you might get out alive. With all your limbs still attached, even. Understand?”

Renshil nodded jerkily. His eyes flickered to something behind Brys.

That was the only warning he had. It was barely enough. A whisper brushed past Brys’ ear but he was already hurrying himself away, pulling Renshil into the space he had occupied an instant earlier. An iron-capped cudgel swung through the air where the back of Brys’ head had been an instant before and slammed into Renshil’s face. His nose vanished in a spray of blood; a tooth ricocheted off a muddy stone.

The attacker didn’t pause to glance down. He stepped around Renshil, who was scrabbling blindly across the alley and making high-pitched little noises somewhere between gasps and screams, and came after Brys.

“Not much of a friend, I see,” Brys muttered as he pushed himself backward on hands and knees. The dodge had thrown him off balance, and Renshil’s knife was useless against that cudgel. He understood why the gambler had paused outside the alley, and chuckled grimly at his own overconfidence. It wasn’t fear that made Renshil delay after all. He’d been waiting for his help.

His help wasn’t waiting for him. Keeping the cudgel slanted across his body and ready to lash out in a bone-cracking blow, the new man closed steadily on Brys. He was bigger than Renshil was, and considerably better with his weapon. The alley walls limited the stick’s range, which helped a little. That was one of the reasons Brys had chosen it for his ambush.

Brys crab-crawled back another pace and flattened his hand against the muddy earth, pushing himself up and twisting swiftly back to his feet. At once the iron-capped cudgel came whistling at him, and despite his quick step to the side it landed a bruising blow on his thigh, dangerously close to the knee. It didn’t knock him down, though, and it hadn’t broken anything. Yet.

There wasn’t much room to maneuver. The alley was too tight to squeeze past his assailant, even if he’d been inclined to flee, and Brys Tarnell was not. Instead he rushed the man, trying to get inside the cudgel’s reach.

His attacker saw him coming and took a step back, swinging hard. Brys sidestepped the brunt of the blow, bringing his forearm up fast to deflect what he couldn’t dodge. The cudgel landed hard, eliciting a meaty smack and a grunt of pain, but he’d lived through worse and now he was close enough to grab the man.
The cudgel-wielder tried to block him with the iron-capped stick, but Brys slipped an arm past it and around the man’s neck. His opponent jabbed clumsily at him with the end of the stick, but he was too close to inflict any real damage. Keeping his arm locked around the stick-wielder’s neck, Brys drove his right fist into the man’s abdomen again and again, pounding him with short sharp hooks. Soon the man was sagging in his grip, gasping for breath. One last strike to the small ribs sent him to the ground.

At the same instant a searing pain scraped along his flank. Brys swore, glanced back, and saw that Renshil had gotten up. A second knife shook in his off hand, wet with blood; the gambler swiped it in wild, drunken arcs, too unsteady to follow up on his momentary advantage.

Brys was briefly impressed. He hadn’t expected Renshil to be so tenacious. Not that it’d help him. Dodging the gambler’s wild flailings was comically easy. A solid punch to the chin, and he was back down again. A couple of kicks kept him there. The first blow was enough, really, but Brys felt he owed the man a little more in return for the shallow cut Renshil had laid open on his flank.

Wiping sweat and mud from his brow, Brys took stock of the situation. He’d been careless twice, and would be dead if these two weren’t such amateurs, but it hadn’t gone badly despite that. Renshil slumped against the wall, groaning at the gaps of his missing teeth with bloody fingers and sobbing. The other man was unconscious, but likely not for long.

He couldn’t manage two captives, especially not while wounded. The man with the cudgel hadn’t flinched from nearly killing Renshil, and Brys saw no reason to second-guess his judgment. If a man’s own friends couldn’t be bothered to keep him alive, who was he to contradict them?

“Should’ve taken your losses.” He grabbed Renshil’s hair, yanked his head back, and cut the man’s throat with the knife Brys had taken from him earlier. The blade was duller than he’d thought, but it got the job done in the end.

Brys picked up the cudgel and tucked it into his belt, then hoisted the semiconscious man back to his feet and marched him out of the alley. The fight had been fairly noisy, and Tarne Crossing was law-abiding enough that the guard might take an interest in disturbances. He could probably talk his way out of serious trouble, if he had to—being a knight carried all sorts of privileges when it came to abusing lowborn scum—but it was better not to be noticed. His immediate plans weren’t terribly chivalrous.

Limping from the blow to his leg, Brys half-led and half-dragged his prisoner to a cluster of dilapidated houses leaning against each other near the town wall. Once he felt reasonably secluded, he used the knife to rip open the seams of his captive’s shirt.

His shoulders were scarred and hairy but bore no brands. Not a Baozite. Brys felt a flicker of disappointment but no surprise; he was never that lucky.

All the ironlords were branded with the Iron Crown if they survived the breaking pits to become soldiers. It sealed their allegiance to their savage god, and it marked them as among the finest warriors in Ithelas: men to be feared. Hated, too. No one wanted to face them massed on the battlefield, but a single soldier, far from Ang’arta, could expect a swift demise—if he was lucky. The ironlords seldom deserted; marked as they were, they had nowhere else to go. There was no mercy for a Baozite caught out alone, least of all from Brys Tarnell.

This man, however, was just a common footpad. Brys slapped the would-be robber’s cheeks. “Wake up.”

“Whu—?”

Brys held the dented knife up, letting the blade gleam in the moonlight. He brought it so close to his captive’s nose that the man went cross-eyed watching it. “Bad move trying to ambush me back there. Not smart. I can only imagine what lies Renshil must have told to lure you into that stupidity. Luckily, I’m in a generous mood today. I’m giving you the chance to repent your sins, pay penance for your misdeeds, and go off into the night older if not wiser. All you have to do is hand over the proceeds of your past crimes.”

“’m not a thief,” the man mumbled sullenly.

“Of course you aren’t. You’re a robber. How many skulls have you crushed with this nice bit of oak? How many travelers have you rolled into the river with their throats slit and their purses emptied? Don’t answer. I don’t really care. What I do want to know is where you put their money.”

“Fuck yourself.”

Brys cut off his ear. It took some sawing to get through the gristly bits; what little edge was left on the knife seemed to have been blunted on Renshil’s throat. Nevertheless, after a few yanks, the ear came free. The man was bellowing like a stuck pig by then, so Brys slapped him with the bloody flat of the knife to shut him up.

“Maybe it’s the other ear that works,” Brys suggested, shrugging. “Nothing seemed to be getting through that one. Of course, it could be that neither of your ears works, and further that you won’t tell me anything worth hearing, which would mean you don’t have any use for your tongue, either. But I don’t want to leap to conclusions, so let’s try this once more: Tell me where your money is.”

This time the man told him. It was a fair amount of money; he’d been robbing travelers all autumn. When he was
finished talking, Brys nodded thoughtfully, broke his neck, and went to collect the stash.
He returned to the Broken Horn just as night’s shadows were lifting toward the grayness of dawn. The babies were sleeping, but Odosse was awake. She winced when he took off his trousers to examine the bruise on his leg. It was swelling and already livid, but it wouldn’t slow him much.
“What in the Bright Lady’s name happened to you?” she demanded.
“I got robbed.” There was water and soap so he washed the bruise and the cut Renshil had given him. The soap stung mercilessly, but the wound didn’t look too bad once he had all the blood off. The gambler’s thrust had skipped shallowly over his ribs; the most impressive thing about it would likely be the scar. When he was finished washing, Brys tore some strips of clean linen from the inn’s sheets, bound them around his ribs, and changed his clothes to sleep. The new boots were caked with mud, but they could wait for morning.
“Should I be worried?”
“You have better things to worry about than dead men.” Brys rummaged through the cloak he’d dropped by the doorway and pulled out a grubby pouch of stained leather. It held most of the footpad’s money; he’d taken out some of the silver for Merrygold, but the rest was still in there. He tossed the bag to her. It landed on the bed beside Odosse, clinking heavily.
She opened it. Coins winked inside. Odosse pulled out a silver ring worked into a design of three serpents twined around one another. One of the snakes was missing its amethyst eyes, and the creases between their bodies were dark with dried blood. “What is this?”
“You’d be surprised what you can get from robbers if you let them live long enough to tell you.” The night’s excitement was fading, and weariness was seeping in. Brys stretched out on the floor’s straw pallet and closed his eyes.
“What should I do with it?”
“Keep it. Spend it. Use it to get another room. I’ll probably have to kill a man tomorrow, and it’s likely to be an ugly death. Might be safest for you to take the children to another inn. I don’t expect the man to have friends, but if he does, they’ll be bad ones.”
“Why? What are you going to do?” Fear sharpened her voice into something like anger. “If you’re going to put my son in danger, I want to know everything.”
“Everything might take a while,” Brys said mildly. “I learned a little about Willowfield’s killers. They were soldiers out of Ang’arta, and they were paid in silver for what they did. One of them stayed behind in Tarne Crossing. Tomorrow I am going to find him, and then I will ask him some questions. If I don’t like his answers, I’m going to kill him.”
He opened one eye, just a sliver, to look at Odosse. “Now, my guess is that this man isn’t one of their company, but a local who was hired to give them the lay of the land. But this is a guess. And if I’m wrong, things could get very messy once the knives come out. If that’s so, it would be best for you and the children to be somewhere on the other side of town, pretending you never met me.”
“How will I know when it’s safe?”
Brys grinned at her. “No sense worrying about that. It never is.”
There wasn’t much left of the servant by the time they found her again. Crows had taken her eyes. A fox or a tree-cat had worried off an arm. It was too dark to see much of the flies’ work, which was a small mercy. Albric hated what maggots did to a body.

Someone should have burned her. It was only decent. It was only wise, where bloodmagic was concerned; the old traditions of oil and flame had developed during a time when dark things walked in the night and men knew what had to be done to stop them. But centuries had passed since the Pale Maiden’s faithful practiced their arts openly in Ithelas, and people in the west had forgotten that there was ever more to the burning of bodies than light and sweet incense to honor Celestia.

The servant’s corpse lay in the stables where Albric had left it the first time he’d ridden through Willowfield, his horse’s hooves wet with blood. He’d pulled the woman out to the late afternoon light, made sure she was dead, and moved on. There were so many corpses to count.

Now the body was rotted, stinking, most of the flesh on its face missing and the rest wrinkled like a soft brown apple, but it was still identifiable by the tatters of its dress and the arrow rattling in its ribs, and it was unchanged in any way that would put off the Thornlady kneeling in the straw beside it.

Albric stayed on his horse and stayed on the road. He saw no need to get any closer to Thornlady Severine’s work.

He disliked her intensely. He hadn’t particularly liked the mercenaries from Ang’arta, either, though they had done most of the killing in Willowfield and thus had been necessary to his lord’s plans. But that was a different kind of dislike. The Baozites were crude men, and cruel, but they were human. They diced and drank by the fire, they complained about cold nights on the road, and they suffered the shits after eating bad meals. He understood them.

He did not understand Thornlady Severine. He hoped he never would. There was something profoundly broken about a mind like hers, something both more and less than human. Whether that was a result of the training she had endured in the Tower of Thorns, or a trait of those who sought out such training, Albric did not know and did not want to know.

He hated that Leferic was relying on the woman. He would sooner have dangled over Spearbridge Chasm on a rotted rope than put his trust in a Thorn … but Leferic had decided otherwise, and it was Albric’s duty to obey.

Ordinarily that was no burden. Albric had neither brothers nor sons, and over the years had come to regard Leferic as a little of both; but the bond between them ran deeper than that. It was, in its purest form, the bond between a knight and his lord.

Albric knew war. He knew how to defend a line of foot against mounted attackers, how to lay sieges and withstand them, how to train a farmboy into a passable semblance of a soldier. In the past and present of the smoldering war along the banks of the Seivern River, these skills were common and necessary.

In the future, they might not be. That was Leferic’s dream, and although Albric could not grasp the full ramifications of what his lord hoped to do, he understood that he played a crucial role in bringing it to pass.

For while Albric knew war, Leferic knew rule. The scope and depth of his lord’s curiosity amazed him. It had since Leferic was a boy of five, reading the works of Inaglione and de Halle while Albric could barely piece together what the covers said. Lord Ossaric had ordered him to make a man of his younger son, as the Oakharne reckoned such things, and even though Albric had failed to make even a middling warrior of the boy, he’d learned that there might be other measures of manhood. Intellect, cunning, patience. Leferic had all those qualities. He would be a ruler such as Bulls’ March had never seen.

He should have been the elder son. Sir Galefrid was not an evil man, but he was a weak-headed one, shortsighted and undisciplined and easily led. He liked hunting and hawking better than the cold practicalities of rule. In that he was his father’s son, and perhaps his mother’s, too, to Lord Ossaric’s delight and the realm’s misfortune.

Albric had never met the Lady Nerissa, Galefrid’s mother and Lord Ossaric’s first wife. A winter chill carried her to the pyre long before Albric came to Bulls’ March. He knew, however, that Lord Ossaric had loved her and mourned her deeply. Although the lord had wed again for the sake of prudence and politics, he never found it in himself to love his second wife.

It was over twenty years ago that Lady Indoiya had come to Bulls’ March. Albric was a young knight then, fuzzy-cheeked and more than half in love with his tiny, fragile lady. She had the pale coloring of the north, with eyelashes so light and long that she seemed to watch the world from behind a veil of snow. High-voiced, fine-boned, Lady
Indoïya was delicate as a creature made of glass. Albric had adored her.

Lord Ossaric had not. He was never cruel to her, but neither was he kind; he did his duty by her and otherwise ignored her. When Lady Indoïya died trying to give him a daughter, Lord Ossaric grieved publicly at her pyre and was done. He had two sons; it was enough. He did not marry again, and he paid little heed to the son given him by his second wife.

Albric, who had never stopped loving his pale lady or forgiven Lord Ossaric’s neglect, took the boy under his own wing.

He had never presumed to treat Leferic as a son. Never. It would have overstepped his station. But over the years, as he saw the man that Lady Indoïya’s child grew into, he could not help but feel some glimmer of pride.

No, Leferic would never be a warrior. But he could be a lord. So when Leferic had come to Albric with a plan for Galefrid’s removal, the knight had swallowed his misgivings and agreed to help. Loyalty and love dictated that he do no less.

Albric had swallowed his misgivings about the Thornlady, too, though he had nearly choked on those. But duty, in the end, won out. A knight’s first duty was to his lord, and Albric’s true loyalty had always been to Lady Indoïya and her son, never to Lord Ossaric. His second was to ensure the peace and safety of his realm. Removing Galefrid had been part of that duty. Thornlady Severine, however little he liked her, was merely another.

Still, being alone in a dead village with her set Albric’s teeth on edge. He wanted this assignment done. Were it for anyone other than Leferic, he would never have agreed to it at all.

She was chanting over the body. Against his will Albric found himself listening. The syllables blended and blurred together, slipping past his understanding, but the sound of the words stirred a deep fear in his soul. It was older than human speech, that fear; it was the fear of darkness and silence stretching beyond the small safety of a fire, of terrible hungers that lurked in the night. Her chant spoke of blood and binding, and spell-crafted chains that could give shape to shades and hold them past death.

The Thornlady raised her whole hand and pricked her forefinger on the bones of the maimed one. Two crimson droplets welled up from the wounds, and she smeared them over the leathery lips and bare teeth of the servant’s skull.

A hiss escaped through the dead teeth, so softly Albric could scarcely hear the sound. It went on longer than any mortal lungs could sustain, and the Thornlady wove her chant around it, alternately coaxing and commanding. Chill white mist gathered over the half-fleshed skull, luminous and eerie as the ghost-fogs that rose from the Greymire’s marshes at dawn. The mist coalesced into a shadowy likeness of the woman whose corpse lay under the Thornlady’s hands, and Severine’s chant ended, for her spell was complete.

Albric knew, without looking, that the Thornlady’s eyes were filled with the same white mist that limned the spirit she had called. He had seen her work this magic before; he had no desire to watch it again. Flicking the reins lightly against his mare’s neck, he guided his horse back down the road.

Behind him, he heard the shade scream.

The Thornlady returned to the road some time later. Straw and windblown leaves clung to the soft black cloth of her robes; there might have been scraps of dry dead skin as well. He tried not to look too closely. Thornlady Severine was unsettling enough in herself.

She might have been a beautiful woman once. The hint of it was still there, in the slim lines of her figure and the grace with which she moved. But everything else about her was as if she had taken a knife and set to work eradicating even the memory of beauty from her form.

Her silver hair was shaved on both sides of her scalp, leaving a long, flowing crest that ran down the center of her head like a horse’s mane. Arcane runes were scarred white on the shaved skin, covering her bare scalp in strange patterns. Some said the Thornlady had cut those markings with her own hand. Albric believed it.

Severine’s left eye was gone. A sparkling ice-blue crystal, framed by a spiderweb of pale scars, glimmered in its puckered hole. The last two fingers of her right hand were gone as well—or, at least, the flesh of them was gone. The bones had been cleaned and sharpened and fixed back into place, the joints sealed together with bright silver.

They said that Thornlady Severine had done exceptionally well in her training, and that she stood high in the Spider’s favor. Albric wondered what was left of those who did poorly.

None of these thoughts showed on his face. A lifetime of castle service had made him very good at keeping his opinions to himself.

“Well?” he asked as she remounted her thin gray mare.

“She gave the baby to a man named Brys Tarnell. A knight in Sir Galefrid’s service.”

“He isn’t a knight.” Albric snorted. “He’s a jumped-up mercenary who happened to win my lord’s melee last year. I know the man. He might have been given spurs and a medallion, but he’s no knight.”

Severine shrugged, lifting her hood over her head so that the black cloth shrouded much of her strangeness. The
blue crystal of her left eye still shone in the shadow of that hood. “Be that as it may. He took the child and left her to
die.”

“Doesn’t surprise me.”

“Is he a loyal man? Where would he take the child?”

“He’s loyal to himself and whoever’s paying him—and the second man’s dead. He’d go wherever he thought he
could get the most profit.”

“Where would that be?”

Albric pondered the question. “Bulls’ March, I’d think. Baby’s only worth as much as his rank, so pick a place
where that matters. No reason to stay in Langmyr. Far as he knows, they’re the killers. Why bring them the baby to
finish the slaughter? Likely to get paid with profuse thanks and a knife in the ribs. Could go to Seawatch, to his
mother’s kin … but that’s a long way to take a baby, and winter’s near upon us. Bulls’ March is closer and safer. I’d
head there.”

“Unless you suspected treachery,” Severine said softly.

“Aye. Unless that. But there’s no reason he should.”

“A man who wins a lord’s melee is likely to be a careful one,” she murmured. “But it is as good a guess as we
have. What road would you take to get there?”

“The one we’re on. Straight to Tarne Crossing and south to Bulls’ March. But he didn’t go straight, or he’d have
gotten there before we left.”

“Do you believe he would have gone anywhere else?”

“No.”

“Then we will begin there, and perhaps find where he diverged.” She touched the mare’s ribs with her heels, and
the gray started down the road.

Albric followed, a little ways behind. “You’re a little exotic for Tarne Crossing, m’lady.”

The hooded head turned. He caught the flash of a smile over her shoulder, and the hint of laughter in her voice. It
chilled his blood.

“Not for long,” Severine said.

As autumn faded into winter, travelers became as scarce as green leaves along the River Kings’ Road. Few
dared to walk the glistening paths, and those that did traveled in groups. Too many rumors had spread about what
happened in Willowfield; even the most isolated villagers knew there was something darker and deadlier than the
usual bandits in the woods. No one ventured near the blood-soaked site if they could avoid it, and if they could not,
they went with wary eyes and ready bows.

It took a full two days for Albric to find a party suitable to the Thornlady’s needs. She had been very specific
about what she wanted, and did not seem to mind the delay. Albric, on the other hand, resented every hour that was
not spent pursuing the infant who threatened his lord’s rule. But he couldn’t hope to find Wistan without the
Thornlady’s help—not without losing more time than he was wasting on this whim—so he did as she asked.

Finally he managed to track down a small company of pilgrims going north. They had the look of devout but
ordinary commonfolk, probably making their one great vows to the Sun Garden in Craghail or the Tomb of the
Redeemer in Mirhain. Even their solaros wore simple brown clothes while traveling; the man was identifiable only
by the bands of yellow on his sleeves and a sun sign that, although it appeared to be made of true gold as custom
required, was by far the smallest Albric had seen on a priest.

The pilgrims were not completely blind to the realities of the road. They carried sturdy sticks and knives, and
three competent-looking armsmen rode with them. Albric spent the better part of an afternoon shadowing the party
in the hopes of assessing the armsmen’s skill, but nothing happened to give him that opportunity. The men carried
their weapons comfortably, kept one of their number ahead of the pilgrims and another at the rear, and bore no
lord’s emblem on their plain leather armor. Albric guessed that they were freewords, good enough to impress
travelers in need of protection but not good enough to have earned a place with a bigger company or a lord’s keep
for the winter.

Severine did not seem terribly concerned about either the pilgrims’ staves or their escort. Once she heard that he
had found a party that numbered more than five and included a woman, she lost interest in the details. All she
wanted was for Albric to show her to them. He took her through the forest, fighting down his misgivings as
autumn’s golden hour passed and sunset stained the sky red through the trees’ rattling branches.

She wouldn’t second-guess him about the straightest road to Oakharn or which of Bayarn Wood’s berries were
edible, Albric told himself. He had no business doubting the areas of her expertise. Even so her casual arrogance left
a bad taste in his mouth.

Albric considered himself a skilled fighter, and knew that to be modestly put. His father, who had trained him
since he was old enough to stand with a stick in his hands, had been the swordmaster of Ivollaine half his life. Albric himself had placed highly in the annual melees, both in Bulls’ March and Ivollaine, every year for the past twenty. Three times he had won.

And despite these proofs of his skill, Albric would have considered it sheerest folly to attack three armsmen of unknown quality alone, for no reason. He wouldn’t have hesitated if his lord’s life or the safety of the realm hung in the balance—but on a whim? With no profit in sight but a sun sign worth less than two solis?

It was hubris, plain and simple, and he wanted no part of it. Whatever happened with the pilgrims, the Thornlady was on her own.

They reached the pilgrims just as dusk stretched over the wood. The glow of firelight through the trees, warm as an ember fallen from the fast-fading sunset, marked their campsite; they had not bothered to hide their fire, or perhaps had not known how. Albric could hear their horses trampling dead leaves and browsing on whatever sparse greenery was still to be found. He slowed his approach and whispered to the Thornlady as they neared.

“Any closer and they’ll hear you. Friendly travelers don’t come sneaking through the woods. What’s your plan?”

“My plan?” she echoed. Her voice was soft as velvet, but there was no mistaking the mockery in it. The jewel of her eye twinkled like a lost star, distant and infinitely cold. “My plan is to meet a swordsman in Tarne Crossing. A very good swordsman. One who has something I want.”

Albric drew away from her, fighting the urge to make a sun sign over his chest. It wouldn’t help, he knew that, but still he wanted to invoke the goddess against her. The bitterness of bile was strong in his mouth. “Will you be needing my help?”

“No,” she said, and he had never been so glad to hear that word in his life.

“I’ll wait here, then,” he muttered. She half-smiled, slight and sardonic, and turned away, and went on alone.

Within a few steps she vanished from view. Albric saw the shadows of the night writhe and rise up around her, as if the darkness itself was her mantle, and then the Thornlady was gone. She had shown no skill at woodcraft before, but there was no sound at her passing. Only the movements of the horses and the faint drift of conversations by the fire, carried by the evening wind, reached Albric’s ears.

He huddled in the brush, pulling his cloak around him to conserve warmth while he stayed still. It was easier if he pretended that he was hunting, waiting for a deer or a fat black grouse to wander by. Not waiting for a Thornlady in the night; not lurking in the darkness while she worked some sadist’s magic on commonfolk undertaking the holiest journey of their lives. It was forbidden for any man to interfere with the vensolles, and while Albric had never considered himself an especially observant Celestian, he had been anointed to the sun and he tried to keep true to the Bright Lady’s laws as best a man in his position could. Betraying the faith in this manner brought a pang of superstitious fear to his soul. That surprised him. He thought he had outgrown that.

There was enough in this night to make any man superstitious, though. Clouds blotted out the moon and swallowed the stars, leaving the forest swathed in darkness. Ahead he saw a silvery glow rise through the trees, silhouetting them as gaunt black claws against its eerie light. The silvery luminescence was broad and diffuse, like a bank of gray fog rolling up from the sea, and it drowned the pilgrims’ fire in its depths.

He realized, after a while, that he could no longer hear the horses or the voices of men. The forest was quiet as death. Even the wind had gone still.

Stretching his legs to ease away the cold and stiffness, Albric gathered his courage and crept toward the camp. The haze of silver light faded as he stood, and vanished before he had taken two steps. Night closed around him again.

He stumbled over the first of the armsmen on his way there. It was so dark that Albric didn’t see the body until his boot hit the fallen man’s stomach. He scraped his hand against a tree trunk to keep from tripping. His breath caught in his lungs and for an instant his thoughts froze as if he were a child facing night terrors in an empty room, not a grown man who had lived near forty years under Celestia’s light and had already seen death in all its guises.

All its honest guises, anyway. There were some things in this world that honest men had no business knowing. Tonight was forcing him to remember that.

The armsman had been sitting guard some twenty paces from their fire, his back to a tree. It was a good place for a watch, Albric recognized, once he could think again; the freewords were indeed professionals. That hadn’t helped this man. His quiver was still hooded and his sword had toppled from his knees, the blade snug in its scabbard. Whatever had come upon him had done so without warning.

And hadn’t killed him. The man was still breathing—slowly, shallowly, but there was no question that he lived. Albric could find no wounds on him. His skin was cold and clammy as a drowned man’s, but his pulse was steady. A touch of warmth remained at his neck when Albric pressed his thumb to the life-vein there. The man moaned and his eyes darted under their lids, seeking escape from some terrible dream, but he did not wake.

Albric stepped over the man and continued toward the camp, making no effort to silence his steps as he came. The
campfire burned low and dim, as if the flames feared to reach too far into the night. More bodies lay around it, solid shapes in the insubstantial dark. He couldn’t tell if they were breathing.

A flare of silver light erupted before him, brilliant as the sun, when Albric crossed into the camp. He staggered back, clawing his sword free of its scabbard. Black and white motes sleeted before his vision, blinding him. Slowly the light became more bearable and his eyes adjusted, still watering. Cursing, he wiped the tears away.

Thornlady Severine stood in the center of the camp, a sphere of misty light hovering over her maimed hand. Her hood was down, and her hair shone white in the pallid glow. Her good eye was sunk in shadow, as was her mouth and the hollow of her throat, but the cold crystal of her left eye was blue and bright as ever. Around her the pilgrims and their guards slumped in nightmare-ridden slumber, twitching feebly as they struggled to fight free of their unnatural dreams.

Albric did not sheathe his sword. He felt foolish with the steel bared in his hand and no enemies left standing, but he didn’t want to let go of his blade. It was the one thing he trusted in this spell-poisoned night. “Well?”

She didn’t answer. She didn’t even glance in his direction. Instead she picked her way through the sleeping pilgrims, delicately, like a highborn lady stepping over curs on her way to a feast. When she came to the camp’s lone woman, a middle-aged matron with a careworn face under her starched white coif and a figure made dumpy by good food and a houseful of children, she knelt and cradled the woman’s head in her lap.

Then she smiled, and tilted the woman’s chin up gently, and drove the sharp bones of her maimed hand into her neck just below the ear. As her victim’s blood fountained dark across the dying fire, Severine drew a small mirror from the folds of her cloak and calmly began painting her own face with red runes. After every few strokes she wetted the small bones of her right hand in the woman’s lifeblood. By the time she finished, the flow had slowed to a weak trickle. The glistening sigils on her face and those scarred on her scalp were pieces of the same strange text, or so it seemed to Albric, who could make no sense of either.

Severine rose, shaking the woman’s head from her skirts as though the corpse were a doll with which she’d tired of playing. As she stood, the Thornlady’s svelte figure grew shorter and thicker, widening at waist and hip until she matched the proportions of the matron who lay limp at her feet. Her crest of silver hair dulled to the color of sand and spread to cover her bare, scarred scalp; the pale smoothness of her skin darkened and coarsened, gaining a fine network of lines to match the sun-carved wrinkles of the dead woman’s face. Even the glimmering jewel in her left eye was masked by her magic: between one blink and the next, Severine’s disconcerting stare was replaced by the friendly, honest brown gaze of the woman she had just killed.

“I am no longer so exotic,” the Thornlady said, and her stolen face creased in a smile.

Albric grimaced. He wiped the flat of his blade against his leg, trying to clean some unseen filth, then shoved it back into its scabbard. “Are we done here?”

“We are not.” Severine tucked away her mirror and took out a knife in a rune-marked sheath. Its blade was a faceted black crystal, flat and unrevealing under the starry light of her silver sphere. It measured the length of her hand from wrist to last fingertip. “This swordsman is a skilled one, you have told me. I do not intend to meet him unprepared.”

“Then what?”

“We will watch,” she said.

Cursing himself for a coward, he did.

They were not men anymore, the creatures that she made. Albric did not know what to call them, if indeed they had any name known to human tongues. Their hair fell from their scalps like leaves from a frost-blighted tree; their skin became hard and white as deadwinter earth. Ivory mist swirled in their empty eyes, and their jaws gapèd open with an unearthly hunger. Their nails twisted into jagged claws, and their teeth stretched into fangs, pushed out from their gums by curves of rough and bloodstained bone that made their mouths look like split rib cages. They moved with a loping swiftness that Albric knew he would see in his nightmares, if ever he was able to sleep again.

The solarsuos was the worst of the lot. Perhaps because he was a holy man, perhaps because the Thorns’ goddess visited a special vengeance on those who resisted her power. Albric wasn’t one to know. But the solarsuos died screaming, not peacefully like the others, and the creature he became was more horrible by far, for the ivory fog did not blind him. Something of the man he had once been stared out from those sunken eyes, half-veiled by a shimmer of mist the color of tarnished gold and clotted blood, and the torment in them was unbearable.

“Kill that one,” Albric said, when the solarsuos’ corpse staggered back to its feet.

“Why?”

Albric shook his head. There was no explanation he could give that she would understand. Mercy, pity, shame:
these were not concepts for which the Thorns had any use, and no one who survived their Tower kept them.

He chose a different answer. “I don’t like that one. It goes, or I do.”

She shrugged, turned toward the offending creature, and issued a command in the same inhuman speech as the chant that had made it. The thing that had been a solaros rolled its terrible eyes upward and let out a keen that might have been gratitude or agony or both. It clawed its face and fell to its knees and was still. Tortured, disfigured, but once more a corpse.

“Are you satisfied?” Severine asked.

“Not yet.” Albric dragged the dead woman’s body to the solaros’—he could not bear to touch the other—and cleared the earth around them, using a hatchet taken from one of the dead mercenaries’ packs. He piled the bodies with deadwood and dry brush for kindling, scooped embers from the campfire, and set the heap afire.

It was, he knew, only the decent thing to do. Only the wise one. The rest of Oakharn might be blind to the return of bloodmagic on its soil, but he had seen its horror and he owed its victims this much.

So Albric told himself, staring into the flames as if they could burn away the memory of what he had seen and closing his nose to the smell of burning flesh under the woodsmoke. The solaros’ body smelled of something worse. But he was not in a temple, and he had no incense to sweeten the pyre, and so he simply shut his senses to what lay before him.

Only when the blaze had taken hold of both bodies did he look back to the Thornlady, who watched him impassively with her pale corpses behind her. He’d spent hours clearing the ground and gathering wood for the fire; dawn was nearly upon them, and already there was a tint of blue on the eastern horizon. But she did not seem tired, although Albric’s own eyes burned with smoke and weariness. She did not seem tired at all.

“We have a child to find,” she said, and returned to the road.
Lord Inguilar saw the Burnt Knight to the road with all honors. His cooks filled their saddlebags with hard cheeses, boiled eggs, and wax-sealed jars of honey; his quartermaster replenished their arrows and gave them oiled, hooded quivers to protect the shafts from foul weather as they rode. Lady Inguilar insisted on rewarding Bitharn with a purse of silver for her victory on the archery field, even though Bitharn tried to explain that as Celestia’s servants they were unable to accept such prizes.

“Take it,” Lady Isavela said, pressing the velvet bag into Bitharn’s hands, “or I shall be insulted. Buy yourself some jewelry. Every woman deserves one beautiful gem.”

Bitharn took the money, but she didn’t buy jewels. She bought a new whetstone: the quarries of northern Langmyr gave up good ones, rough white on one side and soft blue on the other, so that a blade could be quickly polished free of nicks and brought to a fine edge with a single stone. She also bought an oiled horn of extra bowstrings for herself and a warmer winter cloak for Kelland. Lastly, as her one indulgence, she bought a double-stringed ardevle from a tavern singer who had gambled himself penniless and needed the coin.

It was a beautiful instrument, fashioned from ivory-hued wood and inked with twining black vines. The ink was made from the burnt and crushed leaves of the ladyspear tree, said to grow only on heroes’ graves along the cold beaches of the Thousand Rivers. An ardevle painted with such inks, the northmen claimed, would always carry the voice of its homeland in its song. To Bitharn, who had no homeland of her own, the story was irresistibly romantic.

“You don’t play the ardevle,” Kelland said when he saw it.

“I’ll learn,” she assured him airily.

They rode through drifts of falling leaves, their horses’ hooves striking broken music from the white stones of the River Kings’ Road. Bitharn never had time to try her ardevle, for they were scarcely a day’s ride from Thistlestone when she saw the first black birds circling in the distance. Carrion birds.

“Willowfield,” Bitharn said.

Kelland nodded, his mouth set in a grim line. He squared his shoulders and nudged his reluctant horse along the road. Bitharn followed him, full of trepidation.

He had trained for this, she reminded herself. Ten years he’d spent practicing swordplay and learning the prayers that called Celestia’s magic forth in battle. This was the purpose of his life, the end toward which he was Blessed: to confront the enemies that other men could not, and cleanse their evil from the world so that others might live safely.

She knew, too, that Kelland wanted—needed—to prove that he was worthy of the respect people gave him based on the white tabard he wore and the color of his skin. The mystique of the Burnt Knight was purely an illusion, and not one he wanted. Kelland hated that peasants treated him with awe and lords with fear because they attributed some imaginary magic to his blood. Nothing, he’d confided to her once, frightened him more than the possibility that he might be tested and fail before the eyes of a world that expected more from him than any mortal man could give.

Bitharn didn’t believe he could fail. Her faith in him, and in their goddess, was absolute. Nevertheless she felt a twinge of fear as they rode toward Willowfield.

Neither of them had ever faced a Thorn; she didn’t really know what to expect. The Spider was newly come to Ang’arta, her students newer still, and little was known of what they could do. Both Kelland and Bitharn had been in Calantyr when the Battle of Thelyand Ford was fought, and that was the only major conflict in which Thorns had taken the field alongside the ironlords. They’d heard the stories—everyone had heard the stories—but stories had a way of getting distorted between one teller and the next, and Bitharn had no idea how much truth was left in what they’d heard. She wasn’t especially eager to find out.

She said none of this to Kelland. He didn’t need her worry. The birds overhead were ominous enough. Black and stark against the autumn sky, the circling crows could be seen from leagues away. The size of their flocks told the number of the dead.

The wind turned as they came through the wood, and on it was a foulness worse than carrion, worse than the stink of putrefying wounds. It put Bitharn in mind of their first ride out from Cailan, right after Kelland won his spurs and swore his oaths to the sun. They’d gone to the tiny forest town of Silverpool, near Balnamoine, where a summer plague had stopped the flow of lumber across the high roads to the city. The lack of trade worried Cailan’s lords, so they’d sent for a Blessed to heal the sick.

Kelland and Bitharn had arrived to find the town already dead. Its people lay in the streets and their homes and
the tiny chapel, where the last of them had gone to pray for salvation between vomited mouthfuls of blood. The plague had killed them too quickly to spread. A small mercy, perhaps, but to this day Bitharn thought there was nothing natural about it.

There had been crows in the sky then, too, and the same stench in the air when they piled up the bodies to burn. The work had gone on for days, and the stink with it, and when they finally left Silverpool Bitharn had burned her clothes and shorn her hair, because the smell would never come out.

She expected nothing better from Willowfield.

As they came up the road toward the village gate, the first of the crows startled away from their horses. More followed, and for a moment the sky was black and noisy with wings. They did not go far, though. This feast was too rich for them to be frightened from it that easily. The crows alighted on the empty houses’ rafters—the ones that were not too charred to bear their weight—and watched from there, eyeing the intruders warily.

Bloated bodies lay piled up at the gate, hacked by blades and quilled with broken arrows. She saw men and women, a solaros in a yellow robe stiff with dried blood and soft with putrefaction, a fly-specked gray horse with its front legs shattered and splintered wood plunged into its chest. Maggots crawled through the crow-torn flesh of the dead, fat as grains of boiled barley. Flies swarmed around them in buzzing clouds, so thick that some of the bodies looked as though they had been rolled in coarse black sand. There were no good arrows left in them, she noted; the killers had retrieved those.

Bitharn wrapped a scarf around her face to keep the flies away as they rode through the broken, corpse-crowded gate. Her jennet tossed its head back and whickered at the smell, tail flicking at the insects. Kelland’s seal-brown courser, bred for the battlefield, laid its ears back but kept walking.

She stole a glance at Kelland. His face was utterly expressionless. He sat his saddle as stiffly as a statue carved from dark vehrwood, and he did not look down at the dead, but every time his charger came near to stepping on one of their outflung hands or the hems of their clothes, the knight nudged the horse aside.

There were no flies in the center of the village. No crows, either. Carrion-eaters they might be, but flies and crows were creatures of the natural world, and there was nothing but poison for them here. Corpses aplenty, but no food.

The main dirt road was dark and gritty. It looked like a clay bed the week after a storm; once soaked through, it had dried in a hard crust that crunched as it broke beneath the horses’ hooves. It wasn’t water that had drenched the road, though. The sunbaked grit stank of blood.

The thatch on the half-burned roofs was stained red and had a shellacked stain under the afternoon sun. It, too, reeked of death. The whole village did.

More bodies lay between the houses. Children. Chickens. A mother cat, in the shadow of a scorched smithy, still gripping the wrinkled corpse of her kitten by the scruff of its neck, running for a safety they’d never reached. The bodies were shriveled and painted with a fine mist of blood that had been sucked from their veins and rained back down.

Kelland swung down from his saddle. He took a handful of dirt and crunched it in his fist, letting the bloodied grains trickle through his gloved fingers. “So it is true,” he said, and there was a hardness in his voice Bitharn had never heard before. “The Thorns have come west.”

She nodded. She didn’t dismount; she did not want to set foot on that tainted earth. “Should we burn them?”

He struggled with that answer for a while, but in the end Kelland shook his head. “I wish we could. It would be right. But we don’t have time to do honor to all the dead. Nor do I want to signal our pursuit to the Thorns. I expect they will learn we are coming, if they do not already know, but there’s no need to light signals for them every step of the way.”

Bitharn nodded again, silently relieved, but they did not leave at once. Kelland wanted to pray over the dead. While he did that, Bitharn wandered through the village to assess the rest of the damage.

The carnage in the chapel was even worse than that by the gate; but here the killing had been done by sword and axe, not the Thorns’ foul magic. The air was thick with flies and decay. Ordinary things. Things she could stomach.

Bitharn dismounted and went in.

A few minutes later she came back out, clambering over the corpses piled at the door. She took three long strides from the chapel and then she leaned forward with her hands on her knees and gulped air to clear the stench from her lungs. Her eyes watered from the reek and she knew that she would never be able to get it out of her boots, but that didn’t matter just now. She wiped the back of a hand over her lips—she hadn’t vomited, but wanted to—and got back into the saddle to look for Kelland.

He was praying on his knees beside a pair of small, withered bodies. A boy and a girl, she guessed by the clothes. The bodies were in no condition to offer further clues. Shiny, blood-lacquered grains circled the boy’s head like droplets that would never dry. Bitharn waited until Kelland finished his prayers, made a sun sign over the children, and stood; then she coughed discreetly to draw his attention.
“What is it?” he asked, shading his eyes against the low sun as he looked up at her.
“Who did Lord Eduin say died here? The murders we’re investigating, I mean.”
“They’re all the same in Celestia’s eyes. But Lord Inguilar worried about Sir Galefrid, his wife, and his son.”
“And the son’s an infant?”
“In swaddling.”
“I don’t think he died here.” Bitharn nodded toward the chapel. The crows had already returned to its doorway, squabbling over the best pickings. “I found Galefrid and his wife. A lot of liegemen, too. But there aren’t any children among the dead, much less a baby in blankets.”
“Where could he be?”
“Maybe the killers took him.” She shrugged, doubtful. “Do we look for the child or chase after the Thorn?”
“The Thorn,” Kelland said, without any hesitation this time. “Our charge is to find the killers, not recover a missing heir. I fear for the child, and pity him if he has fallen into enemy hands, but we have no business entangling ourselves with his succession. Our first duty is to deal with Ang’arta’s evil.”
“How do you plan to find him?” The stories said Thorns could walk through shadows and disguise themselves behind the faces of the dead. Finding one wasn’t likely to be as easy as asking villagers if any hideously scarred bloodmages had passed by recently.
Kelland bent to the ground and pried up three of the crimson-coated grains that had fallen by the dead boy’s head. He gazed at them in his gloved palm, then wrapped them in a scrap of cloth and tucked them into a pocket. “The Bright Lady will guide me. But we should go. It’s near dusk, and I have no wish to linger here after dark.”
“Neither do I,” Bitharn said fervently.
They made camp a league out of Willowfield, moving against the wind so that the smell of decay wouldn’t follow them into their sleep. While Kelland meditated in the last of the afternoon light, Bitharn saw to the horses, set up their tent, and laid a small, guarded fire. She didn’t think there would be much game this close to the dead village—or, if she was honest with herself, perhaps she simply didn’t want to wander off too far in the woods alone—so instead of hunting, she went into the stores of food that Lord Eduin’s people had packed for them.
They’d been generous. There were bags of dried beans and tough cured sausages and twice-baked bread flavored with garlic and small black seeds that Bitharn did not know. They even had small packets of salt and pepper, rare luxuries this far inland. She started a pot of yellow lentils boiling with onions and garlic, and cut up a sausage to add to her own meal once Kelland had taken his share.
Then, her immediate campsite chores done, she joined in Kelland’s prayer. There was music in his prayer, a sonorous solemnity that she could never match. The Sun Knight prayed with such devotion, such fervent love, that Bitharn imagined she could feel the warmth of Celestia’s presence touch them with the rays of fading light. He prayed until twilight came, and only when the last glimmer of sun was gone did he stop.
After the prayer they ate the soup with pieces of hard crunchy bread. Bitharn let Kelland eat in silence. She knew it took him a while to recover his thoughts after a seeking-prayer, and anyway she was content to watch him by the firelight. The white shells in his hair glowed with reflected warmth, and the fire burnished his skin to the color of deepest mahogany.
He was a beautiful man. Strange that no one else seemed to see it, blinded as they were by his exoticism and the insignia of his faith. Bitharn envied them, a little; maybe it would have been better not to notice at all, instead of longing for something she couldn’t have. But it was past helping, so she watched him by the fire and ached for what she couldn’t say.
“What are you thinking about?” he asked her, smiling curiously.
Bitharn blinked. “I’m wondering what your visions showed,” she lied.
“We should go east.” Kelland’s smile faded. He picked up a piece of bark, turned it in his fingers, and tossed it into the flames. His eyes were dark and hooded in the fire’s glow. “The vision was … tangled, but that much was clear. They rode toward the rising sun. East, toward a castle where a green boy sits on an old gnarled chair, with white wolves defending him against his own dogs.”
“A green boy sitting an old throne could be any of half a hundred castles,” Bitharn said. “Heirs come young in this part of the world. What else did you see?”
“Little that makes sense to me,” Kelland said moodily. He took another chunk of bark from the dirt. “The boy dancing over a pool of blood that pulled away from his feet with each step but surged back to swallow him if he slowed. A bright blue crystal, colder than frost, that gleamed behind a mask made of dead skin. A black cat with an ebon unicorn’s horn and fierce green eyes, and a girl trying to ride it with two babies balanced in a scale, one to each side. Other things, dimmer, that I could barely see. And you, crying.” He held her gaze unblinking, his features stoic, but he broke the bark into tiny jagged pieces as he spoke. “You knelt in the snow, and you were holding my sword, and there were thorns in the hilt that drew blood from your hands. They rose up and made a chain around your
His words chilled her, but Bitharn managed a nonchalant shrug. “Well, better my hands than my throat. Anyway, the visions don’t mean what they show you, you know that. The light of the Lady’s pure truth would blind us, isn’t that what the priests say? The goddess shows us what our minds can grasp, and sometimes we can’t follow her perfectly. I’m sure my hands will be fine.”

“I won’t lead you to harm.” A furrow appeared between Kelland’s brows. She longed to reach forward and smooth it away, and laced her fingers to keep them still.

“I’ll be fine. I was fine in Silverpool, and this is no worse.”

“This is different.”

“Why?” She raised an eyebrow. “This had better not be about protecting a delicate flower of womanhood. I’ll throw a rock at your head. You know better.”

“I still have the bruises from the last time to remind me.” A smile began in his eyes, but soon faltered and failed.

“It’s the Thorns, Bitharn.” For once his gravity slipped and the knight sounded as young as he was. “I’m afraid for you. Not for myself. This is my duty. I knew what it meant when I swore my oaths. But you—”

“—swore the same ones,” Bitharn said firmly, cutting him off. “Or do my oaths not matter, because the goddess doesn’t speak through me?”

That was a low shot, and she felt a flicker of guilt for taking it, but her words struck the mark. Pain flickered on Kelland’s face before his mask of stoicism returned. “Very well. If you insist.”

“I do. You’re hopeless without me.”

“I am.” He tried the smile again, with even less success, and looked anywhere but at her. “That’s why I’m afraid. It isn’t about being Blessed, or not. I can’t lose you to the Thorns.”


“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have—”

“No.” She shook her head, her braid swinging across her back. All the words seemed to have evaporated from her mind. She stood, circled the fire to come to his side, and knelt so that she could press a finger to his lips. He flinched as if she’d burned him, then relaxed into her touch. “Please. Don’t ever be sorry about that.”

“I have to be. I’m bound by my oaths.”

Honesty, chivalry, chastity; Bitharn knew them well. The Knights of the Sun could take no lovers and no wives, for they were required to be as pure in body as they were in soul. Those who broke their oaths lost the goddess’ favor, tarnished the honor of their order, and were cast out from the ranks of the Blessed. Mortal love was impossible for those who enjoyed the favor of the divine.

“I know. I’m not asking you to break them,” she said. It was only half a lie. Wanting wasn’t asking.

“Thank you,” he said, and the words were almost a sigh.

She leaned against him, shoulder to shoulder, and wished that she might never have to move. An unseen wolf howled in the distance. Another answered its cry. Leaves rustled in the wind; one fell into their fire and curled bright-edged into ash. Kelland was warm beside her, and her hand stole down to find his fingers together. A clasp that reassured where words could not.

“What do we know about the Thorns?” Bitharn asked softly. She didn’t want the moment to end, but if they were to succeed—and have more moments like this in the future—they needed to be prepared.

“Very little,” he admitted. She could feel the words reverberating in his chest. Without thinking, Bitharn nestled closer, resting her head against his shoulder. Again Kelland stiffened, but after a heartbeat he continued. “Only two of my teachers at the Dome of the Sun ever faced them: Khierien Solenar and Isleyen Silverlock. Both fought at Thelyand Ford, and Sir Isleyen was at Asen Falls too. Other than those two, and a handful of mentions in manuscripts that go back almost to Calantyr’s founding, we know nothing. Eltanir Teglessin has been working tirelessly to sort through the old lore and recover the arts we’ve forgotten, but these things take time, and in the meantime we’re hobbled. They’re so new.”

“Or so old,” Bitharn said. She’d pried the rest of their history from Kelland during their ride, and what she’d learned was not comforting.

Kliasta, the Pale Maiden who commanded pain, had once been worshipped in the west as well as the east. Her followers had never been numerous; there were not many who felt compelled to spend their lives seeking and cultivating agony. The truly mad went to Maol, while those who sought pure power and were willing to pay for it in blood gravitated toward Anvhad or Baoz, depending on their taste for subtlety. Kliasta drew very few worshippers, and still fewer Blessed, so her faith had been easily stamped out when the Celestians came to power in the west. They had been sadists and bloodmages, all of them, and no one mourned their passing.

The Kliastan faith had never died in the east, though. There, past the ruins of dwindling Ardashir and the blistering wastes of the Black Sands, the emperors of the Nightingale Court kept Kliastans in high honor as imperial
inquisitors and torturers. The Pale Maiden’s temples stood openly there: palaces of carved ivory where coils of incense burned to complement, not hide, the stench of blood and hot iron from her dungeons.

Ten years ago, the man who was now Lord Commander of Ang’arta traveled to the distant east, seeking power at the edge of the world. Back then he was no one, just another Baozite soldier who had survived the breaking pits long enough to earn his brand and sword. He’d had nothing but his own savagery and vaulting ambition.

Eight years ago, he returned with one of those eastern witches. Avele diar Aurellyn, the Spider. His wife. Whether he had captured her, or she him, was wholly unclear; what was soon apparent, however, was that she made a formidable weapon. Within a few short seasons all his enemies were dead or broken, and Aedhras the Golden was Lord Commander of Ang’arta. Soon after that, the Spider took up residence in the Tower of Thorns and began gathering disciples in her bloody arts.

It was then that the Sunfallen Kingdoms began to realize the true danger on their borders. Ang’arta had been a menace for centuries; the Baozites took war for worship, and attacked any vulnerable target near their borders. But for a generation or more, they had not seriously marched beyond those borders.

That changed when Aedhras the Golden took the Whispering Throne. The man who had gone to Kai Amur to find a sorceress was not one to be content with holding the same land his predecessors had claimed centuries ago. He wanted more, and he had the strength and cunning to take it. The Baozites were a terrible force in themselves, but with Aedhras as their general and the Thorns adding their magic, they seemed unstoppable. They’d crushed King Merovas’ armies at Thelyand Ford, seized the territory up to the riverbanks, and would no doubt look for new victims as soon as they’d pacified the conquered lands.

“They must have some weakness,” Bitharn murmured.

“The Thorns? The same as any other Blessed,” Kelland said. “Their vows and their lives. If they have others, neither Sir Khierien nor Sir Isleyn saw them.”

“How did we stop them the first time?”

“We killed them.” His thumb traced along the inside of her wrist, idly, as if he wasn’t fully aware of what he was doing. Bitharn held her breath, afraid that if she moved he might stop. “They might have magic, but they are men, and they can die.”

She nodded, unconvinced but willing to take the offered comfort. The Knights of the Sun were a different order in that age. As their enemies failed and died off, and the commonfolk’s needs grew more pressing, their training had shifted from the purely martial to adopt more and more of the Illuminers’ healing and divinatory arts. Centuries later, she didn’t know how well Celestia’s champions would match Kliasta’s. The Kliastans, Bitharn surmised, would have had little interest in diluting their own deadliness to help the commonfolk in their lands.

Still, Kelland thought he could prevail, and he knew his own gifts better than she did. Her skin tingled where he had touched her. “What can they do?”

“Bloodmist. You saw what it did to Willowfield. It kills anything living in its reach—man or beast, friend or foe. That’s only one of their spells. They can shatter victims’ bones in their bodies without shedding blood or needing a touch; they can inflict wracking pain from a distance. Sir Solenar said he saw one of them turn arrows aside on the battlefield, using shadows to deflect them instead of sunlight to burn them as we do. Sir Isleyn said they sent an inquisitor to Asen Falls, and that inquisitor could wrench the deepest fears and truths out of a man’s mind without saying a word.”

“They can stop arrows? Bitharn felt a cold touch of doubt: what she couldn’t shoot, she couldn’t kill. She had little skill with anything but knife and bow. “What else?”

She felt Kelland hesitate before he spoke again. “Soulbinding,” he said at last.

“Soulbinding?”

“They trap the souls of men in corpses. Sometimes their own, sometimes others’. In Ardashir and Kai Amur, the Zhardians developed this to a high art. Many of them chose to kill and preserve their own mortal bodies, seeking immortality. The Kliastans … inflict it on others, partly as a form of torture and partly to create weapons of war. It is an ugly thing.”

“I can imagine,” Bitharn murmured. What would it be like to be trapped in one’s own rotting body? Could they feel the decay of their flesh? See the revulsion on the faces of those who had once loved them? She hoped not. She hoped she would never find out. “That’s what they’re doing?”

He nodded. “They took the dead at Thelyand Ford and turned them into slaves. Men fought their own dead brothers in the mud. Tireless, merciless, and never-ending … for there were always more corpses to be had. But those, at least, we never forgot how to destroy.”

Small reassurance, but it was something. Bitharn let her gaze drift away through the wind-brushed forest. The white stone of the River Kings’ Road glimmered softly in the dark. The night had grown cloudy, and neither moon
nor stars could be seen, but the road shone with its own quiet light, a luminous ribbon in the shadowed wood. She could just make it out through the trees.

“It’s beautiful,” Bitharn said without thinking. There was nothing like it in Calantyr. They had magic there, some of it grand, but theirs was a young kingdom and it did not have the same weight of mournful history that she imagined for this road.

Kelland followed her look. “Athra lumenos,” he said, the High Rhaelic flowing as smoothly as if it were his native tongue. He had adopted the tone of a Dome lecturer, a habit he had when reciting history from his lessons. Sometimes it annoyed her, but tonight Bitharn found it soothing. “Stone of the light. The Knights of the Sun mined it, or made it, and the Wayfarers laid it down long ago, when all these little realms were part of Rhaelyand. We’ve forgotten the art since then, or perhaps our prayers have grown weaker, but the old stones hold their magic. They built the imperial roads of *athra lumenos* so that they would shine all through the night and travelers would never be lost in the dark. Rhaelyand is gone, but the road shines on. People still follow the empire’s old lines, building their towns and castles where the road leads, rather than bending the road to themselves. Through their holy gift, the gods still guide the shape of history.”

“It’s a wonder no one steals it.”

“It does no good removed from its purpose.” She could hear his smile, if not see it. “Break a piece from the road, and it loses its light. *Athra lumenos* was made for the common good; it will not avail the greedy.”

“Oh.” Bitharn wondered how many people had tried, and how badly they’d been disappointed when they chipped away a little of the gods’ light for themselves, only to find it flickering out between their fingers. Was it so selfish to want a fragment of beauty for oneself? Was that so grievous a sin?

She listened to Kelland breathing beside her. Steady, familiar, yet infinitely fragile. “Can you defeat a Thorn?” she asked.

“Yes.”

**They were back on the road** the next morning. At every hamlet there were babies to bless and illnesses to cure, rumors to gather and gossip to share. While Kelland tended to the sick and injured, Bitharn talked to the patients and their kin, sifting through suspicion and half-truth to find whatever crumbs of real information she could.

They administered justice too. Among Kelland’s powers was the Light of Truth, within which all lies were revealed. Whenever a local liegeman or village reeve had suspicions that a criminal lurked among his commonfolk—or, more likely, knew of one and wanted to demonstrate his loyalty to his lord’s peace—he called upon Kelland to interrogate the suspect and confirm his guilt. Then the criminal was denounced and hanged, and Kelland and Bitharn rode on.

Their presence kept the peace along the border. Word of the Burnt Knight’s ride spread swiftly through town and village, and Bitharn knew that men who might otherwise have gone raiding across the river stayed at home for fear of attracting his condemnation. The hangings helped with that as much as his holiness did, but she still didn’t like them.

“They only give up those men to impress us,” she muttered once as they rode away from a newly decorated dule tree on a gray and drizzly afternoon. The hanged men were accused of burning down an Oakharne farm with its family inside. Kelland’s prayer proved their guilt, so they swung. “If you weren’t here, they’d be just as happy to cheer and join in.”

“They might,” Kelland acknowledged, “but their reasons are less important than their actions. So long as they keep their lord’s peace, half our work here is done.”

The other half, however, remained stubbornly unfinished. Only one girl had seen the Thorn, if that was what she’d seen, and all she could give them was a garbled story about a woman in black with moonlight for hair. A small company of Baozites had ridden through recently, leaving a trail of havoc in their wake, but no one had seen them for over a fortnight, either.

Finally, having exhausted what they could learn on the Langmyrne side of the Seivern, the Celestians turned toward the bridges of Tanne Crossing.

Two days from Oakharn, they saw the crows again.

There were fewer birds this time, for there were only two bodies to feed them, and both were badly burned. It looked like someone had laid one atop the other and made a half-successful attempt at building a pyre in the forest for both. There hadn’t been enough wood to finish the job, but neither was much left to interest the crows. Man or woman, young or old, Bitharn couldn’t tell through the charring and rain-bloat. She couldn’t even say what killed them.

One of the bodies, however, didn’t seem human at all. The crows avoided that one, preferring to squabble over the gobbets of flesh clinging to the other’s bones.
“Look at this,” Bitharn said, holding up the skull and wiping wet ash from its jaws with a gloved finger. The teeth protruded hideously from the jawbones, curving up on bony, gristle-wrapped prongs that stuck out like flayed fingers from a palm. The skull might have been a man’s, but there was nothing human about those teeth.


“Gladly.” Bitharn tossed it into the trees. “What is it?”

“It was a man. Until the Thorns took him. The ghaole—the Hounds of the Night—are among the soulbound. Legends say ghoul-hounds could smell better than dogs and run faster than deer. Their touch froze their victims’ blood, and they could not be killed, for they were already dead.”

“Well, somebody killed that one, if that’s what it was.” Bitharn shrugged, flinging her braid over a shoulder as she got back into the saddle. “And if somebody else could kill one, I daresay we could too.”
The old lord was dying.

On this, Blessed Andalya and Ossaric’s personal physician agreed: the lord’s heart had been broken by grief, and repairing that wound was beyond any of their arts. Neither herbs nor purges nor Celestia’s bright magic could restore happiness to a soul that had lost it. There was nothing they could do.

So Ossaric lay on his sickbed, shrouded from the world by a canopy of linen so fine it was translucent, and waited for death. He seldom spoke and never ate; he only slept, and asked for the dust of dreamflowers in water when he woke, so that he might slip back into slumber and out of the nightmare that was his life.

Meanwhile Leferic sat on his chair and ruled in his stead, Lord of Bulls’ March in all but name.

On occasion he went to visit his dying father, more to show filial loyalty than out of any genuine grief. His liegemen expected such things. On these visits he sat by his father’s bedside in a hard wooden chair and read his quartermaster’s reports or correspondence from neighboring lords. Lord Ossaric never said a word to him—never even turned to look at him—while he was there, and Leferic always left as soon as he could.

He detested the sickroom. Braziers burned constantly to keep the air warm enough for the old man’s thin blood, and incense choked the room to mask the overripe smells of age and decay. It might have been bearable if his father had given him a kind word, or acknowledged his presence … but he never did, and Leferic had better uses for his time.

He felt no real regret, though he knew he should. Fratricide was monstrous, but patricide was worse yet, and if his father died of grief, then Leferic would be the one who killed him. By all laws of god and man, he would be guilty as a murderer of the worst stripe.

Somehow he couldn’t seem to care. If his father wanted to die of a heart broken by the loss of his first son, even as the second sat by his side, then Leferic was perfectly content to let him. They’d never been close. Galefrid had always been the favorite, and the extent of that was becoming all too clear.

They didn’t even look alike. Lord Ossaric was dark of hair and stout of body, or had been, before sorrow grayed and thinned him. Galefrid had been the same. Leferic, on the other hand, took after his late mother: tall and thin and lanky and blond, with a narrow, foxlike face that looked more clever than brave.

No surprise his father showed him no kinship. He’d never looked or acted it before. Every visit only renewed the bitterness, and Leferic was always glad to leave.

After one such visit, as Leferic was closing the door between the two red-cloaked guards who watched over his father’s slumber, Cadarn came to meet him in the hall. The northerner still wore the white bearskin cape with the head snarling over his shoulder, but he had traded his leathers for mail beneath it. “Your knight in the west causes trouble, Leferic-lord.”

“What do you mean?” Leferic asked. He saw Heldric coming toward them and raised his fingers slightly to delay the answer until the older man arrived.

The gesith did not hurry down the hall. Heldric would never allow himself to be seen doing anything so undignified. But it did seem that the old liegeman’s step was a shade faster than usual, and that his mouth was set in a harder line than Leferic had seen there before. A hand rested on his sword hilt, and his bow when he came to them was not a courtier’s obeisance, but the terse gesture of a warrior to a commander in the field.

“Sir Gerbrand has raised the flag of revolt,” the gesith said. His eyes were chill under wintry gray brows. “Not openly, but not far from it. He claims that ‘bandits’ are running wild in Littlewood. Conveniently these ‘bandits’ manage to avoid my own men while raiding across the river and striking at your soldiers. My lord.”

“The knight in the west,” Cadarn agreed in his ponderous, heavy-accented speech. “He is unhappy about his man’s execution. Now he says that bandits killed two of my company. He is lying, Leferic-lord. No bandit would dare raise blade to my men.”

“No,” Heldric said. “Bandits are dogs. They choose easy prey, not foreign mercenaries with heavy arms and light purses. The absurdity of Gerbrand’s pretense is its own insult. He means for your liegemen to see through it. And you.”

“Then we must answer it,” Leferic said. “Can he be dealt with directly?”

“That is my wish. Blood must be repaid with blood.” Cadarn crossed his arms beneath his cloak, his mail clanking. “I will accept no price in silver for this.”

“I’m inclined to agree. My liegemen doubt my strength, not my wisdom. Thoughtful of Gerbrand to reassure
them.” Leferic smiled. At least he thought it was a smile; it did not feel like one. “Cadam, take thirty men and go to Littlewood. Send word as soon as you’ve caught the bandits, and keep as many alive as you can. Let them see that this Mouse has a taste for blood.”

The next morning Leferic sent for Sir Brisic. The old knight had been one of his father’s most loyal liegemen. Galefrid had squired for him as a boy. He’d never been close to Leferic, though, and puzzlement showed on his bluff sunlined features when he answered his lord’s call. “The—your man said you wanted to see me.”

“I do.” That was true, but only just. It wasn’t Brisic that interested him, but Sir Merguil, the younger of the man’s two living sons. The knight had been in Tarne Crossing, handpicking mercenaries, all through the Swordsday competitions. No fool, Sir Merguil had correctly assumed that the best way for a younger son to win lands and riches was to carve his own fortune out of the world. Now he had the better part of a company assembled, already paid for and equipped, and Leferic wanted to use them.

The servants were setting out breakfast in the solar. Leferic waited until they finished and left. He took a plate of bread and honeycomb, gesturing for Brisic to do the same. “I will be riding to Littlewood soon.”

“Gerbrand?”

Leferic nodded. He saw no point denying it; he meant for everyone to know. Rebellion would not be forgiven under his rule. “His disobedience is insulting. He wants to provoke me. Well enough: I will answer. Dying men are allowed a last wish.”

“I had nothing to do with his rebellion,” Brisic said quickly. He still seemed to be trying to guess what Leferic wanted with this audience; his brow was creased and he piled food onto his plate without much attention to what he was taking.

“Of course not,” Leferic said, letting a note of surprise slip into his voice. Actually he had wondered about that. Brisic and Gerbrand had campaigned together under his father and were known to be friends. Neither had any love for the Langmyrne, who had killed Brisic’s second son and held Gerbrand for ransom when he was young. He didn’t think Brisic would be foolhardy enough to send armsmen to support Gerbrand’s defiance—not yet, anyway—but he had little doubt that Brisic had tactically encouraged it and would be quick to join at the first sign of success. Or, he thought irritably, if his father died and took Brisic’s last shred of loyalty with him.

“I would never doubt your loyalty,” Leferic lied. “The reason I summoned you was entirely the opposite, in fact. Littlewood will need a strong hand after the traitor is put down. I understand your younger son has shown himself to be a skilled leader of men.”

“Merguil?” Brisic stuck his fork into a bit of bacon and examined it, shaking his head as he pushed the greasy meat away. “He’s brave enough, that much no one can deny. He’s not tested, though. He was going to lead a company in Thelyand a few years, make his fortune there. Edarric, on the other hand…”

Leferic lifted his cup to conceal his disapproval. He had no interest in giving Littlewood to Edarric, Brisic’s oldest son and heir. Uniting Littlewood to Helsennar, their ancestral hold, would make them the wealthiest knights in Bulls’ March, after Leferic himself, and might encourage inconvenient ambitions. But Merguil was already a grown man with young sons and ambitions of his own. If he came into land, he would not soon give his sons’ birthright up to his brother—and he should be suitably grateful to the lord who granted him his own hold, unlike Edarric, who would merely be increasing the size of his estates.

“I need a man who knows his way around a battlefield,” he told Brisic. “I thought Merguil might be ideal. His men seem to love him, and he’ll get as much experience in Littlewood as he would on the banks of the Thelyand. More, maybe. The ironlords make no man’s practice puppets, and King Merovas has little coin left for hireswords. But, as you say, he is not tested. Sir Halebran might make a better choice.”

Brisic purpled and nearly choked on his porridge. Sir Halebran was a sensible and courageous man, and he’d distinguished himself in the handful of armed clashes that had disturbed Bulls’ March over the past decade. It was Sir Halebran who had ridden out to capture the Slaver Knight and brought him to justice in Langmyr, no small feat of bravery considering the chances that the Langmyrne would hang him too.

But Sir Halebran was sworn to Breakwall, and it was dead Lord Vanegild, his master, whose cowardice at Widows’ Castle had cost the life of Brisic’s middle son.

That was a stupid campaign and doomed from the start, and Sir Halebran had played no part in its failure—the man wasn’t even anointed as a knight then—but Sir Brisic had never forgiven or forgotten the price of Lord Vanegild’s cowardice. To this day he hated all Breakwall men.

“He’s not even a Bulls’ March man,” Brisic protested when he found his breath again.

“He isn’t,” Leferic agreed, “but he’s steady and competent and he knows how to handle a command. A man can always swear new oaths.”

“The knights’ll be outraged if they hear you’re passing them over to hand Littlewood to a Breakwall man.”
“Sir Halebran has always been loyal to Oakharn. As we all are. He served my father well, and he saved our honor by taking the Slaver Knight. I am certain that the knights of Bulls’ March will welcome him once he swears fealty to my father.” That was a lie too, but there was enough truth in it to make Sir Brisic doubt. “Still, he wouldn’t be my first choice. I would indeed prefer to keep Littlewood in closer hands.”

Brisic grimaced. “Let me talk to my boy. See if I can make him see the light. He’s bent on winning glory over the ironlords, but there’s good sense to what you say. He might do better to stay closer to home.”

“Tell me when you have an answer.” Leferic took another sip of bitterpine tea, pleased that his gamble had paid off so well. He’d made the offer to Brisic rather than Merguil partly because he knew the old knight did not want to lose another son—and there was a very good chance of that happening if Merguil marched against Ang’arta—but also because Merguil was cleverer than his father. The son might have seen through Leferic’s dissembling and pressed for better terms, whereas the father was blinded by his wish to stymie a Breakwall man and win honors for his son.

*Know what a man wants, and what he fears,* Inaglione had written in his study of the thirteen princes of Ardashir, *and he is yours.* It was as true today as it had been two hundred years ago. Leferic had Brisic. He would have Merguil. Then he’d have Gerbrand’s head.

Cadarn’s message came two days later. Lord Ossaric was still on his sickbed, clinging to life while staring at death, and Leferic was glad for any excuse to leave the castle. He’d secured Sir Merguil and ten of his riders to accompany him to Littlewood. Nothing kept him at Bulls’ March.

The rider who carried Cadarn’s tidings, and who was to escort them to Sir Gerbrand, was a broad-shouldered youth named Ulvrar. His long hair was white as ice, and he bore a vicious scar on his left cheek. The scar was similar to the ones Cadarn and all his men wore, but distinct, like a different letter in the same alphabet. Ash had been rubbed into the wound to blacken it.

Leferic wondered how he’d earned it. All Cadarn’s men were exiles, which perplexed him. The tribes of the White Seas did not give up fighting men easily, and by any measure Cadarn’s company was superb. Why had they been allowed to go?

Ulvrar must have caught him glancing at the scar, for less than an hour after they left the castle, the northman reined his horse back to ride alongside the lord. He gave Leferic a long, challenging look, and then deliberately turned away so that the left side of his face was fully exposed. He rode in that fashion, stone-faced, until Leferic waved his knights aside and nudged his own gelding a little closer.

“You want to know why I am marked,” Ulvrar said flatly, without so much as a glance his way, before Leferic could ask.

“I’m curious, yes.” The northerners were a blunt people; Leferic did not think the youth would be offended by his honesty.

If he was, he gave no sign of it. “I was a wildblood. I tried to leave before the third rite. My people exiled me for cowardice.” The youth’s hand strayed toward his cloak clasp—a small gesture, soon caught and stilled, but enough for Leferic to notice. The cloak was white-tipped wolfskin, a single hide with its head intact, like all the others in Cadarn’s company. The clasp, however, was silver and cunningly wrought; it showed a wolf with its muzzle raised to the moon. A long silver bar connected the crescent moon to the wolf’s heart. None of the others wore anything like it.

Leferic raised an eyebrow, but Ulvrar was not looking at him and in any event seemed to feel he’d given an adequate explanation. It wasn’t, though; none of those words meant anything to Leferic, and he wanted to know more about these skar skraeli. He was relying on them to help hold his own loyal liegemen in check over the winter.

“Forgive me if I pry, but I’m not familiar with your customs,” Leferic said. “What is a wildblood, and why would not doing a ‘third rite’ make you a coward?”

Ulvrar blinked at him, and Leferic read puzzlement in his clear blue eyes. “The wildbloods are the greatest of our warriors. They consume the hearts of beasts, and from them draw magic. Courage, strength, stamina … other things. There are three rites: the first to enter the brotherhood, the second to deepen connection with the beast, the third to master its magic and truly become one with the wild. Some say the power is cursed, but it is a price most readily paid. I refused. I did not have the courage to master my beast. Thus was I a coward. I do not wear this brand wrongly, Leferic-lord.”

“I doubt Cadarn would have chosen a coward for his company.”

Ulvrar gave him a small, pitying smile. “Cadarn Death’s-Debtor is an exile himself. What choice has he? Did you think we would sell our swords to you if we still held raid-right? No. A warrior takes. That is his birthright. He does not serve soft greenlanders. The thanes cast us all out, Leferic-lord. We are all cursed. It happens that Cadarn the Wolf is an honorable man, and will not turn brigand if denied a thane’s blessing. It happens that we who follow him
share those thoughts. But if we were not outcast, we would not be here.”

“Then I must be grateful to your thanes,” Leferic said, using courtesy to mask his bewilderment. “Their loss has been my realm’s blessing.”

The scarred youth accepted the words with a nod. He touched his heels to his horse’s ribs and the animal cantered forward, joining the other armsmen under the banner of Bulls’ March. Leferic regretted letting him go; there were many other questions he would have liked to ask, but it would have been unseemly to hurry after a hired man. He could wait.

They reached the outer fields of Littlewood as the first stars were rising over the apple trees. The holding was a small one, and not rich; its fields were tiny and uneven, its people few. Most of Littlewood’s meager wealth was in apples and chestnuts and pigs: things that could be grown in trees, or among them.

Trees were Littlewood’s blessing and its bane. They concealed its commonfolk from raiders across the river, but they hid bandits just as readily. Robbers had plagued this stretch of road for near as long as Leferic could remember. Only in the last few years, when there’d been peace enough along the border for Sir Gerbrand to turn his armsmen against bandits, had they finally been quelled. And now the same knight who’d defeated the robbers was using them as a disguise for his own men.

Leferic sighed and rubbed wearily at his eyes. They’d been riding since breakfast, longer than he was accustomed to sit in the saddle, but that wasn’t what tired him. Sir Gerbrand had been one of his father’s most loyal knights. This was an ignominious end to an honorable career, and Leferic did not relish dealing it out … but Gerbrand had chosen his rebellion, and he had earned its reward.

He was honest enough to admit that it would have been easier if he could send his men in his stead; then he wouldn’t have to see Sir Gerbrand’s face. As he hadn’t seen his brother’s, a small traitor voice in his head whispered.

But that was why he had to be here. Not only to show his liegemen that he was unafraid, but to prove the same thing to himself. If he was to be a worthy ruler, he couldn’t be a coward. Not in the eyes of his men, not in his own. He had to see the bloody price of power, and learn to pay it out of his own hand without flinching.

Cadarn’s arrival spared him any further introspection. The northerner had shed his white bearskin cloak in favor of brown wool; winter had yet to lay any snow on the ground, and white drew too many eyes in the wood. Despite his size, Cadarn moved like a ghost through the trees, and the men who came with him were equally skilled. Leferic saw not a hair of them until they stepped forward to hail him.

“Leferic-lord.” Cadarn’s voice was a rasp that emanated from the darkness. He took hold of the gelding’s reins to keep Leferic’s horse from startling. “Best you should wait the night here, away from the town. The bandits will strike in the morning.”

“At us?” Leferic asked, confused.

The brown-cloaked man shook his head. “There is a group of Langmyrne staying at the inn. In the morning they will go back to their village with the profits of their trade, and the bandits will try to stop them. Foolish of them to cross the river … but there is supposed to be a peace, and the commonfolk say there are worse things than bandits in Bayarn Wood, so perhaps they have their reasons.”

“And we must wait until the bandits attack them.” Leferic couldn’t quite keep an edge of anger from his voice. At Gerbrand, for this foolish provocation and the lives it wasted; at himself, for not having the skill to avoid bloodshed before it began. Killing, he thought, was an admission that reason and manipulation had both failed. He hated Gerbrand for forcing him into it.

“Yes. Otherwise they might only be your knight’s men, and not bandits at all,” Cadarn agreed evenly. “We will wait until they are in the wrong. Then they die.”

“Protect the Langmyrne, if you can,” Leferic ordered. “I will not be forced into war by Gerbrand’s rebellion.”

Cadarn nodded. “I will leave Ulvrar with you. He has good eyes for the night. Keep your men close, and sleep if you can. ‘With morning comes peril, but that does not mean the night will be safe.’ So our oldwives say, and they are not wrong.”

With that he was gone, and his skar skraeli with him. Only Ulvrar stayed behind with Leferic and the knights. The scarred youth swung down from his saddle, landing with scarcely a leaf disturbed, and took up the reins of Leferic’s horse along with his own. He led the animals north on a winding course that seemed visible only to his eyes. Leferic could not make out any trail they followed, and the mutters of confusion and discontent from Merguil’s riders behind him suggested that they were equally baffled.

But Ulvrar’s progress was steady and sure, and in time they came to a lonely cottage in a ring of cleared stumps. Gray mushrooms furled the damp wood of its doorway. The thatch was rotted through in places, buried by dead leaves in others, and the forest had begun to reclaim the tiny clearing in which the cottage stood.

“We stay here tonight,” Ulvrar said, leading the horses into the clearing. “Sleep with weapons at hand. In the
morning we await Cadarn’s word, but we must be ready when it comes.”

The cottage had been readied for them: there were mattresses of pine branches piled on the floor, and buckets of water for the men and their horses. That night they had no fire, and made a meal of cold smoked goose with herbed bread. There was little conversation and no wine, though Leferic would have welcomed either to take his mind off the coming day. He laid his bedroll down with the others, but he could not sleep.

He’d never faced real combat before. He had hardly ever seen blood. Like any noble youth he’d gone hawking and deer hunting, but with no great success, and when he did bring something down it was at a distance. Peasant girls knew more about killing than he did; Leferic had never so much as wrung a chicken’s neck with his own hands.

He didn’t think the morning’s work would find him squeamish—but clumsy? Unsure? He was more afraid of making a mistake through his own inexperience than of getting wounded in a fight. Cadarn’s northmen and his own knights would protect him from Gerbrand’s “bandits,” but no one would protect him from himself. Leadership was as much theater as skill, de Halle had written, and he couldn’t afford a bad performance with his grasp on the Bullmarshals’ Chair so shaky.

Leferic sighed and turned over on the pine branches. His cloak offered little warmth and less padding from their prickles, but he willed away the discomfort. He couldn’t show weakness. They already thought little enough of the Booklouse.

Lost in worry, he never noticed when he finally drifted off. No sooner had he found a half-comfortable position on the pine branches than one of the knights was shaking his shoulder, his face indistinguishable in the predawn gloom.

“Wake,” the man whispered hoarsely, and was gone.

The stars were gone but the sky was still a deep, pearly blue when he came stumbling out of the cottage. Sir Merguil, already armed and armored, pressed a cup of steaming bitterpine tea into Leferic’s hands. The warmth was soothing, and the tartness cleared the fog of sleep from his mind. He wondered where they’d built the fire, and when. Everyone else was so much more efficient.

“When do we ride?” he asked Ulvrar.

The youth’s eyes glittered in the dimness. There seemed something not quite human about them: a pallid light more akin to a wolf’s eyes than those of any man. “We go when we hear the signal,” he replied, belting on a set of iron-hilted knives. “Then we will know Cadarn has attacked.”

“Won’t we miss the fighting?”

“Yes.” Ulvrar shrugged. “Safer that way. Stray arrows, panicked horses … no man can guess his fate in battle, and your duty is not to die here.”

Leferic nodded, for the sense of that was too plain to dispute, but discontent gnawed in his belly. He wanted to prove his courage. He needed to prove his courage. Riding all the way out here to pronounce justice on a handful of disarmed bandits … well, it would show his liegemen that he meant to enforce his peace, and that he was not too lazy to leave his castle to do it, but it wasn’t much for glory. Not the way a personal charge to battle would be. Man against man and blade against blade under the wild winter sky, that would set the bards to singing.

The mourners, too, probably. He wasn’t a swordsman. Ulvrar’s plan was for the best.

A harsh horn’s cry shivered through the air, setting their horses to whickering nervously and jangling their harness. Leferic felt a thrill of excitement. Perhaps the fighting was over; perhaps Gerbrand’s rebels were already taken. But it was still closer to battle than he had ever been—and, unless he failed, and the fragile peace broke, it was closer than he should ever be.

“We go,” Ulvrar said.

They came to a scene of carnage. The Langmyrne peasants were a pitiful lot: a handful of men and two frightened women, those with the worn look of widows forced to make their way in the world without brothers or sons. They clustered around a wagon laden with netted hams and tar-caulked barrels. Two donkeys stood between the wagon shafts. One was dead, arrow-struck and slumped in its harness, while the other stood paralyzed by fear. The wagon driver was dead too; he had fallen in his seat with his arms trailing to the ground. Arrows studded his corpse like cloves stuck in a pomander orange.

Two of the “bandits” were dead or dying as well. One was sprawled in the dirt, his throat and collarbones smashed by a vicious blow from some massive, crushing blade. The other sat slack-jawed against the wagon, his eyes glazed and blood trickling slowly down his brow. The top of his head was a cracked pink egg. Leferic stared at it in revolted fascination.

Cadarn’s men had herded the rest of them into a ditch by the side of the road. The sight of Leferic’s banner, however, seemed to inspire new courage—or terror—in the “bandits,” and they fought with renewed ferocity as the black bull came snapping through the trees. The ground was against them and they were jammed too closely together to do more than jab at the northerners using their swords like spears, but they did that frantically.
One of the jabs found a gap in an exile's armor just below his armpit and sank in deeply. He stumbled back, grunting in pain. At once three men rushed him, knocking him to the ground and swinging wildly with their swords as they ran. Though the ditch's sides crumbled under their feet, sending one bandit sprawling, the other two managed to break free.

With a roar of inarticulate rage, another of Cadarn’s men swung his two-handed sword at one of the retreating bandits. The blade struck him across the back of his legs; the man went down screaming in the leaf-flecked mud. The other, startled, tripped but scrambled away on his hands and knees. He got back to his feet, lowered his head, and ran for the trees, arms pumping.

“Stop him,” Leferic said quietly.

Two of Merguil’s riders had dismounted and strung their elm bows. The strings thrummed, two notes plucked from a dissonant song, and the third man fell dying.

The rest surrendered.

Leferic rode forward when they were disarmed. They were injured, muddy, sullen. There were fewer than a dozen all told. He recognized some of their faces. Not as friends; not even as names he knew. Only as men that he had glimpsed at the low tables when his father feasted his liegemen. Nevertheless, it was enough to tell him that Sir Gerbrand had used his own armsmen for this folly.

He turned toward the peasants. “Are these the men who robbed you?”

There was a moment’s silence. Finally one of the widow-women stepped forward. She was younger than he’d first thought, and pretty in a plain way, but hardship had stolen her youth and cut lines of suffering in her face. “They are. They are, m’lord.” She rubbed her hands one over the other, eyes darting to the men penned up by Cadarn’s mercenaries. “They yelled for us to throw down our weapons and give up our goods, but after we did, they shot Dannaud anyway.”

“They kept shooting him,” another peasant said. “He was dead, and they kept shooting him, and laughing about how they was going to do the same to us. M’lord. Said if we was lucky they’d shoot us once we hauled the goods back to their camp, and if we wasn’t they’d do worse.”

Leferic frowned. “They didn’t shoot at you?” he asked Cadarn, puzzled. The northman shrugged. He’d taken a handful of small cuts that dribbled thin lines of red down his arms. Like the rest of his men, Cadarn ignored his wounds except to wipe away the blood if it threatened to slip up his grip. “They were busy looking to the wagon. They did not hear us, and they had no concern for who else might be near. By the time they realized their danger, we were upon them.”

Leferic could only shake his head. Had Gerbrand been that confident that his provocation would go unpunished? Was that how contemptuous he was? All this while he’d been working to isolate Gerbrand politically and militarily, warning Cadarn to be wary of ambushes, and wondering what unexpected counterstroke his enemy might have prepared. All of that, and the man hadn’t told his “bandits” to keep their bows at hand.

There was, he supposed, a lesson in that: something about overplanning, or lulling one’s enemies into complacency. But mostly it was just insulting.

“Bind them,” he ordered, “and hang them. Except that one.” He pointed to one of the few men who had not bowed his head or cowered. “That one watches. When the others are dead, send him back to Littlewood.”

Leferic held the last bandit’s gaze without blinking as he pronounced his sentence. He felt a calm implacability settle upon him. It was the same feeling he’d had upon sending the Thornlady to seal his brother’s death; it was a feeling that seemed to cloak him more often as the days went by and his father crept closer to the pyre. Eventually the other man looked away.

“Tell your master that he has two choices,” Leferic said. “He may confess his treason and submit himself to justice. If he does, he will go to the block, make no mistake of that. I do not forgive rebellion. But his family need not share his disgrace. If he surrenders, I will pardon them. His sons can make their way in the world as armsmen; his daughters can marry without taint.

“If he thinks to defy me, and chooses to flee or fight, he will be taken and he will die. His family will die as criminals; I will have them dragged apart between horses in the market square. Their bodies will be left for the dogs, and their bones will not be burned. Do you understand?”

The man nodded jerkily. He had gone white but he did not flinch.

“Good.” Leferic turned away. He looked to Sir Merguil. “Give the peasants an escort to the river if they want one. Tarne Crossing or a ford, whichever they used to get across.”

“It will be done.” Sir Merguil stroked his knight’s medallion with a kid-gloved hand. He was a lithe and well-groomed man, almost too much of a dandy to be convincing as a war leader. Almost. “Do you believe the man will deliver the message?”

Leferic shrugged. “Take his weapons, his clothes, his boots. He’ll have little choice but to go back to Littlewood
if he wants to survive. Even if he doesn’t, word will reach Sir Gerbrand soon enough. Your men and Cadarn’s saw what happened here, and mercenaries love nothing better than gossip. He’ll hear, and the corpses on the trees will show him that I mean what I say."

“No doubt. Would you really sentence his children to die by torture?”

“If he defies me, yes.” The idea sickened him, but he didn’t let that show. A good threat could spare a hundred lives, but only if it was believed. *I killed my brother. This is nothing.*

“I truly think you would.” Merguil smiled, but his eyes remained hard as chips of flint. “I shall make a point not to defy you myself.”

“Thank you,” Leferic said. Behind him, the ropes went up on the trees.
Merrygold cut her eyes to the door as the dead man entered. She nodded slightly, almost but not quite in time to the harpist’s music.

Brys leaned back in his chair so that the girl on his knee did not block his view, let his eyes fall halfway closed, and studied his target behind the mask of a lazy smile.

He was an unremarkable man in a wine-stained velvet tunic, not small but not broad enough in the chest and shoulders to be an archer or an ironlord. Greasy brown hair fell across his forehead, obscuring small eyes and a reddened nose. He walked with the swaggering precision of the half-drunk, and other than a long-handled knife at his belt, he wore no weapons Brys could see. He didn’t seem to know he was dead yet, but men like that never did.

Brys felt a twinge of disappointment. There was no way this man could be a Baozite. Everything about him spoke of weakness and dissipation, and while the ironlords could be as dissipated as anyone, they were never weak.

Still, this man had betrayed good people to them, and for that he had to die. Brys patted the rump of the girl on his knee. She was soft and pretty and he’d already forgotten her name. “Get up. I need to go out the back way.”

She pouted at him. She’d been talking about something, Brys realized belatedly; he hadn’t been listening while watching the dead man. “What makes you think there’s a back way?”

“There’s always a back way.” Even the meanest brothel had a side door to let patrons slip out quietly when creditors or wives came looking; Merrygold’s house probably had two or three.

“Fine,” she huffed, flouncing off his knee. “Follow me.”

She led him up the stairs and through the hall with its sandalwood-screened doors. Laughter drifted through some of the pierced doors, music or soft cries from others. All the happiness money could buy.

“You could stay,” the girl offered, unlocking a door at the hall’s end. She flashed a coquettish smile over her shoulder. “It’d be well worth your while.”

“I have other business tonight.” He stepped past her into the room. It was smaller than the one Merrygold had shown him. A divan covered in crimson silk stood near one wall, flanked by folding screens of brush-painted silk and pierced sandalwood. The screens, he guessed, were there to temporarily conceal guests who weren’t sure they wanted to leave yet. Or perhaps they had some use that he didn’t know about in love-play. Having met Veladi, Brys was quite willing to concede there were vast areas of bedroom practice that were completely foreign to him. And could stay that way.

At the far side of the room was a door designed to be easily overlooked, if not precisely hidden. It was nestled into the wall and shared the same patterning, although a thin frame of red-lacquered wood marked out where it stood. “That’s the back way?”

The girl nodded. “There’s a ladder. I’ll pull it up behind you.”

“Thank you.” He pressed three solis into her palm. “Stay out of sight for as long as that’ll buy. As far as anyone needs to know, I’m with you.”

She took the money but pouted again. “If Mistress Merrygold asks—”

“Merrygold won’t ask.” Brys opened the door. The cold hit him like a slap in the face, rousing wits that had been dulled by the brothel’s comfort. The ladder was tucked into a niche near the door. It was a woven contraption of rope and some hollow, ridged yellow wood he did not recognize. Iron pegs in the doorframe held its top loops anchored to the floor.

Brys tested the top of the ladder to make sure it was secure, then tossed the rest into the darkness. As soon as it fell he was climbing; he hit the ground before the last rung stopped moving. For a moment he could see the door open above him, a window into a world of golden warmth. Then the girl closed it and Brys was alone in the night.

A few years ago, he thought, walking to the empty rain barrel where he’d hidden his weapons, he might have taken her up on her offer. She had a nice smile and plump breasts and there was probably time for a quick tumble before his target came out of the brothel. But after Veladi, she couldn’t compare. The girl in the brothel lacked her edge.

Brys thought about Veladi as he waited and sharpened his knives. Brilliant, beautiful, ruthless. One of the Spider’s favorite students, until she’d turned apostate and the Spider had ordered her killed.

He’d tried to kill her too. Hadn’t quite worked out.

Brys tested the edge of a blade against his thumbnail and, finding it sharp enough, moved on to another. The knives didn’t really need honing, but it was something to do while he waited for his target to come out and die.
That was a bad winter. One of the worst. Ang’arta had marched on Thelyand that fall, driving back King Merovas’ armies and steadily conquering his land. Desperate for swords to hold back their onslaught, Merovas opened his coffers to any mercenary who’d sign with him. Brys’ company had been quick to take his terms. It seemed like fair money at the time, and the first few campaigns went well. Baozites were bastards to fight, but they relied on muscle and steel like any other soldiers. They were better trained than most, and the breaking pits gave them the savagery of starved dogs, but they were men and they could be beaten.

He hadn’t known about the Thorns then. No one had. There’d been rumors about the eastern witch that Aedhras the Golden had taken to wife, and about the speed with which he’d risen through Ang’arta’s ranks to seize the Whispering Throne, but no one knew what the Spider could do or why he had gone so far afield to find her.

At Thelyand Ford, they found out. That was supposed to be the battle that drove the Baozites back to Ang’arta. It was supposed to be the end of the war. The tide was turning, or so they’d thought. They’d been winning victories against the ironlords, retaking King Merovas’ lost land.

That all ended at Thelyand Ford, when the Thornlords took the field.

Three years later, the memory still made Brys grit his teeth. Good men had died there—died and risen again as monsters, tearing apart companions too astonished to fight back. Bloodmist rolled across the riverbanks in a hellish fog, staining the sun red and killing everything it touched. Shadows took on the shapes of fiends, ripping soldiers limb from limb as if their chain mail was made of paper. Thelyand Ford was a nightmare from which there was no waking.

They’d killed one of the Thorns. One. Against hundreds—thousands—of their own dead. Once the Thorns had crushed Merovas’ vanguard and thrown the rear units into disarray, they had fallen back and the Baozites poured across the ford like iron ants.

It wasn’t even a fight after that. Sporadic battles dragged on through the winter, but the war ended at Thelyand Ford. In the spring Merovas sent his heralds to ratify what everyone on the ground already knew: Ang’arta had won the war. The ironlords annexed a third of Merovas’ kingdom, and Thelyand’s court retreated to lick its wounds in the west.

By then Brys was long gone. The Blackhorn Company had shattered on the blood-soaked riverbanks. There wasn’t enough left of it to regroup. He and a few other penniless survivors had gone to the tiny village of Asen Falls, trying to scratch out a living with every friend they’d had in the world dead or scattered and the ironlords tightening their stranglehold on Thelyand.

It was there, during one of the bleakest periods in his life, that he’d met Veladi.

The people of Asen Falls—all five or six that survived the fighting in their village and the subsequent influx of every hiresword and cutthroat left stranded when their masters died or were ruined on Thelyand Ford—thought there was a voras lur haunting the rivers and sunken mass graves nearby. According to local folklore, the thing was some sort of undead soul-stealer; they thought the Thorns had summoned or made it and set it to prey on them. They’d hired the battered remnants of the Blackhorn Company to deal with it.

Brys hadn’t been much interested in facing another of the Thorns’ monsters, but he needed the money, and he was reasonably sure the voras lur didn’t actually exist. He hadn’t seen anything like it at Thelyand Ford, and none of the other soldiers he’d talked to had heard of such a thing, so he assumed the creature wasn’t real and the villagers had simply been frightened by feral dogs or wolves that had grown bold feeding on the armies’ half-dead stragglers.

He was wrong. The voras lur did exist, and the Thorns had created it. It was no undead monster, though. It was Veladi, newly escaped from the Tower of Thorns.

She’d fought at Thelyand Ford, as he had, and the carnage had broken something in her too. Veladi fled under the cover of chaos, stealing a dead man’s face to disguise herself from her own kind. She didn’t have a plan, didn’t have much of anything beyond determination, cunning and the beginnings of magic that a new goddess granted her.

It didn’t take long for the Spider to realize that Veladi had survived, and to send Thorns after her apostate student. But Brys found her first.

He wondered, as he had often wondered in the years since, why he hadn’t killed Veladi when he had the chance. He’d planned to, at first. Apostasy hadn’t stopped or even slowed her sins; Veladi was a cold-blooded murderer when she was in the Tower of Thorns and she remained one after she left. All she’d done was change her allegiance from one dark goddess to another. Brys had no illusions about any of that. For all the killing he’d done, he was saintly as a Blessed next to her.

Yet he had not only spared her life but saved it twice. Then, when it was clear that they’d find no safety in Asen Falls, he had smuggled her to Merrygold. The courtesan had seen her safely to Calantyr, where the Spider could not reach her and Veladi could live freely under her own face. She was probably still murdering people there. In a city as big as Aluvair or Cailan, she’d never run short of prey.

Why had he done it?
Two reasons. Maybe three. First, because keeping Veladi alive meant spitting in the Spider’s eye; second, because she was a fighter and a survivor and Brys respected that. Third, because she fascinated him.

Veladi knew more about the Thorns and the inner workings of Ang’arta than anyone alive outside their Tower. The first time he spoke to her, Brys had grasped the enormity of her knowledge and why, exactly, the Spider wanted her dead so badly. Killing that wealth of information would have been criminally stupid. Anyway, he liked spitting Ang’arta. It was half the reason he was keeping Wistan alive now. That the Baozites wanted someone dead was reason enough for Brys to get in their way.

Maybe that was a mistake, but life was full of mistakes and there was no use regretting them all. Surviving them was good enough.

The last of his knives was sharp enough to split a mayfly’s tongue. Brys tucked them away and crouched in the darkness, waiting for the traitor to come. He had no doubt that the man would come. If he didn’t, Brys would go into the brothel after him, and Merrygold wouldn’t have that. No matter how drunk the dead man got tonight, he’d be thrown out the door before morning.

He seemed determined to wring out every drop of pleasure until then, though. It was well past midnight, almost to the small hours of the dawn, when the man finally came staggering down the street. Most of Tarne Crossing’s torches had burned out hours ago—the town was neither rich nor crowded enough to keep lanterns burning expensive oil all night—so the man stumbled through inky darkness softened only by cloudy glimpses of the moon.

Even if there had been torches blazing every step of the way, the man would have been good as blind; he was that drunk. Brys slipped out silently behind him, punched him in the head with a knife hilt in his fist, and caught the man as he slumped. The wine did more to drop him than the blow did.

Brys dragged the man down alleys and side streets to a blacksmith’s shop. He’d given the smith a handful of silver yesterday to leave his smithy unlocked and his home empty tonight, and it looked like the man had complied. The house was dark and quiet, the smithy’s forges cold.

Good. That gave him more room to work. Drunk as the man was, he might need it. Brys nudged open the smithy door with a foot and hauled his unresisting captive inside. The moonlight illumined a cavernous space that smelled of smoke and coal. Standing in the doorway so that he could see, Brys struck a small light.

The little flame showed him a freshly swept floor, full barrels of clean water, tools arrayed precisely on their racks. The blacksmith kept his workspace neat. Brys was glad for that; it made it easier to find the things he needed.

He spilled a generous handful of coal into one of the firepots, lighting it with the burning splint. When the fire had taken, he set a handful of chisels on the nearest anvil. Two of them, which he judged able to withstand heat better than the others, he tilted over the forge’s firepot. Then he checked his captive for brands, found none, and splashed a handful of water from the quenching barrel in his face.

The man spluttered and shook the water away. He froze when he saw Brys watching him. “Who’re you? What do you want?” His accent was Langmyrne.

“Someone you tried to kill. I want to know everything you do about what happened in Willowfield.”

“What? Willowfield? I don’t know about any—”

Brys slapped him. It was an open-handed blow, meant to insult rather than hurt. “Don’t lie to me. I know who you are and what you did. Let me tell you how this is going to work. You answer my questions. If you lie, or hold anything back, I’ll cut off one of your fingers. Don’t worry, you won’t bleed to death; I’ve got irons in the fire to cauterize them. If you’re a slow learner and we go over ten lies, I might have to start getting creative … so it’s a good thing I’ve got those irons in the fire. Now: Who hired you?”

“I don’t have a name. I don’t,” the man repeated, eyes widening as Brys pulled his hand onto the anvil and pressed his fingers apart. “I swear I don’t. Tall man, maybe five, ten years older than you. Sounded like an Oakharne—could’ve been a knight or a noble. Looked like a fighting man, but he wasn’t wearing no device. He had brown hair, longer’n yours, and a scar along his chin, like so.” With his free hand, the man drew a finger in a slantwise gesture along the left side of his jaw. “Long-faced fellow. Grim.”

Brys kept his face expressionless, but inwardly he was stunned. He knew that man. “Who was with him?”

“Better part of a company. Maybe a dozen, maybe twenty or thereabouts. Didn’t like to look at them long enough to count.”

“Branded?”

The drunkard nodded, avoiding Brys’ gaze. “Never saw it myself, but … aye, they were. Had to have been.”

“Who was their Thorn?” Which disciple the Spider sent might tell him something about their purpose. They had different specialties; Veladi had explained it to him once. Malentir was her most trusted lieutenant and the most powerful in open battle. Cirephel came close behind him, but specialized in interrogation rather than raw force. Istarlis was a researcher and creator of monsters, while Dyonae was a pure torturer who clung to sanity by her cracked fingernails.
“I only saw her once.” Despite his bloodshot eyes and the reek of sour wine on his breath, the man sounded almost sober. His fingers trembled on the anvil. “Only once, from a distance. No one called her name.”

“What did she look like?”

The trembling in the traitor’s fingers worsened until he was tapping a palsied drumbeat on the hardened steel. His face had gone gray as ash. “Silver hair. Not white, not gray. Silver. Like a river of metal down the middle of her skull. One of her eyes is gone. She wears a blue jewel in its place, and that stone shines when there’s no light to strike it. Some of her fingers are bones. Bones and steel, or silver.”

**Severine.** One of the few good things about the Thorns was that their maimings made them so distinct. No one could mistake one for another, or for any normal person. Veladi had her crimson eyes and half-inked face, Malentir his bracelets of barbed steel. He didn’t remember much about Severine, but at least now he had a name. “What did they have you do?”

“They wanted a way across the river. A way that wasn’t Tarne Crossing nor none of the well-known fords. They wanted to know a village that had a chapel and wasn’t too close to Thistlestone nor anyone else with standing armsmen … and they wanted a quick guide from the first to the second. Then they wanted … they wanted someone to tell them when the Oakharne knight came near that village. When he’d be going there to pray.”

“Who made the requests?”

“The man. One with the scarred chin.”

“What did you get for your betrayal?”

“Money.” The drunkard shifted his weight, looking away again.

“Just money?”

“They said … they said they’d use my village if I didn’t do as they asked. My parents, my wife, my friends. *She* said that. I believed her.”

“You knew they were going to slaughter Willowfield. If you were afraid for your own kin, you knew.”

“I guessed,” the man admitted unhappily. He glanced up at Brys and, just as swiftly, back to the anvil. “What would you have done?”

*I’d have killed them.* And died doing it, no doubt, but it might have spared his kin. No point carrying out threats made to a dead man, especially since they’d have done so at the cost of their real goal. Brys didn’t bother answering aloud. “How much did they pay you?”

“Fifty silver solis and a gold rayel.”

Brys grunted in dour amusement. “Moranne the Gatekeeper.”

“Aye.”

Moranne the Gatekeeper was a child’s morality story, popular throughout the Sunfallen Kingdoms. Two thousand years ago, in the age of legends before the Godslayer’s War, King Cadarn Frosthand built a castle of ice in the north. The castle was enchanted: battering rams splintered like glass on its gates and boulders crumbled to powder upon striking its walls. No enemy could hope to take Icewall Castle by storm, yet the Baozites had marched on it all the same, for their god had granted them a vision of bloody victory.

For a full generation, the story said, the Baozites laid siege to Icewall Castle, winning nothing but frostbit death for their troubles. But the castle’s magic did not protect the countryside around it, so the Baozites raped and slaughtered the commonfolk because they couldn’t reach the king. Their predations were so vicious that scholars and princes gave up all their treasures to bribe their way into the safety of Icewall Castle.

Moranne the Gatekeeper was the one who profited by their pain. A venal man, he let in anyone who could pay his price and barred the door to anyone who could not. Neither mercy nor reason could sway him; silver was his only measure.

One fateful day, he let in three petitioners. The first paid him twenty pieces of silver. The second paid him thirty. The last one paid him a gold coin worth double all the rest. Moranne the Gatekeeper took their money and never looked at their faces, and so he never saw that the last man he admitted was Old Man Death.

Old Man Death laid the king’s guards low with a touch of his corpse-cold fingers. Then he threw the portcullis wide and let the Baozites rush in, streaming fire and blood. As the castle’s inhabitants fell under that steely hail, Old Man Death went back to the postern gate and invited Moranne to watch what he’d wrought. The story usually ended with Moranne weeping and clutching his worthless coins, and either the Baozites or Old Man Death finishing him off.

The payment of fifty silver solis and a gold rayel for Willowfield suggested the Thorn’s hand at work. The scarred man had to be Albric, one of the knights from Bulls’ March, and he didn’t have the black sense of humor or the profligacy needed to make that joke.

If Albric made the requests, but Severine held the purse strings, who was it that really wanted Galefrid dead? Clearly Galefrid had been the target; Willowfield was nothing more than a convenient place to kill him. But why?
Brys drew one of the chisels from the smoldering coals. The tip shone dirty gold. “When was the last time you saw them?”

“After … after they were done in the village. They made me stay and watch. Told me they’d do the same to mine if I betrayed them. They’d give my mother and my wife to the soldiers and burn the rest in their homes. Then they threw me the money and left. That was the end of it.”

“So you came here?”

The drunkard stared at the chisel’s glowing tip, hypnotized. “Thought it’d be easier for my family to believe I was dead. If I never went back, maybe the Baozites would think I didn’t care about them anymore. Then, if something like this happened … they’d have no reason to kill them.”

Brys believed about half of that. A man could drink himself to death faster and cheaper outside Mistress Merrygold’s house. Then again, there wasn’t any reason to pinch pennies before the end. “Where’s the rest of the money?”

The man fished a small, greasy leather pouch from inside his shirt and handed it over. Brys glanced inside. Ten solis, a handful of smaller coins. “This it?”

“Spent the rest. You going to kill me?”

Brys hesitated. He’d planned on it, but that was before he’d talked to the man and seen what a pitiful thing he was.

Still, he’d been willing to betray people to the Baozites once. He might well do it again, and Brys was disinclined to let them know he was alive and asking questions.

“Yes,” he decided, setting the hot iron aside, and snapped the traitor’s neck cleanly.

He scraped the unburnt coal out of the forge and left the rest to smolder out, let the chisels cool, and wiped the soot off of them before replacing them with the rest of the blacksmith’s tools. Then he slung the dead man over his shoulder, carried him to the river, and dropped him into the water with his pockets full of rocks. It wouldn’t deter a determined search, but Brys didn’t expect there to be a determined search. A man like that wouldn’t have many friends.

He was back at the inn before daybreak. Brys took a plate of cold roast chicken and day-old bread from the kitchen and went up to his room. Odosse lifted a sleep-tousled head from the pillow as he came in.

“Best if you go,” he said around a mouthful of chicken, tossing her the last of the traitor’s money. “Take this to get started.”

She opened it with shaking hands. After staring wordlessly at the coins for far longer than needed to count them, Odosse looked up. “Why? What happened?”

“Found our friend from Willowfield. We had a little talk. He gave me that present”—Brys jabbed in the pouch’s direction with a bone—“and then he told me who paid him. Happens that it involved a man I know.”

“Who?”

“Fellow named Albric, if he wasn’t lying to me. I don’t think he was. That means we’ve a problem. Albric’s a knight sworn to Bulls’ March.”

“That’s where Wistan’s from,” Odosse said, confused. She pushed the pouch and its coins away.

“It is. Smells like treachery, but I don’t know whose, and that worries me. Younger son’s the obvious guess, but Leferic never struck me as the murdering type. Spends all his days with his nose in a book; they say he faints at the sight of blood. Hard to match that up with using Thorns for a massacre likely to start a war … but it’s enough to make me think we don’t want to go to Bulls’ March, even if that is where Blessed Andalya’s gone.”

“Could it have been someone outside Bulls’ March?” Odosse suggested. “Or maybe this … Albric … was acting on his own. Wouldn’t a knight earn more glory in wartime?”

“Maybe,” Brys said, unconvinced. Albric wasn’t ambitious, as far as he knew, and he still wondered what role the Thorn had played. Why pay the traitor so lavishly if she was only a hireling herself? But why get involved if she wasn’t? The Thorns had no interest in Bulls’ March or Sir Galefrid that he could see. “We could sit here guessing until the snow melts and come no closer to the truth. I need to look around, ask a few more questions. In the meantime I think it’s best if you take the babies and go off on your own. Stay close, but not so close that anyone puts us together. If whoever hired that man is still watching, he might remember that I was with Galefrid in Willowfield, and he doesn’t need to know that you and the babies came from there too.”

“Where should I go?”

Brys shrugged. “Where would you have gone if you came here on your own?”

She didn’t like that answer, but she didn’t complain. “Are you going to leave us?”

“What?”

“You promised to take me to a town. You’ve done that, and . . . and I thank you for it.” Odosse swallowed. “I don’t have any right to ask more than what you promised, but …”
“Said I’d see you *safely* to a town. You’re not yet safe. None of us is. If you want to go, you’re free to. If you don’t, I’ll keep watching. From a distance, for a while, but I don’t intend to abandon you with Thorns involved in this.”

“Why not?” She fingered the greasy leather pouch. “You owe us no loyalty. Sir Galefrid was your lord, and—”

“Galefrid was an employer. A better man than some, worse than others, dead and gone either way. I swore to his service, but I never meant to stay longer than a year or two. Now that he’s dead, it’s done.”

“You’re a knight.”

“I am that.” He tossed the last chicken bone away and reclined on the pallet, lacing his fingers under his head. “So how can I leave a lady in trouble?”
Odosse wasted no time after Brys’ warning. That same morning, as he lay sleeping in their room at the Broken Horn, she went out to find a bakery.

The brightness of the morning dazzled her. It was a cold clear day on the cusp of winter, and though there was no snow on the ground, the world was filled with a brittle whiteness and a clarity that broke her heart. The beauty of it lifted some of the gloom that had begun to settle over her. She went out into Tarne Crossing with a lifted chin and a renewed resolve that she would find a way to survive here.

She hadn’t realized, until Brys told her to go, just how much she had hoped he would somehow make all of her problems disappear. It was a child’s wish, and Odosse would have chastised herself for it if she’d recognized it before it was gone. He wouldn’t—couldn’t—stay with her and Aubry forever. Nor did she really want him to; it was increasingly obvious that he was nothing like the knights of song and story. Of course she’d have to find her own way in the world.

It wasn’t even that she liked their shadowy existence in the Broken Horn. It was just easier to hide there, clinging to a half-believed illusion of safety, than to go out and face the ugliness she’d seen in Tarne Crossing.

But that wasn’t a real life—it wasn’t any kind of life at all—and it turned her stomach to depend on dead men’s money. She needed her own work, her own place to live.

A bakery was the best place to find that. Odosse had no other skills. And, she thought, in a travelers’ town it might not be impossible for a Langmyrne girl to find work.

Tarne Crossing, like all the border towns, swelled during the winter. Travelers wanted refuge from the frozen roads, freeswords wanted to heal the wounds of the past year’s fighting and train for the next, and crofters in isolated cottages wanted the safety of walls and guards around them. Winter was a hard time, with wolves and wild men hungry in the woods. When the weather warmed, people would go back to the fields and the roads, but until then it was good to be in a town.

There were too many outsiders for Tarne Crossing to shun them, no matter how hotly tempers burned against the Langmyrne. All Odosse had to do was follow the sellswords and merchants to see where they bought their morning bread, and she knew which bakers were friendly to foreigners. Those were the ones she approached with her tale of woe.

Odosse gave them her real name—it wasn’t in her to lie more than she had to, and she doubted she’d remember to answer to a false one—but she claimed both babies as her own. Twins, she said, their father gone or dead. She told one baker that her husband had been a good, honest farmer, killed when his hatchet slipped chopping wood and the cut sickened. To another baker, who had the stump leg and straight back of a wounded veteran, she gave a story about a soldier who left to fight a far-off war and never came home. A third man heard about a sellsword she’d loved one summer night and never seen again.

Every time she told the tale, Odosse changed it. She didn’t care if they believed her, as long as they pitied her. And gave her work.

It was the stump-leg baker who finally let her into his kitchen. His name was Mathas, and he had served under Lord Ossaric before a bandit’s arrow and a bad infection took his left leg below the knee. Coarse black hair bristled along his jaw and out of his ears, while his head was bald and shiny as a brown-speckled egg. He wasn’t a handsome man, but he might be a kind one.

“Hard for me to get around for the deliveries,” he explained, stamping his wooden peg, “and I’m not as nimble around the ovens as I once was. You’ve worked with dough?”

Odosse nodded. “Bread, cake, sweet and savory pie—I’ve learned them all.”

“Let’s see it. Start with a simple bread.” He waved her to the kitchen, a single drafty room with a flour-powdered floor and high windows that let in light and gusts of cold air. Pillows of dough rose on wooden boards slotted in shelves and covered with damp cheesecloth to keep away dust and drying. Sacks of flour and salt slumped against the walls; barrels of water sat by the door. The roaring heat of the ovens in the next room kept the kitchen warm enough to be bearable. Eggs, milk, and butter were stocked on the other side of the kitchen, as far from the hearths as possible, while the rising dough nestled near its warmth.

Odosse tied her unruly brown hair back and knotted a linen coif over it, took a spare apron from its peg, and rolled up her sleeves. She’d walked for hours before getting this chance, and Mathas was the only baker who’d asked her in. Everything had to be perfect. Drawing a deep breath, she willed herself to be calm.
She added boiling water to cold until it was just warm on her wrist, mixed in a fair pinch of the baker’s sponge, and set it aside to ripen. In a second, larger bowl, Odosse portioned out flour and salt, fluffing them together. She made a shallow dip in the center and poured in the cloudy water from the first bowl, mixing it with her fingers to make a shaggy dough that pulled together into a ball.

Once she was back in the rhythm of the work, the bread seemed to come together on its own. The rich smell of the yeast and the gummy texture of the raw dough were so familiar that if she closed her eyes she could imagine herself back at home in her parents’ kitchen, kneading feast breads to be braided and brushed with honey before they slid into the ovens’ flour-dusted maws. Tears welled up beneath her lashes and she dabbed them away hastily, hoping Mathas hadn’t seen.

The baker cleared his throat gruffly. “You’re good. No waste. Where’d you learn?”

“My parents.” Odosse coughed to loosen the thickness in her throat. She tried a smile. It felt shaky, but it came.

“They had me helping from the time I was tall enough to hold up a bowl of pine nuts next to the benches.”

“They taught you well. Mistress Halfrey at the Broken Horn wants a dozen almond tarts for her guests this evening. Wedding party. Think you could see fit to make them?”

“Where are the molds?”

He gestured to the shelves under the rising boards. Odosse pulled out a rack of wavy-sided metal pans, gauging how much dough would be needed to cover them. She cut a block of cold butter that looked big enough to suit, then chopped it into a bowl of flour, sugar and a scant palmful of salt, using a pair of flat-bladed knives to mix the dough so that the warmth of her fingers wouldn’t spoil it. When it came together, she sprinkled cold water over the dough and rolled it into six rough balls and a seventh smaller one.

Her parents had taught her this, too. Odosse could remember them so vividly.

Her mother had blindfolded her and fed her little spoonfuls of filling until she could identify them by taste and scent without trying, and knew instinctively which flavors complemented one another and which clashed. Apricots and almonds, figs and venison, beef and branded dates—she knew them as well as the words to a lullaby.

The little ball of dough was for her father. “Always make one to taste!” he’d boomed, repeating the lesson with every recipe even if it was the fourth time that day. “If they order seven, you make eight, and taste it! Never feed anything to a guest you haven’t tried yourself. If you’re too full, take a bite and give the rest to your dog, but—”

“—be sure it’s something you would feed to a dog,” Odosse murmured to herself, remembering, as she put the balls of tart dough under the windows to chill. She smiled, faintly and wistfully, but the moment vanished into sheer terror as she realized she’d spoken aloud.

Mathas was watching her. There was a glint of sympathy in his black eyes. “Lose them?”

She could only nod dumbly.

“Recently?”

Another nod.

“You look it.” He grunted. “The husband too?”

“He wasn’t—wasn’t really my husband.” She picked up the bread bowl. It was easier to talk while working: it busied her hands and gave her an excuse not to look at him. She stretched the dough out, punched it down, and kneaded it until her fingers ached.

Mathas let her work in silence for a while. Then he said: “Which war?”

“I don’t know,” Odosse said truthfully. She had no idea what brought the Baozites to Willowfield. Surely it was a war, though, of some kind. Sir Galefrid and his knights died to armed enemies of the realm. What was that, if not a war?

She punched the dough down again. It took her anger, absorbed it, and rose softly around the dimples her knuckles left. “It was bloodmist,” she heard herself say. “At least I think it was. That’s what someone told me who was there. Who deserves to die like that? Why?” Tears trickled down her cheeks, hot and helpless, for Coumyn and her parents and all the others who’d been torn out of her life, leaving a ragged hole and flapping threads where strong fabric should have been. All that care and affection, all the little moments that made up the texture of life, ripped away in an instant. And not even for their own sake, not because anyone cared, but simply because they made a convenient backdrop for someone else’s death.

Odosse cried but she kept kneading, sure now that she’d ruined any chance she might have had at work. She cried for that, too, silently, wiping the tears from her chin before they could fall. Still, she emptied the ball of bread dough onto the counter, wiped the bowl with an oiled cloth, and rubbed the cloth over the dough until it was slick and shiny. She put the oiled dough-ball back into the bowl and replaced its cheesecloth cover so that it could rise while she finished the tart shells. Then she waited, wondering whether Mathas would send her away, but he just watched without any expression she could read. So she kept working.

Each of the heavy cast-iron pans had rings for eight small tarts. Odosse took two of them and pressed the pastry
dough into the rings, covering the molds evenly on the bottoms and sides. She made thirteen shells, pricking their bottoms with a fork, and poured a finger-depth of water into the empty rings to protect the molds while they baked.

Mathas peered at the trays as Odosse loaded them into the coolest oven. “Thirteen? Mistress Halfrey wants twelve.”

“My father taught me to always make one extra for tasting before sending the rest out to our guests. Butter’s expensive, but failure’s worse.”

The baker nodded, gruffly pleased. “Taught my daughter the same. She’s up in Isencras now, baking for King Raharic’s kitchen. Sends me letters from time to time. She can’t read, no more than I can, but her boy’s only seven and already knows his letters. Might be yours could do the same, if you want. Blessed Andalya teaches the town’s children. When she’s here.”

“Does that mean—?” Odosse began, but Mathas cut her off.

“I’ve got a spare room over the bakery if you need a place to stay. Room and board, all the bread you care to carry home at the end of the day, and threepence a week. It’s a generous offer.”

“It is,” Odosse said, hardly believing her luck. “I thank you for your kindness, and I’m honored to accept.”

Her days settled into a comfortable rhythm soon after she moved into Mathas’ bakery. Early each morning, when the stars were still bright and the air sharp with frost, she went downstairs to help pull the loaves from their baking-boards and load them into baskets, covered with cloth to keep in the warmth as she carried them through the town.

Half the baskets went into a donkey-cart to be delivered by a taciturn old man named Haeric. The other half were divided between the bakery’s front room, where Mathas sold them to customers who came to his door, and smaller deliveries to taverns and large households within a few minutes’ walk of the bakery. Baskets of loaves went to inns, guildhalls, the town hospice—anyplace that had hungry mouths gathered together and no servants to spare for the errand. By the time Odosse finished her rounds, it was usually well into the morning, and the town came alive around her as she walked.

It was the best introduction to Tarne Crossing she could have hoped for. Odosse learned the streets and the people, the houses and their guests. The bread basket on her shoulder made her welcome at every door, or at least kept people from setting their dogs on her; with the Langmyrne accent still strong on her tongue, she could hardly have expected more. Sometimes she took Aubry bundled up in his carrier, so her son could share the delight of discovering a new town, and she was grateful to Mathas for giving her that chance. She would never have dared take her son out in Oakharn without the shield of her bread basket.

Once her baskets were delivered and the last of the previous day’s retrieved, Odosse returned to help make the next day’s bread. They did more than simple peasant loaves; there were spicebreads and currant cakes, sweet saffron buns and glazed chestnut rings, honeymilk tarts and dried apple pies. Those, too, had to be delivered when done, and if Haeric was not yet back with the donkey-cart, she carried them herself. Between errands it was easy enough to steal upstairs to see the babies; sometimes she played silly games with her son while the loaves were baking.

She did not play with Wistan. She couldn’t. The sick baby was the one cloud of worry in her sunny days. Some days he seemed to be improving: he would take milk and bread-mush with little coaxing, smile at her silly faces, gurgle happy sounds that were almost words. On those days Odosse’s heart clenched with the agony of hope.

But there were bad days, too. He was putting on weight, slowly, but he remained smaller and weaker than Aubry, and the slightest chill could send him spiraling back down. On his bad days Wistan seemed lost in delirium again, and Odosse had to force-feed him milk and water. Once he refused to eat until she thought the child might die; the sunken spot on the top of his head returned, and his lips grew white with dry flaked skin until it looked like he’d been kissing salt. He recovered, eventually, but it terrified her.

Odosse didn’t know what to do for him, beyond feed him and clean him and pray that the Blessed might come back soon. But she didn’t have time to dwell on that worry, either, with so much work demanding to be done.

By dusk prayers she was exhausted, but every night she took a bag of the day’s leavings to the Broken Horn. Most nights Brys was there. He didn’t seem to be having much luck tracking down the architects of Willowfield’s ambush, but there was no shortage of other rumors to fill their ears. Sellswords liked to talk, it seemed, and he had a gift for encouraging them.

“Blessed Andalya’s delayed in Bulls’ March,” Brys told her one evening when she came to deliver the day’s leavings. He rummaged through the bag, picking out a pair of small tarts. “What are these?”

“Yellow’s egg custard, red is elderberry jam.” Odosse pushed back a strand of mud-brown hair that had escaped from the coif she wore while working. “I thought the Blessed was supposed to be coming back to Tarne Crossing. Didn’t they decide she couldn’t help the old lord?”

“Suppose they want her there until he dies. They say his first wife died for lack of a Blessed, and his people don’t
plan to repeat the mistake.” He took a bite of the elderberry tart. “Did you make this? It’s good.”

“You needn’t sound so surprised,” she said, nettled. “If the Blessed isn’t coming soon … what about Wistan? He needs help. He’s done far better than I expected, but he’s getting worse every day.”

“I know. We might have to go to Bulls’ March, though I’m not eager to risk it without knowing Albric’s role in this. Or … there’s a Sun Knight said to be riding around on the Langmyrne side of the river. The Burnt Knight, they call him. Kelland’s his name. He’s keeping the peace for Lord Eduin, supposedly, but I hear he’s asking questions about Willowfield too.”

“The Sun Knights are Blessed, aren’t they?”

“They are.” Brys shook off the crumbs of the first tart and started on the egg custard. “This one’s good too. If I’m allowed to say that.”

She ignored him. “Then why can’t he heal Wistan?”

“He can. I’m not convinced it’s wise to ask him. The Knights of the Sun are a strange lot. They do what they do for their own reasons. I don’t like asking favors of a man when I don’t know what he’ll ask me in turn—especially not a man so godly it’s added his wits. There are other reasons, too, but that’s the one that sticks.”

“We’re talking about a baby. A baby.” Odosse bit back her anger. It wouldn’t help to scream at the man. She simply couldn’t believe that anyone could be so callous about a child’s life—not even someone who so casually spoke of killing men and had probably murdered at least two in Tarne Crossing. She still had the silver that Brys had taken from them; she hadn’t been able to make herself spend it. “Whatever the knight wants, it’s worth paying. And I really don’t think that someone who’s dedicated his entire life to the Bright Lady is going to ask for your firstborn’s blood.”

“Let’s hope not, because I have no idea which brothel you’d find him in.” Brys smirked. “But even if you’re willing to pay a price before asking what it is—and I’m not—good luck finding the man to tender it. The Burnt Knight’s riding all along the border. Might be I could catch him, if it were just me and a horse, but you? Not as easy. Carrying both babies, and with winter nigh upon us? Impossible. Even the Blessed can’t cure the dead, and you’d be frozen solid your first night out.”

“Then what can we do?”

“Let me think on it. Stay at the bakery in the meantime. I like the cakes.”

Odosse stalked out, too vexed to correct him. Tarts, not cakes. But she came back the next night with another bag. And again the one after.

On the third day, she was delivering the Broken Horn’s morning basket of bread when a young man in the commons called her over. He was tall and handsome as Sir Auberand from the stories. Golden hair tumbled over his shoulders in loose, lazy curls. A small strawberry birthmark stained the side of his neck, but it barely diminished his proud beauty.

When he first beckoned in her direction, Odosse looked over her shoulder to see who else was there. But she was alone; there was no pretty serving girl standing in the doorway, nor any elegant lady guest coming down the stairs.

“Yes, you,” the blond youth said. He seemed amused, but his smile was so charming that Odosse couldn’t help but forgive him. “Come here, silly girl.”

“My lord.” She dropped a curtsy, clumsy with yesterday’s bread basket still in her hands. Her lack of grace made her flush. She couldn’t say why it seemed proper to curtsy, or to grant him the title, but it did. His clothes were not especially fine, and he wore no lord’s ring or knight’s medallion, but the honorific seemed to fit. He had that aura.

“Oh, don’t be so formal. Do you have time to sit and talk a while?” He gestured to an empty chair. Next to him, not across the table.

“It’s the middle of morning deliveries, my lord—”

“I won’t take long. A moment of your time. I was hoping to learn a little more about you. Even if it’s only your name.” He smiled again, patting the seat of the empty chair and giving her a slight, suggestive arch of his eyebrows.

She went to him, feeling strangely light-headed, and sank into the offered chair as if in a dream. It was the middle of the morning, and she had five full baskets waiting at the bakery, but somehow Mathas’ disappointment and customers’ impatience were insignificant when set against the stranger’s smile. Odosse straightened the linen band over her hair and tried to smooth out her skirts, as if that might make her more pleasing to his eye.

“My name, my lord?”

“Yes.” There was a whisper of scent about him: musky and spicy, headier than wine. It reminded her of the oils and resins in the charm-crafter’s cottage, each one labeled like a fairy-tale potion. Something about that tugged at her memory, but the thought was soon eclipsed by the force of his presence. All Odosse wanted to do was bask in his nearness.

“Odosse,” she breathed, leaning closer as though pulled by invisible strings.

“A name as lovely as you are.” He touched a fingertip to her chin, drawing her still nearer and tilting her face up
so that their gazes met.

Odosse did not resist, but his words hit her like a splash of icy water. Another, comelier, girl might have been flattered. And perhaps she should have been thrilled to have such a beautiful man lavish compliments upon her. But she felt only embarrassment and the beginnings of rage, because this was all wrong and she’d been so, so stupid not to see it.

Handsome men did not take an interest in her, unless it was to mock her later. She’d had her fill of that in Willowfield. The village boys had made her the butt of so many jokes she’d lost count. Not just the handsome ones, either: the plain ones had joined in when they’d seen how much fun could be had from her. Most of their pranks began exactly like this: with feigned interest and flattery to make her drop her guard. Even Coumyn, the one boy she’d thought might be different, the one she’d thought might really love her, had done the same. That one hurt worse than all the rest combined. She’d believed him.

Odosse had thought grown men would be above such petty cruelties. Evidently she’d been wrong. The warmth she’d felt for him melted away, leaving suspicion and bitter distrust in its stead.

But when she met the stranger’s eyes, all thought fled from her head. The force of his gaze was like a physical blow. Odosse gasped, and flinched, and would have pulled away if not for his fingertip against her chin. That single touch, so light she could barely feel it, held her pinned as surely as a spear driven through a fallen foe.

His eyes belonged to nothing human. The pupils were large and misshapen, spreading outward through his irises like drops of ink in water. The blackness of them was so total, so all-consuming, that it made the darkest scribe’s ink seem insubstantial as morning fog. A soul could fall into those pupils and never come out: they were as infinite, as alien, as the void between the stars.

So profound was the power of his gaze that it took Odosse a moment to realize his charm had cracked around it. His golden hair was not lustrous as she had first imagined: it was brittle and strawlike, not shiny at all, and flecks of ash had caught between the strands on one side. His cheeks were pale and sunken, his lips dry and faintly blue, like a dead man’s. When he smiled she could see that his gums had receded almost to the jawbone, leaving his teeth bared in a skull’s snarl. His tongue was fat and purplish behind them. The scent of his perfume, so sweet a moment earlier, now reeked of corruption.

He is a monster, she realized. But no one else seemed to see it.

A serving girl had come to sweep the commons while they talked, and she went by him with no more than a quick glance and a shy smile. He was still as beautiful in her eyes as he had once seemed in Odosse’s. And the stranger kept smiling, as if he did not realize that Odosse could feel how corpse-cold his touch was and smell the stench of decay on his breath. He is a monster, and he does not know that I know.

“Are you here alone?” His nail curved up under her chin, hooking into flesh. Just a little, just a hint, but it was deadly as a knife blade.

Odosse fought down her panic. She felt like a cornered mouse trying to dodge the cat’s claws. Wildly she wondered what the right answer was. The only thing she could think was that, no matter what happened, she had to protect her son. “I … y-yes, my lord. I am.”

“I thought I saw you in the market yesterday with a baby in a wicker carrier. Perhaps I was mistaken … but it’s hard to imagine two such charming girls in this town. Was the child yours?”

“I don’t know what you mean, my lord.” The lie came more easily this time. Desperation granted her a glibness she’d never imagined. “I was never in the market that day, and I haven’t any children. The only things on my back are my baskets of loaves.”

“Ah, then I am sorry to be mistaken.” He took his hand back and made a small wave, dismissing a fleeting fancy. The stranger did not stand as Odosse picked up her empty basket, made another awkward curtsy, and retreated. But his eyes followed her out of the Broken Horn, and they were cold beneath the charm.

As soon as she finished her deliveries, Odosse went back to the inn to find Brys. She would have gone sooner, but she wanted to be sure that the stranger had left, and if she had gone directly he might have followed her.

The stranger was not in the commons when she returned. Ordinary people filled the tables; the room rang with the clamor of their conversations. Odosse took some comfort from the crowd, but at the same time she wondered if another monster might be hiding among them, and so she hurried away.

Her knock on Brys’ door went unanswered. He wasn’t there. Odosse stood outside for a moment, unable to comprehend how he could be absent in her time of need. When it finally sank in she went back to the stairs, staring at the floor.

The tramp of countless boots had worn the stairs smooth in the center and left them rough at the sides. A trail of gray dirt, ground in by all those feet, snaked up the middle of each step. It was an absurdly small thing, but the shared legacy of so much humanity touched something inside her after that brush against the monstrous. Odosse sat
down on the steps and cried. She was still sitting there when Brys walked up some time later.

“The hell’s happened to you?”

Odosse stood up hastily, wiping her puffy eyes and wishing for a handkerchief. “Nothing. I mean—”

“Come. Tell me inside.”

Inside his room she told him what had happened, at first faltering and then in a rush so fast that she tripped over herself in the telling and had to start again. When she tried to put the stranger’s presence in words, it seemed ridiculous, foolish as coming to cry to him over a ruined pie, and she half-expected Brys to interrupt and tell her to stop being silly. But he didn’t interrupt, and he didn’t laugh, and when she finished her account, his face was somber.

“He asked about Aubry?”

“He did,” Odosse confirmed, then shook her head to correct herself. “He asked about the baby. He didn’t use a name.”

“But it was Aubry.”

“Well, yes. I can’t take Wistan outside. He’s so weak.”

“And he asked if you were alone?”

“He did. I said I was. It’s … it’s almost true,” she hedged, “but mostly I was afraid he was going to try to bring you into it, or Master Mathas. The boys in my village liked nothing better than to make my friends part of their joke. And I was afraid of him. So I lied.”

“Remind me to be grateful for childhood cruelties. Other people’s, anyway.” Brys closed the bag of bread she’d given him and knotted the top. He hadn’t glanced inside. “Tell me again what he looked like.”

“Blond. Very handsome. A little shorter than you, a little thinner. Young. I don’t remember the color of his eyes. Just the pupils. They were black, so black. He had a winemark on his neck, just as big as a fingerprint, right here.” Odosse touched a fingertip to her own neck to show him. “There was something about him … like he was nobility, or even kingly. I don’t know why I thought that—he never said anything about being of high blood, and his clothes weren’t any better than yours—but I was sure of it. Before. Then I looked at him again, and I thought he was a monster.”

“You were right the second time. I know that man, and he’s dead.”

“What? But I talked to—”

“You talked to a Thorn’s puppet.” Brys sat on the bed and ran a hand through his black hair. It was getting long; the front threatened to fall over his eyes. He didn’t seem to notice. Odosse heard anger in his voice, and fear, and something she couldn’t quite place. “The boy’s name was Caedric Alsarring. I saw him die at Willowfield. He was the first one they killed. You talked to a dead man, girl, and we need to get out of this town.”

“Isn’t it safer here? There are guards—”

“Guards won’t stop her. Walls won’t stop her. You can’t wall out mist, and the strongest shield forged won’t stop a spell. The Thorn can’t be more than a day behind her puppet, and she either knows or suspects we’re here. So thank the Bright Lady that the Thornlady tried a glamour on an ugly girl, and let’s get out of here now.”

“But what about Wistan?” Odosse asked, too flustered to care about the insult. “He’s so frail, and it’s so cold. He’ll die, Brys.”

“He might. But if we don’t go, we all will. Risk the baby or die yourself, it’s your choice. I’m leaving before dawn either way.”

The intensity she saw in the sellsword’s green eyes convinced her as much as anything he said. “All right,” Odosse said, defeated. “Give me an hour to pack and ready the babies.”

“Meet me by the south gate. An hour, not more. Or I leave without you.”

It was well into the afternoon when Odosse returned to the bakery. Mathas was sleeping, as was his custom; he’d wake around midnight to begin the next morning’s bread. She wished she could leave a note for the baker, thanking him for his kindness and apologizing for her sudden departure. The days she’d spent working for him were the happiest she’d had since leaving Willowfield, and better than some she’d had there. This could have been a life for her, and a good one: stable, warm, welcoming. She felt real regret at having to leave it behind. But she didn’t know her letters, and Brys would have scoffed if she’d asked him to write it for her, and there was no time left for the luxury of sorrow.

She passed through the empty kitchen quietly, and went upstairs to gather the children.
The trouble with dead men, Albric decided, was that their brains were dead too. Whatever magic animated their bodies and put breath back in their lungs did nothing at all to revive their wits. That was the only reason—the only reason—that he sat out here on a bare wagon bed, freezing his balls off and waiting for the gods-cursed baker to leave his shop.

They’d had the girl. They’d had the girl, the false knight, and the child—that helpless, defenseless, deadly child. All three of them unsuspecting and ripe for the taking.

It had taken weeks to get this close. Weeks of greasing palms and buying drinks and feigning interest in idiots bragging about their “bravery” across the border, when none of them had done more than knife an unarmed crofter and burn down his hut. Weeks during which Albric had wondered if the Thornlady intended to do anything but stand back and watch him do the work that his lord had paid her for.

But, finally, he’d found their quarry: a black-haired freesword with a baby, his identity confirmed by the girl with the Langmyrne accent who was said to be caring for that child. Most of Albric’s sources thought the girl was a doxy who’d been cast aside when her soldier-lover got bored—and the real wonder, they said, was that he’d bedded such an ugly wench in the first place.

Albric knew better. He knew what she was, if not precisely who, and he knew who that baby had to be. Wistan. The closeness of it galled him.

The girl had been right here, living inside this bakery, walking to the same doors with the same baskets every day. It would have been the simplest thing in the world to swoop in and spirit her away. They wouldn’t even have had to hurt her; they could have snatched the baby while she was gone and left her unharmed. She’d been a baker. Bakers started their rounds early, more in night than morning. There wouldn’t have been a soul awake to see the deed, nor a candle’s worth of light to show it. A half-wit could have done the job.

But the gods had ordained that nothing in Albric’s life should be easy, and so instead of executing a clean little snatch-and-grab on the baker’s girl and the baby, Severine’s rotwit hound had spooked her out of Tarne Crossing.

He knew why it had happened, although that did nothing to lessen his annoyance that it had. Tarne Crossing lay in Leferic’s domain, and the embattled Lord of Bulls’ March could scarcely afford to have his most trusted servant kidnapping and killing his own subjects at whim. Leferic had issued strict instructions that they should minimize casualties—and, given the Thornlady’s predilection for making them, that was a wise rule. So they had decided not to seize the baker’s girl until they were certain that she was the right baker’s girl, and that was what had landed them in this pigslop mess.

That was the reason he chose to believe. It was also possible that the Thornlady had tipped her hand deliberately to flush them out of the town’s safety. One couldn’t very well bloodmist the entirety of Tarne Crossing or set ghouls to roam an inn full of people. But out on the road, with nobody watching … out there, they might have to kill all three, instead of removing the child alone. And it would be like her to orchestrate three murders where one would have done. It would be very like her.

Albric spat onto the frozen ground, cursing the night and the cold and the day he’d first heard of Willowfield.

The girl, whoever she was, meant nothing to him or his lord. She was probably some poor, ignorant village girl that Brys had hired as a wet nurse. Most likely she had no idea what she’d stumbled into. Albric didn’t particularly care about Brys Tarnell, either. The man was a wandering mercenary with no family, no armsmen, and scarcely any social standing. He was a landless knight who’d been given spurs by a dead man, and there was nothing he could do to hurt Albric’s lord.

Neither of them needed to die to keep Leferic’s reign safe. Only the child. Only Wistan.

And yet the blood of all three was likely to be on his hands before long, and probably the damn stupid baker’s too. He spat again, adding Severine to his list of curses. He was a knight. His duty was to protect his lord’s people, not murder them. Not when it wasn’t necessary. Not for her sake.

As if in answer to Albric’s oaths, the bakery door finally swung open. Light and warmth poured out to the night: the warmth of hot brick ovens, the light of lanterns to illumine the scoring of raw loaves and the crackly golden-brown of their freshly baked crusts. A peg-legged man hobbled out, sticking his wooden leg in the doorway to prop it open as he eased himself down the step with two big baskets in his arms. He had the belly of a man who enjoyed his own wares, and he mumbled curses at his wooden leg constantly as he walked.

Intent as he was on manuevering his burden, and likely dazzled by the sudden transition from bright to dark, the
baker never looked up as Albric got off the wagon bed and walked over.

“Morning, friend,” Albric said. He stayed in the shadows, keeping his face shielded from the light. On the off chance that this encounter went well, he didn’t want to have to kill the man for having seen him.

“It’s morning all right. I’m not so sure about that next part,” the baker replied. He set his baskets down and squinted into the darkness, propping his fists on his hips and rolling his shoulders forward to show his muscle. Despite his great belly, there was little fat on the rest of him, and his arms were thick as a smith’s. “Might be you should just move on.”

“Might be I will,” Albric said. “Be happy to do just that, if you’ll answer a few questions.”

“What questions?”

“You had a girl working for you not long ago. Plain, brown hair, liked to wear a white band over it. Sometimes she carried a baby while making her rounds. Looks like she might have wandered off. Any idea where she’d have gone?”

The baker’s jaw clenched under his bristly beard, hard enough that Albric could see it, although the man’s back was to the light. “Leave her alone. Whatever she was tangled up in, she’s a good girl, and you ought to leave her be.”

“Only trying to help her,” Albric said, willing the man to believe him. It was truer than he could know.

“That might be. Friend. But helpful people don’t generally accost a man in the dead of dark, so I hope you don’t mind me being a little skeptical. Now it seems to me you should be on your way. I’ve got work to do.”

“That’s a shame.” Albric slid up behind him, smooth as silk, and clapped one hand over the baker’s mouth while he crushed the man’s throat in the crook of his other arm. Cutting off blood to the head was fast enough, as Maol’s stranglers knew too well. It wasn’t the air that had to be stopped, it was the great heart-vein on the side of the neck.

He counted to fifteen. Thirty. Forty-five. The baker slumped limp shortly after Albric finished the first count, but he didn’t relax the chokehold until he finished the last. He hoisted the man up with an effort—the baker weighed near as much as he did—bound and gagged him with the rope he’d carried under his cloak, and shoved him into the bed of his own wagon. Albric covered the unconscious man with baskets of loaves hot from his oven and led the donkey north through the sleeping streets. Just a carter making his morning rounds.

He wondered how long it would take the real carter to notice that his rig was missing and his employer gone. An hour, maybe a little less, if this morning went like the ones before. Plenty of time.

It would have been just as easy to snatch the girl before she’d been frightened off. No, easier; she was smaller, so Albric wouldn’t have had to bother with the donkey-cart. Bright Lady burn the blundering of the ghoul-hound and the hubris of the Thornlady who’d sent a deadwit dead man to do a thinking person’s job.

Albric let the rankling unfairness of it all carry him to the north gate. It was easier than thinking about what would happen when he got through.

The gate itself was eerily silent. The only movement was the flicker of the torches that were burning out at night’s end; the only sound was the soft crackle of burning pitch. There was no mumbled conversation from guards trying to ward off sleep, no barking from their dogs at a stranger’s approach. A crow perched on the wall ruffled its wings and shifted its stance as the cart creaked near, and Albric grimaced as he passed beneath its gaze.

That crow was dead. Distance hid its ragged feathers and gaping eye sockets; darkness veiled the bone that peeped through its balding skull and the dry sinew that roped its legs under cracking scales. But Albric had seen the thing before without the blessing of night’s concealment, and he knew what it was. He knew, too, that the guards and their dogs were sleeping—only sleeping, if the gods were good; they didn’t need more deaths—and that there was no need to be quiet.

He unloaded the wagon two streets away, leaving the donkey in harness and the loaves in the cart bed. They’d likely be stolen before the sun came up, not that it mattered. The thefts would confuse the trail a little, and the odds that the baker would be back to complain were growing slimmer by the moment.

The baker was awake when Albric came to take him. His eyes promised murder, but the ropes held strong.

“You should have answered my questions,” Albric told him, not unkindly, and hoisted him out of the cart.

They left through the small postern gate. Albric closed it quietly behind them and picked his way down the embankment to the ditch inside the ring of stakes that circled Tarne Crossing. The weight of the baker leaning on his shoulder pushed him off balance so that he staggered down the slope too fast, cracking through the thin ice that covered the ditch’s water. His boots were soaked before he came up the other side, and Albric cursed the Thornlady for that too.

Then he was through the stakes and out, and he circled east around the town to where Severine waited in the woods.
She glowed in the dark between last starlight and dawn. Glowed like a ghost, Albric would have said, before he’d seen the ghosts she made and realized the truth of them. Her silver hair shone like a crest of false stars down her neck, and the blue crystal of her eye was so radiant that he wondered why they couldn’t see it from the walls. Two of her ghoul-hounds skulked behind her, their crouched forms nearly eclipsed by her unearthly glow. No glamour covered these; their ragged talons and mist-filled eyes were plain for all to see, and saliva dribbled between their teeth in thick silvery strings as they saw living men come near.

The baker stiffened when he saw the Thornlady. Albric had to drag the man the last few steps of the way; his foot and peg leg drew furrows through the dead leaves. The front of his breeches steamed and stank of urine by the time they reached Severine.

“Here.” Albric pulled the baker upright, yanked the coiled rope from his mouth, and gave him a shove that sent him sprawling face-first at Severine’s feet. “This is the baker that the girl was working for. He wouldn’t tell me where she went. Maybe you can make him talk.”

“I don’t know,” the baker moaned through a mouthful of dirt and leaves. His face was shiny with the tracks of tears or sweat; the moisture glistened in Severine’s aura. “I don’t, I swear, I’ve nothing to tell you. I don’t know where she’s gone.”

Albric believed him, but that didn’t matter anymore. The baker had sealed his own fate by resisting. He’d have to die, and because he was now in the Thornlady’s hands, he’d have to suffer first. And possibly after.

“We shall see,” Severine replied. “Silence him again, please.”

Masking his disbelief, Albric did as he was told, stuffing the spit-slimed gag back into the man’s mouth. He stepped away as soon as it was done.

The Thornlady smiled down at the man. The crystal in her eye twinkled. For an instant all was still. Then the ghoul-hounds leapt out from behind her to seize hold of her captive, one on each side. Their claws ripped through his skin as they hoisted him up, and they leaned forward to lap at the blood with curling purple tongues. They pulled him away, deep into the trees. Albric sat down on a stump after they had gone and tried to shut his ears to the muffled screams.

An impossible time passed. The eastern horizon softened to gray and gentle blue. He watched as a sea of clouds parted to reveal the full glory of the sunrise. A bird trilled over the delicate tapestry of frost that glittered on the browning leaves.

None of it touched Albric’s soul. He had heard from a wandering sellsword that there were warriors in Kai Amur who could find such loveliness in a sunrise that they could kill or be killed thinking of it, and never flinch from the blade either way. Albric doubted that story was true, but he wished he could share in that strange brave madness. Anything to blind himself to the ugliness he had caused.

They weren’t even Celestians in Kai Amur. To them a sunrise was only a thing of beauty, not a call to prayer. Albric was a Celestian, a knight anointed to the sun, and yet he found no comfort under the Bright Lady’s sky. He was unworthy of her light.

Every day he spent in Severine’s company, he betrayed his oaths again. The priest in Willowfield was the beginning, but there at least he’d been able to persuade himself that the solaros was a traitor who deserved his fate. The priest had only agreed to betray Galefrid when they’d threatened to eradicate his village, true, but he had agreed and he should have known better than to trust the word of a Thorn.

So Albric told himself when he couldn’t sleep without seeing the solaros’ crushed face swimming up at him in the dark. Sometimes it worked. Sometimes.

But the other priest? The pilgrims? He had no defense to that. Those deaths, and the ghoulish, shrieking thing that the solaros in Bayarn Wood had become, haunted his nightmares. He couldn’t close his eyes to pray without hearing that awful, reedy cry, seeing the veined white fingers tearing at anguished eyes. The solaros was a holy man on pilgrimage, performing the vensolles to honor Celestia, and Albric had killed him. As surely as if he’d plunged a knife into the man’s chest with his own hands, he was guilty of that murder. Worse than murder: he’d led the Thornlady to them, and she had desecrated the pilgrims beyond mere death.

She might well do the same to this baker, a man whose only crime was trying to protect a girl who’d worked for him.

It was necessary. Albric clenched his fists in his lap, staring at the sky. It still is. I must do my duty. A knight was nothing without duty. Stripped of his oaths and his lord, he was just a man with a sword, a masquerading mercenary like that pretender Brys Tarnell.

But what was his duty, in the end? Albric had no doubt that his oaths and his lord deserved obedience, but he wondered whether Leferic fully understood what he had done in hiring Severine. Had he known what she was? What she would make Albric do?

Surely not. Surely Leferic believed he was simply bargaining for a mercenary. One with unusual skills, to be sure;
one who used spells rather than blades to do her killing, and had no qualms about hiring on for a child’s death. But still a mercenary. Not this mad, sadistic horror. He couldn’t have known about that.

The Thornlady wasn’t even efficient. She’d been lethal in Willowfield, but since then she seemed to have lost interest in the hunt. Her dead crows circled the skies day and night, but they never seemed to find anything useful.

Was she really that ineffective? Or was she planning some treachery of her own?

The thought soured Albric’s stomach. They should never have allied with Ang’arta. Never. His failure to talk Leferic out of this folly was his greatest mistake. If only he’d been a better counselor—more forceful, nimbler with his words …

He looked up as Severine returned. Blood darkened her right sleeve and streaked her face in a diagonal trail of fine droplets. The bones of her maimed hand were wet and crimson, the color just visible in the rising light. She licked the blood from those sharpened bones, favoring Albric with a coy little smile. “He wasn’t lying. He truly didn’t know where she went.”

Albric nodded tersely, feeling another twist of nausea. The man had been one of his lord’s own subjects. “What about the body?”

“You need not be concerned.” Even as she spoke, Albric could see her corpses shambling out of the woods: first the two loping ghoul-hounds, their mouths red with blood and their eyes empty as ever, then the baker moving with a slower, shuffling walk. His bearded head lolled drunkenly from side to side with each step, but no drunkard’s head ever twisted around until his chin pointed down to his spine.

And yet there were no other wounds on the man, nothing to explain where all the blood came from. His clothes showed no sign of dirt stains, although Albric had knocked him down hard.

“What do you mean?”

“Let us say the baker never left Tarne Crossing last night. Let us say he got drunk and stumbled out in the dark. Let us say he tripped—drunkenly, foolishly—and broke his neck. A pity. But nothing to do with us.” The Thornlady gave him one last, cool smile, drawing her hood up against the morning sun. “So, you see, having never made a body, we have nothing to return.”

“Convenient,” Albric muttered. The ghoul-hounds had stopped in the trees near their creator, but the baker’s corpse kept walking, through the stakes and across the ditch that protected the town where he’d lived. He supposed the guards were still in their spell-cursed sleep, for no challenge came from the walls as the broken figure crossed their defenses.

“Yes.” Severine retreated back into the lacy shade of the leafless wood. “I am afraid, however, that the rest of the day will be less so. I am tired, and must rest … and I must send another message to my Tower.”

“Why? What about the baby? The girl left not a week past. They can’t have gotten far. We’re this close and you want to stop for a full day?”

She gave him a frosty glance. Her blue eye glittered like broken ice. “Magic is exhausting. I do not expect you to understand that, but the concentration it requires is far beyond anything you can fathom. You would not like what would happen if mine should falter while I worked. So I will rest, and you will wait.”

“But the baby—”

“Will not get far. For the sake of the child, they must travel slowly. I will send the crows out to scour the skies, and soon we will know where they’ve run.”

Albric scowled. “Why didn’t you do that in the first place? We needn’t have bothered with the baker at all.”

“Yes. But I’d have been less amused,” Severine said lightly, and vanished into the wood.

Behind her Albric’s scowl deepened. What had Leferic been thinking?

The Thorns kept to their bargains. As hated and feared as they were, everyone knew that much to be true. The Maimed Witches of Ang’arta were as oathbound as Celestia’s Blessed; they could not lie or renege on their word, once it was given, and Severine had given hers. She’d taken Leferic’s money and sworn an oath to him in return, so she was bound to do all in her power to ensure that Wistan was captured or killed.

But that didn’t make her trustworthy. She might not play them false, at least not directly … but Albric couldn’t shake the conviction that she was acting on her own time, for her own reasons, and without his lord’s interests at heart.

Whatever she plotted, it was Albric’s duty to see that it did no harm to his lord. But how? He had no idea what she was really doing, and no proof to confirm his suspicions.

Muttering another curse, he stalked after her.

Their camp consisted of two tiny tents on opposite sides of a small clearing left by the fall of a grandfather maple. One would have been more efficient, both for warmth and concealment, but the Thornlady liked her privacy and Albric was all too happy not to sleep near her, so two tents it was. The ghoul-hounds that she kept nearby crouched in the leaves, impervious to such mortal concerns as cold and damp; the rest of them were off ranging. Albric
preferred not to know where.

He’d stabled their horses in town, both as an excuse to keep up on the ostlers’ news and because the animals spooked when the ghoul-hounds came near. They’d likely have to choose between horses and ghoul-hounds when they finally left Tarne Crossing.

That choice would not be made today. Severine sat cross-legged on the frosted trunk of the fallen maple, whispering to each of her dead crows in turn and sending them off with a kiss on their heads. Neither she nor Albric would be going anywhere until her birds returned.

Collecting those crows had been another ugly task. She’d bought a sheep and cut it open on a stubbled field and made him shoot down the crows that came for the gory feast. For hours he’d shot carrion birds, until finally she had near twenty, called an end to the game, and let her ghoul-hounds devour the poor sheep’s carcass. At sunset she used her unholy prayers to animate the little corpses into black-winged, eyeless spies, and Albric had gone to drink himself senseless.

Hellish work, and a waste of a day they should have spent on the hunt. He pushed away the memory and went to his own tent.

Buried at the bottom of his pack was a leather-covered prayerbook. It wasn’t a true book, despite the Celestian sunburst embossed in gold on its cover. Between every short prayer were several pages of simple illustrations, each one blank on its other side. The design enabled Albric to tear those pages loose without a casual observer realizing that anything was missing from the book. The twisted scrap of paper between them, seemingly used to mark his place among the pages, unfolded into a slightly larger sheet with an uneven sunburst cut into its center. Back at Bulls’ March, Leferic had a twin to this sheet.

The prayerbook’s spine hid a thin stick of charcoal mixed with hardening agents. The charcoal stick was wrapped in a tight spiral of dried leaves, helping it hold its shape and protecting Albric’s hand from picking up telltale marks as he wrote. As the tip wore down, he could peel back the leaves to expose more of the stick. It was a Northmarchain invention; their scribes had invented it and their soldiers had spread it. Ink froze too readily to be reliable in their brutal winters, and it was too messy to be easily used in the field.

The writing-sticks had yet to spread far through the Sunfallen Kingdoms, but Leferic had grasped their advantages immediately and procured a small supply some years ago. They were clean, convenient, and readily concealed. Perfect for work like this.

Albric tore a blank page from the prayerbook and laid the sunburst stencil upon it. In the outlined space he described their progress thus far, the news he had heard and the rumors he half-trusted, and his suspicions of the Thornlady’s motives. He didn’t mention his nightmares. Nothing about those would help Leferic, and his lord didn’t need to know how guilt-ridden he’d become. Although Albric avoided names and too-damning words, he otherwise wrote frankly, for a coded message would be harder to disguise.

When he was finished, Albric lifted off the stencil and filled in the remaining space with trivial nonsense, blending the hidden message into a mundane letter to a wife he didn’t have. Then he put away his implements, sealed up the letter, and circled wide through the woods so that he could approach Tarne Crossing from the road. He needed to check on the horses anyway, and a coin to an innkeeper would soon see his letter with a traveler headed to Bulls’ March, where Leferic should receive his message within days.

He lingered in town longer than he had to. The horses were fine, and there wasn’t much new news to be had, but it was such a pleasure to be among living, breathing people—with all their profanities and complaints and base gutter concerns—that Albric was willing to buy men beers just to hear the same rumors retold a dozen times from different mouths. No one was talking about the baker—yet—and that was a relief as well.

Only when the sun was dipping low to the west, and he had heard the fourth version in two hours of the “true reasons” for the Burnt Knight’s ride, did Albric finally make his excuses and stagger out of the Dancer and Drum, pretending to be drunker than he was. He wanted oblivion, but that would be unwise.

Twilight had fallen by the time he returned to their hidden camp. Most of Severine’s crows had come back to roost, squatting in the bare branches of the tree over her tent as if waiting for a hangman to come out with their meal. The ghoul-hounds were nowhere to be seen, and Albric was not about to look. He ignored her tent altogether, hoping she would return the favor.

He had no such luck. He’d barely set foot in the maple’s clearing before she came out of the darkness toward him, drifting over fallen leaves with the silence of a shade. She wore the dead woman’s face, which meant she’d been in town today too. Severine disguised herself as the murdered pilgrim only when she went to visit the good people of Tarne Crossing. He didn’t recall seeing her, but he hadn’t been looking, so that didn’t mean much.

“What?” Albric snapped, in no mood for pleasantry. He should have let himself get drunk as a pig’s uncle in town. Maybe, if he was lucky, he’d have tripped and broken his neck while stumbling through the ditches, and wouldn’t that be a tidy end to it all? But that was a coward’s escape; if he did that, he’d fail his lord and everything
he’d done thus far would have been for nothing. All those deaths, wasted.

The Thornlady seemed unruffled by his foul temper. “My orders have changed.”

“Oh? No more torture and murder of people who have nothing to do with our task? Wait, that never was an order. Never mind, then, I don’t care.”

She raised a sandy eyebrow, but her stance remained serene, an oddly elegant pose for such a dumpy body. “I am to await Sir Kelland’s arrival. The crows have seen him; he is on his way here.”

“You were hired to take care of a child. One child. No one else. Not some hapless pilgrims in the woods, not a bloody baker, not a gods-damned Sun Knight, for the Bright Lady’s sake!” Albric took hold of himself with an effort, forcing his voice lower. The wine he’d drunk sloshed like acid in his belly. “One child. Which, for all these other deaths, you’ve proved remarkably incapable of finishing.”

“He will be dealt with shortly. The crows have seen him as well.”

“Good. Then finish him and let our bargain come to an end. After that, I don’t care what you do. I might even refrain from sending my lord’s men after you for the murder. For a day or two. If you leave promptly, perhaps they won’t catch you.”

“It would be a waste of their lives if they tried.” Severine let the spell fade around her, returning to her own form. She folded her hands into the wide sleeves of her cloak so that she was entirely swathed in blackness and her face seemed to float, disembodied, in the night. “In any event, I shall require your assistance with Sir Kelland.”

“No.” All the corroded remains of Albric’s conscience rose up in rebellion. “I’ll have nothing to do with that. Take care of the child and begone.”

“Easily done … if that is truly your desire. Yes. I can finish the child, and the girl who carries him, and the false knight who fancies himself their protector. And everyone else with them on the road. Oh, yes,” she said, with a glint of malicious amusement at his surprise, “they were not so foolish as to leave Tarne Crossing alone. They left in the company of the Vis Sestani. And they can all be dealt with so easily, and all within the word of our contract. The Vis Sestani do not carry weapons. As you know.”

“And if I stay, and help you with the Burnt Knight?” Albric said, hating himself.

“Then only the child dies. I shall prohibit my pets from visiting harm on any who do not intervene.” Severine unclasped her arms and held up her maimed hand in mimicry of a liegeman’s oath-taking. The bare bones and silver fastenings of her two small fingers twinkled in the shadow-laced starlight.

“Fine reassurance.”

“I cannot promise that they will be gentle with those who get in their way. But they will not inflict one scratch more than necessary to accomplish your lord’s desire.”

Albric bowed his head. It was not meant as a gesture of acceptance; it was that he could no longer hold up his head under the weight of his guilt. But intentions didn’t matter, only deeds, and he knew what his deeds had to be. “Very well.”
“How about a cream horn?” Bitharn asked, broadening her smile to cover her desperation. Bright Lady save her, but she was not good with children. Mothers tended to keep their babies away, as though coming too close to her might infect them with eccentricity, and generally Bitharn was quite content with that. She’d sooner face down a pack of ravening Maolites than be given the care of an eight-year-old for an afternoon … but no one had asked her, so here she was.

Thankfully the little girl nodded, though she didn’t pull her thumb out of her mouth to reply. Bitharn breathed a sigh of relief, took the girl’s other hand, and led her out of her house. Only when they were four doors down did she finally turn to the child and ask, “Where should we go to get one?”

The girl—Mirri, that was her name—pointed down the street, back the way they’d come. Bitharn smiled brightly and took her in a roundabout circle, putting another block of houses between them and the child’s own home before they started back in that direction. “Tell me when we’re getting close. What’s your favorite kind?”

She watched Mirri carefully while she tried to draw the child out of her shell with chatter. The girl might be a little older than she’d first guessed. Closer to ten than eight, maybe, but kept small by hunger and still clinging to a baby’s habits. Many of the children in Tarne Crossing were like that, she’d noticed; perhaps it was something that living on the border did to them. Children who grew up in war-torn lands were the same way: they felt the hardness of the world too young, and it blighted them like saplings hit by a late frost.

Kelland was back at the house with Mirri’s mother, who had broken her leg in a bad fall last spring. It had healed poorly, leaving her with a twisted, painful limb that made it impossible for her to stand more than an hour at a time or carry a pail of water from the river back to their house, let alone help run the vegetable stall that was their livelihood. Her injury put a heavy burden on the family, and the strain of it probably went some way toward explaining Mirri’s size and behavior.

While Kelland’s prayers could likely set the leg straight, and even have the woman back on her feet by sundown, the leg would have to be broken again and the bones realigned first. Mirri’s father and her brother, a strong lad at fourteen, were there to help with that. Breaking a grown woman’s leg was not easy, and forcing it back into alignment would not be quick or pleasant work. But the three of them could manage it, which made Bitharn unnecessary, and there was no need for Mirri to hear her mother’s screams or witness her agony. Kelland could be frightening in his power, too, and a child might misunderstand.

So she had taken the girl out of the home, and now she had to find some way of keeping Mirri occupied for the rest of the afternoon, until the worst of it was over and it was safe for them to go back. Bitharn had no idea how she was going to manage that. Distracting the girl with pastries was a start, but afterward? What did people do with children all day?

As they circled around an apothecary’s stall and the bakery came into view, Bitharn realized with a sinking heart that she might not even get the cream horn.

A cart stacked high with wicker cages of poultry had lost a wheel on the rutted road just outside the bakery, upsetting its load. Frantic chickens and white-feathered geese honked and flapped all across the road amidst the wreckage of their cages. The carter was shouting hopelessly at his birds; passersby tried to help, stole his stray fowl, or simply did their best to dodge the panicked poultry as they scrambled down the street. The birds, too, were wild with confusion. Some tried to flee, some pecked at the crumbs that littered the baker’s front steps, and all contributed to the chaos. The baker’s door was shut against his feathered foes, and it was plain that no one would be buying so much as a penny roll until the road was cleared.

“Well,” Bitharn said, eyeing the madness, “would you like to watch the show?”

Mirri shook her head. She popped her thumb out of her mouth just long enough to say “Hungry,” then slid it back in.

Bitharn didn’t need another look at the girl’s skinny shoulders to believe that. “Of course you are. Where else can we get good pastries?”

The child sucked her thumb harder, thinking, “Mathas,” she offered at last. “He has good tarts.”

“Oh? Where’s that?”

“This way.” Mirri took Bitharn’s hand and led her away from the squawking birds, taking her through the streets with a confidence that belied her constant thumb-sucking. Clearly the girl knew the town, and the people they passed seemed to know her. A few called friendly greetings, which Mirri returned with solemn nods. Most did not,
however, and Bitharn reflected on how strange it must be to live in a town that swelled to bursting each winter and shrank back down each spring. Half the people on the streets seemed to be strangers.

Mathas’ shop sat on a corner between two narrow but well-trafficked streets, next to a tavern and not far from a scribes’ hall. Tarne Crossing was too small to have the extremes of wealth and poverty that defined city neighborhoods in Bitharn’s experience, but nonetheless it seemed to her that the shops were a little more prosperous here, the houses a little larger. At this hour the place should have been crowded with people buying their daily bread and goodwives bringing their own loaves to bake in the communal ovens for a penny. Instead the bakery’s doors were closed and the street outside was empty. Only a scowling old man sat on the steps, turning a battered hat around in his hands and glaring at passersby with muted fury.

Mirri hung back from the man, but Bitharn could see no reason to be shy.

“Excuse me,” she said, walking up to the shuttered shop, “but is this bakery closed?”

The old man squinted against the sun as he looked up at her. He had the browned neck and callused hands of a laborer, and he gawked openly at the sight of a woman dressed in breeches and carrying a bow. Just as Bitharn was about to snap at him to stop staring, he offered an answer. “Baker broke his neck last night. The brewer’s boy found his body outside Steepshank’s this evening. Figure he got drunk and tripped.”

“Oh. I’m sorry to hear that.” Bitharn bowed her head politely and began to turn away.

“Wait,” he said. “You the woman travels with the Burnt Knight? Pretty girl in men’s clothes—don’t see too many of those.”

Bitharn nodded. She would have liked to lie—no one asked that question unless they intended to ask for something else after—but she couldn’t make herself do it with Mirri standing right there.

“I’ve got a boon to ask.” The man hesitated, crumpling the soft cloth of his hat in his hands. He seemed to shrink into himself, suddenly unsure. “My name’s Haeric. I’d have come to ask him personal, but … maybe you can take him my question, instead.”

Mirri or no Mirri, Bitharn was not about to let herself be guilted into promising that. Kelland had too many demands on his time already. But she could be polite. “What is it?”

“Mathas wasn’t a drinker. The baker. I mean—” He cut off, squeezing his eyes shut, and shook his head. Then he tried again, fumbling for words. “It doesn’t make a scrap of sense. I’ve worked for Mathas since he lost his leg, near ten years back. The man never had more than a mug of ale with his dinner. He didn’t like anything got in the way of his work, being as that was all the fates left to him. If he was going to drink himself stupid, he wouldn’t have done it during the night. That’s when he does the bread for the morning. Put that together with his girl from Langmyr goes missing not a week earlier, and my wagon’s gone this morning, and old Clover, too, and the whole thing smells worse than week-old fish. I’m worried I might be next. If you could just look into it, please—”

“I will convey your concerns to Sir Kelland,” Bitharn said, coolly correct.

Haeric took his cue from her formality. “Much obliged,” he muttered, dropping his eyes back to his battered hat as Bitharn left with the girl.

At the third shop there were neither panicked ducks nor broken-necked bakers, and Mirri got her cream horn at last. Bitharn bought herself a honeyed roll studded with raisins and nuts, and the two of them ate in the shop’s small anteroom, warmed by the fires of the great ovens nearby. There was hot mint tea and spiced wine, slightly bitter from oversteeping, to drive away the chill from within as well as without.

The baker refused to take their coins once she realized who Bitharn was. “It’s payment enough just to have you,” she said, and her tone brooked no argument. “We’re mindful of all the Burnt Knight does for us, and that with our own Blessed gone.”

“That’s very kind of you,” Bitharn said, though she would have preferred to pay. Even small gifts carried a weight of obligation, which her temple upbringing and long travels with Kelland left her unable to ignore. But again she felt that Mirri’s presence bound her to courtesy, so she did not insist.

It was still early in the afternoon when they left the baker’s shop, Mirri clutching a braided stick of bread to share with her family at dinner. As they walked through the streets, the girl turned to Bitharn with the peculiar gravity of the very young.

“I want to be a Sun Knight when I grow up,” she announced.

“So you do?” Bitharn smiled. “Why is that?”

“Because you can help people, and they give you things, and they’re always happy to see you.”

“Not always, and it isn’t quite so easy. But that’s a worthy goal.”

“How can I do it?”

“You can’t, dearling.” Bitharn ruffled the girl’s short black hair, taken by an odd, nostalgic sadness. She’d had that same wish herself once. “You can keep a kind heart and a pure mind, and you can hope, but in the end the goddess chooses. We don’t. And perhaps it’s better that way.”
“Why?” Mirri frowned. She wasn’t sucking her thumb anymore, Bitharn noticed; she’d taken to swinging her arms loose by her sides, the way Bitharn herself did, and kept the bread-stick easily in one hand.

“Because the Bright Lady knows our hearts better than we do. She knows who has the strength to bear her gifts. It isn’t easy to be Called, and it’s harder still to live up to the oaths once you take them. Once you go out into the world … everyone expects things, everyone demands them, and many think they’re entitled without a word of thanks. People will try to use your name to justify themselves, or trick you into helping them to power, and sometimes you have to decide whether it does more good to let them or balk them.

“There’s never enough magic to soothe all the world’s ills, and choosing who to help and who to leave … it’s a heavy weight to bear, knowing you had the power to help someone but didn’t, or couldn’t, because you judged someone else needed your magic more. And the hardest part, I think, is remembering how to keep a good heart when you see the ugliest parts of people’s souls every day. If they were kinder to each other, and more responsible themselves, much of our work wouldn’t be necessary—but they aren’t, and you have to help them anyway. How do you keep a heart generous enough to cure without condemning?”

“You help the good people and stop the bad ones, that’s how,” Mirri said matter-of-factly.

“You do,” Bitharn agreed. “But most people aren’t Sun Knights or reavers out of Ang’arta. Most people are a little of both. Even Sir Cadifar sinned out of jealousy, and even the Winter Queen loved her sons. What do you do then?”

Mirri squinted at her toes, thinking, and kicked a loose cobblestone. A pigeon startled away. “I don’t want to be a Sun Knight anymore. I want to be like you.”

“Ah. Well,” Bitharn said, trying not to smile, “that’s a little easier.”

They spent the rest of the afternoon outside the town walls, playing at archery with a scrap of canvas strung up between the ditch-stakes. She didn’t want to take the child out of the walls’ sight, but they couldn’t very well shoot arrows inside. Bitharn got a boy’s bow from one of the gate guards, who gave her an odd look but acquiesced once she explained her position. Being the Burnt Knight’s companion was good for some things, once in a while.

She expected Mirri to get bored after a few rounds, but to her surprise the girl took to the lessons with a fierce determination, aiming each arrow as if the target were her worst enemy’s heart. The child had an instinct for the correct stance and hand placements, and by the end of the afternoon she was hardly missing the canvas target at all. Bitharn had picked a big one and set it close, but she was still impressed.

They were picking up the arrows from the last round when Mirri suddenly straightened and waved Bitharn over. “Look.” The girl pointed to the muddy ditch.

It took Bitharn a moment to see what she meant. The ditch was shallow and foul-smelling; while most of the town’s night soil was carted out to fertilize the fields to the east, whatever the dirt-carriers missed was thrown over the walls into the ditch. There was nothing remarkable in that, and at first Bitharn couldn’t see why Mirri had called her.

Then she saw the footsteps in the mud. There were two sets leading out from a postern gate: a pair of heavy boots that had pressed deep into the soft soil, hard enough to leave clear imprints of the nails in their soles, and a single boot, slightly smaller, matched with the circular pocks of a peg leg. The prints were parallel to one another and each set occasionally trampled over the other, so they had to have been walking side by side at the same time. Two Boots got heavier where Peg Leg got lighter, but the reverse was never true; that meant Two Boots was supporting—and, judging by the grooves left by the wooden leg in places, sometimes dragging—the other person.

“Mathas had a wooden leg,” Mirri whispered. “Are those wooden leg prints?”

“I think they are.” Bitharn followed the trail as far as she could, but the ground quickly hardened away from the ditch, and the prints became too muddled for easy following. She could not see where, or if, they returned. She would have liked to circle around the walls and see where Peg Leg came back—Mathas had been found dead inside the walls, so at some point he had to have returned—but sunset was drawing near. The western horizon was red with the promise of it, and she had to bring the girl home.

Reluctantly Bitharn went back to where Mirri waited. She pointed to the tracks, beckoning the child near. “What do those tell you?”

Mirri looked at the prints and shrugged. “I don’t know. That Mathas was here?”

“And recently.” Bitharn stooped to show her, tracing a fingertip along the edge of the tracks. “Here, see how clear the marks are by the water? Right up here, a handspan from the edge. You can see a dent for every nail in his boots. It’s colder at night than it is now; I’ll bet this mud is half ice until highsun. If you walked this way by night, or early in the morning before it thawed, your prints would look like this. If you came this way now, when it’s warmer, there’d be nothing left but blobs. Soft mud sticks to your feet; it leaves sucking holes, not detailed prints like these.”

“So he was here in the night?”

“Last night, if I’m not mistaken, or very early this morning. The mud hasn’t filled in yet. Tracks don’t stay clear
long in ground this soft.”

“There was someone else with him,” Mirri said. “More tracks.”

“There was.” Bitharn stood up, wiping her hands on her breeches. “But that’s a mystery for another day. We need to get that bow back to the guards, and your mother’s likely waiting for you.”

“Will she be well?” Mirri asked wistfully.

Bitharn hesitated. There was so much hope in the girl’s eyes, and surely it would be harmless to give her the promise … but she had seen too much go wrong, with too little cause, to answer with anything more than the truth. “If the Bright Lady answers our prayers, she will be.”

Mirri nodded, and they went home.

Celestia had indeed heard Kelland’s call. Mirri’s mother was standing on her own two legs when they returned at the end of sundown prayers; the right was unsteady from lack of use, but she walked to the door to welcome them, and she kept her balance when Mirri bowed into her skirts for a hug.

“Thank you,” the woman said, her eyes shining with tears. She held her daughter close; her hand trembled on Mirri’s back. “Thank you for letting me work again.”

“It is Celestia who deserves your thanks,” Kelland said, emerging from the candlelit room behind her. “We do no more than channel her blessings, and for us that is only duty.” His face was shadowed by weariness and his voice was rough with it, but he stood straight as a tourney herald and his white cloak was spotless as ever.

“I’m grateful all the same. Won’t you stay for dinner?”

Bitharn saw Kelland hesitate, and answered quickly in his stead. “It’s generous of you to offer, and I wish that we could, but we’re needed elsewhere. Please, rest well.”

“We could have stayed,” Kelland murmured as they left.

She shrugged and took his elbow, hooking her arm around his and leaning into his side. As they stepped into the street they could have been any young couple strolling through a winter evening. So she told herself, closing her thoughts to his medallion and her bow and everything else that made them who they were, not who she wished they could be.

Just for a moment, Bitharn thought, she could be allowed to forget that. Just until they got back to their inn. “I wanted to enjoy the walk. Alone, with you. We don’t get much time to ourselves here.”

Guards wearing the black bull on red walked the wooden walls above them, lighting torches that sent up thin trails of smoke and burned almost invisibly against the setting sun. Night would fall before they finished setting their ring of fire around Tarne Crossing; but for now the world, too, was between phases, and its transitory beauty brought an ache to Bitharn’s heart. The golden hour had faded, but some of its warmth still glowed along westward walls and high-peaked roofs, while on fences and bare twigs the silver lace of frost glimmered before the dusk.

Kelland drew her closer as they walked. The contact, shoulder to shoulder, warmed her. “What did you do today? I noticed you took the girl.”

“I didn’t think she needed to see her mother like that.”

“You said children make you nervous.”

“It wasn’t so bad.” Bitharn told him about their misadventures in search of a cream horn, Mirri’s swiftly quenched desire to become a Sun Knight, and their archery practice outside the town walls. She was hardly listening to her own words; the story was far less important than the feel of him by her side and the rare moment of closeness in the privacy that twilight allowed. The soft clicking of the shells in his hair was sweeter than music to her ears. “She has a good hand and a good eye, and I think she’s a natural tracker.”

“Give her a stubborn streak wider than the Seivern and a complete unwillingness to play fair, and she’ll be well on her way to achieving her goal.” Kelland gave her a slight, fond smile, barely visible in the dusk.

Bitharn didn’t know what came over her. Seized by impulse, she leaned up on her toes and kissed him right on that smile, shocked at her own daring but not—once the amazement subsided—not sorry at all. Kelland startled like a splashed cat, but she still had her arm twined around his and she wouldn’t let go. She could feel his heartbeat thuddering through his sun-marked tabard. Her own seemed to be going even faster. She had to remember to breathe, and was suddenly and deeply grateful that nightfall hid her flush.

“You were right,” she heard herself say smugly, if a trifle quickly, turning to continue down the street as if nothing had happened. “I don’t play fair at all.”

“You don’t,” Kelland agreed, hurrying to catch up.

The next day he wanted to see Mathas’ body. Bitharn thought that was a waste of time, but between the peculiar tracks in the ditch and the fact that the missing baker’s girl was Langmyrne, Kelland argued that it was worth a look. Since a dead man was less likely to ask them for favors than anyone else they might see, Bitharn let him talk her into
it, but she wasn’t expecting much. She had other concerns on her mind.

In the clear light of morning she regretted the kiss. No, not the kiss; Bitharn couldn’t make herself feel sorry for

that. What she did regret was lying to him that night outside Willowfield.

She did, in fact, want him to break his oaths. One of them, at least. She wanted it very badly indeed.

He never would. Bitharn was certain of that. Not only would Kelland keep his oaths until his dying day, he would

never admit to temptation. Not to himself, not to her, maybe not even to his goddess. But she was equally certain

that he wanted it as badly as she did. It was in his wary glances, the forced casualness of his conversation, the way

he kept a careful distance from her after last night’s kiss, as if the slightest touch of her skin might burn him. He

wanted desperately—as she did—and both of them were duty-bound to say nothing and do nothing that might

inflame that desire.

Under those circumstances, spending the morning in the company of a corpse didn’t seem like such a terrible

idea.

Mathas’ body was laid in a corpse-cellar beneath the town chapel, as was common custom for those with the

means to afford a decent funeral but not a private service. He would be burned at sunset in a day or two, whenever

Tarne Crossing had enough dead to justify a pyre or the insults of putrefaction became too great to bear. Until then

his mortal remains waited in the cellar, where the coolness of stone and air kept decay to a minimum.

A shroud of fine white linen, embroidered with Celestia’s sunburst in gold, covered Mathas’ body on its stone

bier. Similar shrouds masked the other two corpses in the cellar. Local superstition held that it was bad luck to look

upon the faces of the dead, and while Celestia’s dedicated were supposed to banish the shadows of misbelief from

the minds of the people, they usually let such harmless customs stand. Real heresies caused them enough trouble.

Kelland glanced at Bitharn, who nodded almost imperceptibly. She felt strangely apprehensive at the thought of

unveiling the corpse, though she didn’t know why. It seemed that the knight shared something of that feeling, for he

swept off the shroud with a single swift motion, as if it would have been too awful to do it slowly.

But there was nothing terrible about the corpse. The body was bloated, the eyes sunken, and the face pallid behind

a bristle of stark black beard, but both Kelland and Bitharn had seen far too many dead men to be disconcerted by

that. There were no wounds, no signs of struggle, nothing at all to justify that odd prickle of fear.

Bitharn came closer to examine the body. Nothing unusual, but …

“There’s mud on his boot,” she observed, touching the caked toe, “and on his peg.” The dry mud crumbled easily

under her fingers. It had to have been wet when he was walking; otherwise it would have cracked and fallen away.

Even then, he couldn’t have walked far without shaking it off.

“How did his friend say he was found?”

“Outside a tavern in town.”

“There isn’t mud this deep anywhere inside the walls.”

“But we know he went outside,” Bitharn said. “He walked through the ditch, came back, and died before the mud

had time to dry or get knocked from his boots. What I can’t fathom is why a man drunk enough to trip and break his

neck goes outside the walls on the same night he dies. Why? What’s out there to make him do that?”

“If that is what happened.” Kelland shook his head doubtfully. He drew out the golden sunburst that he wore

around his neck—his knight’s medallion, marked with the symbol of his faith rather than the emblem of a mortal

lord. Clasping the sunburst in his right hand, he began a sonorous prayer, calling upon the Bright Lady to grant her

Light of Truth.

White light surrounded him in a nimbus, flickered, and failed. Bitharn bit back a surprised oath. She had never

seen Kelland falter in a prayer since the earliest days of his training. The Blessed simply did not fail, unless …

… unless they were badly beset by doubt, and on the verge of breaking their oaths.

She looked at him, eyes wide, but Kelland’s face revealed nothing. He started the prayer again, reciting the

syllables with calm determination, and this time when the white light blossomed it filled the corpse-cellar with its

radiance. It was so bright that it hurt her eyes; those shadows that were not obliterated were thrown back to the far

corners.

Bitharn’s relief was short-lived, for what the blessed light revealed of Mathas’ corpse was monstrous. His nose

was slit, his left eye gouged; bloody lashes flapped around the hole. His lips had been torn away, leaving him with a

scarlet grin. Ragged cuts and tiny punctures riddled his face and throat and chest. His fingers had been broken and

wrenched in different directions like a clump of trampled grass. She couldn’t count the number of burns on his flesh.

“Around a gag,” Kelland said with the iron serenity that fell upon him when his anger threatened to break loose.

He touched the rope clenched in the corpse’s bloodstained teeth. Bits of flesh flecked the gag; it had been in there

when his lips were cut.

“This wasn’t done to make him talk.” Bitharn felt bile rise in her throat. “It was—for fun?”

Kelland reached across the mutilated body and pried open the lid of Mathas’ remaining eye. Pupil and iris alike
were obscured behind a swirl of ivory mist, which continued to roil as Bitharn watched.

“Not for fun,” Kelland said. The light died around him. The baker’s body returned to its pretense of wholeness as the shadows flooded back in. “To draw us out. The Thornlady is here, and this is her challenge.”

“You can’t meet it alone.” Bitharn said it with more firmness than she felt. She wasn’t sure how much use her arrows would be against a Thorn’s spells, but she was sure that she couldn’t let Kelland go off on his own. He needed her help, even if he was too bullheaded stubborn to say so. Her arrows might only be a distraction, but a distraction could be a crucial edge—and who was to say that she wouldn’t get a lucky shot? Thorns died like anyone else with a yard of steel-tipped ash in the eye.

From the mulish look on Kelland’s face she saw that the knight knew it, too, and didn’t want to give in. “I can. Bitharn—”

“Don’t coddle me. Don’t protect me. You need someone to watch your back. The Thorn won’t be alone. She has her ghoul-hounds.”

“She doesn’t care about them. They aren’t a weakness.”

“I am?”

“That isn’t what I meant.” He touched the corpse’s cold blue lips, bringing up a finger stained with crumbling flecks of flesh that belied the dead man’s illusion of peace. His hand trembled in the air—with rage or fear, she didn’t know. “This is what she is. This is what we face: a creature who would torture a man like this and consider it holy service. A creature who worships pain. You cannot ask me to bring you into her reach.”

“That’s exactly why you have to.” Bitharn crossed her arms, refusing to soften at the sight of his flinch. She wasn’t thrilled at the thought of facing a Thorn—it terrified her, in truth—but neither was she a helpless maiden who’d faint at the first sign of danger. “You didn’t have any trouble bringing me to Silverpool. Or to Rhyanne Tower. You needed me there. And those bandits on the River Kings’ Road when we first crossed into Langmyr? Right now they’d be prancing around on your horse, wearing your armor and waving your sword, if it hadn’t been for me.”

“I know that. I know all of that. That’s why you have to stay back. This is different. She is different.”

“If that’s true, it’s only because you need me even more here. Promise me you won’t try to fight her alone.” If he gave his word, he’d be bound to it: a Knight of the Sun couldn’t break an oath. “Promise me.”

He balked for a long while, his dark eyes filled with anguish, but in the end Kelland bowed his head, acquiescing. “I promise. Bright Lady forgive me, I promise. I won’t fight her alone.”
“Sir Gerbrand is dead,” Heldric informed his lord as Leferic was dressing. “He surrendered himself to Sir Merguil two days ago. He was beheaded at dawn yesterday. The funeral rites were at sunset. Minimal, but honorable.”

Leferic nodded absently, looking from a doublet of gold-slashed green to one of black velvet trimmed in red. The rich green improved his color, as much as mere cloth could, but the formal colors of Bulls’ March were likely to serve him better today. His liegemen needed every possible reminder that he was their lord. Resigned to another day of sallowness, he picked up the black. “His heirs?” There were two sons old enough to be troublesome. Two daughters as well, but they were of little consequence; nobody rallied around a woman to reclaim a hold. A kingdom, perhaps, but not a hold.

“His wife has gone to Isencras to join the Daughters of the Sun. The younger daughter went with her. The elder stayed behind; Sir Merguil seeks your permission and advice in making a suitable match for her. A plain girl, I’m told, and of no great accomplishment, but she wishes to marry rather than giving her life to the Bright Lady, and Sir Merguil sees no harm in agreeing.”

“I’m sure we can find a household knight to take her,” Leferic said. He picked out a gold chain set with three dark garnets and draped it over the surcoat. “Perhaps Lady Vanegild has one looking for a wife.” He wanted the girl out of his own domain—and well away from any loyalists who might linger in Littlewood—but close enough to watch. Breakwall would do nicely.

“She has no dowry,” the gesith pointed out. A pretty girl of good family might find a husband without one, but a plain girl whose father had been executed in disgrace would need a small sack of silver to marry even a household knight with no lands of his own.

Leferic cast about for some excuse to refuse and found none. The last thing he needed was another drain on a treasury already running dry. But he had promised the girl the right to marry, and her father had given his life for it. “Arrange something suitable . . . suitable and modest. I want as little silver as possible wasted on this charity. What about her brothers?”

“Sir Merguil has taken them into his service as armsmen.”

“Has he? Interesting.” Leferic mulled it over and decided that Merguil was a clever man. Keep your enemies closer than your lovers, Inaglione had written. If Gerbrand’s sons proved loyal, he’d have gained two good armsmen; if not, they could be easily dispatched by public trial or a quiet word to one of his other cutthroats. Most of Merguil’s men were mercenaries, and they had no allegiance to any of the petty houses in this part of Oakharn. They’d have no qualms about knifing Gerbrand’s sons at the first sign of treachery. No doubt the boys knew it, too, if they had half the sense the gods gave turnips. One might be kept in line by threats to the other, whereas he would have disregarded any danger to himself.

Yes, Merguil was a clever man. He’d bear watching.

“There is other news.” From the heaviness in Heldric’s voice, it wasn’t good.

“What?”

“You recall the celebrations that followed your nephew’s birth?”

“Of course.” Leferic’s mouth twisted. “Galefrid spent a great deal of money to ensure that everyone would.” His brother, delighted by the birth of his first son, had thrown perhaps the most lavish celebration that Bulls’ March had ever seen. There were roast oxen and sugar-crystalled pastries and rivers of wine; singers and jugglers and even three Moonbrothers in silver and blue. Galefrid had paid for an entire tourney to be staged with a fat purse of golden rayels for the winner, and although Leferic had protested the cost, his brother had only laughed.

“Maritya’s rich,” Galefrid had said, too happy for prudence, “and why shouldn’t I celebrate that too?”

And Leferic, the second son, had no answer that would not sound like raw envy. So he stood silent as Galefrid outspent himself yet again, and then he went up to his study and added that to the long list of reasons why his brother needed to die. Galefrid had never understood how foolish it was to feast the commonfolk when the treasury was bare; all it did was ensure that twice as much food would have to be snatched from their mouths to pay for it later.

He would have been a disastrous ruler. The celebrations for Wistan’s birth had sealed it. Leferic remembered that very well.

“Galefrid did spend a great deal of money,” the old gesith agreed, dry as dust. “We still owe most of it, and the merchants are getting impatient.”
“How can that be?” Leferic had examined the ledgers himself; he’d tried to find something in them that might drive Lord Ossaric to stop the foolishness. He hadn’t found much. The ledgers were clear that while Bulls’ March would be sorely taxed to afford the celebrations Galefrid had planned, it could be managed with scrimping and saving and—critically—letting his new wife’s parents bear the greater part of the cost.

That last part stuck out now, ugly and lethal as a flapping rent in a chain-mail hauberk. “Maritya’s parents refused to pay?”

“They did.”

He wished he could stab his dead brother again. “Bright Lady have mercy. What was the point of marrying a merchant’s daughter if not money?”

Heldric gave him a crooked expression that might have borne a passing resemblance to a smile. “Some might speak of love. In your brother’s case, I believe that might even be true. But it is also true that Galefrid never cared to learn much of Seawatch’s customs, or he would have known that while it is, indeed, customary for a wife’s parents to give lavishly upon the birth of a first child, they do not do so until that child has survived a year. The people of Seawatch are practical, and frugal. Too many babies die in the cradle for grandparents—however proud, however wealthy—to empty their purses on every one.”

“Wait. The money Galefrid spent on Wistan’s birth celebration—the money he relied upon—was money he didn’t yet have? Money he knew Maritya’s parents wouldn’t pay until their grandson was a year old?”

Heldric bowed his head. “The first part is true, yes, my lord. As to the second part … who am I to say what your brother knew or did not know?”

“You don’t have to,” Leferic muttered. “I take it Maritya’s parents will be cancelling their gift.”

“So they have informed us, yes. The message arrived this morning. I still have the scroll, if you wish to read the original words. They are not kind. Reinbern de Marst blames the ‘barbarism of the north’ for the deaths of his daughter and grandson, and curses your father for permitting the match. I do not believe he will be receptive to any suggestions of debt.”

“What if we tell him it’s for funeral expenses?” Leferic suggested, blackly amused. “Or, if he doesn’t like that idea, we could ask whether he has another daughter I might marry and get with child. Maybe the merchants can be persuaded to put off their claims until that one’s a year old.”

Heldric chose not to dignify that with a response. “The money must be found somewhere. Cadarn’s men need paying, Sir Galefrid’s debts must be met, and I fear soon you must incur new debts on your lord father’s behalf.”

“Why?”

“The king is coming.”

“King Raharic? Here? Why?”

“Not here. He is coming to Blackbough Castle. It is still close enough that you will have to spend a pretty piece of silver putting on a show for him … and, perhaps, more. King Raharic Auldring, blessed be his name, believes the time has come for war.”

In the silence of his study, Leferic read the letters himself.

If anything, Heldric had softened the truth. King Raharic was not merely coming to Blackbough Castle. He was bringing his War Court with him, and his message included a royal command for the border lords to gather their swords and await his arrival “to answer the Langmyrne infamy.” If the king didn’t intend to go to war, he certainly wanted to make a show of rattling scabbards across the Seivern. A waste of money, and very possibly a waste of lives as well.

Leferic wished he knew his king better so that he might properly interpret the royal decree. Was King Raharic mad enough to believe that warring across the river in winter was anything but an invitation to disaster? Or was this merely an excursion meant to enliven a dreary court and keep his border lords honest? Leferic had no idea. He had only seen his king three times in his life, and the first two times he’d been a child too young to remember much. The third time he’d only had glimpses across a tourney field and at court in Isencras. Useless.

By reputation King Raharic was a fine warrior and an honorable man, though hard and sour as a pickled rock. He was not said to be either a fool or a blusterer, but why go to Blackbough otherwise?

Leferic put that question aside to puzzle through later. Whatever the king’s intentions, his visit was going to be costly. Heldric was right about that. There would be riders to outfit, additional servants to hire, entertainers to pay. He’d have to feast the king and his War Court at least once in Bulls’ March, and that meant everything from finding a pastry chef with a small army of assistants to having his huntmaster prepare hounds, falcons and drivers if the king wished to amuse himself by hunting Bayarn Wood. Leferic could ill afford the expense, but what choice did he have?

With money on his mind, he turned to the next letter. And found that some things were not about money at all.
Reinbern de Marst’s letter was three pages long: three pages of eloquent, scathing rage. In it he grieved for his lost daughter and the grandson he would never know, cursed Galefrid for taking them into their enemies’ reach, and castigated Lord Ossaric for the barbarism of his realm and his failure to rein in his son’s stupidity. Because of them, de Marst wrote, his wife wept nightly and he himself was consumed by sorrow. Neither prayer nor charity soothed their pain … but revenge might.

*Hire a Maimed Witch,* Leferic thought acidly, reading the outpouring of Reinbern’s grief. *It worked brilliantly for me.*

Reinbern de Marst, however, had other ideas. Seawatch was not called the Realm of Purchased Princes for nothing. There a merchant could be as influential as a lord, and the de Marsts were very successful merchants. They had neither armsmen nor mounted knights, but they had money.

And because they had money, they could order the Banks of the Four Families not to loan a penny to Bulls’ March. If they wanted, they could cut off the entire kingdom of Oakharn without serious damage to their interests. They could order merchants to take their trade elsewhere, leaving Bulls’ March to buy its goods from lowly peddlers or at cutthroat prices from their neighbors in Breakwall and Blackbough.

Small darts, in normal times. Bee stings. Lord Ossaric would have scoffed. Leferic could not.

He needed money. He couldn’t afford to lose trade.

As it was, he would have to raise taxes on the peasants—an unpopular move on the eve of winter, and possibly a very unwise one. He’d be lucky to squeeze another threepence per head from his farmers’ sheep; half of them would probably butcher their animals and salt down the meat rather than pay the additional tax. Take any more than that from them, and the peasants would revolt if they didn’t starve first. Either way, it would be a quick and ignominious end to Leferic’s rule.

Under such circumstances he could spare little thought for Reinbern’s grief. It wasn’t that his letter lacked force; the man would never be a poet, but his blunt, raw words hit harder than a hundred singers’ carefully composed laments. It was that Leferic simply could not afford to care. The order was given; the woman was dead. No amount of prayer or wailing would change that. All he could do now was grit his teeth and chart the best course from where he was.

*You’d be wise to do the same,* Leferic wanted to snarl at the bereaved merchant. *You wanted her to be a lady. You had to know this was part of the game. All nobility is built on blood.*

Yet he did not toss the letter aside. Instead he read it again, engraving every word of Reinbern’s misery on his soul. It was penance, of a sort, and it was a lesson. The past was beyond any man’s power to change, but the future was not, and Leferic wanted to memorize the cost of killing before he resorted to it again. The emotions it unleashed were too volatile. Too violent. Used frivolously they would break a kingdom apart, and he meant to build.

The last of his letters, however, gave him little hope of that.

*A silver lady,* Albric had written, ungrammatically because of the constraints on his disguised message, *plays us false. I do not know her motives or her true goal but it is plain that she does not care to see this work done. The child should have been dealt with by now, yet she delays and makes mistakes that are no accidents. It is not mercy. She wants something else.*

*We are in Tarne Crossing. A baker who gave succor is dead. Questions first. We are close. I will finish duty with or without her help.*

Leferic stared sightlessly at the missive for a long time after he finished reading. Then he thrust it into a candleflame, let it char to a crisp black curl, and pounded the ashes into dust. He poured water into the ashes to make a slurry and emptied it into the soil of a dwarf heliotrope growing by the window. The sweet-smelling herb, sacred to Celestia, was supposed to bring good luck wherever it bloomed, but precious little of that luck seemed to be visiting him.

What could the Maimed Witch want? She had named her price in silver and he had paid in full when he contracted her, knowing that there was no bargaining with the Thorns of Ang’arta. At the time he’d thought the price surprisingly low; Cadarn’s men were costing him twice as much. But that was a full company of white wolves, and contracted for an entire winter, whereas the Thornlady was one woman hired for one task. Leferic, who had never hired a mercenary before dealing with the Maimed Witch, had persuaded himself that the price was more generous than he thought. After all, how were the Thorns to make any money if they set their prices so high that no one could pay?

Now he wondered if his first instinct had been right. She’d come too cheaply. But why? Ang’arta had no interests along the Seivern. To them it made no difference whether Galefrid or Leferic or a three-legged dog sat the throne of Bulls’ March.

Inaglione’s wisdom did him no good here. He had no idea what the Thornlady wanted, or what she feared, and if Albric’s observations were accurate, she was certainly not his.
Albric was right. It was a mistake to have trusted her. But that was part of the past, too, and beyond his power to change.

Pushing his chair back, Leferic left his study and went down to the great hall to do justice.

The parade of woes was by now familiar enough to be tedious: boundary disputes, accusations of stolen goats, and one claim of witchcraft, which was brought by a distraught mother who could not fathom why else her son would have run off with a clubfooted milkmaid who had a mustache to rival Sir Brisic’s. The hardest part of that case was keeping a straight face until it was dismissed.

Then came the litany of sufferings near Langmyr. Sheep and dogs shot down and left to rot, brawls fought over tavern slights, one farmer’s house and granary put to the torch. The family escaped, but their milk cow had been sheltering from the cold inside with them, and the animal died in the blaze. Leferic had hoped that his ride to Littlewood would relieve the tensions crackling along the border, and to some extent perhaps it had. There was still no real peace, but neither had there been any killings since the “bandits” were dispersed.

None he knew about, anyway. Leferic was certain that much of what happened on lonely stretches of river and wood never reached his ears. He ordered reparations for those who had suffered losses, promised that the wrongdoers would be brought to justice, and instructed Heldric to sell a new milk cow to the burnt-out farmer at half price once the man had settled into a new farm. By then, Leferic hoped, his treasury might even be able to afford it.

Finally the last case was over and the heralds cried the day’s proceedings to an end. Leferic escaped as soon as he was able, fleeing the great hall for the fresh air and solitude of the castle towers.

The air was sharp as shattered glass when he emerged into the night, but Leferic didn’t mind. The chill focused his thoughts. He walked along the battlements, eating a spare dinner of cold meat and bread, and mulled over how he might meet his debts. Below him the castle town bustled with torches and lanterns; its streets looked like streams of red fireflies swirling through banks of black air. In the distance the Seivern River glittered under the moonlight, the radiant thread of the River Kings’ Road tracing its curves.

His guards patrolled the walls in pairs. They greeted him as he passed, but none stopped him or spoke long enough to interrupt his thoughts. Leferic had become a common sight on the walls around this hour, and his men were familiar with his habits. After a nod to each, he went on.

The thrum of a bowstring broke through his musings and drew his attention to a darkened stretch of wall. Two of the torches that illumined the battlements had been doused there, swathing the crenellations under a cloak of darkness. It was from there that the sound had come. As Leferic stood listening, he heard a second shot, and then a third.

Prying a nearby torch out of its sconce, he went to investigate.

As his torchflame carved sight out of shadow, Leferic saw a single man standing at the wall with a bow, one foot on a crenellation. By the scar on his cheek, Leferic recognized Ulvrar. The young northman stepped back and lowered his bow as his lord approached; his eyes had the pale green glow of a wolf’s in the night.

“What are you doing?” Leferic asked.

“Practicing.” Ulvrar motioned with his bow to the darkness below, and Leferic peered down from the wall. The ground was too far away; his torch threw long shadows against the castle’s side, but it could not reach the earth. If there was a target, he couldn’t see it.

“In the dark?”

“The night is not as dark for me.” Ulvrar’s eyes shone, green and gold and green again. His faint smile seemed to mock Leferic’s discomfort.

“Because of the … wildblood.” Leferic fumbled for the word.

“Because of that.” The northman sat in the gap between two merlons, his back to the sky. “Had I not been a coward, I would be able to do more—run for leagues without tiring, join a pack’s nightsongs, even take on the shape of a wolf myself. Your legends of skinchangers are about us, Leferic-lord. Did you know? We are your storied monsters. But I was a coward, so here I am in the south, and I cannot become a wolf. I can only see like one. And smell. You are afraid. I can smell it.” His smile became a grin, and his teeth glinted, sharp. “I hope you are not afraid of me.”

“No, not of you,” Leferic said, although he wondered how foolish that made him.

“Then what do you fear?”

“Failing my people.”

The scarred youth grunted. “I feared that once.”

Leferic’s lips twitched halfway to a smile. “What happened?”

“I ran away.” Ulvrar shrugged. “I do not envy you, Leferic-lord, and you are a ruler where I was only a warrior turned wildblood, so for you it is harder.”

“Perhaps.” Leferic had no desire to dwell on his difficulties, and this unexpected encounter was another chance to
ask the questions he had not been able to ask on the road. “Why are you all here? On the ride to Littlewood, you told me that you were all exiles.”

“So we are.”

“Why?”

Ulvrar narrowed his unnaturally bright eyes, but after an instant he shrugged again. “For most of them I do not know. Cadarn knows; he will always hear an exile’s story before he takes that exile into his company. But otherwise he lets us keep our shames private. His own story is known to us all: he killed a man and refused to pay bloodprice, so the thanes made him outcast. Since then he has done it many times. Cadarn Death’s-Debtor owes a great deal of blood money he will never pay. But mostly the men he kills are not worthy men and do not deserve the bloodprice, so it is no true crime.”

“Who was the first one?” Leferic asked, curious what death should have caused Cadarn to leave his people and homeland.

“A warrior of the Split Pines Feirgrei. Cadarn is—was—Split Pines Skarlar. Different clans, but close-together holds. They send raiders together sometimes. One raid they struck a summerlander town. Many of the summerlanders’ women and old ones hid in their chapel, hoping that their goddess would protect them better than their men did.

“Cadarn was leading the Skarlar that day. He told his warriors not to trouble with the chapel. There is no honor in killing women and weaklings, and the houses held more prizes than they could carry home already, so they did not need it. But Garrok, who led the Feirgrei, did not agree. He fired the chapel. His men raped the women and killed the graybeards who came out and left the rest to the flames. So Cadarn became angry and challenged him, and Garrok died.”

“I thought only murders warranted a bloodprice. Not deaths in combat.”

Ulvrar stared at him unblinking. “If Cadarn challenges a man, he dies. All men know this. Garrok knew this. To his credit he went to it well. But the thane of the Split Pines Feirgrei demanded bloodprice, so the bloodprice had to be paid, else there would have been war between the clans. Cadarn said a man who would burn women and weaklings was no true man, so he spat on Garrok’s name and chose exile.”

“I see,” Leferic said, though to him it all seemed clear as mud. “And you?”

“For me it was the skraeli.”

“The skraeli?”

“Is that not one of your names for us? Skar skraeli: killers of the dead.”

“I have heard the name,” Leferic admitted, “but I have no idea what it means.”

“It means we are Ingvall’s children who kill Hrotha’s children to protect ourselves. And you summerlanders, although you do not know it. The skraeli are Hrotha’s children. They are … like men, but not. Mockeries of men. They walk on two legs and have the same shape, but there the kinship ends. Their skin is loose and wrinkled and yellow like old ivory; it hangs off their bony arms in great flaps. They have no hair or lips or eyelids, and their eyes are milky blue like the bellies of the icebergs on the White Seas. Their mouths are filled with teeth like broken needles, and their claws are long and sharp.

“Skraeli eat men. They hunt the seas and the icy slopes in bowl-boats and sleds made of stretched human hide. Their paddles are flayed arms and legs with the fingers and toes cut apart, spread wide, and webbed with bloody ice. Skraeli are things of nightmare. When I was young I thought they were stories, but I have fought them myself and now I know the tales are true.”

“But why should they drive you to exile? Were you afraid to fight them?”

Ulvrar shook his head impatiently. “I was not afraid to fight them. I was afraid to become them. No one knows where the skraeli come from; they have no females or children that anyone has seen. Even when we find their lairs, it is always only males. I believe—and I am not the only one—that skraeli are failed wildbloods. The beast takes them, and they go mad. That is why there are so few skraeli now, just as there have been fewer wildbloods every year. It is a fate I could not face. So I fled.”

“I see,” Leferic said again, and this time it was true. Ulvrar had turned his back on power, and his people, rather than risk letting it corrupt him into a monster. Leferic had not. And although his failure would not turn him into some ice-eyed nightmare, it would doom him just as surely.

But that choice, too, was in the past. He had made his bid for power, and now it was in his hands. All he could do was master it, or be destroyed.
The Burnt Knight came to Tarne Crossing three days after the baker’s death.

Albric stood among the crowd that had gathered to watch the Celestian knight ride across the bridge. Sir Rengaric, the knight who held Tarne Crossing, had ridden out with an honor guard to formally accompany the Burnt Knight into his town, and they made an impressive spectacle as they came clattering across the pale stone bridge in a stream of banners and glittering steel. Red pennons flew from the archers’ towers and the horses wore garlands of scarlet maple leaves, for there were no roses so late in the year. Rengaric’s armsmen wore hardened leather and ring mail, not expensive plate, but they had oiled the leather and burnished the chain until it shone like bronze and silver.

A trumpet blared as the procession came to Tarne Crossing’s walls. With great ceremony the gates swung open and Sir Rengaric led his riders inside. The Burnt Knight rode in the center of the column, and as he crossed beneath the gatehouse arch and back into the sunlight, Albric and half the people of Tarne Crossing got their first look at the man.

He was an astonishing sight. The Burnt Knight rode a seal-brown courser, and his skin was nearly as dark as the horse’s coat. He wore his hair as a pitch-black mass of braids with small white shells clattering at the end of each one. Albric had never seen anything like it. Judging from the murmurs that swept the crowd, neither had anyone else.

The Burnt Knight was smaller than Albric had expected, and much younger. He carried himself well, and he wore his sword comfortably ahorse, but still Albric felt a twinge of doubt. Could he trust his life and his lord’s fortunes to someone barely out of boyhood?

He’d heard that the Burnt Knight traveled with a female companion, but there was no woman among the riders. Sir Rengaric led the procession to the market square, where he began a formal speech welcoming the Burnt Knight to Oakharn. Albric slipped away through the crowd. He had plans to make.

Over the next few days, Albric studied the Burnt Knight and his companion. He found the woman soon enough: she’d come to Tarne Crossing a day earlier, unobtrusively scouting the town and its people while the knight tended to sick villagers in Langmyr. They were careful, these two. They did not go blindly even into friendly lands. That made him feel a little better. Careful or not, though, he had no choice but to trust himself to them.

In the days following the baker’s murder, Albric had spent most of his time drinking alone and staring at the wine-soaked dregs of his conscience.

He couldn’t go through with it. He could not help Severine ambush one of Celestia’s holy champions. Neither could he stand by, idle and mute, knowing what she had planned. He’d dishonored himself and his oaths past any hope of forgiveness already; he couldn’t take any more. Wine pushed his other worries aside and gave him the clarity to see that much, although it hadn’t helped him think of a plan.

How could he hope to stop her? No mortal man could stand against magic. Albric had seen only the smallest part of what the Thornlady could do, but it was enough to convince him of that. He had no prayer of defeating her in combat.

The Burnt Knight, however, had a chance. Maybe a good one. Severine had sought Albric’s help in confronting him; surely she wouldn’t have done so unless she expected the Celestian to pose some real danger. If the Burnt Knight could threaten her, perhaps he could kill her—especially if he was forewarned of what he faced.

The only question left was how to betray the Thornlady without also betraying his lord. Much as he loathed Severine, his first duty was to Leferic: nothing he did could be allowed to compromise his lord’s position. Only after his duty to Leferic was discharged could he turn against the Thorn.

Fortunately, fate conspired to help him there. Albric knew that the Burnt Knight and his companion were investigating the massacre at Willowfield on behalf of the Langmyrne Lord Inguilar. As soon as they arrived, they began asking questions about it, but Albric had little fear that they would uncover his guilt. The only man in Tarne Crossing who could connect his name to the dead village was the guide they’d hired to show them to Willowfield, and he’d died under suspicious circumstances shortly before Albric had reached the town.

A nighttime robbery, they said. Convenient. It saved Albric the trouble of doing it himself.

With the spy dead, approaching the Burnt Knight should pose little risk to his lord, only slightly more to Albric himself, and—if he was lucky, if the Bright Lady was good—a fatal one to the Thornlady. He was far from certain that the young knight could match her, but the people of Tarne Crossing seemed to have faith in him. Albric supposed that would have to suffice.
He did not go directly to the Celestian. Severine was likely to be watching him, and it was impossible to approach the Burnt Knight discreetly. Petitioners were constantly tugging at his hem, begging for help with an ailing parent or a blessing for a newborn child.

Instead Albric went to the girl. He waited until she was off by herself in the market square, browsing through the stalls on a brittle winter morning. In the corner of his eye he could see a crow hopping from foot to foot among the ropes of onions that hung from a vegetable seller’s stall. The bird was too far away for him to tell if it was an ordinary crow or one of Severine’s dead pets, but he wasn’t inclined to risk guessing wrong.

Albric slipped through the crowd and brushed past the girl. He touched her elbow and muttered: “Don’t look up, and keep your voice down. We’re being watched. I need to talk to you.”

The girl nodded, apparently to something a flower seller was telling her about a wreath of prickly holly. She was very pretty, despite dressing in travel-stained men’s clothes. A thick braid of gold-streaked amber hair fell past her shoulders. Her face was a perfect oval, framed by a few bright strands that had come loose from the braid. The last hint of a summer tan still showed on her cheeks, though in winter it was fading to a suggestion of freckles across the bridge of her nose. Albric let his gaze linger. It was no hardship, and it gave him an excuse to talk to her, if Severine was indeed watching through the crow’s eyes.

“You’ve been following us,” she murmured back, holding up the holly wreath and running a finger along the wickerwork that supported the ornamental leaves. Between the glossy leaves the berries were red and orange and yellow, all the colors of the sun, to signify Celestia’s protection through the dark nights of winter. “Who are you?”

“An unwilling pawn of the Thorns,” he replied. The girl tensed, but kept her eyes on the wreath. He admired her discipline. “I would like to betray them. Can you arrange a meeting?”

“Maybe.”

“Try. The Dancer and Drum. Tonight, after sundown prayers. Go to the under-commons; I’ll be there. And be careful. There are unfriendly eyes in the sky.” He turned on his heel and strolled away, making a show of ogling another girl in passing.

Once he was safely out of sight, Albric ducked into a wine seller’s shop. He ordered a cup of strong red to bolster his courage, took a seat on a creaky bench in the corner, and began rehearsing his lies.

He had no way of knowing whether they’d come, but he had to hope. And if his hope was to be worth anything, he had to plan.

By the time Albric drained his second cup of wine, he knew the shape of his story. Close enough to the truth to protect him, far enough from it to protect his lord, and all of it designed to damn her.

After that it was only a matter of waiting.

He came to the Dancer and Drum just as sundown prayers began, and drank his way steadily through them. There was a time, not long ago, when Albric stood his prayers three times a day. Since Severine, he was unworthy of standing among the true faithful, so he hid from the sunlight and drank. Maybe, if he succeeded in scouring her from the world, he might stand in the goddess’ sight again … but even if that was denied him, he’d have the consolation of knowing that he’d tried. That he had done more than let himself be played as a Thornlady’s pawn.

Above, the sunset prayers ended. He could tell by the sudden stirring in the streets and the influx of new arrivals in the tavern’s upper commons. The main taproom was at ground level, where people talked and laughed and a quartet of musicians played. The under-commons, dank and dim and reachable only by a set of narrow wooden stairs behind the front door, were where people went to drink. The under-commons never changed, no matter the tide of the day’s prayers.

Albric ate a dinner of black bread and cheap meat, pale from the brining cask and so salty it burned his tongue dry. He didn’t know what animal it came from; he didn’t much care. It was there only to provide ballast in his stomach for beer.

He was on his fourth mug, and more than half drunk, when they arrived. Two hunched figures, shrouded in robes of sackcloth that covered their hands and dragged after their feet, hobbled toward the lonely table where Albric had gone to do his drinking. He scowled at them, and was about to order them off, when he caught the tip of the girl’s braid tucked inside her cowl and heard the soft clinking of shells from beneath the other one’s hood.

“Well, go ahead and sit,” he muttered.

They did, carefully, taking chairs equidistant from him so that one or the other could see any hidden movements he might make, and so he couldn’t lunge at one without turning his back to the other. Albric grinned sourly when he understood what they were doing. He finished his mug and stood, unsteadily, to fetch another. “Don’t trust me?”

“Would you?” the girl replied. The Burnt Knight stayed silent.

“Ah, no question, my judgment’s always been fine. Look where it got me.” Albric snorted so hard he nearly dropped the empty mug. “Do you want anything? The bread’s half sawdust, the sausage is likely made of patrons who didn’t pay their tabs on time, and I’d call the wine pig piss if it wouldn’t be such an insult to swine. But the
beer’s all right.”

“Suppose I’ll have a beer, then,” the girl said. She sounded amused.

“Bread and water will suffice for me,” the Burnt Knight said.

“What, salt-pickled rat meat not good enough for you?”

The Burnt Knight turned his head slightly toward Albric. He could see nothing of the man’s face in the hood; only the pale shapes of the shells in his hair stood out. They tinkled against one another, oddly musical, as the knight shook his head. “Those of my order do not pollute their bodies with the flesh of the dead, nor do we muddy our wits with wine.”

Albric chuckled, a raspy sound without any real warmth. “Funny. She won’t touch meat, either. Says it cheapens the animal’s pain. Suppose the proper thing to do is make it suffer and then leave the corpse to rot. I’ll get the bread.”

He saw them put their heads together and start whispering behind him. They stopped and pulled apart when he came back with two mugs of ale, a wooden cup of water, and a platter of rough-hewn black bread. Albric pretended he hadn’t noticed.

“So,” he said, sitting, “can we talk?”

“We can. I apologize for not making proper introductions earlier. My name is Kelland; my companion is Bitharn.” No hesitation over the word ‘companion,’ Albric noticed. So the two weren’t lovers. That was in line with what little he knew of the Sun Knights, but he couldn’t comprehend how the man could spend his nights sleeping next to such a beautiful girl and keep his hands off her. Celestia’s Blessed had to be nearly as crazed as Kliasta’s.

“Albric,” he replied. No point lying about his name. It was common enough, and at this stage of the game he wanted to keep close to the truth. The rest of the tale could be shaped and shaded, but first they had to believe him and listen.

“You wish to betray a Thorn.” Kelland took his cup in a gloved hand and drew it up to his hood for a sip. The gesture struck Albric as peculiar; the under-commons were chilly, but not that cold. A man could take his gloves off at the table. Then he realized that this man could not: a glimpse of the Burnt Knight’s dark hands would tell the whole tale, and his faint hope would die with the first whisper to reach Severine’s ears.

They’d been more careful than he had. Good. Albric nodded appreciatively into his mug. Perhaps their youth wasn’t such a concern.

“I do.” Albric took a long swig of his beer. He glanced around for eavesdroppers and saw none. “There’s one Thornlady here. Her name is Severine. She plans to lay an ambush for you. You’re the only threat to her in these parts, now that the local Blessed’s gone to tend some dying noble. I don’t know exactly how or when she’ll do it, but I’ll warn you as best I can. If you want to ambush her first, I’ll do what I can to help.”

“What forces does she have?” Bitharn asked.

“She’s the only Thorn I’ve seen. I don’t think there are any others about. She has ghoul-hounds that run at her command. Six or seven of those, I think, but most of them have gone away. About a dozen dead crows that do her spying. And me.”

“What’s your role?” Bitharn inquired, at the same time that Kelland said, “Where have her other ghaole gone?”

“She sent the other ghouls to attack a band of Vis Sestani on the road.” Albric didn’t have to feign the grimace that came to him at the thought. “I pledged her my cooperation in exchange for their lives. I didn’t dare lie to her about that, not while her ghoul-hounds are out ranging. She has some way of sniffing out lies; I don’t know how she does it, but she knows when what’s said isn’t true.”

“Then how can we trust you?” Bitharn’s frown came through in her voice, although her face was hooded.

“You can’t, not to a certainty. Maybe you shouldn’t. I wouldn’t, were I in your place.” Albric drew a deep breath and knitted his fingers together on the scarred tabletop. “But I tell you this truly, and swear it on whatever hope of Celestia’s grace I still have: I want nothing more than to see that woman dead and defeated, and I will do everything in my power to make it so.”

“Why?”

“I’m hardly Blessed, lady. I’ve had my share of sins. But the things she’s done, the things she’s made me do …”

Albric trailed off. He shook his head mutely.

“I accept your oath,” said the Burnt Knight. “What is the Thornlady’s plan?”

Albric nodded in Bitharn’s direction. “She knows you’re a tracker. The crows have seen you in the woods. The little girl, too—the runty one with black hair, the one you’ve been teaching.”

“Mirri,” Bitharn breathed. She sounded sick.

“I wouldn’t know her name. The crows have seen her in the forest. She sneaks out alone, did you know? I suppose she’s trying to put her lessons to use. Anyway, Severine plans to seize the child during one of her ventures outside the wall. She expects you’ll go out to find the girl, since you know her and the family’s sure to beg the Burnt
Knight for aid. The trail will lead you right into her ambush."

“We can’t allow that to happen.” Kelland shifted his weight, and Albric heard the creak of leather and chain under his robe.

“You should,” Albric said flatly. “I’m not telling you this so that you can hare off and try to interrupt it. She’ll kill whoever interferes, if she can, and if she can’t, she’ll pick another target. And another, if you don’t go after that one. It’s better if you know her plan so that things run smoothly and people don’t get hurt without reason. Listen to me. The girl won’t be harmed, not if all goes the way it should. Severine only needs her to create the trail that’s to lead you into her trap. As soon as that’s done, I’ll take her home, out of harm’s way. You have my word on this; I fought hard enough to make the Thornlady let me. But you must also pretend not to know that she’s safe, and go out onto the trail as if you truly expected to save her.”

“And then?”

“And then I hope and pray that you can best a Thorn in combat. You won’t catch her unawares. Her crows watch throughout the forest and along every road. If Severine thinks she’s at a disadvantage, she won’t stand and fight. She’ll flee. The only way to draw her out is to let her think that she has chosen the battle. But if you can’t best her, we’re all wasting our time. So that’s what I’m asking: Can you?”

“Yes,” Kelland said. There was no doubt in his answer. Looking at him, and seeing the familiar, fanatic light of the divine burning in his eyes, Albric believed the man. A tightness came loose around his heart.

“Good. Don’t tell me how you plan to do it. I don’t want her learning it from me.”

Bitharn gazed at him, steady and searching. “Will you fight with us?”

“Yes. If she doesn’t kill me first. She doesn’t need her servants to be living, and I doubt she’ll leave me alive if she learns of my treachery. If she kills me, and makes me one of those monsters . . . I hope you’ll end it quickly.”

“Bitharn’s very good with a bow.”

“I’ll take some comfort in that.” Albric grunted. An arrow in the heart was a far better death than the baker’s. Better than he deserved. “That reminds me: If you see any crows outside when you leave this place, shoot them. Real crows don’t lurk on roofs at this hour. Anything you see is a spy.”

“May as well make our position clear,” Bitharn agreed wryly. A short silence followed. Then she asked, oddly gentle: “Have you thought of what will happen after she’s dead?”

“No.”

“You’ll have earned some powerful enemies. The Thorns may want to make an example.”

“Then it’s a good thing you know how to use that bow.”

“There are other ways, other choices. You could travel with us.” Kelland’s hood lifted slightly in evident surprise as Bitharn spoke, but he did not interrupt. “The Dome of the Sun is always looking for servants with skill and courage. Whatever you might have done in the past, you’ve shown your true colors in coming forward now and trying to stop her. We’d be glad to have you with us.”

Redemption. The idea chimed in his soul like a high pure note unexpectedly struck from a tarnished bell.

It was a sweet image, for the heartbeat he let himself hold it. It was also a false one. The girl thought him a better man than he was, but Albric knew the truth. This wasn’t about redemption, though he hoped Celestia might forgive his sins if he stopped Severine’s. It was about revenge. He’d never been a particularly good man, but he’d never been a monster, either, until the Thorn had made him her dog.

Beaten dogs bit back sometimes. That was all this was. All he was. An oathbreaker and a knight who’d sullied his vows until he wasn’t worthy of the name. Redemption was a pretty dream, but it wasn’t part of his world.

“I’ll think about it,” Albric lied. “But keep your arrows ready all the same.”

They left a little while after that. Albric drank another mug of beer, dropped a handful of small coins on the table to pay for the meal, and went up the stairs to the night.

The cold startled tears into his eyes as soon as he stepped outside. He pulled his cloak closer and started for the west gate, which gave him the longest way to walk before he got back to Severine’s camp.

There was a small crumpled form on the cobblestones outside the Dancer and Drum. Albric initially took it for a clot of old rushes or an unlucky alley cat, but then the moonlight caught a fan of spread feathers and he recognized the dead thing as a crow.

He turned the bird over with the toe of his boot. It was too light, and by that he knew it was one of Severine’s: muscle and organs all withered away, leaving the empty shell as her spy. And it was dead, truly dead, but not by an arrow.

In the uncertain light it was impossible to see puncture wounds, and of course the girl might have pulled out her shafts, but Albric doubted they’d shot it. The stink of burned feathers drifted up from the little corpse as he nudged it, and melted ice glistened between the cobbles where it lay.

The stories said that Knights of the Sun could call upon Celestia’s holy fire to strike down evil creatures, leaving
the innocent untouched. It seemed there was some truth to the tales. A little, at least. Enough to raise his hopes.

Albric crushed the crow’s skull under his boot. The brittle bone snapped with barely a sound, and he ground it against the cobbles until he could feel nothing under his heel but dust and gritty feathers and stone.

Then he walked on to the west gate and out of Tarne Crossing, the chill night warmed by visions of ghoul-hounds aflame.

SEVERINE WAS SEATED ON THE MOSSY log, reading a book in the dark. A hollow-eyed crow perched on her shoulder, its ragged head thrust forward at the pages. The bones of its neck peeped out from the rough collar of black feathers around its throat, showing the wound that had killed it.

“Where have you been?” the Thornlady asked once he stepped into the clearing. She marked her place in the book with a ribbon and closed it, tilting her head toward him.

“Drinking.” He didn’t stop. Albric had no interest in talking to her. He only wanted to sleep, and his tent was not twenty paces away.

“Have you had enough? You stink of beer.”

“I’m still walking, so the answer’s probably no.”

“Clever.” Her voice was cold and sharp as cracking ice. “Have you contrived of a plan to lure the Sun Knight to us? As I recall, that was your reason for spending the day in taverns.”

“As I recall, the reason for that was to drink. Which I did, so I’d count the day a success.” Beer and contempt were making him too reckless. Albric realized it even as he spoke. The gods promised victory to no man; he could lose everything if he was foolish.

He paused and turned back toward the woman. She was luminous and monstrous as ever, a thin creature of shadow crowned with trailing silver and staring at him with an eye that burned like a ghost-torch of Narsenghal. Albric swallowed uneasily, suddenly conscious of what he had been tempting.

“But I do have a plan,” he muttered, “so you might count it one too.”

She said nothing. She sat there, waiting, and her terrible eye raked his soul. He could just see the tips of her maimed fingers glinting in the moonlight, cold silverbound claws waiting to be warmed in blood.

“There’s a girl,” Albric said, struggling to work spit into his mouth so he could talk. “Her name’s Mirri. The Burnt Knight’s friend has been teaching her to track. Sometimes the girl goes out into the woods by herself. It’d be easy enough to take her and bait a trap with her. They’d have to come for her—they’d have to. People like that … they’d blame themselves for the danger she was in. Then you’d have them.”

“His friend has been teaching this child?”

“That’s what I said.” Albric shook his head. “A waste. She’s too pretty for that. The Sun Knights must be mad.”

“Perhaps,” said Severine. She laid the book open again, its pages blank leaves of shadow, and the dead crow hopped forward to read. “See that the child is taken.”

Albric’s shoulders sagged in relief, even as dread sank into him. He was committed now. “One other thing,” he said, suppressing a flinch as her head lifted toward him again. “I want your word that the girl won’t be hurt. She’s just a child. You don’t need to hurt her to draw out the knight. Once the trail’s laid, I’m taking her somewhere safe. Give me your word that you won’t interfere, that you won’t hurt the child, and that you’ll let her go.”

“If you like,” the Thornlady agreed, utterly indifferent.

It was the best he would get. Albric nodded gruffly, despising himself, and resumed walking back to his tent.

Behind him the crow croaked.

Albric froze. An icy shiver ran up his sides and along his neck, prickling the small hairs on its way. None of her dead things had ever made a sound before. If death itself had a voice, it was in that hoarse, choking rattle, feeble but viciously triumphant.

And yet he had faced death, many times in his life, and never felt such fear as the crow’s croak stirred in him.

“Oh, yes,” Severine said, “I forgot to tell you.”

For an instant the breath stopped in his lungs. She knew. She knew of his betrayal, of his meeting with the Burnt Knight, of the lengths to which his hatred had gone. All his plans were laid bare by her magic—how had he dared to imagine otherwise?—and all his hopes of stopping her were dust on the wind.

He wondered, for a fleeting mad moment, whether he would have any prayer of killing her if he simply lunged at her now.

“What?” Albric forced the word out, his voice nearly as hoarse as the crow’s. He could not muster the will to turn around and face her, to see his doom come.

“I sent my pets after the baby today. Our bargain should be fulfilled shortly. With, as promised, a minimum of unnecessary killing.”
She was mocking him with that last bit, Albric was certain, but it hardly mattered. Nothing mattered, except that his plan was still safe. He felt like a condemned man let free from the gallows; he could hardly think through the fog of his relief, and wished that he’d either had less to drink or a great deal more. Being only half stupid was not helping tonight.

He shrugged, for her benefit, and kept walking, praying that the weakness of his knees did not show in his step. “Hope they don’t take too long with it. I want this done.”

“Oh, I know. Do not forget what you owe me in turn.” The crow cawed again. It sounded like a dead man’s laugh. “And do not think to shirk it. I know your doubts. I see the shadows on the surface of your mind. But remember the costs if you think to betray me—and remember how many will pay.”

“Would that I could forget,” he muttered, and opened the flap of his tent. She did not try to stop him again.

Inside his tent Albric fumbled, stiff-fingered, with the latches and knobs of his lantern. It was nearly out of oil; he’d been so preoccupied that he’d neglected to refill it. He’d neglected many things, it seemed. After an interminable struggle he managed to pour a thin stream of oil into its reservoir and coax a small flame into the glass. It would have been easier in the moonlight, but he would rather work blind than endure another instant in the Thornlady’s sight.

With the lantern burning, he tied the tent flap to keep its scant warmth inside. The tent was musty and cold and creaked in the wind; it smelled of wet canvas and dirty clothes, but for all that it was peculiarly comforting. Even canvas walls offered a sense of protection from the Thornlady’s presence. Illusory it might be, but he’d take it.

Chafing his hands to restore feeling to his fingers, Albric searched for the prayerbook that hid his writing tools. He tore out a page, unwrapped the tip of his writing-stick, and, by the faint flickering light of his lantern, began to write his confession.

He did not trouble to hide this letter behind a false one. He wrote it plainly on the page. If other eyes should happen to find it on its way to his lord, so much the better; then others would see, and know, that Albric claimed all the sins of this journey as his own.

Finding the right words was a struggle. Albric had never prided himself on any skill with language: he was a man of the sword, not a courtier or poet. He could write simple facts well enough, and field reports seldom demanded more. But this, he felt, should be more than a mere recitation of what happened when. This should have something of beauty.

He expected it to be his eulogy. Bitharn had honored him with her offer, but he did not believe, in his heart of hearts, that he would be able to accept. He had seen and done too much that was evil. Redemption required more courage than he had left.

And while Albric did not expect to be remembered with praise, he hoped at least that others would understand that he had committed his sins in the name of duty. Not for himself: for the hope of achieving some greater good for his lord and his domain. So he sat there, by his weak glassed-in flame, and struggled to find the words that could catch truth in a net of lies.

It felt clumsy as trying to carve ivory with an axe, but in the end he found something close enough to suffice. The writing hurt; he hadn’t expected that, but it felt right. By the end his chest ached as much as his eyes did, and his fingers felt frozen through.

Laboriously Albric folded the letter and sealed it with the nub of a candle heated over the lantern. He tucked it back into the prayerbook and lay down to rest.

In the morning he would send the letter. Soon after he expected to die.
“Be careful of the Vis Sestani,” Brys said before they left Tarne Crossing.
“Why?” Odosse had asked. She knew the stories of the Starfolk: that they were thieves of goods and children, that they couldn’t touch iron and so carried no weapons, instead consorting with fell magics to keep them safe on the road. And that they wandered endlessly, from the Sunfallen Seas to the Silent Water, because of some ancient curse laid on their tribe. She had heard all these stories, as had every child in her village, but she had never laid eyes on a living Vis Sestan. To her they were figments of fairy tales, same as the Ragface Knight who flayed stray children to patch up his rotting hide.
“Because there’s a good deal of truth to the tales. They steal things if they can. Babies, too, if they think the babes are rightly theirs.”
“Aubry?”
Brys grunted when she asked him that. She thought he was trying not to laugh. “Your whelp should be safe, unless you slept with a Sestani singer to get him. They only steal the ones they’ve fathered … and sometimes ones with red hair. But keep an eye on him anyway, just to be safe.”
“Why are we going with them if they’re thieves?”
“We need numbers to mask our departure, and there’s a little truth to the stories about Vis Sestani magic. They have a few tricks of their own. It might help keep the Thorn away. We’re safer with them than without. They’re not fools enough to try robbing me”—he touched the hilt of his sword pointedly—“and you don’t have anything they want.”
And so, in the company of the Vis Sestani, they returned to the River Kings’ Road.
Odosse hadn’t known what to expect of the Starfolk. The stories painted them as creatures of song and shadow, hardly human, with dancing flames for hair and faces inked like Festelle masks.
They were human, as it turned out, but it was not hard to see how the stories began. Most of the Vis Sestani were red-haired, in shades ranging from amber-gold to copper to deep mahogany, and all moved with the light quickness of deer. They spoke a strange tongue among themselves, fluid and alien to Odosse’s ears as the babbling of a stream over stones. Their faces were tattooed with colorful stars, sometimes a single small mark at the corner of an eye or over a cheekbone, sometimes a full constellation that covered the entire face in gold and green.
The stories about their lack of weapons were rooted in truth as well. Odosse saw not a single sword among them. They used iron in their pots and their horses’ trappings, so it was no curse that kept them from bearing steel, but the Vis Sestani had no blades bigger than a knife.
Tall red oxen with shaggy fur on their shoulders drew the Vis Sestani’s wagons. Their long, black-tipped horns curved out and in and out again, tracing the shape of a lyre. Their small, quick-footed horses wore sweet-smelling dried flowers braided into their manes and harnesses with silver stars over their chests. When they first left Tarne Crossing the animals wore bells, but after they had been a day on the road, the Vis Sestani put the bells away.
Those first few days, they said little to either Brys or Odosse. The apparent leader of the Vis Sestani was an old woman named Razhi, whose tattooed stars were so faded and wrinkled that they looked like patches of mold on her cheeks. She spoke briefly to Brys as they left town. Odosse was too far away to hear the conversation, but afterward the Vis Sestani let them follow along, seeming to ignore the stragglers’ presence as completely as they ignored the knights and armsmen that streamed past them on the road.
Odosse hadn’t thought that there would be so many knights on the road in winter, but they seemed to be as numerous as the black-necked geese flying south. When she asked Brys about it, the mercenary just shook his head.
“It isn’t usual,” he said. “Raharic’s calling his swords. I’d bet a fistful of silver that Theodemar’s doing the same on the other side of the Seivern.”
“Why?”
“Galefrid, I’d imagine, and Willowfield.”
In that order, she knew. One knight’s life counted for more, on the world’s scales, than did those of everyone else in her village. She watched the riders go, thundering by on steel-shod horses whose charge shook the earth, and was glad to stay beneath their notice. Their faces were so grim.
The Vis Sestani weren’t nearly as grim, but neither were they kindly. “They aren’t very friendly,” Odosse said as they made camp one evening. She gazed longingly at the communal fire burning between the Vis Sestani wagons. The smell of roasting meat and savory stew drifted toward them. She could hear merry voices raised in song,
accompanied by the quick patter of chalice drums and the piping of cane flutes. Aubry raised his head to listen, his chubby fingers waving clumsily to the music. Their own small fire, and dinner of boiled barley and dried sausage, seemed pitiful by comparison.

“They have their reasons,” Brys said.

“We’ve done nothing to them.”

“Plenty of others have.” He spooned the sausage-flecked mush into a bowl with no sign of envying their distant companions’ meal, handing it to her before taking the rest of the pot as his own. “The Vis Sestani don’t travel weaponless because they love peace. They do it because every one of the Sunfallen Kingdoms forbids them to carry swords, and local lords are liable to take the excuse to massacre the lot of them if they’re caught breaking the law. They don’t mark their faces with stars for love of tattoos, either. They do that because they were once branded by outsiders, by force. Rather than let other people disfigure them with hot irons, they made the tradition their own. They do it their way now, and might be they’re happier for it, but it wasn’t much of a choice. So they’ve a right to be suspicious of outsiders, and I don’t fault them for that.”

“Why?” Odosse asked, dropping her spoon in horror. “Why would anyone brand their faces?”

“To mark them as what they are. As I told you: they have a little magic of their own. Enough to make people afraid of what they might do, not enough to keep themselves safe. They don’t have the support of a great faith like the Sun Knights, and they don’t have the shelter of an army like the Thorns. Their magic’s not near as powerful as either of those, anyway. A love potion that might last a few hours, a charm to help a barren wife conceive … that’s about the most they can muster. The only safety they have is in being able to pack up and leave when things get bad for them, and that’s why they keep to the roads.”

“That’s awful.”

“That’s life. They have it better than some.”

Odosse propped Aubry’s head up in the crook of her elbow and fed him a little of the barley mush, spooning it patiently back to the baby’s mouth when he dribbled it out. “Why do they let us travel with them at all, then?”

“How would they make us leave? Anyway, one sword is better than none. The Vis Sestani don’t like mercenaries in force—too many memories of their own hired blades turning against them, I expect—but they’re happy enough to have a freesword or two riding along on the road.”

“How do you know so much about them?”

“I’ve traveled with them before.” Brys scraped the last of the mush from the pot and rose to scour it with snow.

ON THE FOURTH DAY ODOSSE WENT to the Vis Sestani.

Her milk was all but gone, and Wistan was failing slowly on a diet of salt broth and porridge. The winter was still new and relatively mild, but it was another strain on the child, and he had no strength to spare. As self-sufficient as the Starfolk seemed to be, Odosse thought they must have a healer of their own. They had gone to Tarne Crossing to find a Blessed, and had failed there; perhaps she’d have better luck here. If the Vis Sestani could give children to a barren woman, surely they could save one already born.

She girded up her cloak, straightened her back, and marched across the short distance that separated them from the caravan ahead. Brys watched her go with little more than a sideways quirk of his lips: a smirk, she was sure, and one she did not care to entertain. Odosse left him with the horse and went on alone, the babies nestled side by side on her back.

The Vis Sestani gave her odd looks as she passed among them, drab as a goose among peacocks in her plain brown cloak. Even on the road, the Starfolk preferred bright scarves and gems set in tinkling necklaces of silver, although their clothes were practical in cut if not color. Odosse was even more conscious of her mud-brown hair amid a sea of fiery reds, and of her clomp-footed clumsiness among so many who moved like swans. The oxen had more grace than she did.

It didn’t matter, she told herself resolutely. A few blows to her vanity couldn’t deter her from finding a healer for Wistan.

“Oh, pardon me,” she said to the first Vis Sestan to catch her eye, a long-limbed youth with a blue star at the center of his brow. “My baby needs a healer. Do you have one among you?”

The youth stared at her for a long moment, while the horses snorted and the oxen ambled on around them. Odosse wondered if he understood her. Perhaps he didn’t speak Rhaellan. As she was about to step away and ask someone else, he pointed mutely to a wagon near the front. Unlike the others, it had no bronze bells or sun-faded scarves hanging from its sides. It was painted with whirling stars, like all the other Vis Sestani wagons, but where the others showed the marks tattooed on the faces of the families who owned them, this one bore every star worn by every member of its caravan. Each one was rendered in black and white, stark and skeletal. Odosse had the uncomfortable
premonition that the stars were those worn by dead Vis Sestani, not the ones who rode and sang around her.

“Thank you,” she murmured, not sure if she meant it, and hurried to catch up with that wagon.

A girl sat in front, driving. She couldn’t have been more than twelve or thirteen, but she was possessed of a spectral beauty that transcended age. Her hair was long and a lustrous black that made the night sky look dull; her skin was nearly as white as the snow that crusted the drifts of dead leaves around them, and her eyes were so wide and dark that they hardly seemed human. Those eyes seemed at once blind and piercing, as if they could read souls but not see faces.

The girl lifted her head as Odosse walked up to the wagon, and her blind black gaze was so disconcerting that Odosse forgot what she’d planned to say.

“I—I’m looking for a healer,” she stammered. “I was told I could find one here.”

The child-woman gave her a long, unblinking stare. Odosse felt that she was being weighed, and wondered whether she met the girl’s satisfaction. She shifted the carrier on her back, taking reassurance and resolve from the babies’ presence. They needed her.

“Perhaps,” the girl said at last, her words liquid with the melodic accents of the Vis Sestani. “If you are willing to pay her price.”

“What price?”

“That is for Ghaziel to say. Do you wish to know?”

“Yes,” Odosse decided after a pause. Knowing the price didn’t mean agreeing to it. She could always refuse once she knew what it was. And how high could it be, truly? She had precious little to give them, and what she did have she would happily trade for Wistan’s health.

“Then come,” said the girl. Nimble as a squirrel she climbed from the driver’s bench to open the wagon’s door, never setting foot on the ground. She left the reins lying on the seat where she’d been, and Odosse opened her mouth to voice a caution—but the oxen ambled on, stolidly indifferent, and something about the girl’s manner told her that she had done this many times before.

Swallowing her protests, Odosse hoisted her skirts and climbed into the wagon. The girl followed her.

Inside the wagon was warm and close. It smelled of pungent spices that Odosse couldn’t name. The windows were shuttered: it was so dark she couldn’t see her own hands. She stumbled as the wagon hit a bump, falling onto a bundle of clothes from which the scent of cloves billowed in a cloud. Aubry and Wistan began to cry, jarred awake by her fall.

The girl behind her spoke a soft word in her own tongue. A light blossomed in the wagon. Cradled in the girl’s hand was a bubble of clear glass. A spark of blue light drifted inside the globe, floating from side to side until it struck the interior walls and bounced off to strike them again. As the sphere’s radiance fell across the babies’ faces, Aubry’s strong cries and Wistan’s halting sobs both dwindled into silence.

The eldritch light enabled Odosse to see that the wagon’s interior was a single large space, parts of it hidden behind curtains fastened to hooks in the wooden ceiling. Bundles of rolled cloth and carpets filled most of what she could see. The colors were impossible to distinguish in the eerie blue light, but metallic embroidery sparkled everywhere, and crystals and bells gleamed in the glow. Other things glinted amid the cloth: carved bone rods, sculptures twisted from rope and hair, bowls of crystal and rippled agate polished to a satin sheen.

A very old woman sat on a bale of clothes, cushioned on all sides by more, so that she looked over the wagon from a throne of pillows. Her face was wizened as a midwinter apple; wrinkles seamed her cheekbones and sank in around the pucker of a toothless mouth. Odosse could not tell whether her eyes were open or closed, or whether she still had eyes at all, so deep were the shadows pooled in those wrinkled old sockets.

There was no one else in the wagon. Only the babies, the girl, and the crone.

“Sit,” said the girl. She gestured slightly with the bauble in her hand, and the shadows danced to her movement.

The wagon held no chairs. Odosse fumbled behind herself until her fingers latched onto a bundled quilt and sat heavily, pulling both babies into her lap. To her side, the black-eyed girl sank gracefully onto a rolled carpet, shadows rising as she descended.

“Tell us … what is it you seek?”

Odosse cleared her throat and laced her fingers nervously together, keeping her eyes on the old woman though the crone had neither stirred nor spoken. “My baby’s unwell. He—he hurt his head some weeks ago, and he’s not been right since. I was told you were a healer. Can you help him?”

The crone did not answer. The girl did.

“She is not Ghaziel,” the dark-haired girl murmured. “I am.”

“I don’t understand.”

The girl—Ghaziel—gave her a small, weary smile. The uncertain light made her expression difficult to read, but Odosse thought she saw pain there—a great deal more pain than belonged in such a young face. “You are an
outsider among us. We always present one of our grandmothers as tehazra to outsiders; should you then seize her or stone her, the harm to the People is less. A true tehazra is precious to our survival; a grandmother is precious only to our hearts. You see? But the soul-star burns blue in your aura, so I will speak with an open face here.”

“Thank you,” Odosse replied, unsure what else to say.

“You want a healer for the child in your arms who is no child of your flesh.”

“How did you—I mean—yes. Yes, I do.”

“How did I know? Your faces are open.” Ghaziel touched her own face, marked by two hollow green stars whose linked points framed her right eye. “The future is not read in the lines of hands, as you outsiders would believe. The future is not read at all, except by an abhorrence of blood. But the truth of the person is in the lines of the face, and you do not guard yours with others.”

Odosse shook her head, unable to follow and too confused to try. What mattered was whether these people could help Wistan. She returned to that thought as an anchor of reality in a conversation that seemed to drift further from it with every word. “Can you heal him?”

“Yes. The price of one child will be another.”

“No.” She clutched Aubry fiercely, tightening the arm that held him even before the words passed her lips. “I won’t give you my son.”

Ghaziel shook her head, a quick fluid motion that seemed somehow inhuman in the light of her soul-star. The glass chips of her earrings tinkled under her hair and scattered blue sparks from its glow. “We do not want him. Not that one.”

“He’s the only one I have.”

“Accept our bargain, and you will bear another. We will mark him before birth as ours, and we will come for him when he is weaned. That is the price for our aid.”

Odosse swallowed. “Do I have to choose now? Can I think on it?”

“What of it? Ghaziel rose smoothly, despite the wagon’s roll, and unlatched its door. Wintry light poured in.

“Our is a truprice. It will not change until you accept or we can no longer help him. Return when you are ready.”

“We’ll break for Seawatch tomorrow,” Brys said the next night, roasting spitted chunks of venison over the fire. He’d ranged away from the caravan to hunt that afternoon, and had returned with a skinned and quartered deer bundled in its own hide. Half the deer had been traded to the Vis Sestani for odds and ends from their wagons; the other half hissed over the flames. Rubbed with salt and dried rosemary, it was a simple but wondrous meal after a hard day’s walk.

“I thought we were traveling with the Vis Sestani.”

“We did. It’s been five days. No one’s following us. I think we’re safe to strike out alone.”

“Seawatch is—it’s far away, isn’t it?” Unimaginably far, to her. The Realm of Purchased Princes was a name that Odosse had heard only in travelers’ tales; it was as foreign to her world as the Nightingale Courts of Kai Amur or foam-crowned Nebaioth, where the sun never set and pearls were common as stones by the sea.

“It’s a fair journey. Easiest to go by ship, this time of year. We should make Karchel’s Tower in a few days. From there we can start down the sea road and send a bird to Wistan’s grandparents to say we have him.”

“Aren’t you—don’t you have to take him to Bulls’ March?”

“Why? Because of Galefrid? He’s dead.” Brys turned over the spits propped on their split-forked sticks. Fat crackled as it dripped into the fire; he watched it burn without blinking.

“But you’re a knight.”

“What of it? Any oaths I swore to Galefrid died when he did. Seawatch is better. The de Marsts have money enough to buy Bulls’ March down to the last stone, five times over, and still be richer than kings.”

“But Bulls’ March would be safer, wouldn’t it?” Odosse picked Wistan up and rocked him worriedly in her arms. The baby had gotten much worse since they left Tarne Crossing. His eyes were unfocused, his hands unmoving; he barely seemed aware of his surroundings.

“Closer. Maybe not safer. Albric led the massacre, and he’s always been Leferic’s man. I have a hard time believing he’d do that without his lord knowing. I have a hard time believing Weakshanks has it in him to deal with Thorns, for that matter, but I’m not about to bring Wistan into his reach either way. If he was involved with the killings, I’m not inclined to let him finish the job. If he wasn’t, I want him to deal with Albric before I go near that castle. Seawatch is safer for now.”

“Maybe for us. Wistan’s so weak … he can’t last long on the road. The Vis Sestani might be able to help him, but … I don’t know if I can pay their price.”

Brys raised an eyebrow. He stripped off a skewer of venison and handed it to her, along with a stick of spitted onion and apple halves that had roasted over the cooler edge of the fire. “What was that?”
She told him about her meeting with Ghaziel and the offer the girl had made: a child for a child, to be claimed when the Starfolk were ready.

“Can’t advise you on that,” Brys said when she was done.

“How would they know where to find him?” Odosse wondered. She chewed a bit of venison to a pulp and finger-fed it to Aubry. He cooed and grabbed at her hands for more.

“Sometimes they don’t. Not at first. But eventually they’ll find what’s theirs. Only a fool breaks that kind of bargain … but it can be hard to give up a child you’ve borne and had as your own for years. A child of your own blood. It can make people into fools.”

“Is that what happened to the man who hired you?”

“Something like that. It’s not a choice to make lightly.”

“What did he do?”

“Tried to cheat them. Wanted to keep the baby. He ran off, thinking they wouldn’t be able to find him, and hired us when they did. There’s no happy ending to that tale.” He gave her a flat look across the flames.

“But they came. They found him.”

“They did. Don’t strike a bargain with the Vis Sestani if you aren’t willing to pay their price, however hard it is when the day comes. That’s all I can tell you. Beyond that … it’s your flesh, your soul. You know how much you can endure. Not me.”

Odosse nodded, and thought: Not that.

There were things she wouldn’t—couldn’t—do. Not even to save a baby. Odosse knew that now. Perhaps she’d known it earlier, even before leaving Ghaziel’s wagon, but she hadn’t been certain of it until this moment, with Aubry in her lap and tugging at her hands. She could not give up a child of her own blood for a stranger’s.

It wasn’t as if giving a child to the Vis Sestani was the same as setting it out for the crows. The Starfolk were a beautiful people, touched by magic and possessed of a grace she could only admire. They were nothing like the monsters of her village’s tales. A life among the Vis Sestani might be better than any baby of hers would have in a village—especially if, like Aubry, her next child was born of an unblessed bed. Odosse had no husband, and few prospects of finding one with another man’s bastard already on her back. She couldn’t lie to herself about the life her children faced.

No, her refusal wasn’t for her child’s sake. It was for her own.

Odosse couldn’t imagine bearing a child, raising it, loving it—and that was not a choice; she’d loved Aubry helplessly from the first time she saw his squalling prune face, and she couldn’t fathom feeling less for any baby she might bear—and then giving it up to strangers who might come the day it was weaned, or a year later, or ten.

Maybe—maybe—if the Vis Sestani claimed the babe the instant it came into the world, so that she never had a chance to see its face or hold it in her arms and feel the tiny heart beat next to hers … maybe then she could have paid their price. But not after knowing the child. Not after loving it. Aubry wasn’t yet a year old and he was already her world; Odosse couldn’t possibly give up a child she’d held for five years. The parting would break her heart.

She couldn’t do it. Even if it meant Wistan’s life.

Odosse fed Aubry another piece of chewed venison, a finger-smudge at a time, and mixed more into warm water for Wistan. She cleaned and changed both babies as carefully as if they were made of Pelossan crystal, and bundled them up in soft rabbit skins for sleep, but the nightly rituals did nothing to soften the ache of guilt in her throat.

Sleep was a long time coming that night.

In the morning they came to a fork in the road and parted ways with the Vis Sestani. There wasn’t any formal farewell. Odosse didn’t want to face them, knowing that she’d be bidding Wistan’s last hope goodbye, and Brys had never been friendly. The wagons simply rolled on, leaving them behind. Brys and Odosse set their course southward, for Karchel’s Tower and thence to distant Seawatch, and the Starfolk rode off to the east. Within an hour the belled wagons were out of sight and they were alone on the road once again.

By midday snow was falling. The first scattered flakes soon thickened into a windblown curtain that whitened the horse’s mane and clung to Odosse’s eyelashes. Small drifts piled up on Brys’ shoulders; the road vanished beneath a blanket of snow. Odosse put her head down and trudged half-blindly behind Brys, following the shape of the big man’s back as her only guide through the storm.

Snowclouds blotted out the sun and cast a pall over the wooded hills, bringing dusk down early. Odosse set up their tent under a cluster of trees whose limbs knotted thickly overhead, while Brys spent nearly an hour chopping branches and weaving them into bent saplings to make a windbreak for the horse. He tied a wool blanket over the animal’s back, sliding a hand under the ropes to see that they didn’t chafe, and shook a generous measure of oats into its feed bag.
“We need those for porridge,” Odosse protested when she saw how much Brys was giving the horse.

“In this weather he needs them more than we do. We don’t have a horse, we don’t get to town. You can do without porridge for a while. We should reach Karchel’s Tower in three days, four or five if the snow keeps coming. I’ll buy you more oats then.”

They couldn’t make a fire with snow falling so heavily around them, so Brys boiled water over their cooking-lantern and made hot tea and a weak soup instead. The night seemed colder without the comfort of flames to brighten their camp.

The snowstorm might have been beautiful if she’d been watching it from a glassed window. Since Odosse had to sleep under thin cloth beneath it, the luminous fall, radiant with the light of moon and stars caught behind its white cloak, was menacing rather than lovely. Aubry was restless and cried all through their scant meal, batting at the snowmelt that dripped onto his face, and Wistan felt dangerously chill. Odosse was glad to set them to sleep; the warmth of her body quieted them a little, and somewhere in the snow-silenced night, she drifted off herself.

Morning brought a fragile gray light and a slow sense of wrongness. It took her a moment to understand why. The tent was quiet, a small haven of silence broken only by the low creak of snow-laden trees outside and Brys’ snoring inside. Aubry was a fur-bundled pocket of warmth by her breast, and Wistan …

Wistan was cold and stiff beside him.

Odosse sat up with a suddenness that woke Aubry squalling, but for once she was deaf to her son’s cries. With trembling fingers she unwrapped the rabbit pelts that had cradled Wistan through the night. The child didn’t stir, didn’t make the weak hiccuping sobs that had become so familiar.

His face was pale and peaceful. The sunken eyes and dry lined lips gave Wistan the look of a very old man who had died very young, but there was no sign of suffering in him now. He was still as an ice carving in her hands, and just as cold.

Odosse laid him on her blankets with a heavy gentleness, and then she took the single step that brought her to Brys’ side.

He wasn’t surprised.

Ever after, when Odosse remembered that terrible morning after the storm, and all that was wrought on that day, the image that came to her first and strongest was the glint of Brys’ cat-green eyes as he woke to the early gray light of a snow-bound dawn. And his utter lack of surprise.

“Wistan’s dead,” she repeated, thinking he hadn’t heard.

Brys nodded. A moment later he got up, muttering a halfhearted curse against the chill, and started a low fire burning in their cooking-lantern. His coal-black hair stood up on one side where he’d been sleeping, and he raked his fingers through it to push it back down.

“Then we’ve a choice,” he said, splashing water from a skin into the lantern’s kettle, “or you do, anyway.”

“What’s that?”

“Whether it was Wistan who died last night, or Aubry.”

Odosse blinked in confusion. She glanced nervously at her bed, where Aubry was still squalling with scarcely a pause for breath between wails. Beside his red-faced vigor the dead child looked like a wax doll. “Wistan, of course.”

“You miss my point. You know that. I know that. But no one else does. Everyone who knew and loved Wistan in this world is dead. So ask yourself: Is it better for you, and for him, if the child who survives this morning is Wistan, or Aubry?”

It took a moment for his meaning to sink in. Odosse’s eyes widened when it did. “That’s monstrous.”

She wasn’t sure whether she meant Brys’ suggestion or her own temptation to take it. Wistan was dead because she had refused the price to heal him; how could she think of using that death for her gain? Wouldn’t that make her… Odosse floundered for the right word. Not a murderer, no, but not much better. A profiteer from pain.

Wasn’t that what she would be? Deeply unsettled, Odosse moved back to her bed and took Aubry into her lap, rocking her son to quiet his cries.

“It’s practical,” Brys replied. The kettle was whistling; he dropped a hinged metal sachet into the top and left it to simmer. The gentle fragrance of rose hips and oranges rose into the air, soothing Odosse’s nerves. “The boy was sick long enough. I’m surprised you didn’t think of it yourself.”

“It isn’t right,” she insisted, although she wasn’t sure why.

“Think on it,” Brys urged. He handed her a cup. She expected tea, but instead it held a splash of some amber spirit so raw it burned her nostrils. Odosse sipped hesitantly, and coughed as liquid fire seared down her throat. But she drank the rest, determined to find what comfort she could in its heat.

She didn’t feel any more enlightened when she reached the dregs, nor when they broke camp after a light meal of tea and stale, slightly crushed raisin cakes, the last of the things she’d taken from Mathas’ bakery. It was with a sense of vague relief that she watched Brys collapse the tent and pack the tight-rolled canvas back on his horse; walking was a strain she understood, and it would give her time alone with her thoughts.

Odosse understood, or thought she did, why Brys wanted her to make the switch. A dead baby was far less valuable to him than a live one. Delivering the de Marsts’ grandson and the heir to Bulls’ March would make him a fortune; delivering a small corpse would only make him a fool. Wistan’s body was worthless, even to his grandparents, unless they could deliver it with proof of who had killed the others and why. She didn’t think Brys had that yet. His only hope of profit was coming up with a live child and painting himself as the baby’s savior.

All guesswork, that, but she didn’t think she was too far wrong. What puzzled her was why Brys wanted her cooperation—surely any infant of the right age would do as well; it didn’t have to be Aubry—and, more than that, why she was so hesitant to give it.

She shouldered her pack and tucked Aubry under her cloak. It felt strange to have Wistan missing on the other side; oddly unbalanced, and yet easier, too, to walk without that burden and that worry. No sooner did the thought occur than Odosse felt guilty for having it.

She carried Wistan, wrapped in a shroud of blankets, in her arms. It wouldn’t be long. Only until they found a good place for his pyre. That his face was bared to the cold didn’t matter anymore. Nothing could hurt him now.

The storm had spent its wrath overnight. By midday there were only a few lonely flakes blowing on the wind; by twilight the sky was gray but clear. All around them the world was a frozen marvel of snow-cloaked hills and bent, leafless trees caught in crystal. White-bellied bluecrests and black-capped chickadees huddled in the branches, and
by that Odosse knew the cold would continue. When they felt warmth coming, those birds scattered and sang; when
the freeze was hard on them, they flocked silent in the trees. The storm was quiet but not past.

They saw no other travelers, and Brys kept his bow strung and close to hand, for no one but the desperate would
be abroad so far from any town.

Brys refused to let her build a pyre. Burning the body was proper to honor the dead child and see his soul safely to
Celestia’s realm—it was what any anointed soul deserved—but the sellsword would hear nothing of it. They were
out of Bayarn Wood, and gathering enough wood would have meant taking an axe to one of the gnarled, ice-
sheathed trees that grew on the hills by the road. Building even a child-sized pyre would be an afternoon’s work, and
Brys was adamant that sentimentality was no excuse for delay.

“He’s dead,” he told her flatly when she asked. “Nothing you do is going to change that, and he’s not likely to
care about anything else.”

“Then what do you want me to do? Just throw him by the side of the road?”

“Might as well. Less work for the foxes to find him that way.”

“How can you be so callous?” Odosse demanded, near tears. She’d fed this child, nurtured him, held him close
while he slept. His death was … not her fault, perhaps, but her failure. Wistan had been loved, once; he’d been
anointed to the sun and lived under Celestia’s light. He deserved a decent funeral.

But her companion remained unmoved. “It’s better for him, and better for us, than burying him under a pile of
rocks. No Thorn ever made a puppet of a corpse that was in a fox’s belly.” Brys stopped and looked at her, his face
stone-hard through the white mist of his breath. “Sentiments are wasted on the dead. The sooner you learn that, the
better. Do what’s practical, not what some mawkish solaros told you was nice. Nice means nothing. Nice is a waste
of effort, and wasted effort means you’re dead. Let go of it and move on.”

“It’s not nothing. It’s what keeps us human,” Odosse mumbled, but he had already turned away and did not hear.

In the end she left Wistan under a tree near the road, although she did it with what small ceremony she could
muster. She bundled him in rabbit furs so that he might be warmer in the next world than he’d been in this one, and
tucked a coin into his mouth to pay the Last Bridge’s toll. Finally she drew out the tiny blue vial that she’d bought
from the charm-crafter’s cottage, a lifetime ago, and pried it open to anoint the cold wispy-haired head with fragrant
oil.

“As we are born in light, so we return to light,” Odosse whispered as the oil trickled down over Wistan’s eyelids
like slow dark tears. She couldn’t remember the rest of the Pyre Prayer. There hadn’t been many funerals in her life.
Not many deaths, until Willowfield’s, and then there was no one to say prayers for them all.

The scent of the oil was spicy and sweet, not quite right for a pyre but not right for perfume, either. It made her
think of flowers blooming over a crypt, somewhere far to the east where they laid their dead in catacombs instead of
giving them the purity of fire. There was a foulness under the fragrance, and yet it did not seem a contradiction but a
necessary counterpoint. Odosse shivered, in part from the cold, and closed Wistan’s tiny stiff hand around the empty
bottle.

Once she had paid a handful of pennies, and dreamed of being beautiful, so that Aubry might have a chance of
becoming a great man. The real price for that was higher. Much higher. She understood that now.

Still shivering, Odosse packed snow over Wistan’s body to shield him from passing eyes. She cut a stub of candle
no taller than her thumb and set that in the snow mound to guide him to the Bright Lady’s ever-golden lands.

Brys didn’t comment on her absence when she returned. He’d been busy setting up their tent on the lee side of a
thinly forested hill. Nearby his blanketed horse was eating the last of their oats. The snow was lighter there, most of
it caught on the hill’s windward face.

There wasn’t much deadwood among the small twisted trees, but Odosse picked up enough to build a tiny fire,
and chopped a few low-lying branches to round out the blaze. She worked fast, to make up for the time she’d spent
praying, and started beans boiling once the fire was strong enough. Then she took a splint from their fire and went
back to light Wistan’s candle, cupping the fragile flame to shield it from the wind until it took.

She didn’t believe the candle would last all night, as would have been proper. The wind would snuff it, or melting
snow would drown it, or a wandering scavenger would knock it over while digging Wistan out. But she had to give
him the symbol. She had to do that much.

By the time Brys came over it was full dark. He still had his bow strung, and laid his sheathed sword across his
lap as he waited for the beans to finish cooking.

“Don’t like the feel of this night,” he muttered.

“Why? What’s wrong?”

“I thought I saw something moving across the hills earlier today. Following us. It was gone when I looked again,
but … maybe I’m imagining things.” Brys shrugged. He didn’t sound convinced, and he kept a hand on the
weapon’s hilt, his eyes roving through the darkness beyond their fire.
“Oh.” Odosse looked down at her son’s round face, gilded by the ruddy light, and held him close against her breast. She took a deep breath. This was her son. If he was to be a great man—if he was to be anything more than a baker girl’s bastard—he needed her courage. She’d done what she could for Wistan. It was time for the living to move on. Without guilt, if she could. And if not, then with strength enough to master it.

“No,” she said. “I’ve decided. It wasn’t Wistan who died last night. It was Aubry.”

He glanced at her and nodded. “What changed your mind?”

Odosse shrugged. She didn’t have the words to capture what had shifted in her heart. She only knew that, as she’d bent to light the stub of candle that was to help Wistan find his way across the Last Bridge, something had jarred loose in her soul.

If she let the world know that Wistan had died, then whoever had tried to kill him in that chapel would have won. Whoever had murdered his parents, and slaughtered her village, would win. The thought sparked anger in her, but defiance wasn’t what had changed her mind.

It was love. And guilt, and grief, tangled together in a knot she couldn’t begin to unravel.

It was her fault he’d died. She couldn’t be as heartless as Brys was. Maybe Wistan would have lived if she could; then she might not have balked at giving up an imagined child for his sake. But love could be a weakness as readily as a strength. The sellsword was right about that. Love had given her the strength to carry Wistan this far, and it had made her too weak to pay the price for his life in the end.

Odosse didn’t know whether it was strength or weakness that moved her now. But she knew it was love: for Aubry, and the life he might have; for Wistan, and the one he had lost. She hoped that she might raise her son into a man who would do honor to Wistan’s memory. She had to try, at least. They both owed him that.

“I don’t know,” she told him.

Brys raised an eyebrow, but what he might have said next she would never know. He held up his hand for silence and took a half step toward the shadows, and in that moment the night exploded around them.

It happened too quickly for Odosse to follow. One instant she was sitting by the fire, cradling her son in peace; the next they were beset by creatures out of some hellish story, and Aubry was screaming and Brys swearing as he yanked out his sword, and she was too panicked to move.

Their attackers were like nothing she had ever seen or imagined. There were two, she thought, but in the shadows and confusion she wasn’t even sure of that. They had the look of things that had once been human but were twisted into monstrosity, as the souls of sinners were said to be in Narsenghal. They seemed taller than men, and faster. Their hairless flesh was the grayish white of old marble and just as hard; their mouths were hideous fissures lined with clasping, gory-gummed teeth far too long to be real.

Brys was right between them, sword drawn and ready, before Odosse understood what had happened. He had no shield; instead he pulled a burning branch from the fire, flames leaping in a smoky web between the charred fork of its limbs, and swept that at one of the beasts to force it back as he dealt with the other. She caught the swirl of his cloak as he spun, and snow fountaining around his feet, and she saw the monstrous thing he’d attacked shriek and flinch away from him with a long tattered slash laid open across its chest. She hadn’t seen the sword move.

The inside of the creature’s body was withered and fibrous; all its organs were wrapped up in thick strands like a sickly pink cocoon. There wasn’t any blood. It all seemed to be happening very fast and yet very slow, as if she were recalling frozen moments from an otherwise blurry dream.

“Run!” Brys shouted as he pressed his attack.

Run where? Odosse wanted to shout back, but her throat was clenched so tight that she could hardly breathe, much less force any sound through. Aubry was wailing loud enough for both of them.

Both milky-eyed monsters raised their heads at the baby’s cry. One hissed through its mangled mouth, and they loped toward her, their heads bobbing in a forward-tilted, oddly birdlike gait. They darted wide around Brys, one to each side, and although he swept at the wounded one with fire and steel, it dodged away, inhumanly quick. His sword whistled through the air; the fiery branch scattered cinders in a sizzling arc over the snow.

The beasts reached out for Aubry as they came, and by the flickering firelight Odosse saw their bony fingers clutching at the air, curved talons scoring bloodless grooves in their palms as they clenched gaunt fists around nothing.

She stumbled to her feet and backed away, putting the fire between them and herself. Her mouth was dry with fear and her heart fluttered frantically in her chest, a little bird trying desperately to escape. She didn’t have a weapon; she didn’t even have a knife.

The monsters split up around the fire, one coming at her from either side. They moved slowly, warily, clawed hands raised and twitching. Every time she turned toward one of them, it would dart its head forward like a striking snake’s, hissing to make her leap into the other’s claws.

Brys came up behind the one on her right, moving with extraordinary quiet for such a big man—or maybe it was
only because of Aubry’s screams that she couldn’t hear him. He had thrown the burning branch aside; she hadn’t noticed when. As the monster thrust its head at Odosse in another rattling hiss, Brys lunged. His sword took it cleanly through the back, punching straight through the heart. She saw the tip come out of its chest, the steel bright and gleaming without a drop of blood to dull its shine.

They were already dead. Of course. How could steel kill something already dead?

The wounded one shrieked and writhed on Brys’ sword. Its voice was a thin shrill whine, almost too high-pitched for hearing, that cut at her ears like a vibrating knife. Brys locked both hands around his sword’s hilt, twisting it grimly to widen the hole.

The other monster, seeing its companion wounded, sprang for Odosse. She stooped and snatched up the kettle from the fire with her bare hand and swung it clumsily at the creature’s head. The hot metal seared her palm but she didn’t care, couldn’t care; the pain was far away, as if it were happening to someone else. Beans and broth sprayed across the ground like a drunkard’s vomit. She felt Aubry flinch against her breast. Then the kettle slammed into the monster’s face and she heard bone crack under the metal and the angry hiss of scorched flesh, and let go. There was a red line swelling across her palm. Some of the skin was gone.

The monster she’d hit was staggering, screaming. One of its eyes was a melted ruin, crushed beyond recognition; the other was fixed on her, wild with hatred and hunger. Half its mouth had been smashed by the kettle, and its jagged teeth were torn through the flesh of its cheek like a hillside of storm-broken stumps. But there was enough left to kill her.

Odosse kept backing away. She was near the limit of the firelight now and was rapidly losing her vision; she’d sat so long by the flames that she’d lost her eyes for the dark. The monster chasing her didn’t seem hindered. Its good eye stayed locked on the baby in her arm, while the melted one ran down its face in jellied rivulets.

It leapt. And Odosse, still retreating, slipped on a rock under the snow and fell.

The air left her in a rush as she hit the ground. She kicked furiously and blindly at the monster, screaming words without sense, trying to shield Aubry with her own body. Its breath had no scent but cold when it snarled in response.

Claws tore through her thick woolen cloak as if it were flimsy as onionskin. Something more frigid than the wind sliced along Odosse’s back, and her flesh froze down to the marrow of her bones where that touch passed. She expected to feel blood, warm and wet, but there was only an endless chill.

Then its body hit hers flat, striking the breath from her lungs. The next instant it was gone.

Odosse looked up slowly. Her left eye was swelling shut; she couldn’t recall why. Aubry was still in her arms, wailing loud enough to shake the moon, and she sent a swift prayer of thanks to the Bright Lady that her son was not hurt, that he could still scream with such force in his lungs.

The monster was sprawled on the snowy ground barely a step away. It was headless but still writhing, scratching madly at the earth while Brys stood over it with a boot on its back and hacked off its limbs one by one. He was bleeding badly from a wound on his calf; the top of his boot flapped wetly in three torn stripes.

She sat up. Her shoulder throbbed, and her palm hurt, but nothing else was registering yet. Her back felt cold and oddly stiff, as though she’d spent a long day hauling firewood. Her cloak were splattered with blood where the creature had ripped through the wool. Odosse reached back and touched the numb spot. Her hand came away sticky with blood. There wasn’t as much as she’d feared. But it was cold, as her back had been when she’d touched it, and the doubtful light made it glisten like black snowmelt on her hand.

The other monster was lying on the far side of the fire, a great hole rent in its chest. Its head had rolled into the crook of an outstretched arm. Dead, it looked more human than not.

She was so cold. Odosse gathered up her torn cloak and wrapped it closer around herself and Aubry. She moved away from the corpse Brys was dismembering, edging nearer to the fire with a wary glance at the creature that lay inert beside it.

“What happened?” she asked. Her voice was a hoarse croak. “What were they?”

“Ghaole,” Brys replied. He came back to the fire, wiping off his sword, though there was still no blood on the blade. His face was very white and his jaw was knotted with pain. “Tools of the Thorns. Corpses of men they killed and brought back with false life. We have to go. We need to travel while we still can.”

“But you’re hurt.”

A rough rasping sound escaped him. It took Odosse a moment to realize that he was laughing: at her, at himself, she couldn’t tell. “I am. And it’ll get worse. I was trying to avoid that; the touch of the ghaole carries ice-fever. But I had to kick that one off you, and it grabbed me when I did … so I hope you’re ready to take care of the horse along with your baby, in case I can’t.”

“It scratched me too,” she told him.

“Then I hope you’ll last longer than I will, or we’re all dead,” he said.
He’d tied himself to the saddle, looping the ropes around himself where he could and telling Odosse how to tie them where he couldn’t. She bound the tent awkwardly on top. There was nowhere else to put it, and they could hardly leave their only shelter behind, so she tied the tangle of wet canvas and loose poles over the man and tried to convince herself that it had some value as a shield against the wind.

Then she took the nameless horse’s reins and led it into the night. Not south, not anymore. Odosse couldn’t see the road through the snow, and reaching Karchel’s Tower was a fool’s dream now. There was no way they could make Seawatch before one or both of them fell to the gholaie ice-fever.

She turned them east instead. East and north and east again, back into Bayarn Wood, on a course angled through the trees that should take them to Bulls’ March.

Odosse had never seen the castle herself. She’d never been so deep inside Oakharn. And she was not blind to Brys’ suspicions; it was possible, even likely, that the young lord of Bulls’ March had known about the attack that killed her village and Wistan’s parents. He could be working in concert with the Thorns. If that was so, every step taken toward his castle brought them closer to danger. She knew that.

But she also knew that Blessed Andalya was at Bulls’ March, waiting for old Lord Ossaric to die, and that the Blessed’s prayers were the only thing that might keep the ice-fever from stilling their hearts. Their hope of survival lay in that castle. And it was nearer, by far, than Karchel’s Tower.

One road held certain death. The other held only the chance. It wasn’t a hard choice.

For hours she talked to Brys about inconsequential things. It wasn’t a conversation, really; she just wanted the reassurance of a human voice in the dark, and the knowledge that he was still awake, still with her, despite the ice-fever. Odosse talked about her life in Willowfield, circling around the great buried pain of her grief without touching it. When she had exhausted the limits of her own experience, she retold the stories of Sir Auberand and the Winter Queen. Sad stories, but brave ones, all of them.

Somewhere between midnight and dawn Brys stopped answering. Odosse slowed enough to put her hand on his wrist, underneath the fluttering mess of the tent she’d strapped over the man. His skin felt like ice; the heartbeat was sluggish and weak.

But it was there, so she walked on, ignoring the numbness that spread from the small of her back. And she kept telling her stories, whether to herself or Aubry or the horse she didn’t know. The tales became a litany in the night, a way for her to measure her steps and draw some hope from legend when she had forgotten what it looked like in life.

The first hint of dawn found them beneath the eaves of Bayarn Wood. She could see the dying glimmer of the River Kings’ Road ahead. By daybreak they were well into the trees, and the horse’s hooves were loud on the road’s ancient, snow-dusted stone.

Still they saw no other living soul, and Odosse was so weary that her sight blurred between steps. She couldn’t feel her legs, only a suffocating chill from her chest down. Every step was a greater effort than the last.

Finally she could no longer force herself onward. Her legs were trembling uncontrollably. She couldn’t feel them, but she could look down and see her feet shaking as she tried to drag each one forward. Her right ankle twisted beneath her and she stumbled to one knee, and once she was down she could not get back up.

“I’m sorry,” Odosse mumbled to no one in particular. The words were thick on her tongue.

She pulled Aubry awkwardly into her lap, curling her body around him to give him what warmth she still could. Her son was quiet, having exhausted his cries earlier in the night. She pulled his face to her, watching his chest rise and fall, and she wished he could feel the ice-fever. Then she took the nameless horse’s reins and led it into the night. Not south, not anymore. Odosse couldn’t see

The horse nosed at her shoulder and blew out a cloud of white mist. Odosse couldn’t reach up to pat it, either, and after a moment the animal ambled away, continuing down the road with Brys on its back and tent poles dangling off its flanks. She heard the stone clicking under its hooves and watched its bundled silhouette recede between the trees. Then it was gone, and she was alone with her son in the wood, just as she’d been when Willowfield died.

Time passed. Hours, perhaps, or moments; Odosse no way of knowing. A fox crept from the underbrush and looked at her and vanished again, a flash of vibrant russet in a world of brown and white. The numbness spread through her body until she couldn’t feel anything and couldn’t even turn her head back to the road. Her eyes were at once dry and sheeted with tears she couldn’t blink away. Aubry’s face became a pink blur. Somehow that hurt worst of all, that she should die without being able to see him.

And then, unexpectedly, the creak of harness reached her ears, and with it the clop of hooves and the chuffing of horses ridden hard on a cold morning. Male voices spoke a rough unfamiliar tongue over her head. Gloved hands came down to lift her up; she saw them, couldn’t feel them. Someone took Aubry away, and Odosse couldn’t force a protest through her numbed lips. She heard her son crying again.

A face came into her view. She couldn’t make out details; her eyes wouldn’t focus. She could only see a cloak of
white fur, pale hair, a vivid dark scar on a cheek.
“Who are you?” the blur demanded. “What befell you on the road, and why are you here?”
But Odosse couldn’t answer. She couldn’t say anything at all.
Albric emerged from his tent to find a blanket of glistening whiteness laid over the world. It shone like a bridal mantle, newly made and unstained by sin. The air cut him with cold as he breathed, and yet that seemed a small blessing as well: each breath seemed to bring a measure of purity, and of penance.

It was fitting that his last morning should be so frostily pristine. It was a gift, really: a last note of grace from a goddess he had dishonored. He did not expect to see that winter sun set.

Albric ate lightly, savoring each bite of his last breakfast. He heated water for bitterpine tea and washed his face, reveling in those small rituals as well. Finally he allowed himself a sunrise prayer, spoken privately but no less fervently for that, for the first and last time on this journey.

Then he left his snow-covered camp and walked to the edge of the wood, and his perfect morning shattered.

A single trail of footsteps came from the walled town far below the forest: a long line that ran straight from Tarne Crossing to the woods where Severine waited. The trodden snow made a stark blue line across the expanse of dazzling white, dappled darker where each step had landed.

Near the tree line, yet far enough down the bare hill that it stood out like a bruise on fair skin, the snow was trampled in a wider circle and spattered crimson with blood. Scarlet drops sprayed in long shallow arcs across trampled snow and fresh alike. Whatever had bled there had done so badly, and violently, and in a way meant to draw eyes from a distance.

The challenge was too plain to mistake, and it was not the one he had planned.

Albric turned sharply and strode to the camp, careless whether he left any tracks of his own.

A fox slipped out of the snow-cloaked underbrush and trotted alongside him as he came back under the trees. It was a gaunt little animal, and it moved with a jerky stiffness that he knew too well. It was dead. Something had torn its throat out; the fox’s belly was brown with dried blood, and its head bounced obscenely over the gaping wound in its neck with every step it took. Its eyes were glassy and unblinking; he could not tell whether they were glazed by death or had simply frozen in a head no longer warmed by living blood.

Either way it was not a thing he cared to have shadowing his steps. Albric scowled at the fox and quickened his pace.

As he neared the camp he heard a child’s muffled sobs. The sound filled him with a rage that crushed out speech, breath, thought: everything but anger. This was not how it was supposed to be. If Severine had betrayed him …

She had. He saw that as soon as he came to the clearing.

A girl sat on the fallen tree, her face red from cold and crying. Mirri. Bitharn’s friend. She had clapped a hand over her own mouth to quiet her weeping, but tears trickled through her fingers and dripped from her nose. Blood smeared her cheek and her left sleeve, although Albric could see no wound grievous enough to account for all the blood he’d seen on the hillside.

Two of Severine’s ghoul-hounds circled the clearing like vultures wheeling around a dying calf. Their distended faces were drawn taut with hunger; they licked their fangs constantly, staring longingly at the child with empty, fog-filled eyes. But they came no closer than the fringe of trees, for stronger than their hunger was their fear of the Thorn.

Who was there, abruptly, watching him from the far side of the clearing. The dead fox heeled her like a hunting hound, its head lifted so that the grisly ruin of its throat was on full display.

“What have you done?” Albric demanded. He took a half step forward, one hand on his sword hilt. Immediately the ghoul-hounds moved to intercept him, but that did nothing to stop him. He welcomed the provocation; he wanted to fight. Albric slid his sword a handsbreadth from the scabbard, and the ghouls hissed at the sight of steel.

But they did not attack. Severine seemed determined to frustrate him, as ever.

“What I promised,” she answered. “No more than necessary.”

“I was to take the girl.” And keep her safe, he added silently. What else was he cursed to fail at today?

“She came out too early. You were still abed.” Severine shrugged. “The opportunity was there, and I saw no reason to leave it. The trap is perfectly set: How can the Burnt Knight see this poor wounded child, so cruelly stolen, and stay back?” Her voice sharpened to a mocking edge at the end, and the crystal of her false eye glittered.

“Why is she hurt? You said that wasn’t needed.”

“You said that wasn’t needed. I do not recall agreeing. Blood adds urgency, and haste makes fools of wise men. But you needn’t be so upset. She has only a scratch. The fox gave most of the blood.”
“Fine. It’s still damned stupid to have her sitting there while you’re fighting. Letting her run underfoot doesn’t help.”

“It will confuse and slow him.”

“It’ll confuse and slow me. You said you wanted my help. Do you or don’t you?”

Severine frowned minutely and folded her hands into the sleeves of her robe. “What do you propose?”

“Let me take her home. The trail’s laid: the Burnt Knight has to come. You don’t need her anymore. Once he follows her trail into the woods, you have him. I’ll take her back to town on a roundabout path, so there won’t be any steps leading back to ruin your little display on the hillside.”

“No.”

“Why not?” The question came out as a snarl. His patience was near snapping, and the ghoul-hounds tensed as if they could feel it. They shifted their weight forward, whining their hunger. They were close enough that he should have been able to smell their breath, like dogs’, but there was nothing. No breath, no life, no scent.

The Thornlady regarded him impassively, unmoved by his anger. “If you act too quickly, the townspeople will know she is safe. Certainly, if you take her home, her family must know. What reason would they have then to seek out the Burnt Knight? But if you wait, and go too late, you will still be there when he comes to me.”

“Then let me put her in my tent. He’ll still have to come and I won’t be far. You can put your own tent in the clearing if you want him to think she’s inside. Set the hounds to guard it.”

Severine’s lips drew into a bloodless line, but she nodded assent.

Albric didn’t wait for her to reconsider. He shouldered her ghoul-hounds aside and grabbed the little girl’s hand. Without a word he hauled Mirri to her feet and dragged her away from the Thornlady and her hungry, hideous pets.

Only when they were inside his tent, and well out of Severine’s view, did Albric look down and realize that he had taken the girl’s left hand, straining her injured arm. The child’s face was white as death and her eyes were dark with pain, but she hadn’t uttered a word of protest as she stumbled along at his side. Her hand felt like ice. He wondered how long she’d been sitting there, bleeding through that threadbare coat.

Albric let go of the hand at once. “I’m sorry,” he muttered gruffly. “Didn’t realize.”

Mirri didn’t reply. She shivered in her torn coat and began to suck her thumb.

The tent was just as chilly as the clearing outside, although it warmed quickly with two bodies in the cramped space. Albric bade the girl sit on his rumpled pallet and went out to scoop handfuls of snow into his kettle.

While the water melted over his cooking-lantern and slowly came to a boil, Albric tried to get the girl’s coat off so that he could examine the wound. Mirri sat there in a daze, neither helping nor resisting. Eventually he was able to tug the coat loose. She wore two thick woolen shirts beneath it. Both were soaked with blood from three narrow slashes on the left arm between elbow and shoulder. The cuts were from a ghoul-hound’s claws, and although they had not pierced the skin deeply through the layers of wool, there was a creeping discoloration in them already. Tendrils of bloodless ivory radiated through Mirri’s flesh from each of the scratches, and her arm was cold as a corpse’s.

Albric had lived his life by the sword. He knew what infection looked like, and he knew a small cut could kill the strongest man if it sickened with no Blessed nearby. He also knew that no wound, unless poisoned, should sicken so soon.

“How do you feel?” he asked the girl.

“Cold,” Mirri whispered back. Her lips seemed to be numb; she had difficulty shaping the word. The tent was warm, but she only shivered harder. “My arm is cold.”

“I’m going to wash the cuts to keep them clean,” Albric said, although he doubted that any water could do that. “It might sting a little. I’m sorry for that. Try to be brave.”

Mirri nodded and closed her eyes as he cut off her shirtsleeve. Her arm felt like marble. The hot water he swabbed over the cuts sent up steam when it touched her flesh. The girl kept shivering, but she never flinched, and Albric didn’t know if she could even feel the rag on her skin.

“Am I bait?” she mumbled while he worked.

The rag stilled on her arm. Over the child’s head, Albric frowned. He couldn’t lie, not to this girl who had suffered a morning of horror and a ghoul-poisoned wound because of his failed cleverness. But what else could he say? “You are. But not the way she thinks. You’re bait for her, little one, for the Thorn in all her pride and cruelty. Your friends will come, and she’ll stand to fight them, and then they’ll strike her dead.”

“Bitharn will shoot her full of arrows,” Mirri agreed, eyes closed.

Albric patted her shoulder awkwardly. He finished washing her arm and tied linen bandages around it. He was generous with the wrappings; he wouldn’t need the bandages for himself. After hanging the coat loosely over her shoulders, he moved back to the door flap but lingered there, reluctant to leave the tent’s small sanctuary.

“Why do you help her?” the child asked without opening her eyes.
He had no good answer for that. He was spared from offering a bad one by the harsh caw of a dead crow outside.

“I must go.” Albric drew on his gloves. He checked his sword and took up his shield; he expected to need nothing else. No armor today. “If you hear fighting, run. Straight back to your town. Go to the captain of the guard, or the town solaros, whoever you can find. Tell them what’s happening here. Once you’ve done that, don’t leave the town walls again, no matter what happens, until they return and tell you it’s safe.”

“Why do I have to run? Isn’t the Burnt Knight going to win?”

“Yes,” Albric said, forcing himself to sound certain. “But once the Thorn knows she’s losing, she may send her pets to kill you, so you’d best run as soon as the chance comes.” That part, he knew, was not a lie at all.

He didn’t wait for the child to nod. Either she understood or she was dead, and Albric had done what he could to tip fate’s scales toward the first. He hardened his heart against caring any further; it could no longer be his concern.

Ahead he glimpsed the sloped silhouette of the Thornlady’s tent through the haggard trees. There was more blood on the snow outside its door-flap; he wondered what poor unlucky beast had died for that. Two crows perched in the branches of the highest tree above the clearing, and their lifeless eyes sent a chill through him although they did not look down.

Severine was still standing where she’d been before; she didn’t seem to have moved at all. She turned her head as Albric approached, her face pale as a shade’s in her wide gray hood. No ghoul-hounds were in view.

“He is coming,” she said.

“I gathered that. Where are your pets?”

“I sent them to the edge of the wood, the better to bring him back here. He comes without his tracker, and I do not want him getting lost.”

“He came alone?” Albric rasped, too amazed to hide it.

“Unless he can hide his companions on a treeless field of fresh snow, yes.”

“Bloody light-blinded gods-cursed fool! What is he thinking?”

Severine said nothing. But she smiled.

IT DID NOT TAKE LONG FOR Sir Kelland to come. The Burnt Knight made no attempt at secrecy. He walked straight up the hill, following the trail they’d laid for him, his sun-blazoned surcoat and dark skin proclaiming his identity for anyone who cared to look. He carried his sword and shield and wore a hauberk and chausses of silvery chain, and he came alone.

If they’d had arrows they could have quilled him from the tree line. It was still early in the morning; the sun was to their backs and in the Burnt Knight’s eyes, dazzling him from the sky and the new-fallen snow. Shooting him down would have been child’s play. Mirri could have done it, even with her wounded arm.

Severine did not.

With a sense of creeping unease, Albric watched the Burnt Knight go beneath the leafless trees and out of his view for a while. The crows were still in the branches; the Thornlady could still watch his progress.

“Pull back,” Severine said moments later. “He is coming.”

“Why don’t you take him now?” Albric asked. What worse plan could she have for the man if she didn’t take the easy kill?

The Thornlady shrugged. “He is not as unguarded as he looks. In the open sun his goddess watches over him. But he will come to us in shadow … and I have other reasons to wait.” She slipped back through the underbrush, sliding over clutching brambles and crunching snow without a whisper.

Albric moved back more slowly, and more noisily. He was competent in the woods but hardly a Northmarchain tree-scout; it was not in him to do these things silently, even if he had been inclined to try. And he was not. He trampled leaves and cracked icy twigs as he retreated to the clearing, and took a brief pleasure in the tightening of the Thornlady’s lips when he arrived.

He saw the ghoul-hounds slip forward, encircling the maple’s clearing, as he and Severine retreated farther into the wood. There were more than he’d expected. Five, not two. A sixth loped up to join them as he watched. Then a seventh. She’d been killing more men besides the pilgrims to make that many. Albric wasn’t sure whether to be relieved that he wasn’t involved in those deaths or disgusted that he hadn’t had a chance to stop the slaughter.

“Thought you sent them after the baby,” he muttered as the ghoul-hounds came out. Three against one, the Burnt Knight might have been able to handle. Three against two, certainly, if Albric joined in. But seven to one was death for the one, even if he faced mortal men, and ghoul-hounds did not die as easily as that. Seven against two was not much better. Again he cursed Kelland for leaving his archer behind. What had possessed the man?

“It does not take so many ghaole to kill a child,” she whispered, the words barely audible over the wind through the branches. “And you barred me from killing the rest, did you not? So I kept most of my pets close by.”
A crashing through the trees kept Albric from making a reply. Sir Kelland came to the clearing, batting the brush aside with his shield. Snow filled the gaps in his chausses and dimmed the rays of the sunburst on his surcoat; if he lived through this morning, he’d have to spend hours polishing the rust out of his armor.

The knight hesitated upon seeing the tent in the empty clearing, but after a moment he came forward. Standing to the side of its fluttering flap, he eased it open with the tip of his sword. When no crossbow bolt came whistling out, he peered into the opening.

Whatever the Burnt Knight saw in there made him pull back with a grimace. “Thorn!” he bellowed. A shaft of sunlight flashed white as it struck the knight’s blade. “Come out! I know you are here. I can feel you. Come out!”

Severine stayed where she was, that odd little smile still on her lips. Her ghoul-hounds attacked.

They leapt from the trees with a showering of snow and sprang for him, claws outstretched and jagged teeth bared for the sweet warmth of living blood. They came from all sides, gaunt forms blurred by motion: two, three, four. The others stayed in hiding, Albric could not say why, but the four who came out were enough. More than enough. They ringed the Burnt Knight and crowded him from view, claws tearing, jaws gnashing.

His sword was moving before the first one was in reach. Kelland’s blade danced through a dizzying set of parries, low to high, left to right, though the ghoul-hounds’ claws were not close enough to be blocked. Albric wondered if the man was mad. Why waste energy moving when there was no enemy to be hurt? Did he think he could impress them? It was a fine display of skill, surely, but squandered on the hungry dead. No one could fight forever; all the knight was doing was tiring himself too soon.

Then the first ghoul flung itself at him, and Albric saw that he was wrong.

White-gold light burst from the air in a lattice drawn by the knight’s sword strokes. The net showed only where the ghaole sprang into it, fading into invisibility a hands span away, and it was woven in a pattern too dense for Albric’s eye to follow, but he saw that it was made up of gold threads and white ones, swirled around and around in a shimmering wall.

The lattice of white stopped and held the ghoul-hound. The gold seared into its flesh like holy fire. Hairless skin withered and burned, peeling away in curling sheets to show ropy pink muscle and bare bone. The ghoul-hound screamed, a sound that froze Albric’s marrow, and tore vengefully at the web that trapped it, but all that did was shear off its fingers against the fiery net, leaving the creature howling at the burned stumps of its hands as its talons thumped down to the snow.

Kelland set his back to the spell-woven wall and turned to meet the rest of his foes as they loped forward, cautious now. The wounded ghaole pulled itself away from the scorching net, blackened lines still smoldering across its face, and circled warily around it. When the ghoul-hound came free, the visible part of the web vanished again, and all of them approached uncertainly, not sure which angles of attack were safe.

The Burnt Knight did not wait for them to decide. He lunged forward, singling out the nearest ghoul to his left. Again and again he hacked at its side and shoulder, driving the creature farther to the left each time. He kept his shield up to catch the ghaole’s frantic claws, but let it shudder slightly with every raking blow. The ghoul-hound took the bait: it grabbed hold of the shield with both taloned hands and tried to rip it from the knight’s seemingly weak grip.

At once Kelland shoved the shield forward, unbalancing his attacker, who had expected him to resist. Stumbling backward, the ghaole crashed into the sunlit net, and there it burned.

The Burnt Knight spun smoothly away, trusting his goddess’ power to hold his enemy, and thrust his sword low into the gut of a ghoul who had thought to catch him distracted. He spoke a holy word and light flared from the buried blade, throwing the creature’s ribs into sharp relief: a cage of shadows that tried and failed to contain the radiance burning within them like a captured star. One by one the ghaole’s ribs shattered into flecks of bone cinders. It staggered back, vomiting light, and kept burning as it fell. An eyeblink later there was nothing left of it but a handful of charred bones and a toothy skull in a puddle of slush.

Kelland didn’t pause to watch. He was perfectly confident in his magic; he didn’t hesitate to turn his back on the downed ghaole to confront the two that had finally worked their way around the invisible wall.

He dispatched the nearer of the two with three swift strokes, forcing it to its knees and then sweeping off its head. The other he held at bay with his shield—only for an instant, but an instant was all it took for that one to be alone, and doomed.

The sight of it simultaneously humbled Albric and filled him with pride. Hope flowered in his breast, bright and hot as the flame of Celestia’s holy light. This was what it meant to be a righteous man. Standing witness to the Burnt Knight’s valor brought him to the brink of tears. How had he lost his way so badly? How had he forgotten? Why?

Beside him Severine pushed back her hood and strode forward. Albric followed, hesitant once more. Could he trust that the Thornlady had dealt with the child? If so, was he still worthy to stand beside the Burnt Knight? He
drew his sword but held it loosely, the tip near dragging in the snow.

“An impressive display,” Severine said as she came to the clearing. The three surviving ghoul-hounds slunk alongside her. The *ghaole* trapped on Kelland’s wall shrieked and spasmed, unable to tear itself free. “I can see why my mistress wants you.”

“Then come and take me,” the Burnt Knight snarled. Sweat pearled on his deep brown skin and hung like dew from his braids, but he did not seem tired. He wrapped both hands around the hilt of his sun-marked sword and thrust its point into the earth. Between his fingers the golden pommel pulsed light with each beat of his heart, brighter each time: once, twice, and a third beat that filled the clearing with white radiance, dazzling as sunlight on snow. Albric could hardly bear to look up; it was like staring at the sun without blinking, a brilliance too great for mortal eyes to withstand.

He averted his eyes from the shining knight and looked to the ghoul-hounds instead. They were blistering in the sunlight, dying where they stood. Their pallid skin rose up in hissing welts, then burned to gray ash and blew off their flesh. Withered muscle scorched and crumbled as Celestia’s fury tore through their bodies. The *ghaole* flung up their hands to shield their eyes from the sun that had come down to burn them, and the Burnt Knight’s power scoured those hands to webs of bare white bone.

Even Severine gritted her teeth against the onslaught. Her good eye narrowed; her crystal one blazed in answer.

“In good time. I might first wonder why you came alone.”

In the clearing, the wounded *ghaole* exploded into ash against the Burnt Knight’s wall of woven light. The others continued their halting advance, stooped forward as if marching against a punishing wind. More of their skin blew away with each labored step. One stuck its tongue out, panting, and the sunfire seared off the appendage so that it came flapping back behind the ghoul like a ribbon torn off in a breeze.

But Severine’s voice rose with iron implacability.

“I might wonder,” she said, “if you left your companion behind to protect her … or because you could not afford the distraction.” She made a small, vicious gesture with her maimed hand as she spoke. For the briefest instant the Burnt Knight hesitated, but then he jerked his sword up to parry some unseen blow. Had there been a real strike, it would have skittered to the left, deflected by his blade … and even as the thought came to him, Albric saw the *ghaole* in front of him, to Kelland’s left, shriek and double over. The long bones of its arms shattered, pebbling its hairless skin outward with thousands of fragments sent flying by the force of the break.

Severine did not seem to notice her spell’s misfire. “I might wonder,” she continued, inexorably, “whether you left her behind because you love her.”

The ghoul-hound with the broken arms collapsed in a plume of sparks and ash. Its fall seemed the only sound in the world. Now there were only two left. But Kelland’s light faltered for an instant following Severine’s words, and Albric felt the knight’s moment of doubt resonate through his bones, fatal as the tolling of a mourning bell. He saw the Thornlady smile.

A sudden coldness took hold of him, tracing down his back with chill fingers. What had he done? What had he said last night? He couldn’t quite remember, not the exact words, and cursed the drinking he’d done that day.

“I might even wonder,” Severine said—and now she was triumphant in her certainty—“whether you love her more than you love your goddess, and thus you have broken your oath.”

The light went out.

And Albric howled, a wordless cry of fear and hatred and fury at himself for waiting too long, and swung his sword two-handed at the Thornlady’s back.

Shadows flung his blade aside. They rose up from the folds of her robe and seized his steel with tendrils of darkness, too solid to be real, and turned his killing blow away more firmly than any shield. Albric staggered, thrown off balance. His foot skidded in the trampled snow and he went to one knee.

The Thornlady whirled as he struck, her pale face twisted by hatred. In her eye—her good eye, her *real* one—he saw a rage to match his own, and a glimmer of what might have been fear. She brought her maimed hand up like an angry cat drawing back a paw, although he was well out of her reach, and then she seemed to catch hold of herself.

“Kill him,” Severine spat, and turned back to her true prey.

The last ghoul-hounds leapt to her bidding. Both were badly hurt, their talons reduced to yellowed hooks on skeletal hands, but they did not slow like living men and they still had the strength to flense Albric’s flesh from his bones. And although the Burnt Knight had faced them and killed them with Celestia’s holy power, Albric had only steel in his hands, and the *ghaole* had no fear of that.

He sent up a prayer for Kelland, silent and heartfelt, and then they were upon him and his world shrank to a corner of a snowy glade with the fox’s blood spattered underfoot and the ashes of dead flesh blowing on the wind.

It was nothing like a Swordsday melee. In his youth Albric had faced off against four challengers, five, and bested them handily—but that was on flat-beaten ground, against living men using dulled blades and with nothing but pride
at stake. Today he was fifteen years older, and he fought over slippery snow and skittering leaves, against inhuman creatures with claws and fangs and unholy quickness.

He did not fight for pride. Nor did he fight for his life; he had given that up long ago. He fought for Kelland’s, and Mirri’s. He fought for the hope of Leferic’s rule in Bulls’ March, and the chance his domain had to become, finally, something more than a poor border castle torn ragged by war.

For that, he had to win.

One of the ghoul-hounds raked at his throat. Albric dodged back and to the side, out of its reach, and brought his sword down in a razor-edged arc. Its arms had already been burnt to bone by the Celestian’s sunfire; Albric’s blade severed one at the wrist and left the other dangling by sinewed threads. The ghaole screamed, jerking the bloodless stumps away. Turning the momentum of his swing, Albric brought the sword around low, chopping into its thigh. The ghaole stumbled, falling, and his next blow took off its howling head.

His sidestep had brought him into the next one’s reach, though, and Albric couldn’t evade both at once. The second ghoul-hound battered past his shield and tore into his side; he felt, with a tingling sense of disbelief, its talons catch against his ribs and twist in deeper. It thrust its face in for a bite and he slammed his elbow into its nose, crunching the brittle dead cartilage and the top row of its teeth back into its face.

The ghaole never flinched, never wailed. Its tongue curled up under the ruins of its smashed nose, flecks of cartilage clinging to the swollen purple flesh, and wrapped around Albric’s arm. He swore—at least he thought he did; he couldn’t be sure of the words—and kicked at its knees, yanking his arm desperately to get free.

It wouldn’t let go. He couldn’t free his sword to get a clean strike. In the corner of his eye Albric saw a flare of darkness and then another of light, white and gold and white again, before that was swallowed in turn by a wash of fell radiance in the red-streaked pale color of new ivory or bloodied bone. The salt-copper stench of spilled blood filled the air, and he knew he’d be getting no help from that quarter.

If anything, the Burnt Knight seemed to need his help. Sir Kelland was backed almost to the tree line, and he was plainly exhausted. Blood darkened his surcoat in half a dozen places; every stroke of his sword came slower, and although Celestia’s holy fire still limned the blade, it was little more than a candleflame, faint as Albric’s own hopes.

Severine, too, was wounded … but not as badly. Not near as badly. A thin cut on her cheek wept red, and she was favoring her right side, but her own blade moved quick as thought. It was a weapon Albric had never seen before: a needle of gleaming ivory, more long knife than sword, that tapered to a wicked point and seemed to have no edge. The hilt of that strange blade was fused to her palm, and the twisted basket of its crossguard wrapped around her hand and wrist like the coils of a constricting snake. Every time her ivory sword drew blood, Severine grew stronger and the Burnt Knight weakened. Already his fire was dying.

Albric wanted to scream, but his numbed chest wouldn’t let him. The frigid paralysis was spreading. He couldn’t feel the side of the body where the ghaole’s claws had sunk in, and his legs were beginning to falter. Very soon he’d fall.

Fighting to keep his sword hilt clenched between the fingers of his trapped right hand, Albric fumbled out his hunting knife with the left. He hacked awkwardly at the ghaole’s tongue. Slowly the ropy muscle gave way. It clawed at him, but its closeness prevented the ghoul-hound from slashing with much force; all it could do was rake and scratch, shredding his clothes and ripping open more shallow wounds.

Albric couldn’t feel the blood. He couldn’t feel anything beyond cold and terror. Finally the ghaole’s tongue flapped loose from his arm, still licking at him but no longer attached to the creature’s mouth. Instead of jerking away from it as the ghoul expected—it had already set its claws to disembowel him if he did—Albric dropped his sword and grabbed the top of its head with his newly freed right hand, slashing at its throat with the knife. Dry skin and pink-webbed innards gave way much faster than the coiled tongue had; the ghaole was headless before it recovered from its surprise.

Swearing weakly, Albric picked its claws out of his sides. Some were too slippery with blood or sunk in too far for him to pull out, and he left those where they were, leaving the ghaole’s hand to dangle from his ribs like some enormous bony tick. He stooped to retrieve his sword and nearly fell face-first into the snow; bloodloss had him dizzy, and the ghaole’s touch had turned his limbs to unresponsive ice.

He’d never been so slow, so useless, in his life. But he couldn’t give in yet. There was one more thing he had to do.

He walked toward Severine.

She did not turn to see him coming. The Burnt Knight had fallen; his braids snaked dark across the snow and his sword lay at his fingertips, its fire gone. He was breathing, barely, with a shallow, stuttered quickness that spoke poorly of his chances. Severine hunched over the downed knight, chanting feverishly. Whatever she was doing, it completely absorbed her attention. Shadows danced around her like ebon flames, growing thicker by the moment.

With every step, Albric prayed, and for once his unworthy prayers were answered. She did not turn.
Albric plunged his sword into her back.

It was a killing blow; he knew that as soon as the steel bit in, and thanked Celestia for giving him the strength. He’d been afraid that the *ghaole* had weakened him too badly, or that he’d been wrong about what the Thornlady’s wounds meant. But he’d guessed correctly: the fact that Sir Kelland had been able to hurt her meant her shield of shadows was gone. He could hurt her. He could kill her.

Yet as his sword sank into the Thornlady’s robes, scraping past her spine, Albric felt it slide too quickly, too cleanly, as if it cleaved through something less substantial than flesh.

Severine released her chant in a choking gasp and turned toward him. Around her, the shadows continued their frenzied dance, leaping higher and higher until they swallowed the trees. She bared her reddened teeth in an expression that was as much snarl as smile. “You are an extraordinary fool.”

Yes, Albric tried to say. Yes, I was. *But I made amends*. He couldn’t make the words come. Icy bands constricted his chest; each breath came harder than the one before. He felt himself falling and leaned forward so that his dead weight would push the sword in deeper.

The shadows were whirling around him, blinding. They whipped through the air like war-banners caught in a windstorm. Gathering around the Thornlady and the fallen knight, the darkness rose and engulfed them both in its treacherous, shifting depths. An instant later the shadows fell away from a suddenly empty space and were ordinary once again, moving to no more than the wind.

Severine was gone. So was the knight. Blood turned the once-pristine snow to a wallow of red mud where they’d been.

Without the Thornlady’s body to hold it fixed, Albric’s sword slipped and clattered to the ground. He slumped down beside it, unable to stand on his useless, frozen legs.

The Burnt Knight’s sword had fallen nearby. Albric watched the snowflakes collect on its pomme1, blotting out the golden sunburst. Blood darkened the blade’s silvery edge. He stared at the blood, hoping it was enough, that it meant *she* was dead, and let the darkness fill his sight until his eyelids grew heavy.

A scream pierced the stillness. Footsteps crunched through the snow; the blood in it was freezing hard again. A blurred shape fell to its knees beside him, and when he blinked through his exhaustion Albric saw that it was the Burnt Knight’s companion. Bitharn. She had her bow strung and her hair knotted back in a loose, half-finished braid. The buckles of her leather armor were unfastened on the sides; she had thrown it on and run. So foolish. So brave.

“Is she dead? Is … is *he* dead?” Bitharn picked up the knight’s sword, brushing off the snow. The tracks of tears were bright on her cheeks.

A great unseen weight pressed down on Albric’s chest. Breathing was like trying to suck air from the bottom of the sea. He could feel nothing but leaden heaviness in his limbs, and numbing cold everywhere. Still he struggled to speak.

“Don’t know,” he managed to croak.

“He promised me. He promised *me*. He said he wouldn’t fight alone.” The girl’s hands trembled on the hilt. She wiped away the melting flakes, closing the sunburst between her fingers.

“Not alone. I was here.” The words were unintelligible to his own ears. Albric could not tell if Bitharn understood him, but he had to try. “Shadows. Took them both. Hurt … hurt bad. Should have died.” He fought for another gasp of air. His ears were filled with the roar of rushing waves. “Mirri. In my tent. Ghouls got her. She’ll need help.”

Bitharn nodded, and Albric let go of the impossible effort of speech.

It was snowing again. He did not know when it had begun. A light fall, only: soft whiteness drifting from a pearl-gray sky. Snowflakes stuck to his eyelashes and fell on his eyes, and he did not have the strength to blink them away. The first ones melted; he could feel the warmth of them trickling down his face like tears.

Then they did not. He was already that cold.
The ride from Tarne Crossing to Thistlestone was a blur.

Bitharn remembered circling around the clearing where Kelland and the Thornlady fought, and where the corpse of the man who had betrayed her was slowly shrouded by snow. She remembered trying to make sense of the fight through its tracks, and halfway managing it before all the trails ended in corpses or vanished into empty air. She remembered plunging into Albric’s tent and finding Mirri there, already cold as death, with a confession tucked into her shirt.

The confession explained everything and nothing. Bitharn took it because she had no other clues. She took Kelland’s sword, too; she couldn’t bear to leave that among the dead. Then she left, riding for Thistlestone like there was a company of Baozite reavers on her tail.

That part, she hardly remembered at all.

The healers at the Dome of the Sun once told her that great shocks could sear themselves into one’s mind, blazing memories as sudden and indelible as the scars that lightning left on blasted trees. That was why old men remembered their first loves’ perfume, why the survivors of burnt-out villages could recognize their attackers’ faces after ten years of peace.

But the opposite, Bitharn learned, was true as well: sometimes instead of vivid recollection there was only a hazy fog. Sometimes the mind recoiled from holding onto such pain, or simply could not take it and thus could not call that memory back. It lay black and buried at the bottom of one’s soul, too heavy to be dredged up.

Fleeting images were all she kept of that hellish ride: days of snow and thudding desperation, Mirri’s body like a block of ice before her, meals snatched hastily in the saddle. Bitharn had always been careful with her horse, but on that ride she nearly killed the poor beast, and only spared it because she couldn’t afford to walk if it foundered.

Finally, when horse and rider were both on the brink of collapse, she came to the low towers of Thistlestone.

The castle town was even more crowded than it had been at Swordsday. Half a hundred banners flapped from the tents and pavilions that ringed the castle’s hill like so many colorful blossoms in a wreath. Every inn in town wore a banner, and most of the larger houses too; flags of silk and heavy cotton flapped in the breeze, showing everything from hedge knights’ clumsily painted arms to the crown-and-sun of Craghail. They made a sound like a flock of pigeons all taking wing at once, and yet that noise was dwarfed by the clamor that rose up from the streets.

All through Thistlestone, soldiers strutted, archers boasted, whores laughed and teased. Pigs and sheep bawled as they were brought in from the countryside and slaughtered to feed the armies. Fletchers worked in the streets with baskets of goose feathers at their ankles, carefully separated into left- and right-wing bins so that no arrow would have feathers from both sides. Smithies belched noise and smoke into the sky as armorers and weaponsmiths slaved to repair old pieces and craft new ones.

Langmyr was readying for war.

Only a fraction of its forces had answered the call thus far, and most of those were wandering mercenaries or local lords … but the crown-and-sun flew over Thistlestone, and that meant this was only the beginning, for High King Theodemar had summoned his swords in response to King Raharic’s massing on his borders.

Bitharn wondered if she had already failed. It wasn’t too late to call them back, yet, but wherever young knights and glory-hungry lords gathered, bloodshed was quick to follow. On the other side of the Seivern, in Verehart and Blackbough and all the other Oakharne border castles, more swords were gathering to meet them. War made men rich and turned their legacies to legend; it was hard for them to give up those dreams before they were crushed on the battlefield.

Assuming, of course, that their kings and generals cared enough to make them try. Perhaps they didn’t. Perhaps a ruinous battle on the eve of winter suited their purposes perfectly. What did it matter to her? There was no room in her heart for anyone else’s grief; she could hardly bear her own. She just wanted to make her report and leave.

Lady Isavela Inguilar met her at the castle gates. Concern flickered across the older woman’s face at the sight of her, but she welcomed her guest graciously and with brisk efficiency. Servants led Bitharn’s hard-used horse to the stables and bore Mirri off to the sickrooms. A visiting general, someone said, had a Blessed in his company who could tend to the child’s ghaole-given wounds. Lady Inguilar ordered one of her personal maids to fetch the Blessed at once, then escorted Bitharn to her guest rooms.

She led the Celestian to a small but comfortable suite below Thistlestone’s south tower. It was no trivial gesture, Bitharn knew; the castle was so crowded that she saw servants rolling up pallets where they’d slept in the kitchens
and among the dogs in the great hall. Knights and ladies walked through the halls, no doubt occupying those ousted
servants’ quarters. Yet Bitharn had an entire set of rooms to herself, and the south-facing rooms received the most
sunlight and were thus the most comfortable in winter.

It was a generous gift. It did nothing to console her.

Bitharn sat on the bed, hollow-eyed and dirt-smudged, after Lady Inguilar left. There was a mirror near the
washstand by the window, but she didn’t glance at it; she had no desire to see what a wretch she’d become. She
hadn’t bathed or rebraided her hair since the day Kelland fell. Her clothes were filthy from travel, and after days of
barely eating, she could feel them hanging loose.

None of it mattered. Bitharn felt like one of the lost souls in Narsenghal, bereft of anything that might once have
held meaning. All men died, and all shades crossed the Last Bridge when their day came. Those who had been
anointed to the sun went to Celestia’s ever-golden lands; those who served other gods went to their own deities’
lands, Bitharn believed, although the solari at the Dome hotly debated that. But those who were great sinners fell
from the Bridge into the sunless lands of Narsenghal, where they wandered endlessly, aimlessly, through a
shadowscape filled by half-real figments of memory. No light existed there, no joy, nothing but loss and the fading
relics of memory, slowly eroding until the shades lost their faces and dwindled away into the shadow, having
forgotten themselves.

She had wondered, when she first heard that story as a child, how that could be. How could a person forget her
own face? Why would someone let his very essence slip away, collapsing into the nothingness of the shadowlands?

Because, she realized now, a soul stripped of its moorings had no reason to exist. Identity was meaningless,
impossible, when all the principles and places and people that shaped it were gone. Without those things, the soul
was rudderless, lost as a sailor without stars.

Bitharn wasn’t that deeply sunk in despair. She still had faith, friends, duties to see through. But her lodestar was
gone. Kelland had fought the Thorn without her, and he’d lost. He might be dead. She flinched from that thought,
but she couldn’t deny it. There’d been so much blood. Too much for any man to lose and live.

Why had he gone without her? He’d promised not to fight alone—and he’d followed the letter of that promise, as
he had to, but not its spirit. It should have been her standing beside him, not Albric. It should have been her.

If she’d been there, her arrows could have turned the battle. There weren’t so many ghaole. She’d read the tracks;
she knew that several of them came late to the fight, hanging back until Kelland was tired. She could have forced the
ghaole out into his sunfire, could have filled the Thorn’s mouth with feathered steel to keep her from spitting out her
spells, could have …

It didn’t matter what she could have done. She wasn’t there to do it. He’d slipped out of the inn without her,
leaving in the last dark of night so she wouldn’t know to follow. Hot tears welled up and Bitharn let them fall, her
heart too blasted to care. All those things he’d said about needing her, about being weaker without her—they were
true, he knew they were true. Why had he ignored them? How could he have been so stupid?


But he’d lost it all anyway, and so had she. So it was stupidity after all.

Bitharn cried, helpless and hating herself for it, until the door creaked gently open.

It was Lady Inguilar. Alone, thankfully. She dried her tears hastily on a dirty sleeve. The lady entered and sat
beside her on the bed, offering comfort without forcing it.

“I don’t usually cry,” Bitharn muttered.

“Everyone cries when there is a need for it.” Lady Isavela held out a lacy handkerchief, faintly perfumed with
lemon, and Bitharn took it gratefully. Her fingers left grubby smudges on the white cloth, but the lady pretended not
to notice. “Will you tell me what happened?”

She did. She let the words spill out as they would, all in a chaotic tumble, and Lady Isavela listened gravely.
When she finished the lady held her as a mother might hold a weeping daughter. Bitharn wanted to resist, but before
she knew it she was crying again, sobbing into the older woman’s shoulder.

“Thank you,” Lady Isavela said. “I know those words are so small, so … inadequate against what you’ve lost, but
it must be said. Thank you. The child will live because of your haste in bringing her here. Blessed Eliset says that
she will make a full recovery. Another day, and the ice-fever would likely have killed her.”

The news was a balm to her wounds. Bitharn dried her tears a second time on the scented handkerchief. “I’m
glad.”

“Youre news may save many more lives than hers alone,” the lady said. She stood and crossed to the corner where
Bitharn had tossed her muddy saddlebags. “May I look?”

Bitharn winced inwardly. Why hadn’t she brushed off her bags? Or at least put them downstairs with the
servants? She was making a dismal show of the Dome’s courtesies. “Please.”

“This is the letter? His confession?” Lady Isavela held up the torn page. The sacred constellation of the Celestial
Chorus showed on the outside, stamped in blue and gold.

Bitharn nodded.

The lady unfolded the page and read in silence. “So much pain,” she murmured when she finished, creasing the letter and sliding it back into the dead man’s prayerbook.

“The Thorns are good at that.”

“And at fomenting war, it would seem.” Lady Isavela glanced up, brushing a dark curl away from her eyes. “Do you believe Sir Albric’s confession?”

“I can’t tell you what was in a dead man’s heart.” She’d spent much of the ride worrying at that question herself, when she could gather her wits enough to think about anything, and had reached no firm answer. “Much of what we observed corroborates what he wrote. We found bodies in Willowfield that match his account of the slaughter, and we found the unfinished ghaole that he tried to burn. Albric came to us the day before he died, offering to betray the Thorn. When I found him dying, he’d been fighting her and the ghaole—and he was doing it without armor or shield.”

“Because he wanted to die.”

“If he did, he got his wish.”

“Will you tell this to Lord Aegelmar? The High King sent him to take charge of the armies gathering here. He is Lord General of the South, so we are all at his command.” Lady Inguilar smiled wryly. “Fortunately Aegelmar is a sensible man and a good general. He had his fill of ‘glory’ long before Thelyand Ford, but he was there, and he developed an abiding hatred of Ang’arta in that battle. He won’t be quick to send his men against Oakharn if he knows the Thorns tried to manipulate him into doing just that. If you tell him what you learned, he will pull the armies back from this folly.”

Bitharn shrugged, abrupt and almost angry. “It was why you sent us, wasn’t it? So we could find the killers and tell the world and stop this war from happening. Kelland thought it was important to risk himself for that, and I’d sooner … I won’t dishonor him. Yes, I’ll tell your general. But in return I want something from you. And him.”

“I cannot speak for Lord Aegelmar,” Lady Isavela said, “but for myself, if it lies within my power, my answer is yes. Anything. What would you have?”

“The Thorns took Kelland. They took him because you gave him this task.” That wasn’t the whole truth, perhaps not even the greater part of it, but it was what Bitharn wanted to believe. There was an ember of anger burning in her chest under the ashes of grief, and each word fanned it up hotter. She embraced the anger, letting it give her strength and purpose. “I don’t intend to let them keep him. I don’t know how, yet, but I will have him back. When the time comes I may call on you for aid. Will you give it?”

Lady Isavela hesitated, fidgeting with the amethyst drops that dangled from her ears. “He may well be dead, child,” she said, gently. “The Thorns take corpses too.”

“I know.” She hadn’t admitted it aloud until then; she wanted to swallow the words as soon as they were spoken. But she couldn’t close her eyes to the possibility. “If that’s the end, then that’s the end. I’ll go back to Cailan. Back to the Dome. I won’t trouble you any further. I promise you that. But if he’s alive, if there’s any hope, I will have him back. And I may need your help.”

“We can’t give you armies,” the lady cautioned. “We don’t have the men to spare, and my lord would never send them to die at Ang’arta’s gates if we did.”

“No. This is mine to do. I’m not asking anyone else to do my killing for me, or my dying. All I want is … is help. Once I know where to begin.”

“You will have it,” Lady Isavela promised.

“Thank you.” Bitharn closed her eyes, steeling herself. “I’d like to see Lord Aegelmar, if he’ll receive me. The sooner I talk to him, the sooner I can be on the road.”

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THE AUDIENCE WAS IN THISTLESTONE’S GREAT HALL. The banners that hung over the throne had been replaced; the new ones showed the royal crown-and-sun, the ancient emblem of Rhaelyand that the High Kings of Craghail took as their own when the empire crumbled. The golden sigil stood on an azure field, not the High King’s own snow-white, because it was not King Theodemar himself who sat in this hall but his servant, the Lord General of the South.

Courtiers and noblewomen lined the sides of the hall in fur and velvet. With them stood a handful of knights in polished steel, as well as scarred men whose well-worn armor and lack of heraldry proclaimed them mercenaries—leaders and lieutenants of the bigger companies, Bitharn guessed. Lord Aegelmar, or perhaps Lord Inguilar, wanted all Langmyr’s fighting men to see this audience. Perhaps they thought it would be easier to rein the soldiers in if they heard the reasons for it firsthand.

Maybe so. Bitharn couldn’t worry about them. Even if she hadn’t been sworn to neutrality as a dedicant of
Celestia, this war was none of her affair. She wanted to give her report and be gone.

The heralds cried her name and Bitharn came forward, walking past the assembled knights and mercenaries. An astonished hush fell over the hall. It wasn’t only because she was a woman. For a formal audience with Lord Aegelmar, who stood just below the High King in military rank, the meanest freesword washed and shaved and polished his boots. But Bitharn came cloaked in road-dust, her hair a tangled mess half fallen out of its braid.

Lord Aegelmar sat on the Thistled Throne, with Lord and Lady Inguilar standing in the place of honor at his right hand and a tall woman clad in the sun-yellow robes of an Illuminer at his left. That would be Blessed Eliset, Bitharn surmised. The Blessed was a spare, unsmiling woman around fifty; her features were naturally inclined to hardness, but her manner carried a warmth that belied the sternness of her face.

No such gentleness showed in Lord Aegelmar. He was a scant handful of years younger than his Blessed, but hard as steel. His dark brown hair was liberally streaked with gray, as was his short-cropped beard; his eyes were the same color, nearly black but with strange pale flecks, almost silver, that one scarcely noticed until he stood close.

As was famously his custom, Lord Aegelmar sat with his crimson-bladed sword naked on his lap. Gold gleamed on its crossguard, and a garnet big and dark as a pigeon’s heart weighted the pommel, but the hilt was wrapped in plain but bloodstained black leather. That sword, Red Wail, was supposed to have drunk the lifeblood of a hundred heroes slain on the Field of Sorrows; the scarlet had never washed from the steel. It was said to be sharp enough to cut through lies and strong enough to break an army, and Lord Aegelmar always held it when dealing justice or hearing reports.

Bitharn wondered which one this audience was supposed to be. She inclined her head slightly as she came to the throne, occasioning a few more murmurs from the gathered watchers. Lords and ladies bowed to the High King and his representatives. The Blessed of Celestia did not, for they owed deference to no mortal ruler, but Bitharn was not Blessed and it was presumptuous of her to exercise their privileges.

She didn’t care. To her surprise, she saw that Lord Aegelmar didn’t, either. Far from being offended, he was watching her with a gleam of shrewd amusement in his silver-flecked eyes. Granting her the status of a Blessed suited his purposes, Bitharn realized: it lent her report greater authority than if she’d come as a humble dedicant.

“I’m told you went with the Burnt Knight to investigate the slaughter at Willowfield,” Lord Aegelmar said. He had a commander’s voice, clear and strong. “I’m told you found the answers.”

A soft white glow surrounded the dais as he spoke. Bitharn recognized the Light of Truth with a sudden, clenching ache. If Kelland hadn’t used that prayer over the baker’s body—if he hadn’t rushed to meet the Thorn’s challenge by himself—it would be him giving this report, not her. As it should have been.

She shook the thought away and tried to concentrate. Lord Aegelmar and his hosts already knew what she planned to say; Blessed Eliset’s light was merely meant to show the assembled nobles and soldiers that her words hid no lies. It was all theater, but that made it more, not less, important that Bitharn played her role perfectly.

“An answer, my lord.” She bowed her head again, formally offering up the torn page on which Albric had written his confession. Some of the nearer knights craned their necks toward the letter, as if they could read it from ten paces away. “Albric Urdaring, who was once swordmaster of Bulls’ March, wrote this letter to his lord shortly before he died. I found it in his tent, along with the child that the ghaoile injured, after … after Albric and Sir Kelland fought the Thornlady and her creatures.”

“The Oakharne died in that fight, did he not? Along with the Burnt Knight and the Thorn.”

“Albric died, yes, my lord. The others—I don’t know about the others. Not for a certainty. They didn’t leave bodies. Albric told me, as he was dying, that they vanished into shadow, but there was so much blood on the snow …”

“I won’t ask you to speculate. So: the swordmaster confessed and died. What do you make of that?”

“I only met him once, my lord. The night before Albric died, he came to us in a tavern and asked us to help him betray the Thornlady. He was …” She shook her head, searching for the words to capture the pain that gnawed the man. “He was a man utterly consumed by guilt. It ate at him like a cancer. I didn’t know why, then. But if a tenth of his confession is true, he earned that guilt and more.”

“Did he?”

“It is in his confession: he betrayed his lord and his oaths over an old insult. Because Lord Ossaric demoted him from swordmaster to a household knight, he plotted to destroy the greatest happiness in his lord’s life. Jealousy and pride drove him to conspire with a Thorn. A Thorn. He regretted it bitterly, after he realized how she’d trapped him, but the damage was done.”

“Do you believe it?” Aegelmar studied her intently. He still had not taken the page.

Bitharn hesitated. Then she nodded. “Yes. I believe he conspired with the Thorn to murder Sir Galefrid, his wife, and their child. I believe the Thorn killed the people of Willowfield to goad your kingdom into war with Oakharn.
Albric … Albric regretted the deaths in Willowfield. But once he’d yoked himself to that monster, he had no way of escaping save by dying.”

Lord Aegelmar took the letter at last. He did not open it. “You and the Burnt Knight followed this Thorn for some time. You said she killed the people of Willowfield. Did you learn anything that might reveal her motives? I can’t imagine she had much interest in Sir Galefrid or his father for their own sake. Neither fought at Thelyand Ford.”

“War always serves Ang’arta’s interests, my lord. It fills their coffers when their soldiers are hired as mercenaries, and it honors their iron-crowned god. Slaughter on the field is Baoz’s highest sacrament.” That was a safe answer, she thought. Knights held mercenaries in contempt, and other hireswords hated Baozites. The ironlords fought for their god’s glory, not for profit, and seldom respected ransoms or surrenders or any of the other conventions by which mercenaries tried to impose some restraint on the field.

“The Thorns are not Baozites.”

“No. But they serve Ang’arta. And, perhaps, have plans for it. Ang’arta can’t hope to hold more territory now, not with its conquests in Thelyand so new … but in five years? Ten? It isn’t that long a march from Thelyand’s borders to Oakharn’s, or to yours. Every man they kill today is one fewer they’ll have to face then.”

“I’m afraid we might have to disappoint them.” Lord Aegelmar extended the folded letter to Blessed Eliset, who took it and tucked it neatly into her sleeve. “See that ten copies are made, along with a written account of what was told here today. Dispatch messengers on fast horses to each of the border castles with instructions to their lords that they are to hold their soldiers back, and take no action, until ordered otherwise by the High King or myself. Each messenger will carry a sealed copy of the record and confession and deliver it directly to each castle’s lord. Another copy must go to King Raharic and each of the Oakharne border castles; find brave men for that task, and ones without family. The original, and the last copy, go to Craghail and King Theodemar.”

The Lord General returned his unsettling gaze to Bitharn. “There is one other task I would ask of you, if your duties permit.”

She bit her lip. “What?”

“Go with the messenger to Raharic. Tell him what you told us. Take the girl, too, if she is strong enough to make the ride. The Oakharne can be a sentimental people; it might be helpful for them to know that we saved this child’s life from a danger that one of their own knights set upon her.”

Bitharn dipped her head, ashamed that she’d forgotten about Mirri. Of course the girl needed to go back to her parents; they had no idea what had happened to her. Bitharn hadn’t had time to stop and tell them before her headlong ride to Thistlestone. “Yes, my lord.”

“Thank you,” Lord Aegelmar said, and nodded slightly to signal that the audience was at an end. Bitharn made one last bow—a full obeisance this time, ceding her authority to the High King’s—and slipped out quickly, hoping to avoid the court gossips.

None of them caught her. Bitharn locked the door to her guest room with a wave of relief.

It was nearly past sunset. She was late for prayer.

Bitharn hadn’t prayed since she left Tarne Crossing. She hadn’t prayed alone in years. Since childhood, she’d always observed the rites with Kelland. It felt strange to stand by herself at sunset, like trying to dance without a partner, but she willed her grief aside and stood in the waning light. Drawing a controlled breath, she raised her arms above her head.

If the Bright Lady willed, she’d have Kelland back. If not, she’d carry the sword and prayers he’d left to her. There was still a need, still a purpose, whatever happened.

Bitharn exhaled, and began to pray.
The messenger came at midnight. He bore Langmyr’s royal crown-and-sun on his breast, and traveled under a peace-banner that—surprisingly, given tensions along the border—had been honored by both sides. What he came to say, no one in Bulls’ March knew, although rumors ran wild from the moment he came into sight. Leferic heard his servants, and no few of his knights, whispering like roaches in the rushes. The whispers vanished when he came near and sprang back up as soon as he was past.

The messenger spoke to Leferic briefly in the privacy of his library and was gone before daybreak. He left two sealed letters behind; one of the servants caught a glimpse of them before Leferic tucked them into his cloak, and that spurred rumors of its own, especially when their lord told no one what the letters said.

Whatever the news was, it must have been direly troubling, the gossips agreed. For two days and two nights after, Leferic did not sleep. He grew haggard and clumsy, and the castle folk murmured that the messenger must have bewitched him with the same foul magic that had killed his brother and made a soul-broken husk of his father. Several muttered that the Langmyrne should have been given a quick death and sent to the pyre rather than being allowed to ride away, peace-banner or no.

Heldric reported all these whispers to his lord, but Leferic did nothing. Rumors are poison dropped in the ear, Inaglione had written, and can be deadly if not swiftly cured. There was truth in that, Leferic knew, but grief and indecision made him too weak to act on it. He was beginning to understand why his father had retired to his silent bed.

Then, cold and early on the morning of the third day, a new messenger arrived. This one came from the north, not across the river from the west, and he wore King Raharic’s green oak wreath on a surcoat of snowy white. Unlike the last rider, this one stayed through the day; and as he lingered in the castle, and exchanged courtesies with the knights and servants, word of his tidings began to spread. It was in that fashion, slowly, that the people of Bulls’ March came to see the true shape of things.

Or so they imagined, Leferic thought dourly as he sat at the paper-strewn desk in his library. The real truth, and the burden of its guilt, were his to bear alone.

He ran a hand through his lank blond hair, trying to force his thoughts into something like order. By all rights he should be preparing to meet Raharic’s messenger, but the royal herald had sent word that he was exhausted by his travels and would prefer to reserve the formal audience for tomorrow.

The real reason for the delay, Leferic suspected, was that the herald was using this time to quietly feel out his liegemen and how they had reacted to the news of Albric’s betrayal. He wondered what the messenger would make of the fact that most of them hadn’t heard it. The knights, for their part, would probably assume that Leferic’s delay in sharing Albric’s confession with them meant that he’d plotted along with the dead man. They had little love to spare for him as it was: easy enough to believe he’d been part of a treacherous conspiracy.

They’d be right about that, of course. Which was part of what made this so hard.

Leferic raked his fingers through his hair again. His gaze strayed to the books that filled the shelves on every wall. Nearly three hundred volumes of scholars’ research and sages’ wisdom, histories and legends, religious precepts and secular wit.

Three hundred volumes, and no answers.

Even Inaglione, that wisest and most cynical of courtiers, could offer only limited counsel across the chasm of centuries and the great silence of the pyre. Leferic had recognized, that first day when he came up to the library after learning of Galefrid’s death, that he would have to rely on his own wholly inadequate wits to survive. It was not a new thought. But it had never been as brutally urgent before.

Now, for the first time, he saw just how lonely a path he had chosen.

He’d have no friends on this road, no close confidants. His only guide was the shade of a dead courtier, writing to him across the gap of ages and a culture that had fallen from Rhaelyand and Ardashir’s golden palaces to this miserable pile of rocks in the woods.

Any friends he might make would eventually be sacrificed to the needs of his position. Leferic didn’t know if he could bear that again, even if the choice were open to him. Better to keep his friends limited to books and ghosts. Better to be lonely and remember the real price of power: that everyone in his life, no matter how loyal or how beloved, was a pawn he might someday have to give up on the board. Everyone.

He thought he’d understood that, thought he’d accepted it with Galefrid’s death. But his brother had never meant
much to him, and Leferic now saw that he’d understood nothing.

The Langmyrne messenger hadn’t just delivered their Lord General’s message and a copy of a prayerbook confession. He’d brought an unwanted truth, one that Leferic’s thoughts kept circling like a sparrow trying to find a roost on a razorspine tree.

The only way out of his predicament was to let Albric take the blame for a crime of which he was blameless. The sins were Leferic’s, and his alone. But he would have to shove them onto his friend’s corpse if he was to keep his throne. Or his head.

And Albric had known that, and had opened his arms to take them before he died.

Leferic struggled to grasp the enormity of that choice. Albric had warned him away from the Maimed Witches since the inception of their first plan. When his warnings weren’t heeded, Albric had accepted death and dishonor as the cost of shielding Leferic from his own folly. He hadn’t fought his fate, hadn’t complained; he had simply done it, accepting as his duty a sacrifice that Leferic could never have asked for.

And Leferic would have to let that go. There was nothing he could do to lessen the stain on Albric’s honor without bringing suspicion onto himself and rendering that sacrifice worthless. He had little use for the empty mouthing that “honor” often was, but Albric had prized it, and it was a grievous irony that he should have given up his to save his lord’s.

It still might not be enough. Even if Leferic stood silent, even if he joined the mob spitting on his friend’s good name, his liegemen might seize on the excuse to be rid of him. They’d claim he’d turned a blind eye to Albric’s plotting, allowing the treachery to go forward so he could seize the throne. Or they’d say he had only been allowed to keep his father’s chair because he was a puppet to Ang’arta, bowing to the Thorns’ every whim.

With more time he could win them over, as he’d won Sir Brisic and Sir Merguil. Leferic was sure of that. Bit by bit he could chip away at old alliances, exploit old enmities, weld competent men to his side, and replace fools with loyalists. But to do that he needed time and money. At present he had neither. Without those, all roads led to the same end: a fall from power, maybe to the headsman’s block. All those deaths for nothing.

Albric had bought him a chance, not a certainty. His thoughts circled that, trying to find a safe place amidst the bristling barbs and failing, failing every time.

A knock sounded at his door. Leferic lowered his head into his hands, hoping futilely that he’d hallucinated the sound in his grief and exhaustion.

He wasn’t that lucky. Another knock came, this one louder. Leferic forced himself out of the chair and to the door, letting Cadarn in. He saw no one listening in the hall, but this was not a conversation to be shouted through three inches of wood.

The exile shook his shaggy blonde head. “Ghaole, Andalya called them. Corpses of men made into monsters by foul magic. She said they were the work of Thorns.”

Leferic sank nervelessly into his chair. His elbow jostled a sheaf of papers, spilling them across the floor. “Who did they attack?”

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“A girl, a knight and a baby. Andalya said the knight is from Bulls’ March.” Cadarn’s blue eyes were steady and appraising. No accusation there, not yet. Leferic wondered if the skar skraeli had heard the rumors about Albric’s treachery.

“Can they tell us what happened?”

“Not yet. Andalya said the girl might be awake by sundown. She was not hurt so badly as the knight.”

“The baby?”

“Cold. Hungry. Not hurt. The other two fought hard to keep it so.”

“Where are they being housed?”

“The sickrooms. For now.”

“See that they have guest quarters when they are well enough to take them. Until then, keep a watch on the sickrooms. Only your men, or those you know well enough to trust.” Leferic hoped the northerners would do it themselves, but he thought it best to give them some leeway. Neither Cadarn nor any of his men used Blessed Andalya’s title, and all seemed uncomfortable around her. “I do not want anything untoward to befall them.”

Cadarn furrowed his brow. “You think they are in danger?”

“I would prefer not to risk it. If a Thorn sent monsters to attack them, who knows? Better to be safe. You said the girl would be awake by nightfall?”
“So Andalya said. Nightfall.”

SUNDOWN FOUND LEFERIC IN THE WHITEWASHED sickrooms. There were three such rooms on the castle’s southwestern face, between the chapel and the kitchens. In peacetime two of them were used to store flour, smoked meat, and other foodstuffs, but one was always waiting for the wounded. Peace was never that sure on the banks of the Seivern.

Blessed Andalya was tidying up and preparing to leave her charges for the night when Leferic arrived. She was a short woman whose hair had begun graying when she was sixteen; now forty, she had a round, youthful face under a braided coil of starry white. The Blessed patted Leferic’s shoulder as she passed through the door in a rustle of sun-yellow robes.

“Be careful of them,” she said. It was not a request. “They’ve been through seven hells to get here.”

Leferic bowed in response, and closed the door after the Blessed.

Glassed lanterns hung from hooks on the walls, shedding a warm golden light and perfuming the sickroom air with the fragrance of vanilla and cloves. The Blessed forbade torches in her healing rooms; she said their smoke polluted the air, and insisted that the sickrooms be illuminated by lanterns that burned the scented oils she brewed. The fragrance was supposed to ease the dreams of the wounded, or something of that sort.

It didn’t seem to soothe their current guests. Certainly the big man sleeping on the first linen-draped pallet was not resting easily. His coarse black hair was a rumpled mess and his clothes were spotted with sweat; his jaw clenched in his dreams and his hands kept twitching toward fists. Thick-wrapped bandages swathed a wound on his calf and another on his side.

Leferic knew that man. Brys Tarnell: one of his brother’s knights, not long sworn to his service before Galefrid died. Albric had never liked him, calling him an up-jumped mercenary with the honor of an alley cat. All true, so far as Leferic could see, but the man was alive when Galefrid and his other knights were dead, so perhaps there was something to be said for alley cats.

He did not know the girl on the next bed. She had the look of peasant stock: callused hands, thick legs, broad plain face. There was no hint of beauty about her, save in her wide brown eyes, which watched him with the fear of a doe beset by hounds. She held a baby in her arms, and she was humming a cradle song to the child as Leferic came to the foot of her bed.

Leferic studied the baby carefully. Brys Tarnell had been with Galefrid in Willowfield, and there was only one child in this world that an honorless man like that would risk his own hide to protect.

He barely remembered his nephew’s face. Children of that age all looked much the same, and he’d never paid much attention to Galefrid’s family. But why else would a mercenary fight off ghaoles to save a baby? The child had to be Wistan.

The absurdity of it made him want to laugh. Or hit something. All that plotting and agonizing, all those deaths … and all he’d had to do was wait for some peasant girl to bring the child home.

Or not. Perhaps it might have turned out differently without those ghaoles on the road. How much was the world changed by each word spoken, each decision made? How many ripples did each drop make on a rain-hammered pond? Leferic would never know. What he did know, looking at the peasant girl and the baby sleeping in her arms, was that he had the opportunity to remove one of the myriad threats that plagued him. The Blessed had already declared that the child suffered from the strains of the road; it would be the easiest thing in the world to leave him on the windowsill, let him take a fatal chill, and put him back to be found safely dead in the morning.

Should he do it tonight? Or wait until tomorrow evening, and have both Brys and the girl dosed with dreamflower dust first?

The girl stopped humming. Leferic glanced at her, wondering if some hint of his intentions showed on his face. She watched him warily, clutching the baby tightly to her breast. “My lord?” Her accent was Langmyrne, and as lowborn as he’d guessed.

Leferic shook himself inwardly. The girl had done nothing to offend him, and she was a guest under his roof. That he was planning to kill the baby she held was no reason to treat her with discourtesy. He offered her a half bow and the ancient words of greeting: “Be welcome under my roof. Bright Lady bless your presence in my halls.” With a slight, reassuring smile, he added, “It was a long road to get here, wasn’t it?”

“It was.” A little of her wariness faded, but the girl still looked like a doe who might spring wild in panic at any moment. “We’re grateful to your men for bringing us in. We’d likely all be dead without them.”

“For the road is long and dark, and no man sure of safety,” Leferic quoted. “It was one of your countrymen who penned those lines, was it not?”

The girl’s expression closed in on itself, as though she suspected him of mocking her ignorance. She looked down to the child. “Might’ve been. I wouldn’t be able to say, my lord.”
“It was. Casubel of Craghail, one of the great poets of his age. There aren’t any Oakharne who come near matching him, I’m sorry to say. But I came to talk of roads, not verses. Which one brought you here?”

“I’m from Willowfield, my lord.”

“My brother met his end there.” Leferic said it casually, attaching no great emphasis to the fact, but he watched her reaction intently.

“I know.” Her eyes flickered up toward him and back down to the baby’s face. “I’m sorry for your loss.”

“We all die in the end. What matters is what we do with our lives before then. Galefrid died young, it’s true, but he left the most important legacy behind.” Leferic paused, wanting the full import of his words to sink in. “He left a child.”

The girl nodded. Her head stayed bowed, and her shoulders hunched in; she looked like a servant cringing before a clout. Her arms drew the baby closer to her chest, shielding it within the curl of her body. Leferic realized, with a twinge of uneasy surprise, that the girl was crying. The sobs were nearly silent, but the ragged catch in her breathing gave them away all the same.

He hadn’t expected her to become so emotional over a stranger’s child. Neither had he expected his thoughts to be so clear to her. If she already knew what he meant to do, then neither she nor Wistan could live. Regrettable, but unavoidable.

Leferic’s voice softened, almost without his willing it, as he asked the final, fatal question. “And you saved that child, didn’t you? You brought Wistan here.”

The girl shook her head mutely. She brought her face up, red and shiny with tears, and in her wide brown eyes there was nothing but anguish. “No.”

He couldn’t have heard her correctly. “What?”

Laughter was his answer. It was a bleak, awful sound, the laughter of a criminal reprieved from the gallows only to be sent to the Thorns. It did not come from the girl.

Brys Tarnell was awake. And laughing. The mercenary sat up against his pillow, his face pale as death but his green eyes burning bright. At last his black mirth trailed off and he gave Leferic a wolfish grin, little more than a baring of teeth. “She isn’t lying. Though she should be, if she had half the sense the gods gave turnips.”

Leferic shook his head. “I don’t understand.”

“I’m sorry.” Tears ran freely down the girl’s cheeks, dripping from her chin and vanishing into her blouse. The baby whimpered toward wakefulness as her tears spattered onto his blankets. “I tried—I tried so hard, my lord. I should have done more. I’m sorry.”

“No. We were going to—I would have told you this was Wistan, and let you raise him for your own, but I can’t lie to you, my lord. I’m sorry. I can’t. This is my son. Aubry.” She wiped at her eyes, keeping her gaze averted from Brys’. Leferic gave her a bandage from a basket on the shelf and she blew her nose into it loudly. “Thank you.”

He brushed off her thanks with a wave. “Begin again. What happened to Wistan?”

The girl twisted the sodden bandage around her fingers, dabbing alternately at her eyes and nose. “He was—I think he was hurt in Willowfield, I don’t know how, but he was weak from the first time I saw him. We went to Tarne Crossing, hoping to find the Blessed, but she was gone. I would have waited for her to come back, truly, but …”

“But what?”

“But he was so weak, and … and there was a dead man.” Her eyes darted up to meet his and away again; she made an uneasy try at a laugh that came out as a sob. “I know how ridiculous that sounds. I do. But it’s true.”

“It is true,” Brys said flatly. “The same Thorn who killed Willowfield used one of the men murdered there as her puppet. Caedric Alsarring. You might remember him: he served your father and your brother. She turned him into a monster and sent him to hunt Wistan.”

“I believe you,” Leferic said. The mercenary’s expression did not change in the slightest, but those three simple words seemed to relax the girl a little, and she managed a weak smile. “Thank you.”

He went on, wringing the scrap of cloth unconsciously as she spoke.

“We had to leave Tarne Crossing so she wouldn’t find him. We went with the Vis Sestani. I tried to find a healer among them, but … I couldn’t, my lord, and he died. I left him in the snow with a candle. I know it wasn’t right, but we didn’t have time for a proper pyre. I’m sorry, my lord. I hope it was enough for his soul to find its way home.”

“Then who is the child you carry? Tell me again.”

“Aubry. He’s my own.” She said it fiercely, twisting the bandage until her fingers went white in the knotted linen. “His father died in Willowfield. I’m all he has, and he’s all I have.”

“But you were going to pass him off as Wistan? Is that it?”
“More money in it.” Brys made the admission bluntly, without shame. “Yes. I was going to say he was your brother’s child and hope for some reward. It was my idea, so if you’re going to get angry about it, get angry with me, not her.”

“No,” the girl protested, “no, that’s not true. I mean, it is … but I agreed to it. I thought—I thought it could be a chance for my son to become someone important. If everyone thought he was Wistan. That’s why I agreed. But I can’t do it. I can’t lie, my lord. I’m sorry we ever had the idea. You saved us and brought us here and had the Blessed heal us, and I was going to lie to you. I’m sorry.”

“You needn’t be sorry for that.” Leferic said the words absently, not really hearing them, for the implications of their plot had finally sunk in and they left him thunderstruck.

His first reaction had, indeed, been anger—but that was foolish. Wasteful. Why should he be angry that they’d considered deceiving him? They hadn’t done it. By confessing the deception and throwing themselves on his mercy, they’d presented him with a gods-sent gift.

Adopting “Wistan” was the perfect solution. The simplicity of the idea was staggering. Leferic cursed his own stupidity in failing to think of it earlier. He’d never considered that Wistan could or should survive, but adopting his brother’s son as his heir would solve so many problems. In one fell swoop he could legitimize his own rule, remove a rallying figure from any would-be rebels, and bind Galefrid’s loyalists more tightly to his own side. News of “Wistan’s” survival might even pry loose from Maritya’s parents the money that Bulls’ March so desperately needed.

And if the child should ever become a threat, why, then he could drag out the girl and put her before a Blessed to confess the truth of how she had deceived him? They hadn’t done it. By confessing the deception and throwing themselves on his mercy, they’d presented him with a gods-sent gift.

Leferic turned the idea over in his mind and could see no flaws. Certainly none that compared with the pitfalls of his current predicament. Both the child’s parents were dead, so there would be no one to say whether the boy looked like them. The peasant girl had roughly Maritya’s coloring, if none of her delicate grace. The resemblance might be close enough to pass.

Oh, perhaps someday the boy might come to believe that he was ready to rule in his own name, but it would be fifteen years or more before he reached his majority. By then Leferic expected to have Bulls’ March firmly in his grasp. If he couldn’t hold Wistan off by that time, he didn’t deserve to rule at all. Besides, the boy might grow up to be a fair ruler in his own right, someday. Especially if he had a wise regent to teach him from the cradle …

Leferic realized the girl was crying again. He touched her shoulder lightly and gave her a smile that he hoped was kind. “Is there any reason, outside your own honesty, that you would not want your son raised this way?”

“No, my lord.” Her voice was hoarse from all that sobbing, but that could not hide the heartfelt honesty in her words. “I’d give anything for Aubry to have a chance at greatness.”

“Then he will.”

“My lord?” She blinked at him in confusion, her lashes wet and eyes puffy with tears.

“I am going to leave you to your rest. I will forget everything we discussed tonight.”

“But … then …”

“Then I will come back in the morning with Blessed Andalya and you will tell me that you and Brys Tarnell rescued Wistan from the massacre of Willowfield and I will believe you. And I will make your son my heir. Do you understand? I accept the lie. I am giving you your chance. Will you take it?”

Her jaw worked as she struggled with the idea; Leferic marveled at the peasant girl’s unworldliness. But in the end she nodded, gazing at the child in her arms. “In the morning I’ll … I’ll tell you that he’s Wistan. But, my lord … can I stay near him, even when he is?”

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“Of course,” Leferic said, with all the graciousness of a man handing a cup of sweetly poisoned wine to his rival. He needed her near, in the event that he ever needed to unmask “Wistan” as a fraud. “The child has no mother. He’ll need a nursemaid to raise him. I assume you are willing to serve in the castle?”

“Yes. Oh, yes—”

“I’m not,” Brys interrupted.

“No. Nor would I ask you to.” Leferic weighed the man. He needed the girl so that he’d have someone to blame if the secret ever came out, but he only needed one scapegoat and Brys Tarnell was unlikely to be a safe choice for that role. Moreover, while he was fairly certain he could keep the girl muzzled—exposing the truth would expose her son, and a mother as softheaded as this one would never do that—he had no such control over the sellsword. Better if he was gone. Better still if he were dead, but Leferic had had enough of killing for a while.

Maybe that made him weak … but he didn’t think so. The coward and the tyrant call the headsman at any provocation, and fall to him the same, Inaglione had written. Those who were too quick to execute their enemies always seemed to find more of them, somehow, closer and closer to home. A wise ruler used that solution sparingly, and only where it was needed.
It wasn’t needed here. Leferic was sure of that. If Brys tried to threaten him with revelations of Wistan’s true identity, he’d name the man as a blackmailing fraud and have him whipped out of the castle. The sellsword had neither friends nor allies, and no credibility in court; he didn’t pose any serious threat. Even so, it would be safest for them both if he was gone. Brys was probably intelligent enough to realize that himself. The lord of Bulls’ March could always change his mind, after all, and a man alone died easily.

“I think,” Leferic said carefully, “that it would be best if you were honored for your service to Bulls’ March and rewarded for your loyalty to my brother. And if, following that, you found that grief made it impossible for you to continue your service here. I’m sure your skills are in great demand outside the Sunfallen Kingdoms.”

“I will,” Brys suggested. “Was thinking of going there anyway once this was done.”

“That would do splendidly,” Leferic agreed. He turned back to the girl. “I will see you in the morning. Have your story well rehearsed. And when we are properly introduced, perhaps you might begin by giving me your name.” He made a last bow in parting and left her in the sickroom, her eyes shining with something more than tears.

Outside the night was well past freezing but Leferic hardly noticed. Excitement wrapped him in a warmth that no wind could pierce. He crossed the courtyard without feeling the cobbles under his thin-soled boots or smelling the manure from the stables nearby. Only the faraway gleam of the stars and a thin fringe of torches lit his way across the icy stones, but he had never felt so sure-footed in his life. He gave thanks to Celestia for her mercy, to the peasant girl for her naive honesty, and to Albric’s shade for his courage.

Then he went up to his library to place his stakes upon this gamble.

For the rest of the night Leferic wrote letters until his ink-stained fingers cramped around the quill and the words blurred together and stung his eyes. He wrote to King Raharic, acknowledging the herald’s arrival and announcing his own intentions to abide by Langmyr’s suggested peace, now that his liegeman’s treachery had been uncovered and the baby Wistan delivered safely by one of his brother’s surviving knights. He wrote the same message to the lords of Breakwall and Blackbough and all the other castles of Oakharn, both on the border and deep in the heartlands.

Lastly, and most carefully, he wrote to Maritya’s parents in Seawatch. To Reinbern and Alta de Marst, whose names were a byword for wealth in a realm where merchants made princes look like paupers, Leferic sent polite expressions of grief, then piety, then joy: for, he told them, through the infinite beneficence of the Bright Lady, their grandson had been saved. He invited them to visit for Wistan’s first birthday, and promised at that celebration to formally declare the child his heir.

By the time he sealed the last letter and set it aside for the morning’s messengers, it was near dawn. Blue shadows crept along the windows’ ledges; the sky was pale through their thick glass. Leferic rubbed his grainy eyes and stretched to ease the ache in his back. He hadn’t seen a sunrise since Galefrid’s funeral vigil.

Standing before the largest and clearest of his library’s windows, Leferic watched the night-tide recede. Dawn came slowly, for the sun was hazy behind a veil of clouds that drew its light off into long ribbons of amethyst and gray and pearling gold. The sky brightened from black to a deep luminous blue that put sapphires to shame. No longer dark, not fully light, the cloudy radiance of the early morning promised a gentle day ahead.

Leferic watched the dawn come to his winter castle, and then he called his messengers to make that promise real.
The thrushes came back early that year.

Among the commonfolk this was taken as a good omen. It meant the spring would be mild, the summer long and fruitful; autumn would bring a rich harvest. Around the castle town, people made a game of strolling through the woods and listening for the flutelike, repeating whistles of the thrushes’ song. The last crusts of snow, flecked brown with dirt and pitted by raindrops, still clung to the land, but people talked and laughed as if spring were already blooming on every bough.

Odosse was glad to join them. She wasn’t familiar with the folklore of thrushes; in Willowfield they’d never treated that bird as a herald of spring. But even if there wasn’t a grain of truth to the legend, she thought this year’s harvest had a better chance than most of overflowing their granaries.

For this year, unlike any other she could recall, the border was peaceful. The bridges of Tarne Crossing stood wide open; the shallows of Seivern Ford were unblocked. Soldiers on both sides of the river, many from other domains and untouched by the old grievances of Verehart and Bulls’ March and Cleavehill, were under strict orders to keep the peace—and they were obeying.

It wasn’t perfect, of course. Nothing Celestia’s children did on their mortal earth could be. But there hadn’t been any major clashes since Albric’s confession became known. No lord, Langmyrne or Oakharne, wanted to be the one whose weakness allowed the Thorns’ plots to take root. Fear of the Maimed Witches made allies of old enemies, and from that grudging beginning calmer heads could work toward something more lasting.

Yes, this spring carried a rare promise. Even Odosse, at the periphery of a border court, could see that. And someday—someday, if all went well—her son, Wistan Auberand Galefring of Bulls’ March, might inherit a more prosperous throne than either his real father or his named one could have imagined.

She wished Brys could have seen him. The sellsword was gone, though: as soon as he was well enough to walk, he’d taken a purse of silver solis and struck out eastward, searching for something he wouldn’t name. He hadn’t told her what he sought, and she hadn’t asked. They’d been strangers chance met on a road, no more. Now that the road had come to an end, so had their loyalties to one another. She’d expected nothing else.

Still, Odosse wished her son could have met the man when he was old enough to understand that he owed his life and lands to a mercenary. She wished, too, that Wistan could have learned a little swordcraft at his side.

No matter. If Celestia willed, their paths might cross again. If not, Cadarn could teach him that, as the new swordmaster of Bulls’ March, or maybe Ulvrar Wolfheart, who had saved his life on the road. There were so many other things Wistan needed to learn, and people he needed to know. His grandparents would visit soon: Reinbern and Alta de Marst had sent word that they would come as soon as they saw their spring ships off to the sea. Leferic said those ships traveled on the same warm winds as the thrushes, so they might arrive any week.

They would love him. Odosse was confident of that. They would love him as she did.

“They will. And you’ll learn your letters and your numbers and you will be a great man,” she whispered to the baby on her back, as she had whispered in the woods a full lifetime ago. He burred his agreement, and she laughed and spun him around, because now she could make those promises come true. She could.
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