



From the *New York Times* and *USA Today* Bestselling Author

MICHAEL J. SULLIVAN

THE RISE AND FALL • BOOK TWO

FARILANE



Farilane

BOOK TWO OF
The Rise and Fall

MICHAEL J. SULLIVAN

PRAISE FOR THE RISE AND FALL SERIES

*“Nolyn is masterfully executed, and the disparate storylines are equally intriguing as they are spun beautifully together into an ending full of gnarled twists and grim surprises that will leave you clamoring for more. For true fans of epic fantasy, Michael J. Sullivan’s *The Rise and the Fall* series is not one to miss.”* — David Estes, Amazon #1 bestselling author of *Fatemarked on Nolyn*

“Breathtakingly epic in scope, yet the characters are infused with the breath of genuine humanity that makes Sullivan’s work utterly unique.” — Andy Peloquin, bestselling author of *The Silent Champions* series on Nolyn

“Vengeance and love test the boundaries of honor in this phenomenal epic fantasy by Michael J. Sullivan. Heart-wrenching and powerful, you can’t help but root for Nolyn and Sephryn as they struggle to unravel the plots against them before the final trap is sprung. I loved every minute and can’t wait to see what happens next!” — Megan Haskell, award-winning author of *The Sanyare Chronicles* on Nolyn

“With Nolyn, a true master of epic fantasy shines even brighter. Sullivan has an amazing ability to craft a brilliant ensemble of characters and lead readers on an adventure that keeps them wide-eyed and begging for more with each expertly written page.” — Dyrk Ashton, author of *The Paternus Trilogy* on Nolyn

“Finished it a few hours ago and still reeling from the last couple of chapters. Absolutely amazing writing . . . what a story.” — Beta Reader, on *Farilane*

*“Even in an outstanding series, *Farilane* stands out above many of the other installments.”* — Beta Reader, on *Farilane*

“The entire story was great, but the ending was an absolute roller coaster that I could not stop reading.” — Beta Reader, on Farilane

WORKS BY MICHAEL J. SULLIVAN

The Rise and Fall

Nolyn • Farilane

Esrhaddon (Summer 2023)

The Legends of the First Empire

Age of Myth • Age of Swords • Age of War

Age of Legend • Age of Death • Age of Empyre

The Riyria Revelations

Theft of Swords (*The Crown Conspiracy & Avempartha*)

Rise of Empire (*Nyphron Rising & The Emerald Storm*)

Heir of Novron (*Wintertide & Percepliquis*)

The Riyria Chronicles

The Crown Tower • The Rose and the Thorn

The Death of Dulgath • The Disappearance of Winter's Daughter

Forthcoming: *Drumindor*

Standalone Novels

Hollow World (Sci-fi Thriller)

Short Story Anthologies

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Unfettered: "The Jester" (Fantasy: Riyria Chronicles)

Unbound: "The Game" (Fantasy: Contemporary)

Unfettered II: "Little Wren and the Big Forest" (Fantasy: Legends of the First Empire)

Blackguards: "Professional Integrity" (Fantasy: Riyria Chronicles)

The End: Visions of the Apocalypse: "Burning Alexandria" (Dystopian Sci-fi)

Triumph Over Tragedy: “Traditions” (Fantasy: Tales from Elan)
The Fantasy Faction Anthology: “Autumn Mist” (Fantasy: Contemporary)

ABOUT THE BOOK

(From the Back Cover)

**SOME TRUTHS ARE DANGEROUS, CERTAIN SECRETS BEST CONCEALED,
AND ONE STORY NEVER SHOULD HAVE BEEN WRITTEN AT ALL.**

Being an unwanted twin in the imperial line of succession, Farilane becomes a scholar, an adventurer, and—in a time when reading is forbidden—a hunter of books. Her singular obsession is finding the mythical *Book of Brin*, a tome not just lost but intentionally buried. Although she is respected and beloved by the Teshlor Knights, not even their legendary skills can protect her, for what she finds is more dangerous than what she sought.

From the three-time *New York Times* best-selling author Michael J. Sullivan, *Farilane* is the second novel in The Rise and Fall trilogy. This latest set of stories sits snugly between the Legends of the First Empire series and the Riyria books (Revelations and Chronicles). With this tale, Michael continues his tradition of unlikely heroes who must rise to the call when history knocks, demanding to be let in. This series will conclude in the summer of 2023 with the release of *Esrhaddon*, the final piece in a narrative that began in 2008 and contains nineteen full-length novels spread across four series.

Farilane is a work of fiction. Names, places, and incidents either are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental. In accordance with the U.S. Copyright Act of 1976, the copying, scanning, uploading, and electronic sharing of any part of this book (other than for review purposes) without permission is unlawful piracy and theft of the author's intellectual property. If you would like to use material from this book, prior written permission can be obtained by contacting the author at michael@michael-j-sullivan.com. Thank you for your support of the author's rights.

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World Map

Maps are problematic on e-readers that don't have adequate resolution to display them, and for this reason you can access [a high-resolution map online from this link.](#)



This book is dedicated to my fellow indie-authors.

*Look how far we've come, and always remember that the road ahead has no
limits.*

May each of you find as much joy as I have by braving your own path.

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

Since you're reading this, I must assume you fall into one of three categories: You've read *Nolyn* and enjoyed it enough to come back for more; or you're a completionist and insist on finishing all the books of a series, regardless of how you feel about them; or it could also be that you just picked this book off a shelf because you liked the cover but know nothing about me or the world of Elan. Given these three options, I'd like to say thank you for coming back, or for sticking with me, or welcome to my world.

The book you're about to read is the second in a trilogy, but don't fret, newcomer, because it's not necessary to start at the beginning. Like the previous book, *Nolyn*, this one can be read as a stand-alone story. The reason why has to do with how I structured the trilogy. Most of my other series tend to be a continuous story divided into complete episodes. They feature the same characters that develop and grow over the course of a multi-book plot. For this series, *The Rise and Fall*, I went a different way.

My desire was to tell the two-thousand-year history of the Novronian Empire, something that features prominently in my two other series. *Legends of the First Empire* shows the empire coming into existence. The other, the *Riyria Revelations* series, takes place long after the empire is gone. This left a glaring hole between the two, where readers could almost connect the dots, but not quite.

I was faced with the dilemma of covering a lot of ground. To do this in the same manner as I had with *Legends* and *Riyria* would require hundreds of novels. I'm not a young man, and I don't have that kind of time.

My solution was to create a trilogy of "one-and-done" novels that focus on the lives of three significant individuals who alter the course of history and highlight the most distinct periods in that era—hence *Nolyn*, *Farilane*, and *Esrahaddon*. These books are separated by significant gaps in time. *Nolyn* starts eight hundred and fifty years after *Legends*. *Farilane* picks up a bit over one thousand years later. *Esrahaddon* will take place two hundred years after that. As a result, there isn't much opportunity for long-term

character development—unless you realize that the main character in each book is the empire itself.

Farilane is the second novel in this series, forming the keystone that joins the eras. As such, Princess Farilane has a foot in both worlds, so the novel blends the elements and styles of both Legends and Riyria.

This was a fun book to create, and truth be told, the one I was most excited to write. I began sketching it in note form long before the other two. *Farilane* heavily influenced each of the other books' focus and direction, which I think would have pleased her. There was even a time when I considered skipping *Nolyn* altogether and revealing what had happened through commentary and discoveries in ancient texts. In the end, I decided that was cheating. I really couldn't skip the first eighteen hundred years and claim to have covered the history of the empire. I'm glad I didn't, as *Nolyn* helped provide vital foundations for what comes next.

For those of you who are curious, or concerned, or both, the draft of *Esrhaddon* has already been completed. It will be my twentieth published novel, and unless editors run rampant through its pages with bloody scalpels dripping with red ink, it will be my longest. If nothing unforeseen happens this year or the next, *Esrhaddon* should release in the early summer of 2023. And we all know that nothing unexpected is likely to occur in the 2020s. That's just ridiculous.

My greatest hope at present is that everyone reading this Author's Note will also be here to read the one in *Esrhaddon*. I don't care if you buy or read the book. I'd just like for you to still be around.

Michael J. Sullivan
January 13th, 2022

CHAPTER ONE

THE TWELFTH NIGHT

Another series of bright-white explosions erupted where sea met shore as Farilane stood on the rocky coast and scanned the darkening sky for the star that would guide them to the treasure. That was the hope. Being that this was the twelfth night she'd stood at the same spot, Farilane had her doubts.

On the first three evenings, it had rained. The next two, while dry, were frustratingly overcast. The sixth day dawned blue, but by late afternoon, the clouds had returned as if they'd forgotten something. Poor weather continued throughout the seventh and eighth days. The three after that were literal washouts, forcing a retreat to her field camp or risk being rinsed into the sea. Trapped in her leaky tent, Farilane had reread her notebooks, verifying the calculations for the hundredth time. She'd missed nothing. That shelf of stone partway down a rocky cliff was the correct place. Everything except the weather was perfect, but time was running out. She couldn't bear to wait for another year.

Then on the twelfth night, she caught a break. A star appeared.

"Is that it?" Kolby asked, pointing at the singular pinprick of light on the darkening horizon. There was hope in his voice.

"Tell you in a minute." Farilane took out her astrolabe and positioned it directly over the staff she'd placed days before. She struggled to align the device's rule with one hand while dangling the delicate instrument with the other. "Be a dear and hold this for me, will you?" She offered the ring at the top of the disk to him.

Kolby took the brass apparatus of movable plates with his left hand. Farilane had known he'd use his left before she had offered the instrument. His choice wasn't arbitrary; nothing about Kolby ever was. He always reserved his right hand for his sword.

"What is this thing?" he asked, his eyes studying the device, his nose turned up as if the metal reeked.

"You're holding the entire universe in your hands." She smiled. "So don't drop it."

Kolby narrowed his eyes, first at her and then at the device, his concern turning to skepticism. He held the large ring at the full extent of his arm so that the bottom barely touched the top of the measurement staff, leaving the disk to hang like a lantern.

A lantern. Farilane smiled at the idea. *Yes, that's exactly what it is, a tool to illuminate the world.*

"Now hold still," she commanded.

"How still?" he asked.

Typical Kolby: precise, exacting, and literal. A byproduct of the training, no doubt. All Teshlors were that way to a degree—more than a bit inhuman, until you saw them drunk or angry. That didn't happen often. She suspected that controlling one's rage was also part of the training. If it wasn't, it ought to be. An enraged Kolby topped Farilane's list of the scariest things she'd ever seen.

"Like you're about to loose an arrow for a very important shot, one you can't afford to miss."

Kolby nodded, took a deep breath, then held it. The astrolabe hung from his fist as if nailed to a tree.

Farilane resumed lining up the rule with the star. As she did, Virgil stirred. The philosopher woke with an unhappy moan. He had been napping on the cold rock for the last two hours.

Wiping his eyes, he got to his feet. Snow-white hair, long beard, and a dark cloak flew about him like living things. As he stretched his arms and neck, a grimace relented to the demands of a wide yawn.

How can he sleep on the eve of such an auspicious discovery, not to mention on such a narrow ledge?

The old philosopher was such a sound sleeper that he could doze on the back of a cow caught in a stampede during a thunderstorm. He'd always

been that way and had gotten better at it with age. “Well?” he asked.

“Give me a second,” Farilane said. She rotated the astrolabe’s rete to the proper position, realigned the rule with the star, then read the face of the disk. “That’s the Eye of the Bear, the brightest star in the constellation Grin the Brown—first evening star of early spring.”

“Are you done? Can I move now?” Kolby asked.

“No. Keep holding that bow steady, soldier.” Farilane offered him a grin, then moved around to the other side of the astrolabe and peered through the same sight holes on the rule. “There!” she yelled, pointing down near the foaming water at a dark gap in the honeycombed cliff.

“What’s she pointing at?” Kolby asked Cedric, a note of concern in his voice. The younger soldier instantly advanced, and after taking a look, he shrugged.

Farilane had nearly forgotten Cedric was with them. Although physically larger than Kolby, he seemed smaller. She attributed this conflicting phenomenon to personality. Kolby had a presence, but Farilane couldn’t remember having heard Cedric speak. She had supposed he might be mute but felt it would be impolite to ask. “Relax,” she told the pair. “We aren’t in any danger of being attacked.”

“You always say that,” Kolby grumbled.

“What are you worried about?” She looked up at the rapidly fading, orange-cast sky, where a handful of seabirds soared. “Man-eating seagulls?”

“Goblins,” Virgil said. “They didn’t name this the Goblin Sea because it’s shaped like one.”

“The Ba Ran are seafarers,” Farilane pointed out. “We’d see their ships if any were near.”

“Not necessarily,” Virgil added. “This area is littered with coves and caves. They could hide their vessels in any of them. That happens all the time. Haven’t you heard about that poor little village of Tur? It’s been ravaged over and over.”

“That’s all the way down on the southern tip of Belgreig. And goblins aren’t raiding that coast. Pirates are.”

“Perhaps, but let’s not forget that a thousand years ago, goblins came from out here and used a network of underground waterways to attack Percepliquis and kill Emperor Nyphron.”

“That’s only one theory,” Farilane qualified. “We both know there are several contradictory accounts of the first emperor’s death. And for the record, he died one thousand twenty-nine years, eleven months, and two weeks ago.”

They all stared at her as if she’d belched.

“How many hours?” Virgil asked and then chuckled.

Confused as to why the scholar was laughing, she replied, “Sixteen and a half.” She glanced at the astrolabe. “Give or take a minute or two.”

Virgil stopped laughing, and they all stared at her, dumbfounded.

“What?” she asked. “How precise do you need me to be?”

His expression changed from amusement to shock. “Ah no. That’s . . . that’s fine.”

“Are you sure? Or would you prefer to discuss the ramifications of the Belgic War for a few hours before getting back to why I practically screamed *There!* twenty minutes ago?”

No one said anything.

“Good. Because I was pointing out the cave entrance we’re looking for. I found it. It’s that one down below us.” She took the astrolabe back from Kolby and carefully stowed it in her pack. “Shall we, gentlemen?”

“You can’t be serious,” Virgil said. “It’s nearly night. Now that we know which hole to explore, can’t this wait until morning?”

Farilane pointed at a hazy gray curtain of rain sweeping across the Goblin Sea. “Wind is blowing our way. The last storm trapped us for days, and we’re running low on food. Besides, all these crevasses look the same, and if we come back in the morning, I doubt I’ll be able to identify the right one.”

The old man frowned as he looked down the slick, jagged face of the cliff. “Allow me to rephrase. You don’t expect *me* to climb over slippery stone in the *dark*, do you?”

“Why not?”

The old man replied with a dangling jaw.

When she didn’t respond, he explained, “I’m not a limber young woman. I’m sixty-eight years old, and even in my prime no one would have described me as athletic.” He took a step forward for a better look, then grimaced. “One slip and your man-eating seagulls will be pecking flesh off my shattered bones.”

“Virgil,” she began, placing her hands on his shoulders, “life is a gamble, my friend. The trick is to wager wisely, balancing risk against reward. At your age, nothing is too perilous. Working for a wedge of cheese at a leper colony wouldn’t be out of the question. And the reward waiting in that cave is so much better than a bit of cheese.”

“You can’t know that. The book you’re searching for has been intentionally hidden for centuries. I have to think there’s a reason. Perhaps you should reconsider the implications of unleashing such a thing upon the world.”

“I seek the truth, and the truth is always a good and noble goal.”

“Is it?”

“Yes.” She nodded sharply. “For example, earlier you said you weren’t a *limber young woman*. This was meant to suggest the contrast between the two of us. But Cedric might interpret the comment to verify the all-too-vocal and false rumor that the imperial family *is* human. It’s possible Cedric could repeat the comment, erroneously describing me to his friends as *a young woman*, and thus further the misconception. If repeated enough times, that inaccuracy could be believed by millions. So, what began as an innocent joke between friends might become a distorted reality for future generations.” She hoisted her pack to her shoulder and turned to the younger knight. “For the record, I’m old enough to be Virgil’s great-great-great-grandmother, and I’m not a *woman*.”

Cedric eyed the princess suspiciously.

Farilane frowned as she considered the myriad of things the young knight could be thinking. “What I meant is that I’m only *part* human. My father is descended from Nyphron who was elven—or *Fhrey* as they used to call themselves.” She paused to calculate. “Since all the emperors except Nolyn took human wives—and because both Nolyn and his wife, Sephryn, were half-elven, which resulted in no bloodline dilution—that makes me only one thirty-second elven. Arguably, I am more human than elf, but it’s still not technically accurate to call me a *woman*.”

“It’s truly a wonder why you aren’t married.” Virgil shook his head. “You knew what I meant.”

“*I* did. *He* didn’t. Facts are important. They are the notches we cut in trees as we explore reality—lose them, and we might never find our way.”

The old man shook his head again. “The point I was making is that I can’t climb as easily as the three of you can.”

“What do you want from me, Virgil?” Farilane slapped her sides. “The knights aren’t allowed to abandon me even to assist my tutor, and you can’t climb back up the rope by yourself. I can’t leave you here on the side of this cliff. You’d fall asleep, roll off, and die. Either we climb down now or give up, and I’m not willing to quit—not after so many decades of searching—not when we’re this close.” She took a breath, then added, “Look, it will be okay. I promise. And when we get back to camp, you can have pie.”

“Oh really? Pie? Well, that’s a completely different argument, now, isn’t it?” Virgil peered below at the violent war being waged between sea and coast. “And you’re right.” He sighed. “I’m not risking much, am I?”



Kolby found the nearest thing to a path and led them down in single file over algae-and-lichen-covered rocks to the mouth of the cave. The sea continued to battle the cliff. Waves churned and exploded in geysers, each accompanied by an impressive *boom!* Blasted by the constant ocean wind and drenched by the salty spray, the four shivered with cold. Farilane pulled tight the front of her cloak and drew up the saturated hood. She attempted to wipe her face with a sleeve, only to discover that it, too, was soaked.

Kolby and Cedric entered the sea-slicked cave first. The younger man paused just inside and dropped his pack next to a small tidal pool. He drew forth one of three lanterns and set to lighting it as evening faded into night.

“All the caves on this coast are reputed to be haunted. Did you know that?” Virgil asked while struggling to keep up. “People in the village said so.”

“Every town has ghost stories.” Farilane adjusted her pack, which had been cutting into her neck. Satisfied that the strap was in a better place, at least for the time being, she glanced back at Virgil. “And since when do you believe in ghosts?”

“Always have.”

Farilane smirked, to no effect. The man was going blind and likely couldn’t see her face beneath the hood. “Next you’ll be telling me you

believe in the gods.”

“I *do*.”

“Really?” she scoffed.

“We’ve discussed this on many occasions!”

Farilane frowned. “I’d hoped you were just going through a phase. I mean, how can you still believe in deities? You’re the most educated man I know.”

Virgil shook salt water off his cloak. “The more we know, my dear, the more we understand how little we understand.”

“Sounds like you’re stuttering in whole words.” She smirked again, only to remember he still couldn’t see her expression.

“No one knows everything, and you could benefit from listening to me once in a while.”

“Uh-huh. Okay, old wise one, tell me this: Do gods grant wishes to their faithful?”

Virgil considered this a moment, then shook his head. “Not usually, no.”

“Then what’s the point of having them?”

“Wishes or gods?”

She smiled. “Cute. Gods, of course.”

“That’s like asking what’s the point of air, trees, or rain. You can’t—”

Farilane used her fingers to tick off each of the three in order. “To breathe, for lumber and fuel, and to drink.”

“Okay, bad examples.”

“Not at all. They illustrate my assertion perfectly. Everything has a purpose, except the gods. So why have them?”

“But we don’t *have them*. They exist by their own right.”

“Oh, really? Can you name a single person who has seen a god?”

“There are several stories where—”

“Those are myths. The question is, have *you*, or anyone you’ve personally met, encountered a god?”

“No, but—”

“Neither have I, and I’m nearly two hundred years old and have a social circle that includes people who have lived to be more than a thousand. Tell me, Virgil, have you ever seen a tree being blown around in a rainstorm? Of course you have. Everyone has. Air, trees, rain, all accounted for. But the gods—well, they never seem to show up, do they? Strange, don’t you

think? Given how vain they're reported to be, you'd expect them to pop up all the time to demand praise, propagate fear, or inspire awe.

Instead . . . nothing. If you got rid of all the people, the trees, rain, and air will still be here. But the gods? Could it be because we invented the whole lot, and they only exist in stories?"

"Such an insane notion could only be conceived by you."

"Yeah, well, we both know I'm odd. So tell me, Virgil—O Believer in All Things Divine—which member of the grand pantheon managed to provide the crucial bit of evidence that kept you faithful? Are you a follower of Eton, the god of the sky? Eraphus, the god of the sea? He'd be really handy right now, don't you think? Or is it Arkum, that bright fellow who supposedly rides a chariot overhead each day, then takes a nap before doing the same thing the next morning, and oddly never tires of the routine? Or are you devoted to that stodgy old elven relic, Ferrol, who is still somehow the official imperial god? Oh, wait—no—don't tell me you're a convert to the new cult, the one that insists Nyphron was a god. Or is it a demigod? I always forget."

"You're being purposely obtuse just to annoy me."

"Of course I am."

"Why?"

"It's fun. Where is your sense of humor?" She threw back her hood, this time to reveal a grin. "You know how easily I get bored. You just have the misfortune of being around when it happens."

Virgil shook his head. "Kolby is always with you, too. You never speak to him like this."

Farilane glanced at the two men who worked single-mindedly to light the lantern. "Oh, he'd just smile and nod. There's no fun in that." She inched closer to the philosopher and whispered, "Besides, if he actually comprehended my supposition, Kolby would kill me."

Virgil raised both eyebrows. "The man is sworn to protect you with his life."

"His oath to a distant emperor and an ancient creed is hardly a shield against momentary rage coupled with a razor-sharp sword. The man is a walking death trap. A vicious lion held by a string leash."

"You don't honestly believe Kolby would ever hurt you?"

Farilane shook her head. "Of course not."

“But then why did you—”

“Oh, please!” Farilane threw up her hands. “You *really* don’t understand the meaning of the word *fun*, do you?” Once more, she grinned, and Virgil sighed as if a noisy expulsion of air was a remarkably convincing argument.

Virgil folded his arms, locking them in a show of frustration. “We’re on the outskirts of the empire, beyond the civilized world, literally at land’s end, and venturing into a complicated labyrinth of sea-soaked tunnels—at night! I’m cold, wet, and quite frankly, more than a little frightened. We have no idea what lies ahead. Could be anything. This is incredibly dangerous—no joke. Anyone who went to such great lengths to hide a book down here didn’t want it found. They likely took precautions to protect their treasure. Every step we take is a risk.”

“Oh . . .” Farilane said, surprised. “I apologize and stand corrected. You *do* know the meaning of fun.”

The lantern caught fire, and the glow illuminated a natural tunnel that twisted and turned.

“I’ll take that.” Farilane stepped forward and reached for the light.

Kolby snatched it away. “I’m going first.” Then he dutifully added, “Your Highness.”

Farilane frowned. “I could order you to stay here.”

“Think that would do it, do you?”

Farilane looked to Virgil.

“Kolby Fiske!” the philosopher snapped in a reprimanding tone that was designed to quash the self-confidence of pride-filled students. “You’re honor bound to obey her.”

“Sort of,” Kolby replied.

“Come again? What do you mean by *sort of*?”

Kolby shrugged. “We serve to protect the emperor and his family—even *from* the emperor and his family. It’s part of our code.”

Virgil eyed the knight with the concentration of a cat prior to a pounce. The philosopher knew the Knight’s Creed as well as anyone, and he was a skilled orator who had used rhetoric to win debates in the Imperial Council. “Where exactly is that written?”

Kolby grinned. “In the section that says, ‘Don’t be an idiot.’”

Farilane snickered. And when she saw Virgil’s appalled expression, she laughed harder.

“The two of you . . .” Virgil huffed and shook his head. “It’s like being trapped with children, and I’m tired of being the only adult.”

“I’m sorry,” Farilane said, and she took the philosopher’s hands in hers. “But you’re just so good at it. You have that whole frowny-face thing going for you, and that marvelous sigh, which really lets me know how disappointed you are with my behavior.”

“Yet it does no good, now does it? We were almost crushed to death by that giant near Fairington and nearly drowned in the headwaters of the Urum River. Then there was the . . . *Dwarf Incident* in Haston five years ago. Don’t think I’ve forgotten. Believe me, I’ve tried. I still have nightmares. And I don’t know how we escaped without starting a war.”

“Would have been a really short war,” Cedric muttered.

They all paused and looked at the knight. Then the joke landed. Not the cleverest of jests but given how little he’d said up to that point, it made even Virgil laugh. “We have two comedians now, I see.”

Farilane and Kolby looked at each other, puzzled and a little disappointed.

“All right—” Virgil relented. “*Three*. You’re all clowns. Does that make you feel better?”

Farilane nodded. “Much. Now, shall we proceed?”

“I’m still getting pie, aren’t I?”

“We didn’t bring any, Virgil. The pie is a lie. You know that, right?”

The philosopher sighed but nodded. “Then by all means, lead us to our deaths.”

Farilane turned to Kolby and made a welcoming gesture toward the tunnel as if the cave were her home. “After you, light-bearer.”

The knight held the lantern as if it were an astrolabe and began the descent. Cedric followed at the rear. The route was uncomfortably tight at first, and the knights struggled to squeeze armor-plated shoulders through the narrow space. Certain noises were painful to Farilane’s ears, and metal scraping stone was near the top of her list. The tunnel widened but never allowed for more than a single file march. They hadn’t gone far when Kolby stopped. “That’s not good.”

“What’s wrong?” Farilane asked, unable to see past him. His silhouette, outlined in the glow of the lantern, filled the tunnel, but she heard a

constant rushing sound, a roar of water that echoed loud enough to suggest the corridor had opened considerably.

“See for yourself.” He stepped aside, granting her access while holding the lantern higher. The tunnel stopped at the edge of a cliff—a massive vertical shaft with no visible ceiling or floor. A waterfall spilled from high above, its spray illuminated by the lantern. “Passage ends here.”

“No, it doesn’t.” Farilane pointed across the chasm. “The tunnel continues on the far side.”

“You can see a far side?”

“Yes. About thirty feet, maybe less. What I can’t make out is a way to cross.”

“Might not be any,” Virgil said. “There may have once been a bridge, which time and that waterfall destroyed. Or perhaps the means of access was intentionally removed.”

Farilane shook her head. “I don’t think so. There are no signs of erosion, and while the book has been buried to keep it safe for future generations, the monks would have needed a means to retrieve it.” Farilane looked up at the waterfall that issued from darkness and plummeted to more of the same. There was a bottom. She couldn’t see it but heard the splash from far below. “Why do you suppose that waterfall is here?” she asked.

“Because water has to go somewhere? And usually that direction is down.”

“But why here?”

“You know, Your Highness, sometimes there isn’t a reason.” Virgil leaned on the stone wall of the tunnel and took off one of his sandals. “You need to accept that some things just are. The gods are. That waterfall is. The world doesn’t manifest itself merely for your entertainment.”

“And yet, that hasn’t been my experience.”

Virgil rubbed the heel of his bare foot. “Growing up in a palace could have something to do with that.”

“Don’t confuse me with my brother. He’s the one who wears silk pajamas and has a gold crown waiting. I’m . . . well . . .” She gestured at her skirt and leather tunic. Except for the dragon pendant in the center of her chest, she looked like a youthful legion scout on his first deployment. “Let’s just say the sun doesn’t shine on my ass because I want it to.”

She caught Kolby and Cedric smiling and wondered why. They might see her as the quintessential spoiled brat who got whatever she wished, but the pair of grins could have been an expression of solidarity. She hoped for the latter but cautioned herself against seeing only what she wanted. Farilane spent more time in their company than her brother's, and while a princess, she felt more at home with the knights than the imperial family.

No one spoke after that, which returned her attention to the sound of falling water. "Why is that waterfall here?" Farilane looked at each of them. She didn't expect an answer. It wasn't a real question, at least not for them. This was merely her process, the way she solved puzzles. She addressed the riddle and waited for it to answer. In this case, the waterfall was being pigheaded, refusing to give any clues. "No, I'm certain that waterfall doesn't just *happen* to be here."

Kolby reached out his free hand, wetted his fingers, and tasted. "Fresh."

"Fabulous," Virgil said. "Good to know we won't die of thirst. One less item on the lengthy list of potential causes of our demise."

"Hmm," Cedric uttered. Unlike the others, he wasn't looking into the shaft, but rather at the floor beneath their feet. This caused each of them to do likewise.

"Hmm, indeed," Farilane agreed. "Kolby, if I promise not to jump into the abyss, can I borrow the lantern?"

He held it out to her. The princess backed away from the edge, bent over, and examined the floor.

"Writing?" Virgil asked.

"Looks like it." Farilane set the lantern down and brushed aside dust and dirt until the engraved markings were clearly visible.

"Can you read it?"

Farilane exhaled a disapproving puff of air. "So, you found your sense of humor after all. Was it lost at the bottom of your pack or something?" Farilane held up the lantern to get a better view and then read, "But by the name of god will you enter here."

"How wonderful," Virgil said, delighted. "It is so rare for irony to be on my side."

The princess set the lantern on the floor once more. "This doesn't mean gods exist, merely that another person has been equally duped."

"And yet what is existence, but that which we believe it to be?"

Farilane scrubbed her palms together to clean off the dirt. “I’m astounded that *you* were appointed to be *my* teacher.”

“It may appear that I’ve been a poor tutor. After forty years, I wonder if you’ve learned anything from me, but is that the fault of the instructor or the student?”

Their conversation was abruptly interrupted by Kolby shouting, “Ferrol!”

Turning, they saw him with hands cupped on either side of his mouth, yelling into the darkness. He looked surprised when nothing happened.

“He’s so cute,” the princess said to Virgil.

“What?” the knight asked. “God’s name is Ferrol.”

“You’re right,” Virgil told the princess. “He wouldn’t have comprehended the supposition.”

“I don’t understand,” Kolby said.

“Exactly,” the philosopher replied, and having rubbed life back into his heel, he put his sandal on.

Kolby frowned and hooked a thumb in his sword belt the way he usually did when annoyed. “Would you care to explain whatever it is I’m apparently missing?”

“Certainly,” Virgil said. “My role is to educate, after all, and since the princess refuses to allow me to improve her mind, I might as well help you. First, there are hundreds, perhaps thousands, of gods. Everybody has their favorite. Second, Ferrol is the elven god, and the people who built this vault were definitely not elven. They were, or are, a sect of humans known as *monks*, a word derived from the elvish *monakus*, meaning *solitary*. This is a bit of a misnomer, as these men always dwell in groups. You saw one of their little habitats outside the village of Roch—that ruined stone building next to the domed temple. They call buildings like that *monasteries*, which also absurdly means *to live alone*.”

“Or *apart*,” the princess inserted. “The monks were outlawed by the empire during the reign of Nyphron for spreading subversive lies. They were driven into hiding in remote places like this. They were hunted, practically for sport.”

“Why?” Kolby asked.

“Nyphron didn’t like the monks’ practice of writing things down,” Virgil explained. “He sought to erase their slanderous lies by destroying

their records, hoping that memories would, in time, grow fuzzy and fade into non-existence. The monks countered by hiding their most important texts in secret vaults like this.”

“So we’re here to destroy this book you keep speaking about?” Cedric asked.

Farilane shook her head. “No. We’re here to learn the truth.”

Virgil coughed most insincerely.

“My pedagogue disagrees,” Farilane said. “He is willing to accept the official imperial dogma just the way it is, all whitewashed and tidy with no inconvenient questions like: If Persephone insisted on having the capital built on the site of her childhood home, and Nyphron obliged her out of his intense love, why was Percepliquis built on the wrong side of the Urum and Bern rivers, since every known record describes Dahl Rhen as being just south of the ruins of Alon Rhist, placing it in western Rhulynia?”

“A mapping error,” Virgil said.

“Not likely. Percepliquis is located in the Imperial Province of Rhenydd, which is clearly elvish for *New Rhen*. Can’t have a *new* Rhen without an *old* Rhen, right? And do you honestly think Nyphron betrayed his own people—led a war against them—for the love of a woman whom he’d just met?”

“As you already mentioned, there are many who believe Nyphron wasn’t an elf at all, and his real name was Novron. To some, he was purely human, or even a god, depending on who you talk to.”

Farilane’s brows rose. “Oh my! So the cultists *have* gotten to you.”

Virgil smiled, and a glint of mischief was in his eyes. “I thought you knew the meaning of *fun*.”

“Ha ha.” The princess pretended to laugh and added three slow claps of make-believe applause. “Isn’t it about time you stowed that sense of humor back in your pack?”

“So I still don’t understand,” Kolby said. “What did the monks call their god?”

“That’s easy.” Farilane bent down, and placing her face close to the floor, she blew what remained of the dirt and dust away from the markings.

BUT BY THE NAME OF GOD WILL YOU ENTER HERE

A quick check proved all the necessary letters were present. Placing her thumb on the “M” in the word *name*, she pressed. The stone on which the letter was engraved dropped slightly into the floor. Then she moved to the “A” and did the same.

“They’re levers of some sort,” Kolby said, then looked around for the effects of her actions, but nothing had changed.

“Fifteen hundred years ago or so,” Virgil began in his lecturer’s voice, “the early monks enjoyed a friendly relationship with the Belgric Kingdom. Those dwarfs likely showed them all manner of insidious mechanisms.”

Farilane depressed the first “R,” then the “I,” then the first “B.”

“I can’t read,” Cedric admitted as he studied Farilane’s movements. “What is the name she is using?”

“The monks believe the god of humankind is named Maribor,” Farilane said, as she finished by depressing “O” in *of* and the second “R.” “Maribor, Ferrol, and Drome—the three sons of Erebus, father of the gods.”

An instant later, they felt the ground shake—not really a tremor, more of a short-lived jarring as if a massive hammer had hit the floor. Nothing else happened.

For a long moment, no one said a word. Heads turned side to side, all of them looking into the shadows beyond the lantern light.

Farilane got up and brushed off her knees. “Something is different.”

“What?” Kolby asked.

“The waterfall. Don’t you hear it? The sound has changed. The tone of the splash is hollow.” The princess moved past Kolby to the edge and peered down. “The shaft is filling up.”

Both knights moved to the edge and looked down.

“Is that a good thing?” Virgil asked.

“If the water rises high enough, we can swim across,” Kolby said.

Virgil looked back up the narrow corridor. “And if it goes too high, we might drown.”

“Won’t need to swim,” Farilane announced. “There’s a bridge floating on the surface of the water.”

“There is?” Kolby held the lantern out over the drop. “I don’t see—oh, there it is.”

It took surprisingly little time for the shaft to fill and the bridge to appear, bobbing like a long dock.

“This corridor will fill up,” Virgil warned. He glanced back.

Kolby looked concerned, first at the rising water and then at Farilane. He was calculating when he would need to grab her and run for it. The princess’s life was his responsibility, his sole concern. Kolby wouldn’t waste an instant on the survival of either Cedric or Virgil. When events crossed a certain line, no force on Elan would stay his actions.

The moment the bridge became level with the passage, Kolby took a step toward Farilane, then stopped after hearing a rapid series of snaps.

Virgil pointed at the writing on the floor. “The markings have popped up.”

“The bridge is going back down!” Farilane shouted. Without hesitation, she ran onto it.

“Damn it!” Kolby cursed. He handed over the lantern to Cedric. “Stay here in case we need you to punch that name in again.”

Cedric shook his head. “Not a monk. Can’t read. Can’t spell.”

“I can do it,” Virgil said. “I’ll stay with Cedric. Go with her!”

Farilane had leapt out as far as she could onto the bridge, guessing correctly that it was an unstable raft, and her weight—dumped too close to one side—might capsize the whole thing. Seeing the rate of descent, and the far passage rapidly rising beyond her reach, she scrambled through the cold shower of falling water until her weight began to tip the scale. The moment Kolby jumped onto the bridge, his impact nearly catapulted Farilane off. Only a fast drop to her knees and a quick grab of the planks saved her from a swim.

“Stop!” she shouted, holding a palm out toward Kolby as the knight worked his way toward her. “You’ll tip us.”

With his weight as a counterbalance, Farilane reached the opposite end. Whatever had corked the shaft and lifted the bridge had come unplugged and the discharge far outmatched the inflow. Already the passage on the far side was more than five feet above the bridge. By the time she got there, the opening to the tunnel was too high to reach.

“Go back!” she shouted and waved at Kolby. “Use your weight to raise this end!”

“I need to come with you!”

“You can’t! I need you to lift me! Do it! Do it now!”

With a frustrated growl, the knight shuffled backward. His weight, far more than hers, lifted Farilane's end until she could almost grab the ledge. "Jump!" she shouted over the rush of the falls crashing on the center of the bridge.

She didn't look to see if he heard her. Farilane turned her back on him and positioned herself on the edge of the bridge-raft like a diver on a board, her toes hanging off the end, her knees bent, and her arms out. The bridge went down briefly, then lurched up.

Farilane jumped.

Her fingers caught the ledge of the far passage. The wooden platform fell away, leaving the princess to dangle, legs swinging. Her body slammed against the rock wall as the bridge, Kolby, and the water plummeted beneath her.

This probably wasn't a good idea.

She heard Kolby gasp and grunt as he dealt with what she imagined to be an unruly raft reacting poorly to her exit. He sounded disturbingly far away.

Fingers can't last! she mentally yelled at herself. Up! Climb! Up!

She got her chin onto the ledge. Gritting her teeth, she used her jaw as a third hook, just enough to find an improved grip with her left hand.

"Farilane!" Kolby shouted, his voice a gasp from far away. "Are you all right?"

Can't talk right now—I'm hanging on by my chin!

Once she had her elbows up, life improved immensely. Pressing both down, she bent at the waist, lifting her hips and swinging a leg up. After that, she rolled onto her side and lay panting for air. Her heart raced and muscles burned.

"Princess!" This time it was Virgil.

"You're missing all the *fun*, my friend," she shouted back.

"Oh, I'm certain of that. Are you okay?"

Farilane sat up. Looking across the chasm, she spotted the glow of Kolby's lantern. "Nothing broken, and I'm on the far side. Kolby, how are you?"

"I'm fine, but I'm at the bottom."

"We'll need to raise the water level again," Virgil said.

"Not yet. Hold on. Let me light a lamp."

Farilane pulled off her pack and took out her old clay pot. Working by feel, as she had many times before, she filled it with oil from the little bottle. Stuffing the wick in, she made certain to drench it. Finally, she fished around for her char cloth, flint, and the striker that was shaped like a little flat metal dragon with a long, curved tail. A few good sparks, some deep breaths and solid blows, and Farilane had the lamp lit.

Ahead of her was more tunnel. Rough-hewn, poorly chiseled rock displayed an impoverished work ethic by its narrowness. These monks got by with the least amount of effort, leaving her a tight passage and an easy decision. “Okay, everyone stay where you are,” she shouted. “I’ll be right back.”

Virgil asked, “Where are you going?”

“I’m certain it’s just ahead, and it looks perfectly safe.”

All of this was a lie, but she felt going unaccompanied was for the best. If the choice had been hers, she would have taken the entire trip alone. But the Princess of House Nyphron was an imperial treasure too valuable to leave to her own devices. She had been forced to accept not just one but two Teshlors and Virgil—whom she could only guess was there to talk some sense into her. Farilane’s greatest fear was the possibility of getting someone in her party killed. Virgil had been correct in his evaluation that this venture was perilous. The ancient monks were clever beyond normal men. Armed with literature, they had a collective repository of information that stretched back thousands of years. Each monk possessed the knowledge of all those that had come before. They documented centuries of problems and the solutions that worked, as well as those that didn’t. Even the ancient elves couldn’t rival their knowledge. So long as the monks had their books, they forgot nothing.

“I’m sure it’ll only take a few minutes.”

“That’s what you said in Fairington right before the giant attacked,” Virgil shouted. “Just let me raise the bridge so Kolby can join you.”

“You can’t do that.”

“Of course I can. I’ll just repeat what you did.”

“This crossing was designed to be used by a team. For Kolby to get to me, Cedric would need to join him on the bridge, putting Cedric at the bottom. And since we need you to operate the controls to reverse the process, I don’t think it’s a good idea to leave you alone. What if the

goblins that you're so afraid of turning up come to investigate the light of your lantern shining out of this cave? If something happens to you, the rest of us would be trapped."

No one replied. The only sound was that of the waterfall.

Farilane continued to shout, "I'm fine. Kolby's fine, and you're protected by Cedric. I'm just going to grab the book and come back. It can't be far. The Monks of Maribor are human, not dwarven, so they couldn't have dug too deep. Just sit tight."

Everything she said made perfect sense, her logic impeccable, but still, she was worried.

"I've got this." She spoke too quietly for them to hear over the splash of the waterfall. That didn't matter. She'd said it mostly to herself.

CHAPTER TWO

The Ragman

Sheldon Faust had always thought the city of Percepliquis was crazy huge, and that its five square miles weren't nothing if not filled with mind-boggling wonder. All them streets being paved like they was, windows having glass, ladies having hairstyles, and men walking around with shaved faces and shoes was just, well, better than anything had a right to be. And the city had plumbing—*plumbing!* Sheldon had never heard the word before coming there. Back in his village of Damansa—where cheese ruled and cow patty flinging was a legit competition—everyone carried their water in buckets. But in the city of Novron, plumbing was the miracle that made water flow from fountains, clean enough to drink, and so plentiful that people soaked in it like chickens simmering on his mother's stove. Folks in Damansa never bathed, but here whole buildings were made for people to sit, soak, and waste their time. He'd even heard of homes with pipes and taps in the walls. Rumors held that some of the fancy villas even had *hot water. Just turn a screw and steam pisses out the end!*

Yup, Percepliquis was certainly grand. It was the home of the emperor, a bull's-eye of business, the belly button of the world, and now Sheldon Faust was here.

He just hadn't expected to be a hunted criminal.

Darting down Ebonydale, Sheldon stopped at the Column of Destone, an out-of-place, tapering pillar of rock. At eye level, an arrow pointing east had been chiseled into the stone. Below that were markings. Sheldon couldn't read, but he knew they were letters, and the markings bothered him. When Novron ruled, writing was forbidden, but the column had been

put there by the first emperor's son. Nowadays, the old rules were back, and writing was more than merely illegal. It was heretical, and that was just fine by Sheldon. He guessed no one had bothered to erase them words on the column, but that would change.

Sheldon paused, hid behind the pillar of stone, and peered down the moonlight-sprayed street. The stone walls and paved road glistened, looking wet, like the city had been oiled. He checked the dark doorways and the eaves beneath shop canopies. Nothing moved. He listened for the telltale sound of a slapping sword. Old Damansa, with its dung-carpeted paths and matching smell, might not have plumbing, but it also didn't have sentinels. While there was no curfew in Percepliquis, no *proper* person had a legit excuse to be out so late. If discovered, the city guards would surely stop him.

"*Whatcha name, boy, and whatcha doin' out here so late?*" he imagined them asking, and what could he say? Sheldon was awful at lying and couldn't tell the truth. For the good of the empire, he had to keep his secrets. What really scorched his giblets, though, was that he hadn't done nothing—at least not nothing worth getting beat or locked up over. Didn't steal a thing, never hurt no one, and didn't owe so much as a pin or a pith to a single living soul. But in Percepliquis, he was The Ragman, condemned just for believing the truth.

Sometimes the truth was confusing, complex, and often took years of study and research to understand. That's how it had been with woodworking. Back in Damansa, Sheldon had worked under a couple of carpenters for over a decade to become a skilled joiner. Early on, he'd been terrible. Then one day, something clicked. All that previously jumbled, confusing stuff fell into place in his head, and his hands knew exactly what to do. Since then, he could build a cabinet with nothing but the natural expanding swell of the wood to hold it together. He'd learned the truth of joinery, the subtle differences between woods, grains, and shapes. That's how some truths were.

But other truths didn't need no study at all and snapped into place straight away. That's how it had been with Proust's teachings. The first time he had heard the man speak, Sheldon swore he actually heard a *click* as the words dropped into place just like a perfect half-blind dovetail, the sort of joinery that didn't need no glue or pegs. Everything the man said rang true,

his words set fire to the long-dry shavings of Sheldon's soul. Proust had said things that Sheldon had felt but lacked the skill to put into words. The man had a way of explaining the *whys* of stuff. And not just the *big* whys, like how come mankind was made to suffer, but the *little* whys, like how it was that Sheldon was alone, penniless, and forgotten by everyone, and all by the slightly overripe age of thirty-four. Proust deciphered the mystery of Sheldon's two-year stay in a debtors' prison and the curious riddle of why he was still a virgin. Proust had the answers to everything—all of it true. Sheldon knew this because everything Proust said had landed deep. His words addressed parts of Sheldon buried so far down that he was hardly aware they were part of him. That's how it was when Proust explained that the first emperor wasn't elvish at all, that his real name was Novron, and that Novron was the son of God.

After several minutes of silence, during which the shadows stayed in their places, Sheldon debated going for it. This was the dangerous part. If he was being followed or watched, he'd lead the sentinels right to Proust. The best hope for mankind would be exposed and likely destroyed, all because Sheldon was too clumsy and impatient. He forced himself to wait another few minutes.

The sky was clear and what little he could see between stone buildings was filled with stars. Graffiti defaced the buff-colored stone to his left: a circle containing a chevron painted in black. Those symbols were all over the city—marks of the resistance. Sheldon had painted his fair share but wished this one was gone. The tag was too close to home.

The street remained quiet. Not even rats were out, and Sheldon felt stupid. He was being too cautious now, and maybe a tad full of himself. No one cared about a poor carpenter. With one last look around, he ducked behind the rugmaker's shop. The back door to Wegans Weaving had been left open, and the shop was dark. Moonlight entered the pair of windows and spoke of stuff in his path: looms, crates, piles of wool, and wood. The air whispered of sheep, lye, and smoke. Wegans wasn't a big or fancy shop. The family didn't make draperies or tapestries for the rich. They made simple rugs for common folk—the hardworking sort whose labor let them jump out of bed onto warm wool instead of cold wood or stone.

The Wegans didn't always charge money. They knew about hard times and accepted work or stuff in trade. Sometimes, they sold rugs on credit,

and around the holiday of Wintertide, they gave mats to the poorest families. Desmond Wegan avoided embarrassing those folks, saying with a wink that he'd *fleeced* the poor saps, and that was why them folks didn't say how much they had paid.

The Wegans were one of the first families in Percepliquis to open their doors to Proust. He blessed their wisdom by setting up his own weaving shop there, but instead of wool, Proust wove a "brighter future from the hopes and dreams of mankind."

Reaching the center of the shop, Sheldon struck the floor with the heel of his boot three times, paused, then pounded twice more. A latch scraped, and a door in the floor opened.

Holding a lamp above her head, Rhapsody waved him down the ladder. Sheldon was pretty sure her real name was Mayda Brixton, but Rhapsody was the name Proust had given her, the same way he had dubbed Sheldon The Ragman. All of it was part of a little ceremony that marked their "official entrance into the congregation: the Worshippers of Novron." Or as the ignorant referred to them: the Church of Nyphron.

"What'd you find out?" Rhapsody whispered as she re-latched the trapdoor with just one hand.

She was good at that. Her fingers could have played a harp. She might have been a musician—if not for the elves. A lot of things *could have been*, if not for them. *All that's gonna change. We're gonna make it better so kids born today don't need to suffer like we have. Them with clever fingers will get a chance to play music.*

"Plenty."

"What?"

"You'll hear when I tell him."

Rhapsody scowled.

A year or two younger than Sheldon, she had a wide, flat nose and a receding chin, or at least her overbite made it look that way. She kept her hair hacked short, and her lips always looked like they was frowning, so that lines had formed like ruts in a road. Her eyes were small, just two more blemishes on a pockmarked face. She stood hunched over, as if carrying an invisible weight. Her clothes didn't help much. Most of the time, she wore a ratty shawl over a dress so frayed that she looked like a dog with mange. Still, she was the only woman he knew—the only one without white hair—

who spoke to him. He'd fantasized about being alone with her, mostly because it was possible. They saw each other a lot, and he didn't think her bar was too high. Because it could happen, that made it more exciting than daydreaming about someone like Princess Farilane, whose feet, he was pretty sure, never actually touched the ground.

Despite his desire to impress Rhapsody, Sheldon wasn't about to tell her first. Lust was one thing, but his faith was more important. "Is the master here?"

She continued to scowl but nodded. "In the back."

Proust didn't have a nickname like the rest of them. He had titles: teacher, tutor, and mentor. Master was the most common, and Sheldon liked it best because he felt it showed the most respect. Proust deserved it. The man had changed his life.

Sheldon knew that Proust was right about the first emperor being human because that one truth answered a hundred questions; hearing it had made instant sense. The whole elf thing was a cover-up, a great lie, a conspiracy started by the Imperial Council, wealthy merchants, and of course, the *elves* themselves—all of them hiding the truth. That they had managed it just proved how cunning they were. Everyone knew the Great War was fought *against* the elves. Humans won, and yet everyone was expected to believe that the first emperor was an elf? Cow flop!

But they were pulling it off. Folks called Novron by the elven name, Nyphron. All the paintings and statues of the emperor were done up to make him look like one of *them*. All the *genuine* paintings must have been burned or buried in a pit outside Rodencia, or possibly a secret site deep in the Durat. All the public hearings and official businesses used that awful *elvish* language, and elves held all the important positions in the empire. After "mankind had freed themselves from elven tyranny," the elves had "waged a reverse-revolution," a quiet war. Now, they was in control again.

Proust had made all this clear when they had first met. Sheldon couldn't understand how everyone else didn't realize, rise up, and take back the empire from "the elven pestilence." But of course, they would eventually see. Sheldon himself had been partially blinded. He'd always known things weren't right, but Proust showed him what was wrong. The master explained "the injustices"—told him why people like him had to struggle just to put bread in their mouths while elvish clans like the Ronelles and

Orphes ran “their own mini empires.” Proust was too smart to make himself a target by standing up on a fruit box in the middle of Imperial Square and declare what he knew to be true. Targets like that could easily *disappear*. Instead, Proust intended to beat the elves at their own game. He would secretly and silently rot the empire from the inside out, just as the elves had.

As smart as Proust was, the elves were no dummies. They had spies everywhere, and everybody knew they could hear better than bats. They also had control of the empire. Maybe not the throne. No one knew “the true state of the emperor.” Proust said the imperial line remained human, but just by looking at the emperor, any fool could see he was a man. Proust figured that the elves either “isolated” Estermon the Second within “a wall of lies” or kept him a prisoner through “intimidation, threats, bureaucracy,” and maybe even “blackmail.” The empire that Proust sought to save was—for now—against them. The trick was figuring out how to “kill the disease without hurting the patient.” If anyone could do that, it would be Proust. Not only was the man a genius and wiser than anyone Sheldon could imagine, but he could also perform miracles.

Wegan’s cellar was nicer than any basement had a right to be. The rug shop was built on the foundation of a much older building. The whole thing was constructed from huge stone blocks, the rooms separated by archways. The back of the structure aligned with the outer wall such that it allowed for a cozy hearth.

Sheldon had never considered himself worldly. Born in Warica, he’d traveled in a straight line through the rat-teeming town of Rodencia to Percepliquis. He never paid attention to much beyond sleep and food, but he did know furniture, and he was certain that the single high-backed armchair in front of that hearth at the rear corner of Wegan’s basement was special. Sheldon had never seen anything like it. He wasn’t even sure what it was made from. Being a journeyman joiner that was saying something because the chair had no visible joints. It appeared as if the seat had been formed out of one solid piece of . . . wood? *Had to be. Can’t be stone, and it ain’t metal. So what else is there?* The style was strange, too. The back curved and tapered; the arms swept inward, and the seat tilted up. But the truly unusual aspect was that the chair only had one leg, like the stem of a mushroom.

As always, Proust—the master—sat in his chair, his legs stretched out toward the fire.

“What news do you have for me, Ragman?” he asked without turning, without looking, without knowing who had entered.

“The princess was seen in Alburnia seven days ago, Master.”

“Where?”

“Out on the coast past Blythium Castell.”

“She’s spelunking again,” the master said.

“Um . . . what?”

“Nothing.” Proust turned, showing Sheldon a smile.

The world always felt warmer and brighter when the master grinned at him.

“Let me know the moment she returns—before, if possible. She doesn’t know it, Ragman, but Princess Farilane is our best hope for saving the world. And so are you . . . so are you.”

CHAPTER THREE

THE BOOK

The passage Farilane found herself in was crudely cut, erratic in direction, and unreliable in proportion. Chisel-marks scarred the walls, ceiling, and floor, contributing an additional hazard due to leftover rubble that even the most slipshod dwarven excavator would have died to remove. This led her to speculate that, while the dwarfs might have assisted the Monks of Maribor in the first portion of this endeavor, the Belgric engineers clearly had no hand in this deeper portion.

At times, the aisle was tall but so narrow that Farilane was forced sideways. In other instances, the way was squat and broad, causing her to stoop. One consistent idiosyncrasy did reveal itself as she penetrated deeper—the monks had grown tired of their work. This reality became evident by the ever-diminishing size of the passage. Before long, Farilane found herself on hands and knees, crawling through the sharp gravel and still needing to dip her head now and again.

Just when Farilane felt the passage was as small as possible, the monks managed to further impress her with their laziness. Still on her knees, she studied with revulsion the next section of the passage, barely a foot tall by three-feet wide. Lying flat on her stomach, skidding her clay lamp across the floor ahead of her, Farilane snaked onward.

After more than a hundred feet of slithering through dirt and debris while breathing the sooty fumes of her lamp, she paused to rest. Her abraded thighs and arms burned from dozens of tiny cuts and scrapes. Her lungs struggled for air that *seemed* to be in short supply and was infused with the musty smell of dirt, dust, and oil smoke. At that moment, she felt

the light kiss of the ceiling on her back even while her stomach was pressed flat to the floor. Lying with her head sideways, her cheek rested on something damp and sharp. She considered the very real possibility that she might get stuck. *If I wedge myself, how will I get out?* She could scream her face blue, and no one would hear. Kolby would cross that shaft if she took too long. This was as much a certainty as the routine-obsessed Arkum riding his chariot across the sky in the morning. The knights refused to fail. They were all but magical that way—living legends who kept the peace, enforced the emperor’s law, and above all, protected the imperial family. But how could he help her? Even if he stripped naked and slicked himself with grease, Kolby could never crawl as deep as she had. The man was too big, and Cedric even larger. Saving her would require a Furgenkroian effort involving imperial engineers and dozens of laborers to excavate the tunnel on her behalf. As she was nearly one week from the capital—three weeks, for the sort of people and equipment needed—Farilane knew she would expire from thirst long before salvation arrived.

So much risked for an old book, a set of withered pages that might not even be hidden further ahead. I’m insane.

Her mother, Lydia, was the one who had taught her to read. Of all the grand gifts Farilane had received as princess of the empire, this was her most beloved. She felt like a magician when she perceived the words and ideas of people long dead. In that way, reading was a form of necromancy and treated as such by her great-grandfather, Estermon the First, and now his son, Estermon the Second. They were alike in more ways than just their names: Both were conservative in their thinking and dedicated to preserving the imperial phobia of magic that had started with Nyphron. To them, that is what writing was—a form of the dark arts.

Virgil, who was just as guilty of the dark art of literacy, but far more discreet about his vices, called her obsession “bibliomania”: *book madness*. Given the risks she’d already taken, and the ones she’d forced him to share over so many decades, she couldn’t blame him. Flat on her face, pressed between tons of solid stone with only a single spitting flame and a small bowl of oil separating her from utter darkness, she wondered a bit herself.

Perhaps I am mad.

Hours before Lydia’s death, her mother had ordered Farilane to *Be adventurous. Be reckless*. The princess was certain that the advice was

given to encourage Farilane to dress provocatively, drink strong wine, tease men, and engage in illicit affairs.

I don't think Mother pictured this.

Facing her last hours, Lydia had wished to pass on the wisdom that a life well lived was a comfort at death. While Farilane hadn't seduced anyone or ignited a scandal, she had no fears of dying with the regrets from submitting to a leash of expectations. Her mother might not agree with her choices, but she ought to be proud that Farilane made them her own. And with that encouraging thought, she slithered on.

The gap between ceiling and floor widened. *Of course it did—it had to. The monks needed to get in and out, didn't they?* Soon, she was on her knees, and then much to her delight, she was back on her feet. But her celebratory mood crashed almost instantly when she saw the doors.

Apparently, the monks had found their second wind at this point because the threshold was a good twelve-feet tall and sealed by double metal doors. Looking back, she realized the massive plates would have just barely fit through that sorry excuse for a tunnel.

She held up her oil lamp. The moment the light hit the bronze, she gasped. Each of the gates contained a stack of five rectangular reliefs that depicted scenes from ancient history. The doors were bordered by niches containing exquisite statuettes. The artistry was astounding, and Farilane lost herself for a moment in those images, landscapes, and figures that told stories she knew to be long forgotten.

The first panel showed a small, stockaded village on a mounded hill where simple people tended flocks of sheep beside a great forest. The last one illustrated Percepliquis, the shining new city on three hills. In between were scenes from the Great War: one was clearly the Battle of Grandford and another, near the bottom, showed a magnificent tower on the edge of a waterfall where a crowd had gathered to witness a fight.

How can such a thing be down here? Stepping forward, she touched the reliefs, letting her fingers tremble over the sculpted faces. *Magnificent, and such a waste.*

Magnificent, yes, but still an obstacle. She pushed on the pair, which failed to notice. “Worth a try, right?” She patted the surface as if it were a great and friendly beast, a mammoth watchdog guarding her treasure.

Pushing was the only option, as there was no handle or ring to pull on. In addition, she saw no hinge hook, lock, or bolt.

Beautiful but vexing. This must be the work of dwarfs.

Spotting the markings chiseled into the walls around her, any doubts about dwarven involvement were abolished. She had seen the same symbols at various other sites of interest—the secret ones—but only in the dwarven Belgric Kingdom. They were always chiseled, and with such depth, precision, and clarity, that Farilane felt confident of their Belgriclungreian origin.

Farilane knelt, set her lamp on a shelf of stone that appeared built for just that purpose, and pulled the notebook from her belt. Her *field book*, as she called it, was no bigger than her hand and comprised one hundred and ninety-two pages bound in a battered and stained leather cover that was closed by a rawhide wrap tied to a stick of sharpened graphite. Multicolored scraps of paper bookmarked important sections. First, she verified that the markings on the walls were the same as those she'd seen elsewhere. Farilane had taken the time to copy the entire set of twenty-five symbols into her book. A quick comparison proved her right. The markings were known as the Orinfar, wards that were supposed to defend against magic. Dwarfs were a superstitious lot. Performing sleight of hand and card tricks carried the oddly severe punishment of having every other finger removed.

Second, she flipped to the green tag and read the words she'd copied seven months ago: Behind the Gates of Knowledge lies the truth.

She had found the reference in an ancient scroll in the abbey of Breckon Moor, down in the province of Dulgath, the oldest monastery in the world. Virgil had distracted the abbot while Farilane stole peeks at the Forbidden Text section that was buried in a chamber deep beneath the scriptorium. In the scroll, she saw references to Bran the Beloved and his devoted follower Falkirk de Roche. Further unrolling the scroll, she spotted a mention of the territory of Alon-Bern, now the imperial province of Alburnia. Bran, the founder of the Monks of Maribor, was forever on the run from Emperor Nyphron, and he had a habit of founding new monasteries wherever he went. He stayed in one place just long enough to make a copy of the famed *Book of Brin*, teach a handful of others to read, and command them to instruct their brothers. These seeds of literacy were sowed one step ahead of the imperial scythe. Bran often referred to himself as the Keeper of the

Light of Truth, and in the growing darkness of imperial fabrication that sought to erase the past, he stood against Emperor Nyphron. Since her mother's death, Farilane had discovered she had a personal and crucial stake in learning that truth.

Licking her index finger, she swiped to the next page. Each sheet in the field book was packed with drawings and scrawled notes. Most were written in neat lines across, but others curled up and around the edges of the pages. Her handwriting varied in legibility. Most notes had been recorded in camps or roadhouses, but many parts had been jotted down while she bounced along in a wagon, or in the case of the green tag, in great haste in a dark room.

DAHL RHEN—ALON RHIST—DRAGON CAMP—AVEMPARTHA

These words, scrawled across the bottom of the page, had been circled twice. An arrow led to the facing page, upon which was a crude sketch. Farilane had drawn a tall rectangle divided into ten squares—two columns of five. At the time she sketched it, Farilane had no idea what the group of boxes had meant. Now, sitting within her lonely island of light, she looked from the drawing to the door.

“Found you.”

DAHL RHEN—ALON RHIST—DRAGON CAMP—AVEMPARTHA

The puzzle wasn't hard. Knowing the twisted minds of dwarfs as well as she did and having the door before her made it easy.

Dahl Rhen was clearly the upper left square, the one with the stockaded village on the mound. This was the famed hometown of Persephone, over which the present imperial capital was supposedly built. All monk histories began there.

Alon Rhist was the ancient elven fortress in the scene depicting the famed Battle of Grandford. This was obvious from the spire and dome, both featured prominently in the epic poem.

The other two were a bit more difficult. She made a confident guess that the panel with the sleeping dragon was *Dragon Camp*, but *Avempartha* was a mystery. The name gave no clue.

She flipped through her field book, looking for help, but found none. Pivoting sideways to put her back against the tunnel wall, she picked up the stick of graphite and tapped the word *Avempartha* repeatedly as if torture might force the word to cough up a clue.

“Partha,” she said. *Partha* was a word in ancient elvish, a verb meaning *to fall*.

Farilane picked up her lamp and studied the panels, searching for a scene depicting someone tripping or falling. *Perhaps Avem is a person who was slain?* With this in mind, she searched the battle scenes but found nothing specific enough.

I could try each. Eventually I would pick the correct one . . . right? She shook her head. *Wishful thinking.*

Dwarfs were short, ugly, superstitious, dishonest, and greedy, but she knew from personal experience that they weren’t stupid. She might get more than one chance to open the doors, but then the lock would seal according to a timer and not be accessible for a specific duration—maybe a day, maybe a decade, maybe forever. Dwarfs were fun like that.

“Ah-vem-par-tha.” She sounded the word out carefully. *What does Avem mean?* She ran the term through every language she knew. *Avech* was Fir Ran Ghazel for flower. *What kind of messed-up language has the word flower sounding like a cat hacking up a hairball?* She was pretty sure that *Avam* was a term for sculpture or artistry in old elvish, but it also might mean *to collect*. *Avr* meant *green*. The only word in Belgriclungreian that came close was *Veem*, which she was pretty sure was part of a profanity. Most dwarven words seemed to be that way—not a happy people. And Grenmorian really didn’t have any words that came close, but then again, the language of giants didn’t have many words.

Had to be a name then: Somebody fell. But she saw no images of anyone or anything—

“Water-fall!” The idea hit her so suddenly, she said it out loud. Her voice echoed back off the doors as if they agreed with her conclusion.

A total guess, but at least there was some rationale behind it. Stowing her field book away, Farilane stood, and reaching high, she pressed the upper left square with both her hands. When the panel sank in, she let out an involuntary hoot of delight. She’d expected it, depended on it. But nothing was ever certain, and the joy of a correct guess came with a rush.

“That’s one,” she told herself and the door, which was fitting since the bronze work of art was involved in this, too, and its cooperation was crucial.

She rubbed her hands together, warming them. Then she blew on her fingers for good luck. Finding the image of Alon Rhist, she pressed, and again the panel moved inward. “Two down, two to go.” But the next two were the hard ones, the guesses.

Farilane took a deep breath before pressing on the sleeping dragon image. After she had, nothing happened for a second, then it also settled inward. “Don’t do that to me, door!” she admonished. “I’ve spent eighty years and six months getting this far. I don’t like jokes!”

She rubbed her hands again and flexed her fingers. “Last one.” Farilane reached down to the bottom right side, and with another deeper breath, she pressed. The panel with the illustration of the tower and the waterfall retracted like the head of a startled turtle.

Click!

She held her breath and waited.

Nothing.

“A little anti-climactic, don’t you think?” She frowned at the door. Despite her withering glare, to which she added a loud sigh, the door continued to disappoint. With no other option, she gave it a gentle push, hardly more than a touch. The massive pair of doors swung inward.

Each was revealed to be eight inches thick, yet they opened wide without making a sound. *Dwarfs: as ingenious as they are disingenuous. I wonder how many soon-to-be-child-slaves were offered up in payment for this bit of work?* If there was one consistency in all the literature, it was that dwarfs were sometimes necessary but always evil. There were several cautionary tales illustrating the point. The two most famous were *Gronbach and the Treasure of Neith* and *The Evil Dwarf of the Crescent Forest*. Both were copies of copies that Farilane had found in less-than-pristine condition. To preserve the stories and make them more readable, she had re-worked them as *The Dwarf and the Dairy Maid* and *Little Wren and the Big Forest*. She made small changes for the sake of coherence and modern language conventions but kept the morals pristine: Dwarfs are ingenious, evil monsters. “So true,” she muttered as she gave the doors one last sneer.

After all the drama and years of research and study, the dangerous raids, infiltrations, and crypt pillaging, Farilane knew exactly what was behind the door: a massive chamber with a tiled floor, fresco-painted walls, and a domed ceiling. At the center, she would find a podium or altar upon which would be a massive tome bound in hide—perhaps animal, but more likely ghazel, dwarven, elven, or even human skin. The pages would have been gilt-edged and detailed with strange markings and drawings, and the entire tome would be sealed with huge metal clamps requiring a key—probably one carved from bone. She even pictured a single shaft of white light streaming straight down to illuminate the book in ethereal brilliance.

She lifted her lamp and stepped inside. As usual, reality disappointed.

The *room*, also lined in Orinfar, was the size of a large closet and once more displayed all the artistry of men wanting to be done with a miserable job. Hacked out of stone was a space not much larger than what was needed to accommodate the inward-swinging doors. Lying on the floor as if dropped with indifference was a stack of unbound, blank leaves of parchment.

Blank?

Farilane felt her stomach drop and her heart weaken at the sight.

All this way for nothing?

Then on closer inspection, she noticed the top sheet was faded nearly beyond legibility, but there were ghostly markings. A careful lifting of that page revealed darker, clearer writing beneath. She knew her time had not been in vain as she read the first passage:

*They came with hardly a warning,
thousands both beautiful and terrible.
They came on brilliant white horses,
wearing shining gold and shimmering blue.
They came with dragons and whirlwinds,
and giants made of stone and earth.
They came and nothing could stop them,
save honorable men.*

She'd found what she came for.

She had found *The Book of Brin*.



“I’m alive!” Farilane shouted as she returned to the waterfall shaft.
“And I managed to—

“Princess!” Virgil shouted back. “It’s raining outside!”

“How bad is it?”

“Not awful. The usual little trickles of water are starting to form, but it’s getting steadily worse. Soon, we’ll have waterfalls outside as well.”

“If it gets worse and doesn’t let up, we run the risk of becoming trapped,” Kolby shouted from the depths, where she guessed the knight had waited on his little raft for the better part of the last hour. “We only have supplies for a day or two.”

“Okay,” she said, “bring me back.”

The philosopher used the name of Maribor to set the bridge rising once more. Knowing what to expect, Farilane and Kolby performed the return acrobatics smoothly. The princess leapt down before the bridge reached its apex with Kolby running out to the other end to keep the beam balanced. Farilane wasted no time running across as Kolby ran at her. They passed at the midpoint, keeping the platform level. Then, just as the letters snapped back into place, Farilane leapt off. Her sudden absence resulted in the bridge tilting upward in the direction of the exit. Sprinting back the way he had come, Kolby raced up the slope and jumped while the bridge still had some height. He caught the edge and pulled himself up with seemingly no effort at all.

“Show off,” she said.

“Are you all right?” Virgil asked.

“I’m fine,” Farilane replied. “Let’s get going.”

They returned to the entrance of the cave. As Virgil had mentioned, it was indeed raining. “This will make scaling the cliff more than a little reckless,” she said.

“Should we stay?” Virgil asked all of them.

“If we wait, things could get worse,” Farilane said. “If we climb out now, we might clear the bad sections before the storm gathers its strength. I say we go.”

Kolby nodded, and the decision was made.

As she stepped out into the rain, Farilane double-checked that her satchel was sealed. The leather was treated to be waterproof. She looked toward her companions, expecting someone to inquire about her find, but everyone rushed out.

They're all distracted by the storm, by the urgency of the growing crisis. Maybe they didn't ask what I found because they're just so relieved I'm safe.

Then again, having stowed the pages in her satchel, she looked the same way coming out as she had going in. *They didn't ask because they think I failed. That all this was for nothing. They're afraid of embarrassing me.*

A fine sentiment, perhaps, but she would have expected at least Virgil to inquire. Truth be told, she was glad. Indications were promising that she'd found *The Book of Brin*, but there was only so much she could determine in the dark of a monk-hewn tunnel. She'd hate to declare victory only to face the later embarrassment of a false conclusion.

Rock-climbing a jagged cliff in the rain, at night, was crazy. Luckily, most of the route—the worst, and last, part—had been carefully scouted over the first twelve days of waiting and secured with safety ropes. That section was a simple hand-over-hand affair following a safe line. Lightning flashed and fluttered over the Goblin Sea, illuminating the rock face. In those moments of stark light, the stone glistened black like the oiled skin of a dark olive. Everywhere, water ran. Tiny creeks rushed between boulders, through cracks, and leapt as daredevils off the ends of rocks, plummeting hundreds of feet. In the air, rain swept at angles tossed by gusting winds. The spray also made a point of striking Farilane's face. Her hood had blown back, and the tie holding her tresses came loose, freeing the monster everyone else casually referred to as her hair. Long enough to reach between her shoulder blades, her locks were pretty at a party, but a hazard in the field. Wet and whipped by the wind, the monster lashed her face, frequently blocking Farilane's sight just as both hands were busy clutching stone or rope.

Virgil is cursing me right now. If I'm struggling, he's dying, and likely working his way through his third set of profanities from a number of languages.

The philosopher was behind Farilane, which she hated. She would have preferred Virgil where she could see him—where she could help if needed. Kolby had assigned the order, with Cedric going first and her second. Virgil, being seen as expendable, always followed the princess. And Kolby, being Kolby, brought up the rear. He was a stickler for procedure and not inclined to debate.

In the end, everything worked out fine—*almost*.

All four of them safely reached the top of the wind-swept bluff before the rain became a real curse. They fell onto the puddle-laden tufts of grass, happy to be alive and on horizontal ground. Farilane's thoughts quickly turned to hot tea and shedding her wet clothes, but then she looked across the plain, puzzled.

"Where's the camp?"

Their four tents and a communal cooking tarp were gone. Only a few snapped ropes looped to stakes remained. The horses were gone, too.

Kolby picked up a tether and studied the strap.

"This is going to be one of those *long* nights, isn't it?" Virgil asked, surveying the devastation. The old man clutched his cloak so tightly, his beard was trapped inside the folds.

"If you mean a night to remember," Farilane said brightly, "the sort that reminds you that you're alive and how wonderful such a thing is, then yes. I believe so."

"Water might be nice," the old man said.

"What need do we have for stale water?" Throwing her head back, she opened her mouth and caught raindrops.

"You're not altogether sane, are you, dear?" Virgil asked.

She paused in her aerial imbibing to look at him with a mischievous grin. "Tell me it didn't take *this* long to realize *that*."

"The legion has a camp not far from here," Kolby said.

Farilane nodded. "Blythium Castell, established by Estermon the First in seventeen-oh-one, as the eastern bulwark against a ghazel invasion. But personally, I think it was built as a means of establishing his claim on Alburnia as a true province. Can't claim you own something if you can't control it."

Kolby stared at her with tortured patience.

“Did you know it was once an ancient elven fortress and that they built on the site of still-older ruins? Although, I suppose it was less built and more restored. No sense in throwing away old stone if it’s in the right place. But it raises the question: Who built it? Not the elves. Not their type of construction at all.”

Kolby continued to wait.

“So, yes, I know about it.”

“Right,” he said, then returned to his interrupted thought. “We can get supplies and horses there.”

Virgil made a sound halfway between a sigh and a whimper but managed a single nod. “I don’t understand how the wind could have caused so much destruction up here when it wasn’t nearly so bad down there.”

“The wind didn’t do it,” Farilane said, “did it, Kolby?”

“No, Your Highness.”

Virgil looked at both of them, then at Cedric. “I don’t understand.”

“Kolby, being the thorough fellow that he is, hobbled the horses so they couldn’t run off.”

Virgil took a moment to wipe his face clear of the rain and peered into the night. “And yet, I see no horses.”

“That’s because the tethers were cut,” Farilane said. She looked at Kolby. “Yes?”

The knight held up the buckle strap. “Sharp blade, too.”

“Someone attacked our camp?” Virgil asked, stunned. “But who would do such a thing? Surely not the carnivorous seagulls.”

“Technically, I said *man-eating*,” Farilane corrected. “Seagulls *are* actually carnivorous. They eat fish and insects.”

“Best guess?” Kolby said. “Those less-than-helpful monks in the village.”

“Maybe,” Farilane said.

A dramatic flash of lightning reached between sky and sea and pulsed briefly like a living thing, revealing the entire bluff, seaside, rain, and voluminous overhead clouds before vanishing. “Whoa,” the princess muttered. Seconds later, she felt as much as heard the thunder. “Is this wonderful, or what?”

She threw her head back and her arms out, her hands splayed palms up, feeling the rain pummel her body and run down her skin. She was soaked, a

bit chilled, and aware that standing on that bleak promontory, made her one of four likely targets for the next bolt of lightning. And yet, she couldn't be happier. *This is what it means to be alive.*

The others stared at her as if she were mad. She wasn't surprised, nor did she care. She'd drawn such looks for decades. *They're the faces of the sleeping, shocked at the presence of one awake.* She twirled around and began laughing.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE BEAR MAN

Blythium Castell was a fortified legion encampment on an imposing precipice overlooking the long bay that divided the imperial province of Alburnia from Rhulynia. The octagon of bland, beige walls caught the morning sun rising behind them. Farilane had seen the walls a mile away but suspected the others were only spotting them now. The fortified camp, or *castell*, marked the farthest physical presence of the empire to the northeast. Technically, the ancient elven homeland of Erivania was further north and east, but no one counted it because it was isolated by imperial law. This left Blythium Castell as the last vestige of imperial authority on the eastern frontier. The stark utilitarian fortress had a lonely, desolate appearance as it perched bright on the dark cliff like a sentinel peregrine watching over the tiny village at the mouth of a river.

The road to Blythium ran through the village where, thirteen days earlier, four treasure hunters led by a princess of the empire had stopped for supplies and found little. The village consisted of a handful of crude dwellings built of thatch, sticks, and daub. Large, rich fields of newly planted green surrounded the community. A simple wooden bridge gave access to a small island where sheep and cattle grazed in a natural corral. The only stone buildings were the little monastery and the domed temple beside it that appeared like a miniature version of the Temple of Ferrol in Percepliquis. While small and simple in features, the elaborate dome was nonetheless remarkable, given its surroundings.

Someone had spent some serious time and money building a ridiculous chapel in the middle of nowhere.

The four arrived in the village for the second time just past dawn. Covered in mud, stripped of their mounts, and wrapped in wet cloaks, they fit in well with the impoverished locals. Kolby led them to the monastery and beat on the door four times before it opened.

Holding the wood back but a crack and sticking his bald-patched head out, a monk grimaced at them. “Back so soon?”

“Might we come in?” Kolby asked and started forward.

“Why?” the monk asked, holding the door firm.

Kolby furrowed his brow. “Because it’s cold and wet, and we’d appreciate the chance to dry ourselves.”

Once more, Kolby pushed on the door, and once more the monk held fast—likely had his foot jammed against the base. Kolby wasn’t big, but Farilane knew he was strong, and she didn’t envy the monk’s foot.

“This isn’t a public house. You need to leave. Go away. You’re not wanted here.” With that, the monk slammed the door.

Even though Kolby beat on the wood again, the monk refused to open. Kolby gave up and rubbed the reddened heel of his hand.

Farilane faced the village. As always, farmers were out early. Girls tended cows, boys cut wood, men and women—drawn by the banging—paused to watch the strangers. *What kind of life is this?* Farilane studied the dirt-smeared cheeks and tired eyes. *Up and out of bed at—no*, she corrected herself—*before dawn*. These close-to-the-dirt people had to drop their bare feet onto cold ground well before sunrise. They shivered until the fire was lit, cold wind coming through glassless windows. *Who am I kidding? The wind likely comes just as easily through the copious gaps in their walls. Then they haul water, dig in the dirt, and fight off flies and mosquitoes. Or not.* On their first trip through, she recalled seeing a little boy covered in flies. *A person can get used to anything, I guess—if you have to.*

Then Farilane focused on a girl who had more than dirt on her face. Her left cheek and eye were purple, yellow, and swollen. *Not the same girl as last time. This one is taller, and the bruises are on the other side.*

“They steal our horses, trash our supplies, and now deny us common hospitality,” Virgil complained. “I realize they didn’t want us raiding their vault, but this is just spiteful.”

“We don’t know for a fact that they were responsible,” Kolby said.

“You were the one who said the monks stole the horses.” Virgil stared at Kolby, frustrated. The philosopher wasn’t used to walking all night in pouring rain. They had kept him going with the promise of warmth, shelter, and a good meal in the monastery. Now he felt entitled. To him, the closed door had to be a betrayal—as much by Kolby as by the monks.

“When I said that, I was only guessing. A hunch isn’t proof.”

Virgil frowned and folded his arms in disagreement. He obviously had made up his mind.

Spotting the bruised milkmaid, Farilane wasn’t so certain.

She took a breath, moistened her lips, and gave three powerful and very unprincess-like whistles through her front teeth. In reply, they heard a sharp whinny. Farilane smiled. “Mirthlyn.” She set off in search of her horse and found the white stallion trapped in the monk’s corral. “There you are!” she exclaimed as the horse pushed past several others to the edge of the wood fencing to greet her.

“That looks like proof to me,” Virgil declared. “And there!” He pointed. “That’s the horse I rode here on. These monks are not only rude, but they are also horse thieves. You should deal with them.”

“Deal with them?” Kolby asked.

“Isn’t that your job? You keep order, enforce laws, right?”

“Our mission—at this moment—is to protect Princess Farilane. Anything else undermines that priority.”

“Can you at least get our horses back?”

“I can do that,” Farilane said and unslung the corral gate to let Mirthlyn out. “Now where did you put your saddle, big fella?”

“Leave my horses alone,” a very large, very hairy man ordered. He came from the direction of the monastery, walking fast and pulling a furry bear hide up over his naked shoulders as a crude cape. Aside from leather britches and that bear skin, the only other thing the man wore was a sword.

Farilane took an instant dislike to him. Something about the eyes. He had one of those single protruding brows that ran across his face like a shelf, shading his vision and lending him a cruel expression. The absurdly large jaw, decorated by a wild beard that matched his tumultuous hair, did not help. The man impressed her as one step above an actual bear, and an angry beast first thing in the morning was never a welcome sight.

I shouldn't judge people by how they look, she chided herself. Shouldn't judge people at all. Can't help it. The mind forms patterns and sticks to them whether I like it or not. Amazing how annoying one's own mind can be.

"These are not *your* horses," Virgil declared.

"Says who? *You*, little boy?" The furry man, whose hair matched the hide he wore, had doubled down on his wild-beast attire, which was augmented by a necklace of bear claws. To this ensemble, he now added an ugly frown.

I believe my earlier assessment was an insult to bears.

Farilane stepped forward. "No, I do," she stated clearly. "These are indeed our horses. This, for example, is *my* horse. I raised Mirthlyn from a foal, didn't I?" She scrubbed the stallion's forehead as she spoke to it. "Yes, I did." She nuzzled the horse with her nose. "Besides, Mirthlyn is an Alleyas, quite a rare and restricted breed—descended in a direct line from Nyphron's original Alon Rhist stock."

"You calling me a liar?" the man growled menacingly.

The guy was certainly committed to the bear theme. In another place and time—at a costume party for example—Farilane might have found it cute, or at least creative. "I don't know," she replied, turning from the horse to present him a pleasant smile. "The definition of a liar is someone who *knowingly* tells a falsehood. I suspect it's entirely possible you're an idiot and therefore don't actually know the difference between a wild horse and one that is tethered by its owner."

The bear-man took an aggressive step toward Farilane.

Kolby moved between them. "Don't," was all he said. The word was soft, almost gentle.

From out of the monastery came several people. Some were monks, but at least five looked like close relatives of the brooding fellow who now faced off with Kolby. Most of them had weapons.

"Four of these horses belong to us," Kolby explained. "They were taken from our camp last night. I don't know how they came into your possession. I don't care. But they belong to us, and we're taking them back."

"They belong to me." The man stood nearly a foot taller than Kolby. His shoulders were wide and thick, as was his neck. "This whole village belongs to me. You will, too, little man, if you aren't careful."

In response, Kolby unfixed the brooch at his throat and let his cloak fall. The sight of the gold dragon emblem on his chest and the three swords he wore provided the expected response: a collective gasp.

“Teshlor Knight,” someone whispered, and the message was transferred back until Farilane was sure even the milkmaids heard the news.

One of the men, armed with a short sword wrapped in a crude hide sheath, moved up alongside the bear-man. “What is he doing here?” This new fellow was just as brutish and hairy, causing Farilane to speculate that it might be less a fashion statement and more a family trait.

“Right now, we’re just collecting our horses,” Kolby explained, keeping his voice low and steady. “If someone could inform us where the saddles and bridles are, I’d appreciate that.”

“You aren’t taking my horses,” the man in front of Kolby maintained. He pulled back his lips to show teeth.

“Don’t be a fool, Gibson! Let them have the horses,” one of those with a sword said. “He’s a Teshlor, you idiot.”

“One Teshlor,” Gibson said. “There are eight of us.”

“Only takes one.” The bear’s relative began pulling on Gibson’s arm.

Most of those holding swords were topless or dressed in light nightshirts. While the farmers and herdsman were always up before dawn, these barbarous brutes had only now rolled from their beds. Such a late start said a lot. *Not farmers, not herdsman, not woodcutters, not huntsmen, and definitely not monks—so who are you?* The village wasn’t a popular destination and couldn’t have many visitors.

“Let ’em go, you fool, and count yourself lucky they aren’t looking for the ones who took them animals.”

Gibson ground his teeth, his lips folded inward as if trying to keep from saying the words. The bear-man proved he had some rudimentary brain in his head when at long last he managed to utter, “Fine. Take the four animals and get out.”

“Be happy to.” Kolby nodded to Virgil and Cedric, who entered the stable in search of their tack.

“So which is it?” Farilane asked Gibson.

“What?” The bear-man focused on her. Those two little eyes trapped beneath that massive brow peered out with twin confusion.

Farilane shrugged. "I just hate that we never cleared up the mystery—so I need to know. Are you a liar or an idiot?"

Out of the corner of her eye, she noticed Kolby sigh and give an ever-so-slight shake of his head.

"I mean, you *look* like an idiot." Farilane gestured at him with her hands. "You have that primitive I-killed-a-bear-and-now-I-wear-his-pelt-for-clothes simpleness about you, but it's true being poor doesn't make you stupid. I suppose it's possible you needed that disgusting hide to keep warm. Still, there is a huge difference between the industrious poor"—she gestured toward the growing crowd of villagers who'd worked up the nerve to approach to within hearing range—"and stupid." She pointed at Gibson. "I think the necklace is the problem. I mean, honestly, that just screams bad judgment. You're actually wearing the nails of an animal around your neck? Why? If you expect to impress ladies with that sort of adornment, think again. And let's be honest. You probably didn't kill that bear, did you? That's an old rug, isn't it? Wearing it just makes you look like an idiot draped in a carpet. Although that does give weight to the argument that you're a liar. So wait . . . is it possible you're both an idiot *and* a liar? Yes—yes, I think it is."

Gibson drew his sword from its scabbard.

The man beside him restrained his arm. "Don't."

"Everyone remain calm," Kolby ordered. "I cannot allow anyone to harm this lady. If you make any attempt, I may be forced to kill you." Kolby had a wonderfully composed, matter-of-fact way of speaking. If he were a ship on a stormy sea, the crew and passengers could eat meals while balancing wine glasses on their knees. Normally, this was a virtue. At that moment, not so much.

"Don't listen to him," Farilane said. "I'm a loudmouth. My voice is high and irritating. Just hearing me speak—one of you must want to make me shut up, right?"

"What are you doing?" Kolby asked.

Farilane ignored him and advanced on another man with a sword. "Hey! You look like a hothead. You gonna just let us embarrass your chief bear-man like that? Come on, wouldn't you like to slit my throat?"

"My lady," Kolby said firmly.

“At least break my nose. How hard is that? It’s right here and ever so breakable.”

The man she spoke to shifted his eyes between her and Kolby. “If I try, he’ll kill me.”

She turned, making a show of pretending to search for Kolby, even going so far as to hold a hand above her eyes to shield from the non-obtrusive sun. “He’s waaay over there!”

“But he’s a Teshlor.”

Farilane folded her arms and frowned. “And you’re a coward. All of you are nothing but little girlish milksops.”

“Are you trying to get someone killed?” Kolby asked.

Farilane clapped her arms against her sides. “Obviously!” She looked at the group of ugly hairy men and sighed. “And doing a piss-poor job of it.”

“Why?”

“Because I know you won’t hurt anyone unless they try to hurt me.”

“You want them dead because they stole our horses?”

Farilane rolled her eyes. “Of course not.”

“Then why?”

Movement up the hill caught everyone’s attention as the gates of Blythium Castell opened. A small column of armored legionnaires issued out of the fortress, accompanied by an ominous drumbeat. They were led by a prymus on horseback, his red-plumed helmet appearing as a flame on his head.

“Thank the gods,” Kolby said. “They can handle this.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure of that,” Farilane warned.

In two neat lines, a half-dozen imperial soldiers entered the village along with a drummer and a standard-bearer who held the Fourth Legion flag high: a sculpted boar on a pole. Reaching Farilane and her companions, the prymus halted his squadron and peered down. “What is at issue here?” he asked in a superior tone that often accompanied those on horseback when speaking to those who were not.

“Horse thieving,” Kolby explained. “These men lay claim to four horses stolen from us last night.”

“They be my horses,” Gibson declared.

The prymus didn’t bother to look at the bear clan. Instead, he studied Kolby. “That’s the uniform of a Teshlor Knight.”

“It is,” Kolby replied.

“And do you claim to be one?”

“I am Kolby Fiske, Teshlor Knight of the First Order.”

“And what is a First Order Teshlor doing here in our humble village?”

“I have a better question.” Farilane addressed the officer, “Why do you permit the local thuggery to rob, rape, murder, and terrorize the residents of this village, or aren’t you aware that as imperial legionnaires it is your duty to protect the empire’s citizenry?”

A host of eyebrows jumped, except the bear-man’s. Farilane doubted his single brow had the capacity to move.

“That’s a very serious accusation,” the prymus said, in a menacing tone. “Young girls should be careful not to make such dangerous assumptions.”

“Calling me a young girl is an assumption—what I’m telling you is a fact. Our first time through this village, despite the fine herd of cattle and flocks of sheep and so many planted fields, no one could spare us even a loaf of bread. Initially, I suspected they didn’t like strangers, but then I noticed how skinny everyone appeared—not just thin, mind you—but malnourished, starving. One has to wonder where the food goes. Not to the monks. They look like everyone else. Add to that the skittish, tail-between-their-legs look of both villagers and monks, and it isn’t difficult to determine that these people are the victims of habitual theft and violent intimidation. A quick glance at any of the young or attractive girls and you’ll discover not one without extensive bruising. Unless the dairymaids of this village are hammering their own faces into trees, I think it’s a sure bet that someone is beating them. And just now, the abbot of this monastery tried to persuade us to leave by being uncharacteristically rude. I strongly suspect this was his way of trying to protect us from his unwanted—although clearly frequent—visitors who had just arrived with stolen horses.”

“Who are you?” the prymus asked.

“At first, I assumed the members of Clan Cave Bear were merely morons.” She lifted a finger to emphasize her point. “What kind of fool steals horses, then takes them only a few miles away to the one place the victims will certainly visit? Then I realized: the sort of thief that doesn’t worry about getting caught.”

The prymus addressed Kolby, “I suggest you shut this little tart’s mouth before she says something to get you all into trouble.”

Kolby shook his head and sadly lamented. “Oh—if it were only that easy.”

“I think one only needs to lift one’s eyes to the hilltop to spot the source of this problem,” Farilane went on. “Governor Vicross must be unhappy with his position here in Alburnia and looking for a change of scenery. The only remaining question is, are we dealing with a simple matter of illegal taxation and appeasement, or is Blythium Castell encouraging local warlords”—she dipped her head to indicate Gibson—“to rebel as a first step toward treason?”

“First Spear!” the prymus shouted.

“Sir!” A weathered soldier in the front row snapped to attention.

“Arrest this woman.”

“Treason it is then,” Farilane concluded.

The soldier took one step.

So did Kolby. “Can’t let you do that.”

The prymus smiled. “You can’t stop it, either.”

“Actually, I can.” He said this so casually, that the First Spear hesitated. “Look, I like the legion. I have a cousin serving in the Seventh, so I don’t want to step on toes, but we both know that the Teshlors’ mandate comes directly from the emperor. Truth be told, if I didn’t have her along”—he gestured to Farilane—“I’d be the one arresting you, your legatus, and Governor Vicross. Then I’d order a complete investigation into charges of corruption, negligence, conduct unbecoming, and high treason. But, lucky you, I’m not here for any of that. So we’re just going to take our horses and leave.”

Kolby smiled sincerely at the prymus, then the First Spear, and finally Gibson and company, all of whom appeared to accept this notion of a peaceful resolution.

“Then when we get back to Percepliquis,” Farilane jumped in, “I’ll publicly announce that Blythium Castell and the legion stationed here are all traitors to the empire. I’ll do it on a box in Imperial Square, right in front of the palace. That should get the emperor’s attention. And I will provide detailed descriptions of everyone I see here. I’ll even do sketches. I’m a pretty good artist.”

“I really hate you sometimes,” Kolby told her.

“Change of plan,” the prymus announced. “Kill them all. Starting with her.”

This was the part Farilane could do without. She knew she was right. Farilane also knew that if she waited, most of the guilty would escape, but that hardly factored into her decision-making. The real problem—and this was the part she didn’t think Kolby had added up yet, or if he had, he chose to turn a blind eye to it since her safety was his first concern—was that the moment after they left the village, every inhabitant would be slaughtered. Witnesses and evidence would be erased. This outcome was a certainty from the moment the legionnaires suspected Kolby was a Teshlor. Bodies would be buried, the cause reported as sickness. In a stunning display of irony, this intentional falsehood would inadvertently be the truth.

With the nimble quickness her family was noted for, Farilane leapt onto Mirthlyn and removed herself from the fray she’d created. This was the wisest course of action. With her on the stallion’s back, an arrow would have trouble catching her, and this quick retreat granted Kolby plenty of room and time to act without factoring her safety into his calculations. Besides, she’d be of no help.

What Farilane knew about martial arts was purely theoretical. While she had watched the Teshlors practice quite often and had witnessed them in actual battles on a few unpleasant occasions, she had never trained with weapons. Farilane believed that any solution requiring violence on her part was a sign of utter failure, a complete collapse of her intellect. Learning the sword would be tantamount to a bird practicing how to bounce.

She did, however, enjoy the fluid movements of the Teshlor’s drills. She found grace in their dance, a calm in their clashes. Exercises were far more enjoyable than implementation. Theory was always so much more beautiful than reality. For this reason, Farilane chose not to watch. She had already stained her memory with enough ugly things. She didn’t need this.

When the first cries of men cut the morning, Farilane trotted toward the planted fields and marveled at how green the beans already were. A young man clutching the handle of a hoe to his chest stood wide-eyed and open-mouthed as he looked past her at the source of the loud sounds.

“Best if you don’t look,” she told him.

“Un-unbelievable,” he stammered. “Like he’s threshing grain.”

Just like a farmer. Everyone metaphors from experience, I guess. I'm certainly glad he's not a butcher.

"What's your name?" Farilane asked, leaning down and patting Mirthlyn's neck.

"Darrin, ma'am, Darrin Seret. My father is the village elder."

"Well, Darrin, I think after today, you and your family—this whole village—will experience a surge in prosperity. These beans are going to taste especially fine, since your sister and mother won't have to pay for the handful you're allowed to eat."

This broke the spell cast by the action across the yard. The boy looked down at the crops. "That they will. How did you know? No one is allowed to speak of it."

"I pay attention."

Something new caught the boy's sight. "Another one! There are two Teshlors! And he's huge!"

"You don't see an old man anywhere, do you? White beard, long robes, terrified look on his face?"

"No," Darrin said, his eyes intent, shifting from sound to sound.

"Good. He's still in the stable then. I knew he was smart."

"Why don't you watch? Why don't you look? You sort of started this, didn't you?"

"There's no *sort of* about it, and that's why I don't watch."



"Did you ever consider that I might have been killed?" Kolby asked as he bathed.

The area around the village appeared to have been dyed red. Even the puddles past the monastery were fouled from the violent bloodbath. Kolby had been forced down to the river to wash. Farilane found him stripped to his waist, cleaning both his body and clothes. A single line of red snaked downstream from him.

"No," she replied.

Kolby looked up, surprised and perhaps a bit hurt. "Really?"

“Of course not. I also don’t take into consideration whether or not the seasons will continue to change before I plan for the year.”

“Victory in combat is never a certainty, Your Highness.”

She smirked at him. “You don’t even have a scratch. The only marks on you are those stupid tattoos.”

“That’s not the point.”

“What is the point?” She slipped off Mirthlyn. “Did you want them to slaughter this entire village? Look at the girl over there.” She pointed to a twelve-year-old child crying beside the village cistern. “Go over there and tell her—”

“I didn’t say you weren’t right.”

“No? What are you saying?”

“I . . .” Kolby took a breath. “I don’t know now. You made me forget. I suppose I’m just frustrated.”

“About what?”

“I don’t know.”

Farilane studied him. Kolby’s eyes were strained, the muscles on his face taut. The line of his compressed lips was drawn down. “You really are upset.”

“I am.”

“Why?”

He shook his head and resumed plunging his tunic in the river. “It’s not important.”

“Yes, it is.” She approached until her feet were in the water. “Why did you—”

“He was scared,” Virgil announced, as he strode down the grassy slope.

“The old man survived,” Farilane observed. “I’ll have to try harder next time.”

“Oh, I have no doubt of that,” Virgil replied.

Farilane looked back at her washing knight. “And for your information, it’s a practical impossibility for Kolby to be scared.”

“Is it?” Virgil asked. The old man looked at Kolby.

Farilane did, too.

The knight said nothing. He refused to look at either one.

“You *were* scared?” Farilane said. “Why?”

Kolby found new interest in his cleaning.

“He was afraid something might happen to *you*, my dear.”

“Oh, sweet cackling serenade, you’re not in love with me, are you?”

Kolby jerked up, his eyes wide. “By the Unholy Twins! I’m certainly glad I’m not, or that comment surely would have killed me.”

“Sorry,” she said. “That was coarse, wasn’t it? I just—you caught me off guard.” She retreated out of the water and wiped her sandals. “So why —”

“I have one charge, and that’s protecting you.”

“He’s lying,” Virgil said. “It’s more than that.”

This brought a dangerous glare from the knight.

“Don’t ever call a Teshlor a liar, Virgil,” Farilane said quickly and seriously.

Virgil held up his hands in defense. “I don’t mean it that way—he’s certainly telling the truth in that he has no interest in fathering your children, but he does love you. They all do. The Teshlors have cherished you for years. Go on. Deny it if you can,” he dared the knight.

Kolby went back to washing.

“You see, they serve your grandfather, respect your father and brother, but they *love* you. You’re the goddess they never had. The embodiment of their principles. The ideal they *choose* to serve.”

“Are you serious?” She looked between the two of them.

“You’re adventurous, brave, intelligent, athletic, generous, kind, and above all—at least as far as they see it—good.”

“Yeah, but I’m a bitch.”

Kolby laughed. “She’s got you there, old man.”

“True, but that only means that if she could use a sword, she’d be the absolute embodiment of a Teshlor.”

“Doesn’t need to use a sword for that,” Kolby said, his words so weighted with sincerity they could have left marks. “The true measure of a knight isn’t their skill with a weapon, but adherence to the code we live by. For that, Her Highness is a walking illustration. If you had died on my watch . . .”

“That’s why he was scared,” Virgil concluded.

“Not you, though,” the princess accused.

“Me?” Virgil replied. “I’m always terrified for you. A princess who openly refuses to believe in any god is just asking for trouble.” He looked

back toward the monastery. “What are we going to do now? I’m certain there are more legionnaires where those came from.”

Kolby nodded. “I’ve ordered Cedric to assume control of the fortress and detain the governor and legatus until I can send relief.”

“Assume control of an entire hostile legion fortress . . . by himself?”

Kolby nodded. “But only until I contact the Second. They’ll dispatch someone to serve as a legatus pro tem. It’ll be a while before the emperor appoints a new governor, but that won’t be our headache.”

“By himself? He’s just going to walk up there and take over?”

Kolby nodded, then smiled wickedly. “I told him not to wash first.”

CHAPTER FIVE

THE SCRIBE

A month later, in a fit of frustration and disappointment, Farilane conceded that she had not found *The Book of Brin*.

What she had dragged out of that hole in the seaside cliff was another partial copy. Farilane's mistake, her jump to judgment, was prompted by the writing itself. The letters were not drawn in the typical Monastic Script—a font styling that Farilane maintained was designed for something other than reading. Instead, the words on the pages she'd found had been laid down by a civilian's hand, someone with little practice or patience with a pen. The pages she found were old indeed, but not the original. Like all the others, her find was incomplete, and age had destroyed much of the writing. Despite her failure, Farilane discovered her efforts were not for naught. This was likely Falkirk de Roche's personal copy of the book, and it was in better condition than any she'd found prior, allowing her to fill in many of the gaps that marred her masterwork, *The Migration of Peoples*. Her history of the major races of the world was a grand puzzle. De Roche's copy of *The Book of Brin* provided many of the missing pieces, but that wasn't what made the find so important. The real treasures were the notes in the margins, scribbles done in small, simple script that reminded Farilane of her own field book.

They were scrawled throughout the manuscript. A frustrating number were illegible, not merely due to age, fade, and rot, but most to horrible handwriting. She doubted even the author could have deciphered much of it. Still, Farilane did her best. Armed with a cup of salifan tea and seated on

the high stool in her sanctum sanctorum, her literary lair, she practiced the forbidden art of bibliomancy—reading a book.

Three knocks on the door, a pause, then two more got her off the stool. She knew who it was. That was *their* knock.

Most of the time Farilane pretended not to be home. She hated to be interrupted while working. Given that reading and writing were considered forms of magic and therefore illegal within the empire, she also preferred to know who was bothering her before she opened the door. Farilane didn't actually think the palace guard would haul the princess of the empire to a stone cell if she were caught reading. The law against literature was randomly enforced, and the princess's obsession was the worst-kept secret in the empire. Still, it might be politically embarrassing to the emperor if enough people reported her vice. This, then, was the motivation for developing *the knock*.

She threw open the door. "You're not going to believe what I found, Vir—" She stopped, seeing that the philosopher wasn't alone.

"Good morning, Princess." Virgil bowed. He was dressed in his normal court robes, the archaic off-white pallium with the scarlet stole of a pedagogue. His hair hung in its accustomed rebellion, partially blinding him.

She nodded, then looked at his companion.

Dark-brown hair—no gray—few wrinkles, a high forehead that might have been a receding hairline, but just as likely could be a family trait; she estimated his age at early third decade. No facial hair. Farilane had done a study and discovered that beards and mustaches became increasingly prevalent the more distant one went from the capital. Even on the outskirts of Percepliquis you'd find finely trimmed mustaches and longer sideburns. Provincials sported goatees and manicured chin straps. A full-on beard, like that which Gibson the Bear-Man sported, was the norm for the world beyond civilization. The lack of any facial hair indicated that this man was educated and urban, calling the central city his home. A pale complexion supported this theory and eliminated all chance that he was a warrior, laborer, or courier. He had clear and attentive eyes, further suggesting an education above normal. Those eyes were focused on hers, demonstrating an impressive degree of self-confidence. Upon meeting the princess, most people didn't dare match her glare. This impudent fellow brazenly stared

right back. He was human, which ruled out a member of the elven Instarya tribe.

*Leaving what? A scion of one of the powerful merchant houses?
Nephew of a governor?*

“This is a friend of mine, a scrivener,” Virgil said in introduction.

Farilane’s eyes widened. *Scrivener?* He might as well have introduced the fellow as a thief. “Scribing is illegal.”

Virgil frowned and sighed.

“Sorry,” she said. She forced a smile at the new guy. “Good morning! So nice to meet you! How’s the family? Have a nice trip in?” She put gusto into her words to blanket the insincerity.

“Oh, for all the gods’ sakes.” Virgil shook his head. “Just stop now, please. I beg you.”

“I tried,” she said and retreated back into her lair. Glancing over her shoulder—*He’s still looking at me.*

“With such effort”—Virgil followed her in—“you might make a success of such complex endeavors as falling asleep.”

“You’d think that, wouldn’t you?” she said.

“Maybe you should. A good rest might improve your manners.” Virgil followed her as she wove between the stacks of parchment leaves, bound books, and pyramids of scrolls that formed literary stalagmites rising up from the priceless Calynian rug.

“What’s with him?” she asked, pointing at the new arrival who remained at the door. He looked wide-eyed around the room. “Do you need to slap your leg, whistle, and offer a treat or something?”

“Oh! Sorry,” the scribe said, and just before entering bit his lower lip and smiled at her in a seriously charming manner.

Despite her natural repulsion to strangers, Farilane enjoyed how the man had successfully, and subtly, continued her canine metaphor by demonstrating the human equivalent of raising his ears and tilting his head. *He’s cute, at least.*

“Close the door, and don’t move from that spot,” she ordered, as the scribe attempted to follow their path. He, too, was dressed in the old-fashioned pallium robes, although his were black, with a blue stole worn backward in the fashion of a scholar. The lavish robes were a hazard to her precise but fragile filing system, and she fought a cringe.

“Wouldn’t think of it,” he said, stopping between the five-hundred-year-old stool she was in the process of refinishing and a tower of scrolls stacked in chronological order. “This place is . . .”

She waited as the scribe continued to look about at the framed diagrams, maps, and seals hanging in close order on the walls.

“ . . . wonderful,” he finally concluded.

“I’m so pleased you approve. Just remember—none of this exists. Repeat it to anyone, and I’ll have you torn apart by dogs.”

The scrivener blinked.

“You might want to go a little easier on him,” Virgil said.

“Why? Is he the son of a council member?”

“No, he’s replacing me.”

Farilane stared at the old man for a long moment, then shook her head. “That’s ridiculous. Why do you need replacing? What are you talking about?”

“When we were on that cliff, you made me see that . . . well, I’m too old for this anymore.”

“You’re quitting?”

“I prefer to say I’m retiring.”

“Quitting,” she insisted.

“You need someone younger, someone . . .”

“What? My own age?” She shook her head and laughed. She didn’t like the sound, too high, too cynical, too angry, too hurt.

“I’m sorry,” Virgil said. “I know this isn’t easy for you.”

Farilane folded her lips tight, breathed through her nose, and shook her head. “Why do you say that?”

The philosopher offered a sad frown in return.

“It’s just . . .” she started, then stopped because she thought her voice might crack if she didn’t. Swallowing, she began again. “We only just got to know each other. We just met, and now . . .”

“I’ve been with you for *forty-seven years*.”

“I know!” She wiped her eyes. “It’s like we were just starting to click. I was finally getting used to your habits: the way you like your tea with lemon and to be woken up just before dawn.”

“I hate waking up before dawn.”

“What? No, you like getting up early so you can see the sunrise during your morning runs.”

Virgil laughed. “I haven’t run in the morning for almost thirty years.”

“Really?”

He nodded. “And I can’t drink tea anymore. It keeps me awake, and I have a hard enough time sleeping.”

They just stared at each other for a long moment, as if playing a game. Who would blink first?

“Why are you really doing this?” she asked.

“I told you. I can’t keep up anymore, so I want—”

“How long?” Her voice lost all humor, all patience.

Virgil paused. He bit his lip, folded his hands, and looked at his feet. That lock of rebellious white hair swung in front of his eyes.

“How long do you have, Virgil?”

“Not long.”

Farilane felt hot tears welling. “Does it hurt?”

“Not as much as this.” Virgil raised his head and she saw his tears through hers. “Not as much as saying goodbye to you.”

Farilane reached out and took firm hold of the man’s trembling hands.

“I’m sorry,” he said.

She shook her head. “Not your fault. You’re only human.”

“I’m so sorry, Farilane.” Virgil placed his face in his palms and wept.

She held him while he cried. She cried, too, but it wasn’t the same. This wasn’t her first farewell. She’d been saying goodbye like this for years. Everyone she cared about eventually left. They didn’t want to. They just got old. The first few *departures*, as she liked to call them, nearly killed her. Then she learned to keep her distance. What Virgil saw as poor manners—her rudeness, disregard, and neglect—were all shields against the inevitable loss she’d have to face. But she was a poor warrior.

Don’t care too much for them, her father had told Farilane. If you do, you’ll either die or go insane.

This wonderful tidbit of wisdom had been offered over the casket of her own mother as Farilane wailed in grief—her father’s way of consoling his devastated daughter who had lost not only a mother, but a best friend.

The worst thing was that Farilane’s father was right. It took a few deaths for her to realize it, but Farilane eventually understood. Yet, despite all her

precautions, departures still hurt. She loved Virgil. Not like she'd loved her mother, or Jona. When they had died, those two had taken entire pieces of her. She'd kept Virgil at arm's length. But the news bled her. She was losing another one. The difference this time: While the scar would remain forever, she knew the pain would fade. Farilane would never forget Virgil, the young and ambitious teacher, who for his whole first year worked under two false impressions: that she was much younger than he, and that he had actually been appointed to be her teacher.

When Virgil recovered, she brushed the tears away and asked him, "What do you say we get some pie?"

Virgil scrubbed his face with the palms of his hands. "That's your answer for everything."

She nodded. "That's because *pie is the answer for everything.*"

"I want custard this time."

"This time, Virgil, this time you can have any pie you like, my friend. I'm the princess, remember. I get whatever I want."

"Maybe not quite everything," Virgil said.

"Yeah . . . maybe not quite."



When she wanted to be alone—really alone—Farilane went to the family crypt. That evening, after seeing Virgil to his room, she struggled to cross a sea of depression, and the Vault of Days stood out like a lighthouse to a storm-tossed ship.

According to family lore, the palace had not been intended to be the residence of the emperor—at least not the home of a living one. After Nyphron's death, his son, Nolyn, had begun construction on a tomb for his famous father: one tenth crypt, and the rest a golden-domed monument. Nolyn, who hated the archaic, war-weary, Instarya-styled First Palace, had every intention of building a proper home for himself and his new bride, but he'd never found the right location. So much time, effort, and artistry had been poured into constructing the massive tomb, it seemed a waste for it to hold only a single coffin. The crypt was also in the perfect location at the end of the Grand Marchway. Rather than build a separate palace, Nolyn

altered the plans for the crypt, designating sub-levels for the vaults, and everything above ground as the new imperial residence. As a result, Nyphron slept undisturbed, for the public was denied access through the palace, and the first emperor's family never visited—at least no one besides Farilane.

Since her mother's death, Nyphron's great-great-great-great-granddaughter had made a habit of wandering there, at first to make a daily pilgrimage to her mother's final resting place and later to take refuge from the living world. She marveled at the Vault of Days, a massive chamber of lavish gold and silver that had been laid out like a ballroom. As a child, she'd imagined the ghosts of all the prior emperors and their wives dancing nightly in the hall. She pictured the men in uniforms complete with dress swords, the ladies in lavish gowns with hair styles that defied belief. Most often, her visits consisted of one-sided conversations held with the sarcophagi of her forebears that began with questions and ended in heated arguments and tears—hers, not theirs. Never theirs.

Descending the stairs and entering the Vault of Days, Farilane had no intention of asking questions or arguing. She had come to weep, and she could think of no better place. Her plans for a good, solid, out-of-the-way cry were shattered when—to her great surprise—she discovered Nordyan standing in the archway between the Vault of Days and the crypt.

"Picking out your spot?" she asked.

Her brother spun as if she'd thrown a spear at his back. Relief washed over his face, and a smile grew. "Yes, I want to be on the top shelf of this second row, not trapped for all eternity under father and the two Estermons. How about you?"

Farilane hesitated. She'd never considered the question before and found that strange. She looked past him into the communal crypt, which was illuminated by burning braziers. Colonnades lined both sides, arches framed chambers within which lay stone sarcophagi along with life-sized statues of the three dead emperors. Plenty of space remained. Nyphron had his own private room beyond a door marked with the epitaph: *Here lies Nyphron the Great, first emperor of Elan, savior of the world of Man.*

"I won't be here," she explained. "These berths are reserved for emperors."

She saw confusion in his eyes; the idea had obviously never occurred to him, either. He looked back across the Vault of Days to where the wives were interred, each in clever drawers that pulled out—their names chiseled above the recessed handles. “Not a wife, either. But you are family—a blood descendant.”

“Perhaps I’ll be propped up in a chair in that corner.”

“Don’t say that.”

“Why?”

“It’s ghastly.”

She wasn’t certain how to translate that. *Is he uncomfortable with my death or the idea of a corpse left to rot in a chair?* Farilane had been close to her brother when they were children, but he had become aloof about the time of their mother’s death. When she most needed him, he wasn’t there. Farilane had resented it. Over the decades, she’d come to understand, but understanding and forgiveness were two different things.

“What brings you down here?” she asked.

He shook his head. “I don’t know.”

Probably a lie, but she wasn’t certain. He often acted without thought. Between the two of them, Farilane always felt he was the most like their mother.

“Have you heard about Virgil?”

He nodded but offered no sympathy.

She didn’t want any but found it odd just the same. “Were you expecting to find me here?”

“I suppose.”

“Did you have something you wanted to speak to me about?” This was, in Farilane’s mind at least, a wholly rhetorical question. She was opening the door to the visitor on the porch and asking if he wanted to come in.

Instead, Nordyan shrugged.

“You don’t know?”

Nordyan huffed with annoyance, turning away. “Look, I just haven’t seen you in . . . I don’t know—a really long time. Strange, don’t you think? Brother and sister—twins—living in the same house for two hundred years and we hardly see each other.”

“Not quite two hundred,” she reminded him.

He took a step back. He looked hurt.

She didn't want to hurt him—wasn't his fault. Maybe it wasn't anyone's fault. Farilane would have blamed it on the capriciousness of the gods if she believed in any. Maybe that was how Nordyan saw it, but something had brought him there, and it wasn't Virgil. Compassion? Sympathy? Love? Most likely it was guilt, but since she had her choice, she picked all of the above. What good came from hating a brother?

"Look, Laney," he began, like they were kids again. "I just wanted to . . ." He held out his hands as if trying to grasp something in the air. Another shrug.

She waited.

"It's not my fault, that you're not in line for the throne," he finally said. "It's tradition. That's all."

"Tradition?" Farilane raised a brow. She glanced at the trio of sarcophagi in the vault. "There have only been five emperors—all men—never a daughter—never co-rulers. That's like saying you can't try something new for breakfast because you've had porridge five mornings straight."

"It's just the way it is," he insisted. "And I . . ." Nordyan hesitated, then clapped his hands to his sides, and he headed for the stairs without another word.

"Do you even want to be emperor?" she asked with enough blunt force to turn him around.

"Of course. Who wouldn't want to rule the world?" His voice lacked conviction, his tone betraying the weakness in his character. As emperor, Nordyan would be manipulated and controlled by those around him.

He took after our mother, and I took all the Instarya blood.

"Sorry about Virgil," Nordyan said on his way out. "I know you liked him. You really shouldn't get too close to people—to humans—to those with such short lifespans. Father says it can make you insane. You have to keep your distance, wall yourself off, or . . ." He stared then in a way that puzzled her. Normally, she could read her brother, but his face was indecipherable.

He'd come to tell her something but didn't seem to have the nerve.

Nordyan walked out, leaving her pondering the message he never delivered. Or maybe he had.



Virgil's replacement was still there when Farilane returned.

The thin man with the prominent nose and staring eyes sat on the antique stool in her personal chambers, just about where she'd left him. No—precisely where she'd left him.

Don't move from that spot. She recalled her own edict and smiled. *He's interesting. I'll give Virgil that.*

Farilane didn't need another replacement tutor. She hadn't needed Virgil. Jona had hired the first when it became obvious that her nagging cough wasn't going away. Jona had been her second mother, appointed to that task by Farilane's real mother, Princess Lydia. Lydia, anticipating how her passing would devastate Farilane, charged Jona with the task of watching over her daughter, then naming a successor. This peculiar tradition continued. As far as Farilane could tell, it had stemmed from a fear that, if left alone, Farilane would implode, or perhaps go mad, commit suicide, or develop a preference for unsavory men. As asinine as it might be, there was no question the custom was born of compassion. She understood that each handoff, as cruel as it felt—and it felt like being dumped off a cliff by a trusted friend—was ultimately an act of love. Despite that, she always hated the replacements.

Farilane didn't want to hate him, any more than she wanted to judge people by their looks. Always happened, though. The weather and her own mind were a pair that couldn't be controlled, no matter how much effort she put into it.

I'm going to put this poor bastard through such misery.

He seemed like a decent sort. Cute, quiet, and clearly trustworthy. She honestly suspected he hadn't moved from that spot in over four hours. It was wrong to torture an innocent man, but she would. Unable to help herself, she'd wreck this sad little scrivener. Farilane was a person of many talents, none so perfected as her ability to destroy a person's day. He would seek to console, try to lighten her mood, or offer comfort. She would hate him for it and respond with world-class insults customized to inflict the

most damage. If he survived with a shred of self-respect, they might become friends. By the look of him, she doubted that.

Don't judge a person by how they—I know, I know. Shut up, already! Geez!

“Still here, eh?” she greeted him.

“How was the pie?” he asked, standing up.

“Awful. Misery pie always is.” She closed the door and then faced him. “You don’t have to stay here. I don’t need a hand to hold. I’ll be two hundred years old in a few months. I’m not a child, and this is not my first funeral. And I certainly don’t need a pretend scrivener.”

“Pretend?”

“You don’t actually know how to read.” She moved through her artistic filing system with practiced ease, aiming for the island of her desk. He started to speak, but she cut him off. “Oh, I’m certain you’re excellent at copying text. That’s what a scribe does. That’s all a scribe does. Just need a steady hand and the ability to use a pen. I’ll even grant you the benefit of the doubt and assume you might also be a wonderful illuminator. You have to have some artistic ability to accurately draw all the letters. You certainly have the eyes for it. But you can’t read.”

“Why do you say that?”

“The stool you were sitting on is a first-millennium artifact, an antique. It is one of the original twelve seats fashioned to furnish the Teshlor Guildhall when the knight’s order was first founded, immediately after the death of Nyphron in the year eight fifty. The knights gave it to me as a token of appreciation, and because I love old things. That one is believed to have belonged to none other than Amicus Killian.”

“Oh!” the man said, alarmed. “My apologies. I didn’t know it was so valuable.”

“Don’t worry. It’s lasted this long. It will suffer your buttocks just fine.”

“But . . .” The scribe appeared perplexed. “I don’t see how that suggests I can’t read.”

“I’m in the process of restoring it. There’s a sign next to that stool that reads *wet paint*. Your aforementioned buttocks have a wonderful pale smear.”

“Oh.”

“Although, I am curious.” Farilane sat down at her desk and planted her elbows on it. “As reading and writing are against imperial law, how is it you survived as a scribe?”

“I’ve been working abroad.”

“Where?”

“The Belgric Kingdom,” he said, then after a moment he added, “That’s the dwarven kingdom.”

She smiled. “Yes, I know. What were you scribing down there? I wasn’t aware the dwarfs were terribly keen on literature.”

“They aren’t, but there’s a small community of imperial writers in exile. I first worked on *The Tale of Ibernus the Giant*, a lovely story about a collar that refuses to unlock until the wearer is dead.” He paused and thought a moment. “Actually, it’s not all that lovely a story, now that I think of it. I also worked on *Elquin*.”

“Orintine Fallon’s poem?” Farilane sat up.

“You’ve heard of it?”

“It’s considered a literary masterpiece, and it’s not even done. Orintine Fallon is a genius. His theory that patterns in nature are reflected in society is . . . amazing.”

“True, but his habit of picking his teeth is revolting.”

She stood up. “You’ve met Orintine!”

The man nodded. “Lived with him down on the southern tip of West Echo for a year as we worked on the poem. Bad judgment on my part. Artists are so . . . messy.” The scribe looked around, then offered an apologetic grimace.

Farilane ignored him. “You worked on the poem with *him*. You . . . assisted Orintine Fallon on the masterwork *Elquin*?”

Again, the man nodded. “Assisted . . . is really the wrong word.”

“I should think so!”

“I would say *I* authored most of it. Orin really assisted *me*.”

Farilane smiled, then chuckled. “Okay, you’re funny. I can see why Virgil picked you.”

He gave her that adorable head tilt again, then asked. “What was it you found?”

“What’s that?”

“When you first opened the door, when you expected Virgil to be alone, you greeted us by saying, ‘You’re not going to believe what I found.’ So what did you find?”

“Oh, that.” She looked down at the pages before her. “It’s nothing.”

“May I?” The scribe gestured toward the path between him and the desk.

She smiled again. “If you’re very careful.”

He nodded. Grasping the skirt of his robes and holding them tight to his legs, he approached and looked at the vellum stack she had rescued from the Goblin Sea cliffs.

“I just found this a few weeks back. Been studying it every waking moment, which is to say, every moment since then. This is an incomplete copy of an extremely ancient work called—”

“*The Book of Brin*,” he finished for her.

She stiffened. “How did you know that?”

The scribe looked guilty and tried to wipe it away by lying. “I’m sure Virgil must have told me.”

“Virgil didn’t know. I never had the chance to tell him what I found.” Farilane glanced at the amateur penmanship that was hard to decipher right-side up, and realized the scribe was looking at it upside down and could still . . . “You *can* read.”

“Yes.” He smiled and nodded. “I’m sorry if I misled you.”

“I don’t understand. Why did you sit on the wet paint?”

The scribe looked back at Amicus Killian’s stool as if he’d been betrayed by an old friend. “You told me not to move from that spot. You were gone for hours.” He shrugged. “I can get a new robe. Feet are harder to come by.”

Again, he made her laugh. Hating him was a great deal harder than she had expected.

“So what is it you found?”

“Another reference to something called the Horn of Gylindora. It’s not in the text, but in the marginalia. I believe this book was the personal property of Falkirk de Roche. These notes, I suspect, were made by him.”

“And that’s significant—why?”

“Because Falkirk was a very successful frontier herdsman. He lived in the ancient Gula-Rhune homelands at a time when the Ba Ran Ghazel were

disputing that territory. By most accounts, he is the founder of the modern imperial province of Alburnia. He wasn't a weak man. Nor was he given to flights of fancy. This was a practical, jaded, weather-beaten rock of an individual, who spent the latter half of his life devoted to the worship of Maribor." She leaned in, supported on her elbows. "How could such a practical, independent man be so thoroughly convinced of the existence of a mythical god at the midpoint of his life that he would build a temple in the middle of nowhere—that is still in the middle of nowhere?" The scribe respectfully waited for her to answer her own question. "Because he was personally converted by the one man capable of it—the man who was known to have been both alive at the time and suspected of having been in that area."

"Who?"

"Bran. Bran the Beloved. Bran, the disciple of Brin himself. Bran, the founder of the Monks of Maribor. That Bran." She tapped the parchments before her with conviction. "These notes were made by a man who had seen the original *Book of Brin*, who spoke to the apprentice of the author himself!"

"For a person who refers to Maribor as *mythical*, you seem strangely excited about this religion."

"I don't care one grain of sand for the religion—any religion for that matter. The gods are a lie we tell ourselves to get through hard times, the same way a woman clings to a rich husband despite witnessing everything except his actual copulation with the widow next door. What I care about is the accidental history threaded through these fairytales. In particular, I'm curious about Falkirk's reference to the Horn of Gylindora—which in later texts has been called the Rhelacan or ancient relic. From what I've been able to determine, this horn helped us win the Great War and may be the most powerful weapon in history. The elves' belief that we have it may be the only thing that keeps them on their side of the river. But . . ."

"But what?"

"I have reason to believe the horn is missing."

"Have you spoken to the emperor about this?"

"Not yet. My grandfather and I aren't close, and he tends to frown on my *hobby* of digging up dangerous *magical objects*, as he calls them. He honestly thinks I'm some kind of sorceress because I can read. Maybe I

should escape to the peninsula of Belgreig like you did. Orintine Fallon and I can live together and have a tempestuous affair.”

“You wouldn’t like it. He lives in a little fishing village on the coast. Nice weather, but it stinks of fish most of the time. And as the dwarven kingdom collapses, the outer villages are left undefended. It’s frequently pillaged by invaders who have a bad habit of destroying what they can’t stuff into their ships—that includes people.”

She laughed. “You’re hilarious. I mean, your tone is so . . . I almost believe you.”

His brows rose. “Best to be wary of what you choose to believe in, Highness. It can come to define who you are.” He nodded toward the rescued parchments. “Case in point.”

“Yes . . . yes, you’re absolutely right. Say, what’s your name?”

“Kile.”

“Is that your first name or your last?”

He thought a moment. “Well, it’s certainly not my first, and I doubt it will be my last.”

Again, she laughed, but Kile the Scrivener kept a disturbingly straight face. Once more, she had to wonder if he was serious.

CHAPTER SIX

THE TRUTH OF HIS STORY

Farilane had stared down a nine-foot giant afflicted with a bad temper and a serious history of violence. She'd purposely sailed a ten-foot sloop into a storm that had sunk a fleet. She'd jumped off a cliff into a pool of water she *suspected* of being deep enough, and she'd challenged a dwarven lord and his kingdom to a fight she'd won by bluffing. The Teshlor Guild had awarded her an honorary Teshlor Shield of Bravery, which meant they thought she was insane. Most of the empire's subjects agreed, attributing her behavior to too much Instarya blood. Farilane was said to be a scholar who had somehow failed to learn the definition of the word *fear*. Despite this, she dreaded meeting her own grandfather. The Emperor Estermon the Second was—even in the privacy of her own mind—*eccentric*.

“Good day, Your Grand Imperial Serene Eminence,” she said, addressing the emperor of the world in the utterly ridiculous manner which he demanded, made all the more ludicrous given that he was on his throne. Not the big ornate chair in the imperial reception hall, but the velvet-trimmed wooden stool that was placed over the golden chamber pot in Estermon the Second's bedroom.

As usual, a mouthful of platitudes wasn't enough.

“You say the words, but I hear no sincerity in them.” He said this leaning forward, so that his necklace—a gold chain adorned with a single tiny key—swayed in front of his chest. His imperial robes were bunched around his waist, spilling across his lap and sparing Farilane a singularly unique imperial view. The coincidence of the fabric, she knew, had no relation to her presence.

Beside the emperor stood the Groom of the Stool at crisp attention, a series of towels folded and draped over his forearm. He could have been replaced by a towel rack.

“Have you ever?”

“Have I ever what?” the emperor asked.

“Have you ever heard anyone address you with that absurd mouthful of blandishments and genuinely mean it?”

She was off on her usual best foot but took solace in the fact that he had invited the comment by receiving her in such a fashion. The meeting wasn’t unexpected or last minute; she’d applied for an audience a week ago.

“You never learned humility,” Estermon said.

“You never taught it.”

He paused, his ancient face compressing, either in sudden contemplation, or an effort to complete his deposit in the golden pot.

“That’s very clever. If words were blades, you’d have no need for bodyguards, but then you’ve always been a smart child, haven’t you? That’s what got you in trouble. Your brilliance proved an irresistible temptation. Reading ruined you.”

“Glad you brought that up, as it’s why I asked to see you. Oh, but before we get to that, allow me to thank you *so much* for clearing your schedule the way you have. It shows how much you care for your only granddaughter, whom you haven’t seen in two years. I missed you, too, Granddada.”

“I’m a busy ruler. What do you want?”

She thought of asking for a more caring grandfather and a better emperor, but instead, she made the unaccustomed adult decision. “How did you get to be emperor?”

Estermon frowned, which made an already wrinkled face all the worse, like stretching out fatigued leather. “I grant you leeway because you’re family and because we’re alone.” Farilane glanced at the Groom of the Stool, who showed no indication that he’d heard the remark. “But I don’t like your jokes.”

“I’m not joking. I seriously want to know. To be precise, did you fight anyone to gain the right?”

“Don’t be absurd.”

“Do you know what the Horn of Gylindora is?”

“Is this a riddle? I don’t like riddles. Too early in the day for riddles.”

“It’s a question. Most people can identify questions by the way the tone of a person’s voice rises at the end of the sentence.”

Estermon smiled—sort of. His old, puckered lips drew out into a disturbing grimace that she chose to believe was a smile. “You’d be smart to watch *your* tone, or my voice *will* rise, and what I say won’t be questioned. And you wonder why I don’t clear my responsibilities to accommodate you. Get out.” He waved at her with his ring-decorated hand.

“I’m not done.”

“Yes, you are, and don’t expect to see me again until your wedding or my funeral.”

This last bit he mostly spat out, which was an indication that he wasn’t kidding. The adage *spitting mad* was coined by those who witnessed Estermon the Second in a rage. The smart ones retreated when the ruler of the world began to froth. She knew he wouldn’t kill her in a rage; he was her grandfather, not a monster. But she might spend time under house arrest in a secluded villa as punishment. Farilane couldn’t afford to lose a day and didn’t feel like taking up watercolors. The sand in her personal hourglass was draining far too fast.

“Farilane,” the emperor called as she made her exit, “as I suspect my funeral will precede your convincing a man to tolerate you, let me give you some important advice. Stay on good terms with your father. He will be emperor soon.” As if to offer proof, he coughed a series of disturbing hacks that brought phlegm to his lips. When he spat, she saw blood.

Farilane was surprised, and not just by the blood. In spite of his anger, Estermon the Second was offering her genuinely beneficial advice. For a moment, he was a real grandfather. In return, she granted him an authentically sad smile, and the truth. “When she died, my father replaced my mother in less than a week. In my grief, he told me I ought to forget Lydia—pretend she had never existed, the same way he had. Easier that way, he said. I did him one better. I pretend my *father* doesn’t exist. Easier that way.”

Ignoring protocol, Farilane turned her back on the emperor, and left.



Descending the Illustrious Stair from the Grand Solarium—a farcically pretentious title for the room she’d just left—Farilane hit the main floor of the palace and found it awash with hundreds of the usual people.

Ambassadors, clerks, military officers, petitioners, servants, and a dizzying number of bureaucrats turned the open-air gallery into a marketplace for influence peddling. Famously having no influence to peddle, Farilane was immune to the feeding frenzy. But this morning, a man chased her.

“Princess Farilane?”

Surprised, she turned and faced an altogether unkempt and greasy fellow jogging toward her. Shoulder-length hair that looked to have been steeped in oil was clumped in locks that fell across an equally slick face. Noting the extensive layers of dirt build-up on every inch of his visible skin, she estimated his last bath must have been around the turn of the century. Whoever he was, the filthy fellow must be new to the city and hadn’t yet discovered that baths were free. He wore a ridiculous wool tunic that—unless he’d lost an insane amount of weight and two inches in height—had belonged to a much larger man. Aside from the stains along the hem, which dragged despite his best efforts to hoist it, the tunic was remarkably clean. Farilane concluded the simple pull-over garment had been borrowed for the purpose of gaining entrance to the palace’s main floor, something his usual attire—if he wore clothes at all—would not likely have accomplished. He had the look of a nervous lamb foraging through a pack of wolves, but he had found the courage to address her, which suggested a certain degree of desperation. He certainly looked wretched enough to be in terrible need—but of what? Farilane began compiling an inexhaustible list of possibilities but realized the truth could only be discovered by asking.

“Yes?” She waited to hear the answer to the riddle.

The man looked shocked, as if he hadn’t expected to get this far. “Ah—I . . .”

He swallowed, then gasped for air. Shifting his weight from one foot to the other, he wiped the slimy hair aside, then dragged the same hand down his cheek. A furrow formed in the dirt as if the sweaty heel of his hand were a plow. “I have an invitation . . . I’m supposed to ask you to . . . if you want to . . . I mean, would you like to . . .”

Farilane reached out and placed her hands on the man's shoulders. He stiffened, as if her touch had turned him to stone.

"Relax," she told him. "Take your time. Think about what you want to say—*then* say it."

His eyes looked as if they might fall out. His mouth was open, but no sound came. Realizing the man wasn't even breathing, she let go. A second later, he began to thaw. Drawing a shuddering breath, he closed his eyes and started again. This time he spoke with such deliberate articulation that she knew his speech had been memorized.

"I am here to extend an invitation for you to meet with Master Proust on a matter of extreme urgency and importance, which concerns the future of the empire." He opened his eyes once more and breathed.

Not even on my list. Farilane was certain he had been about to ask for food, a job, clemency for a loved one, or perhaps a bar of soap. This was so far off the mark, she was intrigued. "Who is this Proust? What is he a master of?"

"He, ah . . . hard to say exactly."

"And why didn't he come here if he wished to speak to me?"

"Master Proust is a very important man—"

She smiled. "And I'm the imperial princess. With the exception of the emperor, my father, or my brother—there is no one more important. People come to us."

"Yes, yes, yes—I understand. So does he. It's—it's just that he can't. It's hard to explain."

Farilane had no doubt about that. This man likely had a difficult time explaining his name. "Fine. What is so urgent and important?"

"I don't know."

"You don't know?" Farilane suppressed a laugh. "You want me to go meet a stranger you can't describe, who refuses to come here for reasons unknown, to discuss something you know nothing about?"

He answered with a painful grimace.

"Look"—she almost put a hand on his shoulder again, but caught herself—"as enticing as all this sounds, and I'm not being facetious here, it really is bizarre enough to be intriguing. I'm certain I have other plans. Almost positive I was going to file dead skin off my heels later today. So please relay to your *master* that I'll have to pass. I'm sorry you had to call

in your last favor to borrow that tunic, but a meeting is not going to happen.” Farilane turned. She took three steps, then the man managed to speak again.

“He wants to help you find the Horn of Gylindora.”

Farilane stopped.



“Going somewhere, Your Highness?” Ethan Yardley asked as Farilane followed her new guide out of the palace and into Imperial Square. Seeing the Teshlor Knight, she knew it was past midday. In the mornings, the gate was watched by Ransara Soto, one of the few Calynian Teshlors, the one who wore a gold earring and made the ladies swoon. Ethan was no slouch, either. The man was as chiseled as a statue, but unlike most of the knights, he let his hair grow long.

“Yes,” she replied, still struggling to attach the pendant to the collar of her hastily grabbed cape. “I was thinking of heading out to the forest, stripping naked, slathering myself in honey, and then running through the trees screaming, ‘Come get me, bears!’”

“I’d take that as sarcasm if someone else said it.” Ethan fell into step alongside her, as was his job. Knights assigned to gate duty were required to act as escorts for any member of the imperial family leaving the security of the palace. Had she been her brother or father, Ethan wouldn’t have said a word. He’d have silently followed behind, shadowing her steps and keeping as invisible as possible. Any attempt at familiarity would have been rebuffed and a complaint lodged with the Teshlor Guild. Farilane was different, and the knights knew it. She liked them, and they liked her.

Ethan pointed at the greasy fellow, who clearly didn’t appreciate being pointed at by a man in armor carrying three swords. “Who’s he?”

“Don’t know.”

“Honey merchant?”

Farilane laughed. “Tell me something, Ethan. Why is it that all of you are so damn handsome?”

“I’m serious. Who is he?”

“I’m serious, too. I don’t know who he is, and you *are* handsome. Is the ability to make women faint merely by smiling a prerequisite for knighthood?”

“Why are you following him, then?”

Ethan was going all Teshlor-serious on her and not playing along.

“He’s taking me to meet someone.”

“Who?”

“I don’t know.”

“Where?”

“No idea. That’s why I’m following him.”

The day was bright and warm, the sky a wonderful springtime blue. Along the Grand Marchway, the trees retained their blossoms. Founder’s Day was two weeks ago, but tremble stands persisted, the merchants trying to move the remainder of their stock before it went bad. Farilane loved trembles. The fermented fruit juice served in cute little thimble-shaped cups were only available for a short time each spring, making the drink special. “Liquid spring,” her mother used to call it. “Sure to cure the winter gloom and make way for summer bloom.”

“I’m starting to wish the honey story were true,” Ethan said, his eyes still on their guide.

She flashed him a wicked smile. “I *bet* you do.”

The three marched through the square where a crowd had formed around a bald man in a plain white pallium standing on a weathered crate that had once held eggs. Gesticulating wildly, he shouted about the evils of wine and women.

“You should listen to him,” Farilane advised the knight.

Ethan gave her a smirk. “Why heed a priest when a goddess walks beside me?”

She grinned. “Wow, you’re good.”

“At many things, princess. At many, many things.”

Her brows lifted. “I stand corrected. You’re awful.”

“You there!” Ethan called to their guide. “What’s your name?”

The greasy fellow tripped and nearly fell. Might have been the tunic’s fault, but the man had been so tightly strung, Farilane was surprised he didn’t explode altogether. His behavior was hard to read. He might merely be shy. Arranging a date with any woman could be a trial; making one with

the imperial princess had to be a nightmare. Then again, it could also be that he was luring her to a kidnapping, a plan far less appealing with a Teshlor Knight suddenly tagging along.

“Sheldon Faust,” the greasy guide answered. Then after gathering up his tunic’s excess material, he rushed forward once more. He moved with all the speed of a superstitious man dashing past a graveyard—fast enough to cut the misery short, slow enough not to attract attention. He led the way out of the square and onto Reglan Road. They went but a block before turning onto the less traveled, far narrower Tope Street. Sheldon stayed out in front, glancing back often to reassure himself she was still there. Each time he looked, he seemed surprised. Then those same eyes would flutter to Ethan and instantly jerk away as if the knight were a hot pan.

“So you don’t know anything about this guy?” Ethan asked, ignoring the fact that Sheldon could easily hear their conversation.

She rolled her eyes. “Of course I do. Sheldon Faust here is in his mid-thirties, unmarried, born and raised in a small village in Warica where he apprenticed to become a carpenter, but settled for journeyman joiner. All that changed recently when he delivered a cabinet to a customer here in Percepliquis and met a man called Proust who fundamentally changed his life. Oh—and he’s right-handed.”

Sheldon stopped in the middle of Tope Street and stared at her. “How . . . how do you know all that?”

“Well, you just told me your name, didn’t you?”

“Yes, yes, but what about the rest?” Sheldon appeared absolutely terrified—which wasn’t all that different from how he’d been before, but her supposition had clearly tipped the scales enough to force a stop.

Concerned he might not continue walking, Farilane went to the trouble of explaining. “Your age is an educated guess based off the start of wrinkles and the maiden voyage of a receding hairline, not to mention a host of other incidentals. Your chinstrap beard is popular in the province of Warica, and your sandals are typical of a small villager. Well-developed and scabbed calluses visible on the ridge of only your *right* thumb suggest you’re right-handed and repeatedly use an upright tool: a hammer or sword. Your flattened left thumb confirms the use, but not quite the mastery, of a hammer as well as a chisel. Your overall size leans in favor of woodworking rather than stone. And you show no indication of being a

soldier. Your age and willingness to abandon your trade suggests you're not a master. You wear no ring, bracelet, or necklace, any of which would be customary for a married man of Warica—even a poor one. The most likely way an impoverished woodworker from Warica could find himself in Percepliquis is if he were sent here to deliver a product. Granted, there are hundreds of potential choices from barrels to boats to boxes, but given that Warica cabinetry is currently very popular in the capital, and all the other options are made locally, I settled on cabinet-maker, based on sheer probability. Cabinets are furniture, and joiners dominate the furniture field—hence, “journeyman joiner from Warica.” The extreme reverence with which you spoke of this Proust fellow left me with the lingering impression he's not your boss. The fact that you are doing his bidding rather than going home tells me you've given up your dream of carpentry for a new future serving Proust.”

“Oh,” was all the journeyman joiner could utter.

“If you're not already scared,” Ethan told Sheldon, “you should be. You've just invited the Princess Farilane into your life. Nothing will ever be the same. This is a truism the Teshlor Guild has long known.”

Sheldon nodded once, then resumed his march into ever-diminishing alleyways.

They emerged onto Ule-da-var Way. This was the West End of Percepliquis, home to hardworking men and women. Here were the lumber warehouses, sawmills, and training clubs for arena gladiators. Sheldon passed all these and entered a horse barn.

Far from an ordinary stable, this massive building was the equestrian hostelry for the famed Grand Circus charioteer teams. Formed from a series of broad brick arches that held up three floors of stalls, mangers, granaries, showers, an animal hospital, a hay elevator, and showrooms, this was the heart of the most lucrative entertainment industry in the empire.

Sheldon led the way through open doors on the bottom level, where the smell of straw, grain, and manure greeted them with all the subtlety of an outhouse in high summer. Dim and dank, the pungent bottom floor of the Imperial Grand Circus Stables would have been suffocating if not for the stalwart breeze that forced its way through the large open doors. The floor was slick and littered with straw. The air remained one great cloud of hay-and-straw dust only visible within shafts of sunlight, of which there were

few. The ground floor of the Grand Circus Stables was a smelly cavern crammed tight with horses.

Farilane wanted to ask why they were there but guessed her question would be answered faster if she exercised patience. As usual, she was proved correct. Near the back, with a window view of the training track, a man waited for them.

“Mister Proust, I presume?” Farilane asked.

“Indeed,” he said, then turned to Sheldon and added, “Thank you. Carry on.”

Sheldon nodded, took one last long look at her, then scurried down one of the straw-carpeted corridors, patting the rumps of several horses as he went.

Proust was an unimposing, nondescript man: dark hair, dark eyes, and a medium, noncommittal skin tone. One thing stood out. He was relaxed. Few men appeared so indifferent in her presence. Most groveled, and many froze. Then there were those like Sheldon, for whom ignorance had granted a bumbling, childlike response. Proust stood, arms folded, slightly stooped, leaning one shoulder against a support column. Her presence neither frightened nor impressed him. He also failed to blather. No swarm of nervous words spewed from his mouth. In fact, he didn’t say anything at all, just stared. No, not stared—*studied* her.

He’s sizing me up. The idea was remarkable. This man, dressed in a queer and unsightly arrangement of dark-dyed woolen tunic and mantle, who had chosen to meet in the back of a glorified horse stable presumably out of fear, was assessing her like . . . *Like I’m a horse he might buy?*

“I was told you wanted to speak to me.”

“I very much do.” In contrast to his clothes, Proust’s voice was cultured, with the hint of an accent she struggled to place. “And I appreciate your coming. It’s unorthodox to ask the imperial princess to trudge across the city and meet in a filthy stable, but these are the times we live in.”

Farilane found this a curious opening statement: half apology, half accusation, and with just a dash of superiority. “What times are those, pray tell?”

“The age when truth is outlawed by faceless conspirators who are bent on rewriting history.” He said this with all the lyrical tonality of an

experienced orator lecturing to his peers and ignoring the possibility that she wasn't his audience.

"I see."

"Do you?" he asked intently, as if no one could, but with the clear suggestion that he would be willing to enlighten her. "Do you really?"

"Yes. Yes, I do," she said firmly. "Conspiracies are wonderful for manipulating people—particularly the faceless sort. Proof is unnecessary. Only suspicion is required because anything is possible, isn't it? But I can see you're skeptical of my credentials to properly evaluate *your* particular contrivance, so allow me to elaborate. You're Proust, the leader of this fashionable new religion which insists that my great-great-great-great-grandfather was the son of a god and a poor human girl, isn't that right?"

"Did Sheldon . . . ?"

"Didn't need to. His blind admiration is commonly seen in devotees. Combine that with your contradictory, self-deprecating arrogance, followed by your opening salvo concerning conspiracies and the rewriting of history, and the fact that the name Proust is often mentioned prominently in relation to the Church of Nyphron, and the conclusion is undeniable."

"I see."

"Do you? Do you really?" Farilane was only warming up. "You and yours are all the rage these days. Salacious stories are crowd-pleasers, aren't they? And they spread like urine pissed on pavement, always running faster downhill than up. It's wonderful to learn that our empire was founded by nothing less than a godling. Who wouldn't want that? But there're problems with this whole theory, aren't there?"

Proust appeared significantly less sure of himself, but she still wasn't done. His wheelhouse had rolled into her pet peeve. "How did that work, I wonder? Did Maribor assume the form of a bull, then rape the poor girl like in that ridiculous story of Anadale and Arkum, or did he become the man of her dreams and *then* force himself on her? I suppose he could have treated her to a nice meal, followed by a day at the chariot races. And it's also possible he spent months getting to know her parents and obtaining their permission to treat her backside to a soft field of flowers, before abandoning her and their child, but honestly that doesn't fit the whole god-of-mankind persona, does it? Can anyone really take a deity who asks

permission of the father before raping the daughter seriously? Really, when you think about it, that whole bull story seems more plausible.”

“I didn’t ask you here to discuss religion,” Proust said a bit stiffly, his irritation cloaked in measured words.

“How disappointing. I did so want to know if I’m the direct descendant of a god. Wouldn’t that make me divine, and if so, why do I need to eat? More importantly, why, when I *do* eat, does all the weight go to my hips?” She glanced at Ethan. “Shouldn’t I be able to just will it away? Or better yet, wish it into my breasts where it will do some good?”

Ethan said nothing, nor did she expect him to. As a Teshlor Knight, he knew better than to interfere in a sparring match.

“You don’t like me, and we only just met.” Proust took the direct route, now that this was the only road she left open to him. “Why?”

Farilane shrugged. “You’re right. I’m being presumptuous. Who knows? Perhaps you’re a wonderful man who just happens to feel that all elves should either be executed or boxed up and shipped back to Erivania—a belief that is also a cornerstone of this wonderful new world religion sweeping the empire. I have no idea what I was thinking—oh, wait—I’m elvish. Perhaps that was it.”

“I didn’t ask you here to discuss any of that, either.”

“Of course not. You prefer to sway the minds of people who don’t know any better. Ignorance is fine kindling for building a fire of hatred that you can blow in whatever direction you find useful.” She held up a finger and shook her head. “One problem with that, too. Wind has a nasty way of changing direction, and fire an almost predictable tendency to resist control. Soon, the flames are going in every direction, destroying everyone and everything, and by then, there’s never enough water.”

Proust stared at her then looked at Ethan. “Are you going to arrest me?”

Ethan looked at Farilane as if he was wondering the same.

The princess folded her arms and licked her lips. “That depends. Tell me what you know about the Horn of Gylindora.”

Proust smiled.



“Well?” she asked, when after a minute, Proust continued to smile, but said nothing.

“Oh—I thought you were going to explain that, too.” Proust leaned back against the pillar. “You appear to know everything.”

“No one knows *everything*. For example, I don’t know how it is *you* know about the horn. Why don’t we start there?”

“I could explain, but it involves conspiracies and cover-ups and all the things you don’t believe in. So what’s the point?”

“Look, you asked me to come here.”

“And you came. Sheldon didn’t put a knife to your ribs. You followed him here because you wanted to. I’d say that makes us even. So drop the high and mighty, know-it-all princess performance. I don’t impress you. Fine. You don’t impress me, either. But I can see you’re skeptical of *my* credentials to evaluate your particular contrivance. So allow *me* to elaborate. You’re Princess Farilane of House Nyphron, twin sister to the Crown Prince Nordyan, daughter of Nyrian. You’ll be two hundred in three months, and—”

“Everyone knows all that.”

“You like to correct people.” He grinned. “You bite your nails and clean your ears with whatever is at hand. You love history and solving puzzles, and—”

“Still common knowledge, yes?” She turned to Ethan, who nodded. “The average twelve-year-old stable boy working here would report the same things. You’ll need to try harder to impress me.”

Proust sighed. “Fine. You’re the unwanted *extra* twin. The problem that won’t go away. You want to be a hero like in the old stories you’ve read but know you can’t for the same reason you can’t be emperor—*girls* never are. You work harder, and take greater chances to prove to the world, to your family, that *you* are the better choice for ruler, but you know—don’t suspect, don’t question, don’t wonder, but *know*—that it doesn’t matter. But maybe something in the old writings says different. Maybe there is a way?”

“You’re speaking about the horn now?”

“Yes, I’m speaking about the horn—and you’re right. The law requires that it be presented to all eligible challengers, and that if it is blown, the heir to the throne and the challenger must fight. Winner takes the chair.” He leaned in. “No one presented the horn after Nyphron was murdered. As a

result, no one blew it. Therefore, Nolyn was never truly the emperor. Nor was Nurgya, Estermon the First, or our current emperor.”

She shook her head. “The horn is elvish specific. Failing to blow it doesn’t prevent Estermon the Second from being emperor, only from being ruler of the elves.”

He nodded. “True. But if he’s not ruler of the elves, what they call the *fane*, and they find out, he won’t long be emperor, either.”

Farilane took an unconscious step back as if Proust had hit her. She stared at him, stunned. “They don’t know?”

“Ah!” Proust grinned. “Did I finally touch on something you’re not aware of?”

Farilane barely heard him as she calculated, looking for mistakes. Her knowledge of the horn and the Great War were largely defined by her study of fragmented texts, most of it attributed to the legendary *Book of Brin*—no complete copies of which had survived the centuries. The majority of her education derived from other books that referred to the original text. Too many of these she found to be in contradiction, but enough aligned so that she was able to piece together a working narrative. Nothing in her reconstructed account allowed for the elves to know that Nyphron had died.

Proust pushed on. “Consider that at the end of the Great War, Nyphron divided the two cultures.”

“They were already divided. Humans and elves were at war, after all,” she pointed out. He’d landed a blow, and she refused to grant him even a modicum of misstatement.

He shrugged. “True, but Nyphron made it permanent and absolute. Men are forbidden, on pain of death, from crossing the Nidwalden River. The same goes for the elves. An appointed steward in Erivania functions with complete autonomy. In eighteen hundred years, there has been no communication between the two regions. Elves often live into their late second millennium. Some have even passed the three thousand mark. If alive today, Nyphron would be two thousand, seven hundred and fifty-five, and be expected to live several centuries more. But time is running out. The reign of an elvish ruler is either their lifetime or three thousand years, whichever ends first. The elves will eventually expect to see that horn, and if they don’t . . .”

“The war will resume.”

“We didn’t win that war,” Proust told her. “Nyphron cheated. He didn’t conquer the elves. He blew the horn and used their own rules to assume authority over them. Without the horn, we would have lost. In a few hundred years from now—or sooner—without the horn to save us . . .”

“The Church of Nyphron’s creed is that the first emperor was divine, and *this* is why he won. Now you’re saying your god is a cheat?”

“From the viewpoint of the elves, he would be.”

“So Nyphron isn’t divine? He isn’t the son of God?”

“Of course he is. Who do you think gave him the horn?”

She considered this, but found no obvious flaw, at least nothing beyond the typical absurdities of religions to accept fantasies in lieu of facts. The horn itself was an absurdity. Farilane knew elves worshipped the god Ferrol, but having witnessed her own family’s lackadaisical devotion, she got the impression the worship of that god was more of a quaint tradition than steadfast belief. If what Proust said were true—and she grudgingly had to admit it did match what she’d found in her research—then the elves were more devoted to their god than even the Monks of Maribor.

Is it possible that the elves surrendered a war they were winning because of a religious belief? Had ignorant superstition forced them to concede?

“Do you know where this horn is?” she asked.

Proust’s boastful demeanor deflated. “I was hoping you did. What was it you pulled out of Alburnia?”

“You were spying on me?”

For the first time, Ethan’s expression shifted from patient to disturbed, which on the face of a knight was never a good thing. His gaze on Proust sharpened.

The formerly confident post-leaner slowly drew back as if Farilane’s previously well-trained dog had begun to growl. “Did you plan your trip to be a secret? If so, you’re not good at stealth. Anyone who had even a mild interest in the actions of the imperial princess knew where you went. They simply lacked an understanding of *why* you went there.”

“And you know why?”

“Once more, you don’t play your cards close to your chest, Your Highness. Taken as a whole, your behavior tells a story. Over the last few decades, you’ve raided through tenth-century crypts, led a dig at the

presumed ruins of ancient Alon Rhist, and have made a habit of visiting monasteries that later report important books missing, or at least moved.

“I like to read, and there aren’t that many books.”

“True, but it is also quite possible that you might be looking for something specific, something more than a good adventure yarn. All I want to know is—did you find it?”

Farilane frowned. “I found part of a copy of a book.”

“And did you read it?”

She nodded.

“Anything about the horn?”

“In the margins, it is mentioned.”

“Anything specific about its location?”

She shook her head.

Proust thought a moment. “The day Nyphron was murdered, the horn disappeared.”

Proust had impressed her with his revelation about the elves’ ignorance of Nyphron’s death, but he lost points with this foolishness. “Nyphron wasn’t murdered, everyone knows he was killed in a ghazel invasion of the city.”

“That’s only one theory. We both know there are several contradictory accounts of the first emperor’s death.”

Farilane’s brows rose. She glanced at Ethan, but then she remembered it was Kolby and Cedric who had been with her when she said those same words to Virgil—or something close—just a few weeks before.

Coincidence? Probably, but for a moment she felt unsure of herself, and more than a little uneasy. She’d heard rumors, fanciful tales about the leader of the Church of Nyphron, a charismatic man who knew more than was possible and could do miracles. Farilane didn’t believe in miracles any more than she believed in gods or magic. *Has to be coincidence.* The only remaining options were that Proust had a spy trailing them down the side of that perilous cliff who was close enough to hear them but had managed to avoid being seen; or that Virgil, Kolby, or Cedric had reported the conversation to Proust word for word. Coincidence felt the most plausible.

Proust and I were just talking about conspiracies, so it’s not surprising he brought it up again. And I’m not the first one to suggest that the story of

that infamous ghazel raid on the capital was unlikely to the point of suspicious. And how many ways are there to say it?

“It’s my belief,” Proust went on, “that the attack was merely a diversion, a sleight-of-hand distraction that allowed someone to assassinate the emperor and make it look like he was killed in battle. I also believe that someone was looking for the horn, and I strongly suspect it was stolen during that invasion.”

To acknowledge that legend and truth might differ was one thing, but this was pure supposition taken to an absurdity. “I *believe* most of what you say is unsubstantiated rubbish, and I *strongly suspect* you get away with your insinuations because you make a point of speaking to the ill-informed and the malleable, who become more so the longer they listen to you. This, in and of itself, doesn’t dictate that you’re wrong. So let’s put it to the test, shall we? I’m going to state up front that despite your grand theory, you have no idea who killed Nyphron and stole the horn, and if you think you do know, you have no proof. Isn’t that right?”

Here, Proust shrugged. “Only that it’s someone who doesn’t want to blow the horn, or they already would have.”

For the first time, Farilane was lost. “What are you talking about? What difference does that make? Why would anyone care about blowing this instrument? It’s a symbol. The real threat comes from the elves discovering their ruler is dead and our lack of this ridiculous talisman to scare away the primitives.”

“Primitives?” Proust appeared confused.

“Any culture that can be frightened by a silly trumpet can hardly be described as advanced.”

“The Horn of Gylindora is more than that. If it is blown by someone with elven blood in their veins, all elves will hear it, no matter where in the world they are. That sound will proclaim the death of the previous fane and the challenge of a new contender for the throne.”

Farilane fought back a laugh and covered her mouth with her hand to hide it. “Tell me—I mean, I know that elves are known to have superior hearing and all, but . . . how do elves hundreds of miles away—who haven’t managed to hear that Nyphron is dead—detect the blowing of a horn?”

“Because Ferrol made it so.” Proust said this straight-faced. She saw not a hint of sarcasm.

He truly believes this.

“Ferrol decreed that any elf who killed another of his kind would forever be banned from the afterlife, so as to create order from chaos. There was but one exception: the fane, who is endowed with the power of life and death over all his people. The horn was given to the elves by Ferrol as a means to peacefully determine their leader. It is, therefore, governed by the Law of Ferrol.”

“You just said the horn was given to Nyphron by Maribor. Are you getting your theologies mixed up?”

“Not at all. The horn was created by Ferrol for the elves. Maribor stole it and gave it to his son Nyphron as a weapon to defeat the elves.”

“Good to know our god is a thief as well as a cheat. But be that as it may, given that you have no evidence and no name to nail your murder accusation to, we once more find ourselves staring at the faceless conspiracy. The perfect foil—for how can you defeat the unknown?”

“Believe what you will, but I tell you truthfully that the Horn of Gylindora is the most important relic that has ever existed. The horn that Nyphron had, which has gone missing since his death, and has been all but forgotten must be found. Without it, the Great War *will* resume. And who knows how it will go this time? Now, it’s possible a human—incapable of blowing the horn—took the instrument to keep it out of the hands of the elves. That person likely hid it, and being human, then died. But if they did that, they must have known the horn would eventually be needed, and if that is true . . .”

“You think there’re clues to its whereabouts? Maybe in *a book*?”

“Isn’t that the real reason why you search for books? Isn’t that why you study faded, dusty pages?”

“I dig up old tomes because long ago I discovered the original text often has different tales and different versions of existing stories. I find that intriguing. It suggests that what we *know* might not be what *is*.”

“Exactly.” Proust was back, leaning against the brick post, his arms triumphantly folded across his chest. “And now that you’ve discovered the true purpose of the Horn of Gylindora—a footnote in time that might not only save humanity from an awful war, but could also provide you with a path to significance—what is your intention?”

A nearby horse snorted and stamped a hoof, the *thump* echoing loudly. Until that moment, Farilane had forgotten that she was still in a giant horse stable. The pungent smell seemed to have faded. Most likely she'd merely gotten used to it. She'd always found it strange that a smell so powerful upon first encounter could all but disappear once she became acclimated. A lot of things were that way.

"What do you want, Proust? We're down to it now, aren't we? You invited me here. Why?"

"Because you're right. I'm not fond of the idea of mankind being ruled by elves. You're adventurous and respected. You can read; you know history; you're wealthy so you can afford to travel; and you're the princess, which comes with advantages far beyond us mere mortals. I want to find the horn to make certain one of *them* doesn't blow it and undo all that our savior Novron has given us."

"I'm one of *them*."

Proust smirked, and Farilane was certain that in one hundred and ninety-nine years he was the first person, outside her family, who had ever displayed that expression to her. "Hardly. You're one thirty-second elfen. That's next to no elfen blood at all, and due to a shortened lifespan, the rate of dilution will continually increase. Nolyn lived half as long as Nyphron should have. Nurgya lived half as long as Nolyn—"

"You're not even close—where did you learn math? Life expectancy of an elf is estimated to be close to three thousand. Nolyn died of a fever at the age of one thousand, two hundred and five. And Nurgya was killed. You can't factor in his lifespan."

"Fine, but Estermon the First only lived seven hundred years."

"Seven hundred and twenty-one, and his son is already six hundred and seventy-six."

"That merely means our present ruler is stubborn in more than mere attitude. He's overextended his stay, but lifespans aren't exact, and it doesn't change the fact that Nyphron's bloodline is fading. You're more human than elf—only one thirty-second, apparently—and that's fine with me. In a few more generations time, the imperial family will be almost entirely human."

Farilane nodded. "You just don't want a transfusion of new blood in the system."

“The elves have their place in Erivania. This should be ours.”

“No one says that about dogs.”

This caught even Ethan’s attention. Both men looked at her in bewilderment.

“How’s that?” Proust asked.

Farilane lifted her hands, palms up, as if lifting an invisible window sash. “No one says that there should be a separate place for dogs. No one has a problem with living side by side with *them*.”

Proust frowned at her apparent silliness, and with adult-like seriousness explained, “Dogs don’t try to rule us.”

“No?” Farilane chuckled. “We feed them, house them, protect them, and they spend the vast bulk of their time sleeping in the sun and drooling while everyone else works. Only rarely do they do anything constructive on our behalf. Are you sure they don’t rule us? I’m just saying, we don’t complain about living with birds. We don’t demand that trees and flowers are kept in a place where we don’t have to see them. We simply coexist. Why is it we have such a problem with those more like us? Seems they should be easier to live with, don’t you think?”

“We compete with elves and dwarfs. Doing so creates animosity.”

“We compete with other humans, too. Old and young are at odds, male and female, rich and poor. Must we all be separated until each of us lives in utter isolation? Granted, I’m the last person to argue this position. In many ways, total isolation is my idea of paradise. I also don’t claim to understand the workings of the universe the way you do. And while I don’t believe in gods or any behind-the-scenes planning, I can’t imagine that life is meant to work that way. All life competes with everything else to live, but all life also needs everything else to survive.” She paused, thought about what she just said, and laughed. “I just outlined the best argument I’ve ever heard for the existence of gods: sadism.”

The two stared at her, sharing an expression she’d seen many times. Most people walked away at this point, or more accurately, backed away slowly. Since she was the princess, they usually apologized and feigned the need to refresh their drink or pretended to hear someone call their name. Once, the wealthy wife of a council member apparently couldn’t come up with an easy escape and settled for fainting dead away. If it was an act, Farilane admitted it was a fine performance.

Neither Ethan nor Proust could pretend they had another place to be, nor were they going to faint. Instead, they watched her and waited.

"I'm going to find this horn," she told them both. "Not to *advance my ambitions*, as you say, but because it's very possible that we will one day need it, and because you may be right—I may be the only one who can."

"At last, we can agree on something," Proust said. "Might I suggest you begin your search at Dibben Monastery."

"Dibben? Why?"

"Because Dibben is the chief monastery of the Monks of Maribor, and quite curiously, a monk of that order was present when Nyphron died—at the very moment the horn went missing."

She took a step back. "How do you know that?"

Proust shook his head. "You wouldn't believe me if I told you. But you're a smart lady. You'll figure it out. And when you do, in return for the tip, I request a small favor."

Here it was: the point of the meeting at last. He wanted payment—an audience with the emperor, a title, a building for his deluded followers to congregate in. "What is it?"

"When you go to Dibben, I would like you to take Sheldon with you."

"Sheldon the Frightened and Greasy?" She hooked a thumb back in the direction the man had disappeared into. "That Sheldon?"

"The very same. He will be no bother. I only want him to learn firsthand what you do and report his findings back to me. I want to know the fate of the horn—that it is safe, and with it, the future of the empire."

"That's assuming I go to Dibben."

"Of course."

"Which I'm not."

"I understand."

That was the problem. Farilane believed Proust understood far too much.

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE FERRY

Farilane threw her cape on the floor, once more remembering her forgotten mental note to obtain a coat rack or at least a wall hook. She crossed the maelstrom of her office and took a seat at the desk, where she thumbed through some recently obtained parchment pages that lay in two piles. She stared at them for no more than a minute before screaming in frustration, then followed this by pounding her forehead on the desk.

It's all so pointless, she thought in frustration. *Even if I win, I lose—*
She heard breathing that wasn't hers.

Looking up, she spotted Kile seated near the window. Most of him was hidden by a monstrous stack of scrolls. Leaning back, she peered around the pile. The scrivener sat on the big, cushioned chair that she'd been using as just another storage space. The recently dislodged pile of clothes—topped with the remains of yesterday's dinner and a hairbrush she thought she'd lost—were placed as neatly as possible on the floor. Kile sat with his feet flat, knees together, elbows in, palms on thighs, and fingers dangling off his knees like epaulet fringe. On his face was his puppy smile. If he'd had a tail, she imagined it would be wagging.

"What are you doing here?"

"I wanted to let you know I'm packed and ready to go."

"So you're saying goodbye?"

"No." The puppy face faded to a puzzled frown.

"Then I don't understand. Why have you packed?"

Kile continued to appear confused. Then his eyes focused on the center of her forehead.

She pretended to look up. “There’s a mark, isn’t there?”

“Small one.”

She sighed and shoved back from the desk.

“Something wrong?” Kile asked.

“Remember that horn we discussed? Well, I’m certain now that it’s missing. What’s more, I strongly suspect its absence could cause the death of thousands—real old-world, Great War-era kind of destruction. According to all the ancient scrolls, the elves weren’t pushovers. Some accounts even suggested we were losing when Nyphron challenged the elven leader to single combat. My grandfather won’t speak to me anymore, so he’ll be of no help, which means no one else will, either. And I have so little to go on, even though”—she waved at the room about them—“this is likely the greatest accumulation of knowledge in the world. So much so that I’m actually running out of space.”

“You don’t say,” Kile managed with a straight face.

“Don’t push the cute thing. We’re not friends. I’m still feeling guilty about you replacing Virgil, even if it was his idea. The man is still alive after all.”

“Sorry.”

“I would love to ask my grandfather for a whole building I could use to properly store all these scrolls, manuscripts, letters, and documents. A book house, if you will. A *bibliary*.” She smiled at the term she just invented. “Be even better if it was open to the public.”

“I had the impression you preferred your privacy.”

“I do, but no one lives forever—and when I die, all of this will likely be burned. That includes my own work.”

“You write?”

She nodded and pointed to a massive manuscript on its own shelf beside a long-dead potted plant. “That’s my master work: *The Migration of Peoples*, an accounting of the three major nations. I was inspired after reading *The Forgotten Race* by Dubrion Ash.”

Kile nodded. “The dwarven historian.”

Once more, Farilane was impressed by the man’s literacy. *At least Virgil found a smart one.* “His book is quite obviously biased in favor of his people—more of a condemnation of everyone else, written in response to the impending disintegration of the dwarven kingdom, which Ash blames

on imperial indifference and growing racial prejudice. I wanted to take the idea a step further and relate in cold, hard facts the genuine history of the elves, humans, and dwarfs. No biases, no myths or legends, and no mention of gods or magic. It's good, I think, and it saddens me that the powers-that-be will erase it the moment I can no longer prevent them from doing so—burned as black magic. A public repository for literature is the only way I can think of to protect my life's work. In a way, I feel guilty. I've spent more than a century digging up and gathering together all these priceless treasures—all this wisdom, all these immortal lives—and it will only make destroying them that much easier. My good intentions have turned evil.”

“I take it you spoke to the emperor about this horn and his response was unsatisfactory?”

“Not just him. I was contacted by the leader of the latest cult craze, a guy named Proust, who amazingly already knows about the horn. He agrees with me that it's a problem, which right there makes me second-guess my conclusions.”

“What did he say about the horn?”

She shook her head, raised her hands, and rolled her eyes. “Oh, he vomited all manner of conspiracy paranoia. It's a language for him—for all *those* people. To them, winter is a mercantile scheme to sell coats, and the lack of rain is arranged by the empire to make the aqueducts look like a better investment.”

“And the horn?”

“Well, according to Proust, we couldn't have beaten the elves in the Great War. He insists our victory is one big lie, which, shockingly, no one in several thousand years has broken confidence with. Apparently, the real story is that Nyphron cheated. But then Proust goes on to say that Nyphron wasn't actually killed defending the palace during the ghazel invasion.”

“He's still alive?”

Farilane laughed. “No, of course not.”

“Oh, good.”

“Good?” she asked, finding it odd that anyone would be happy an emperor was dead. She found it even stranger that he would admit his feelings to a member of the imperial family.

Kile shrugged. “For a second, I had this vision of Emperor Nyphron lying low, working as a bartender at a Rodencia bordello, and regaling

patrons with stories of the good old days. It wasn't a flattering sight."

Kile was turning out to be several shades past normal, which was to say he was growing on her faster than she had expected. His having mentioned it, she pictured the image herself and smiled. "No, Nyphron is very dead. His body is still interred under our very feet, but Proust insists all of that was a mere diversion. The real truth, according to High Priest Proust and his gang of wheelless chariots, is that Nyphron was secretly murdered, and the horn stolen that spring morning by a Monk of Maribor, no less."

Kile sat back in the soft fabric chair that swallowed him. He brought his fingertips together like a villain in one of the amphitheater's tragic plays. "Hmm," he uttered.

"What do you mean, *hmm*?" She didn't like him giving even a moment of credence to such insane faddle—not when she was just starting to like him. "The story is absurd."

"Maybe."

"Maybe?" Farilane punched home her indignation with a set of leaping eyebrows.

"Well . . ." Kile bit his lip and looked at the parchments on the desk. "You said the horn was mentioned in the margins of this partial copy of *The Book of Brin*. You also suggest that the writer might have known Bran, who was the founder of the Monks of Maribor. Just seems like there might be a connection."

"That would only make sense if there were a monk present during the . . ." Farilane's eyes drifted to the window. She stood up, pulled back the curtain, and stared across the square and down the Grand Mar in the direction of the obelisk of stone that she had passed thousands of times without a thought. "The Column of Destone. The monument Nolyn raised to commemorate Seymour Destone, the Monk of Maribor. Destone came from Dibben Monastery." She dropped back into her seat and looked at Kile. "His body was returned there for burial."

"People are often buried with personal items, aren't they?" the scribe asked. "Like swords, or jewels—perhaps even a strange musical instrument."

"And Dibben is the chief Maribor Monastery. I've always wondered why that was."

"What do you mean?" Kile asked.

“Dibben isn’t the first—that’s Breckon Moor down in Dulgath. And Dibben isn’t the last. That honor goes to that gaudy temple Falkirk de Roche established in Alburnia. So what is it about Dibben that makes it so significant?”

“Because something very important lies there? Something that needs to be protected?”

Farilane nodded. “If you really wanted to hide something for a very long time, something that’s both dangerous and necessary, what better place is there than a grave?” Farilane smiled. She wagged her index finger between them. “See, this right here—this is good. We’re getting to know each other.” Farilane jumped up, grabbed a bag from the corner, and began stuffing it with her field book, an extra graphite stick, and the recently revealed brush from the pile of clothes. She paused, picked up a shirt, sniffed it, then crammed that in as well.

“Going somewhere?” Kile asked.

“I’ve always wanted to visit Dibben. If you’re coming with me, you should—” She stopped and narrowed her eyes at Kile.

He smiled. “I’m already packed.”



The fact that Kile had packed for their trip before Farilane knew she was taking one would have been cause for serious and extensive investigation, even concern, if not for the death of Virgil Hearn. The old philosopher hadn’t been kidding about “not long.” When he said it, *not long* amounted to exactly one month, one week, and one day.

Farilane learned of his passing while still in the process of packing. She’d known it was coming and had tried to take the necessary steps to avoid regret by forgiving slights, acknowledging kindnesses, and admitting respect and appreciation. Now that he was gone, she realized she hadn’t done as good a job as she’d hoped. Farilane wondered if she’d succeeded in expressing how much he had meant to her. Maybe Virgil knew, but she feared he didn’t. In the space between those two uncertainties, regret found fertile soil. Farilane hated regret and fought it at every turn, never yielding to fear or doubt, leaving no question unasked, no path untaken.

Farilane took one last look around her room. In preparation for every journey, one always forgets to pack at least one thing. For Virgil's trip it was Farilane who had forgotten something. She'd neglected to say, *I love you*.

Farilane didn't stop by Virgil's room. She didn't want to see the empty shell he'd left behind, and she wouldn't stay for the funeral. After two centuries in a predominantly human city, Princess Farilane had attended enough funerals that the smell of flowers depressed her. Humans always laid them on the casket to mask the rot. The scent of apples reminded Farilane of autumn, pine of winter, honeysuckle of spring, but flowers now conjured death and depression. Funerals, she concluded, were a sadistic tradition designed to desensitize the mourners into forgetfulness. Struggling to face the new reality of life without someone who'd always been there, the loved ones of the deceased were forced to endure the torture of whole days focusing entirely on their loss. By the last day, survival instincts usually kicked in, and people wanted out. The whole process felt like the method of kicking a habit by subjecting oneself to excessive exposure. After the last handful of dirt fell on the grave, everyone hungered to forget and move on, to think about tomorrow, to think about anything else, to just be able to laugh again.

Either way, the dead didn't care. Virgil was gone. Even if he were still alive, she knew this was what he would have wanted.

Dressed once more in her leather tunic and skirt, Farilane trotted up the marble steps and entered the Teshlor Guildhall. The polished white-and-black checkered floor suggested a game of strategy. The fortress walls with their embrasures and slender arrow slits looked out on a peaceful marketplace and represented protection and strength. The interior walls, festooned with glittering arrays of gleaming blades, projected power and martial prowess. Teshlors were big on symbols. Bullies projected an illusion of power to intimidate, but Teshlors needed no falsehoods. The knights *were* power. The imagery existed for the safety of those stubborn or foolish enough to test the legends.

The four-story-tall chamber was filled with busy people—all men. As usual, her presence brought the guildhall to a halt.

"Your Highness," Enzo greeted her. "What brings you to our humble hall today?"

The southern Rhulynian hailed from the port city of Vernes. Olive-skinned, with coal-black hair that just touched his collar, he indulged in the extended goatee made popular in his hometown by sailors and pirates. With carefree hair and a handsome face adorned with dark, intense eyes, Enzo had all the visual ingredients of a romantic-poet turned adventuring buccaneer.

Great Grenmorian's Ghost, I love the Teshlors. It's like having a personal storehouse of the empire's handsomest, most eligible bachelors—a tap with hot and cold dashing gentlemen.

“Have you seen Kolby?”

“Your Highness?” Kolby Fiske descended the left stair as fluid as water. He wore his cloth tunic and soft boots. The knight was not on duty. “I just heard about Virgil. I’m so—”

“Get your things together. We are going out again. I have a new lead, a very promising one.”

Enzio smiled. “Is this the sort of excursion that requires two knights, Your Highness?”

“Wouldn’t hurt,” she said, giving him a wink.

“Your Highness.” Kolby waited until he had reached them before saying more. He drew close, then spoke in a low voice. “First Minister Dray has sent instructions that, ah . . . that you are restricted to the city limits until we are told otherwise.”

“What? Are you . . . are you serious? You can’t be. You’re joking.”

Kolby shook his head.

“Why? What reason did he give?”

“None, but Dray did say the order came from the emperor.”

Farilane set her jaw and shoulders.

“Why do I suspect I ought to pack anyway?” Enzo asked, but she wasn’t certain who he addressed.

Kolby answered her question before she asked. “I believe Dray is in his office.”



Farilane couldn't prove it, but she was fairly certain Martasen Dray had once been a rodent. The princess didn't believe in magic, but the First Minister of the Imperial Council was the best evidence she'd ever seen to the contrary. Short and thin, with beady eyes, ears far too big, a head too small, and an unsightly overbite that revealed pronounced front teeth, Martasen Dray was decidedly rat-like. If her personal philosophy were to allow for the existence of enchantments, Farilane would have seized on the theory that some malicious witch had promoted Dray from humble pest to imperial pain. As it was, she settled on the idea that this was—as Orintine Fallon once wrote—a perfect example of “truth bleeding through.” The idea centered around the notion that the honest nature of anything must show itself. Evil was ugly, good beautiful, and Martasen Dray was a rat.

“Minister Dray, have I heard correctly? Did you place me under house arrest?”

“I . . . ah . . . good morning, Your Imperial Highness.” Dray, who had been seated at a desk large enough to serve a banquet on, shoved his chair back and stood up. This was a feat of considerable effort, given the size and weight of the velvet-padded armchair he'd enjoyed before her arrival.

“I . . . ah . . .”

“Aya, aya? Is that an answer, or do you have a new secretary you're calling?”

Dray presented an embarrassed smile as he brushed wrinkles from his sleeves and straightened his back. He took a breath and managed to compose himself. “The order that you remain in the city was issued by the emperor, not me. I am merely tasked with the responsibility of ensuring His Imperial Majesty's will is implemented.”

At that moment, Dray literally twitched his nose. Perhaps he felt a sneeze coming on, but Farilane suffered a moment of personal doubt on her denial of magic. *Is there a tail under that robe? There's certainly a self-centered cruelty in those eyes.*

“And why am I to remain? What possible reason could there be? Am I being punished because I didn't finish my peas last night?”

Dray appeared to wince at her sharpening temper, or maybe he was just squinting after the fashion of his sewer-dwelling cousins. “The emperor did not say.”

Farilane was all but certain that was a lie. Not that she felt her grandfather and the rat were so close that no secret could squeeze between them, but rather how Dray's squinting eyes slipped off her own as he answered. Shadows couldn't face direct sunlight, and falsehoods couldn't bear the weight of a stare.

Again, his nose twitched, and this time he reached up and rubbed it. His fingernails were dirty, edged in black as if he'd been digging in fertile soil. Perhaps the enchantment followed the fabled sort where the rat-man did a periodic switch following some arbitrary lunar cycle. Dray might have been out running with the pack the night before, digging for choice morsels of garbage. Perhaps this was how he had landed the esteemed position. Maybe the entire Imperial Council was one homegrown rat pack summoned in disguise, called to balance on two legs in order to employ their particular expertise in service of the empire.

He's just so odd.

His peculiarity was not restricted to his appearance. His voice was a raspy, nasal drone emitted from behind a dominant set of central incisors that were hemmed in by a tiny, puckered mouth. At frequent intervals, he licked at his lips and sucked on those massive front teeth, producing a sound not unlike a baby bird's *cheep*. And he blinked as if she were blowing smoke in his eyes. Even after drawing himself up to face her with as much dignity as he could muster, the man remained hunched with his arms slightly bent as if they were incapable of hanging straight. His hands were in constant motion since she entered the office. He rubbed thumb against fingers, as if trying to eliminate some awful substance on his skin.

How did one such as he get appointed to such a principal position?

Farilane couldn't recall when Dray had been appointed. She remembered that the First Minister before him was a fellow named Blaine, or some such. She couldn't keep up with all the names, as each served for only a few decades before being replaced. She also had no interest in the careers of the Imperial Council, the handful of administrators who oversaw the actual running of the empire. Their lives were a miserable gray drag of meaningless words and invisible martyrdom. They were weathervanes that followed the current wind direction, stood for nothing, and created only obstacles both for themselves and others. Bureaucracy was built as a bulwark against change, as shelters for bureaucrats to hide behind.

She had no idea what methods were followed to appoint such men. There ought to be some criteria, some checklist, some test. The First Minister was the voice of the emperor and head of the council. His word was just as much law as Estermon's, more so, since the emperor relied on the First Minister and his council to carry out his will. She couldn't imagine that her grandfather had randomly grabbed a passerby and slapped the title on him. And yet, she couldn't fathom how a person such as Dray held the job. Why not the likes of Kolby, a man of impeccable courage and integrity, or an educated, dignified, well-spoken man like Virgil? She barely knew Kile but was certain that even the slender scribe would have been far more capable than this rodent with the dirty fingernails and itchy nose.

And there was one more thing—he unnerved her.

She sought to attribute the feeling of apprehension to his odd nature, his diminutive social powers, and rodent-esque habits but knew this to be defensive rationalization. She felt embarrassed to be worried by such a marvel of awkwardness, yet if she were honest, she must admit that he frightened her. She couldn't say how, couldn't fathom any route by which such a destination could be reached by such a person as he, yet there it was: a stunning contradiction, an unsolvable puzzle with buck teeth.

She continued to stare at him, to study the man behind the desk, and he remained standing, content it would seem to be stared at. This, too, bothered her. Why didn't he wave her away, claiming to be busy, as he most certainly was? Why didn't he attempt to douse her anger with platitudes, offers of wine, and titillating tidbits of current news that he most assuredly possessed? He did none of those things. Martasen Dray, First Minister to the Emperor, stood before her, patiently waiting as she studied him.

It's as if he expects the scrutiny. Like he has been waiting for this moment to arrive.

Thinking that Martasen Dray was in some manner ahead of her in his planning was like realizing spring would not follow winter this year.

That's where the fear rises from. Those are the embers that emit the smoke. His awkwardness is a lie. He's putting on an act. Is it just for me, or do others know?

Does it matter?

The man had been First Minister for at least a decade, and no problem had revealed itself. Still, Farilane felt there was something here, just as with

Kile the scribe, that warranted investigation—but not now. She already had a full schedule.

“How long am I to be under this arrest?”

“Until your birthday.”

“My birthday?”

“I suspect your family wants to ensure that you are on hand for a planned celebration. A surprise party, I suppose. But you didn’t hear that from me.”

“Well, then,” she said, and nodded. “I suppose I’ll need to change my plans.”

“Thank you for understanding.”

“Not at all. You’re only doing your job, aren’t you?”

That’s when she saw it. The mask slipped. All she spotted was a tiny glimpse, but it was enough. This was no ordinary rat-man, and he knew exactly what sort of surprise party was planned. *I only wish I did, but then it wouldn’t be a surprise, would it?*



Farilane found the scrivener in the palace courtyard laden with bags—his and hers—and not seeming up to the task. Thin and gangly, Kile was no one’s picture of a rugged male. Compared to the Teshlors, he was a malnourished willow sapling growing amidst a forest of stately elms, but he was all she had.

“Is someone bringing the horses?” he asked her. The morning sun was bright on his face as he stood in the dapple of late-flowering tremble trees. Most of the white petals had fallen and covered the ground like patches of snow.

“We’re not going to take horses,” she told him.

“No horses? A wagon then? Or chariot?”

“No,” she shook her head. “We are going to walk.”

“Walk?” He spoke the word as if he didn’t understand the language it derived from.

“Yes. Walk. It involves the moving of your legs in a to-and-fro manner. It’s not hard. I’ll teach you.”

Letting him frown, she searched the traffic near the palace steps, where the pediment cast a shadow on the marble. She spotted Colin Wells on duty and sighed. She liked Colin. The Teshlor was a wonderful singer, lively on a trip, and his company would have made the journey a joy. Now he would likely suffer on her account. This was his watch, and for the first time, Farilane didn't want to be seen leaving the palace. "Did anyone notice you bring these bags out?"

"No," Kile replied, "I don't think so." Already she could see confusion whetting the edges of his expression.

He senses something is amiss, but isn't sure what, or whether it warrants alarm or not. Perhaps he thinks it's a game I am playing on him because he's new. He'll pretend and go along, for now.

"You're still up for this, aren't you?" she asked.

"Absolutely." The word was definitive, but his tone less so.

"Good. Follow me, then." She led him away from the front steps around to the garden side of the palace.

Unlike the smaller, somewhat crude original imperial residence, which now served as the Teshlor Guildhall, the "new" palace had no walls. The golden-domed, white-marbled edifice that marked the end of the Grand Marchway—originally built as a tomb for Nyphron—had become the palace out of sheer laziness. Plans were drawn up for a new palace, rejected, and drawn up again. In the end, *temporary* became *comfortable*, and concerns about living above a crypt were discovered to be unfounded. No wall had been slated for the tomb, and none added when the imperial family became permanent residents. The age of constant warfare was over. Nolyn's reign was a time of peace. Walls were seen as a relic of the past.

Farilane saw it as a convenience of the present.

Slipping out the back, Farilane led Kile toward Arion Avenue, a lovely little street that was spared the mercantile crowds of Imperial Square. The two walked the serene boulevard divided by towering trees. Farilane lifted her hood, carefully tucking her golden hair out of sight, and wrapped her body in the muted cloth. She let Kile continue to carry her bag as well as his. Who could accuse her of trying to escape without bringing so much as a pack? She could claim to be seeing Kile off on whatever journey he was taking. Once they reached the far bank of the Bernum River, when the odds of her being seen by anyone who might dare to stop her were reduced to

absurd, she would carry her own weight. For now, she let Kile suffer the thought that she expected him to haul everything all the way to Dibben. It was good for him. She hadn't tortured *the replacement* near enough.

The city itself also lacked a wall. She and Kile would not need to pass through any gate or checkpoint where people might ask questions. Percepliquis was a trusting city in a peaceful time.

"Where are we going?" Kile asked, struggling to keep up with her quick, unencumbered strides.

While the city might be trusting, Kile was less so, but Farilane was glad of it. His inquiry showed he wasn't a fool—an excellent trait in a traveling partner. Also, the question was far more eloquent than it appeared. He showed no concern, made no accusation, although she was certain by now that he held both. Farilane was confident in her ability to perceive much about a person at a glance, but here she had studied Kile only to come up mystified. He was far more intelligent than he let on, wearing his commoner personality like a cloak. His true face, she believed, was hidden from her. That alone made him more interesting than anyone else she'd met in the last hundred years, with the possible exception of First Minister Dray. But where Dray gave the repulsive impression of a rat, Kile had the feel of an adorable mutt.

"The docks," she replied, and deftly slipped around a woman pushing a flower cart.

"Are we meeting others there?"

"I'm certain there will be others there."

This appeased the scribe who, she guessed, drew the conclusion she wanted him to. Farilane would have plenty of time to go into detail once they were on the ferry. If, after she explained, he wanted out, he could return with no great hardship, but he would need to wait for the next ferry to do so, giving her time to disappear. Since he remained an enigma, Farilane didn't know which way Kile would go. She hoped he would stick with her. Farilane had been on many adventures in her life, but always with others, always with guides and guards. Even with Kile along, this would be new. A woman alone on the open road—even if she claimed to be the princess—was taking a risk. Anyone daring to hurt her would draw down the wrath of the emperor, but a posthumous revenge did little for the victim. She planned only to visit a nearby monastery, a simple thing, yet for the

first time, she was working without a net and in direct defiance of the emperor.

And of course, her birthday was just over a month away. *If my family really is planning a party for me—a first—I ought to at least try to attend.*

Summer, if it didn't rain too much or leapfrog too quickly into hot weather, was wonderful in Percepliquis, and that morning was unquestionably beautiful: blue sky, gentle breeze from the south, not too hot or cold. The word *perfection* was reserved for such days, and it scared Farilane to death. She'd never known an adventure that started wonderfully to end the same way. She had a theory that the start of a journey was inversely proportionate to the outcome. The better it began, the worse it finished. Judging by the sky and the breeze, she could guess that this was going to be a nightmare. Her one hope lay in her failure to obtain an escort. She would have preferred to have Kolby along. Not having the knight at her side made the whole venture seem empty. This disappointment was at least a tiny bit of insurance she could take with her. If everything else failed, one small thing ought to go right.

The Percepliquis dock was a massive enterprise. This busiest point of entry flooded the city with all manner of luxuries imported from every corner of the empire, brought up by long barges from the seaport at Vernes. The boardwalk was a rush of stevedores rolling carts and tossing sacks. Men shouted vulgarities, and huge crane booms swung nets of wooden crates overhead. At the northern end was the modest wooden ferry, whose only function was transporting passengers across the river. The West Bernum, at that point, was wide and lazy, lined with cattails and rushes. Only a few centuries ago, that section of the Bernum had been known as the Urum River, with the Bern being its sister-fork a few miles farther east. Over the centuries, the Bern and Urum of old had blurred into one, and few had noticed or cared. Now the pair of noble waterways—each of which had individually contributed so much to history—were reduced to the combined title of East and West Bernum as if the two branches needed to be joined to amount to anything. This was such a sad development in her mind that Farilane often brought it up to remind her companions of the world's loss. But when she did, people assumed the princess was joking, and that she was also an awful comedian.

The ferry was a curious thing, for there had once been a bridge over the river. Constructed in the age of Emperor Nyphron, the stone bridge had replaced the ancient Havilyn ferry dock. For reasons unknown, the bridge had been torn down long before Farilane was born, and the ferry returned, although under new name and management.

Farilane and Kile boarded the ferry—a large, flat, diamond-shaped raft that hauled people, livestock, and wagons to the far bank. Several passengers looked at them. Despite Farilane’s telltale hair refusing to stay inside her hood, no one cared. On the ferry, she wasn’t the only blonde. Farilane counted five. Those other golden-haired travelers also displayed teardrop ears and the high cheekbones of pure Instarya elves. These made a point of keeping to themselves, remaining in their wagons, staring at the water, pretending they were alone on the voyage.

As the ferry departed, Farilane and Kile settled against the northern rail to watch the water surge beneath them. That was when she spotted him. There was no mistaking that dirty face and oily hair. Sheldon Faust approached, clutching a bulging satchel to his stomach.

“Good morning,” he said, a bit out of breath. “I almost missed the ferry. That would have been a disaster.”

“Why is that?” she asked, a bit surprised at his familiarity. The last time they met, Sheldon was terrified of her.

“My master would not have been pleased. He told me you’d be here and not to miss the boat.”

“Proust told you I would be here?”

Sheldon nodded, dislodging a clump of congealed hair that dangled in his face. She could see the sweat on his brow glistening in the rising sun.

“Proust told you I’d be on this ferry this morning?”

“Yes. He said you were on your way to Dibben Monastery and would be trying to sneak out because the emperor forbade you to leave. He explained that in your haste and need for secrecy, you would neglect to invite me as you had promised. It’s understandable. You didn’t even risk getting horses, so why would you take the time to search for me? And how would you find me on such short notice if you did?”

“How indeed?” Farilane said, feeling disturbed in the way she imagined animals were before a quake. “But tell me, Sheldon, how did Proust know I was *sneaking* out?”

Sheldon looked at her, puzzled and dumbfounded. “God told him, of course.”

“Oh.” She nodded. “Of course.”

Kile was studying both of them. She felt the heat of his questions in that brilliant gaze. *It is quite possible that Kile is an agent of the emperor, who Virgil was forced to implant into my confidence to monitor my actions. And I accused Proust of being obsessed with conspiracy theories!*

When Kile opened his mouth, she braced for his words.

“You promised *he* could come?” Kile asked, nodding at Sheldon with a weakly suppressed grimace.

“Proust was the one who pointed me toward Dibben,” she replied. “His only request was that Sheldon here be allowed to tag along.”

Kile studied the carpenter. “Tell me, have you ever heard of the term *bath*?”

Sheldon once more looked puzzled.

Kile glanced at Farilane with the shared suffering of the knowledgeable amid the oblivious. Then he turned to look out across the water at the approaching bank. Not a single comment did he make on the subject of their circumstances.

Farilane recalculated her mental abacus. *He knows the subject is sensitive, and he is keeping any questions or objections to himself until we can speak privately.* This was the only conclusion possible . . . wasn’t it?

Sheldon threw himself and his bag down on the deck of the barge and relaxed with all the abandon of a laborer momentarily unshackled by demands. Kile continued to peer ahead, leaving the princess at least a tiny moment of peace and a chance to breathe before the fight she was certain would follow, one she already regretted. Farilane barely knew Kile but had looked forward to his company. Assuming Kile refused to join her in defying the emperor, she now faced the possibility of traveling into the wilderness alone with Sheldon, not an appealing prospect.

Never one to daydream or meditate, she studied her environment, her eyes darting and weaving among the other travelers. In addition to the Instarya elves, there were also a large number of passengers of mixed elven and human heritage, known by humans as *myr*. In the elvish language, *myr* simply meant *of*, as in Jarab *of* Dimhollow, or Alan *son of* Amsefort. In the post-war era, those of mixed race struggled for social position and set great

store by their lineage. Paternal family names became a badge of honor. In formal circles, Farilane was referred to as the Princess Farilane myr Nyphron, or in even more formal circles where first names were inappropriate, simply the Imperial Princess myr Nyphron. Hearing these introductions, but not understanding the usage, humans believed all mixed heritage elves were called *myr*. The expression took hold and became a common term. That there were so many elves and myr on the barge was not unusual, since the ferry was the first leg in any trip to Merredydd, originally one of the four elven fortresses, where the Instarya elves who refused to live with humans settled. In time, the isolated enclave became a major city, and the peninsula on which it sat became the Imperial Province of Instarya.

Movement caught her eye. Kile came closer, standing shoulder to shoulder with her. He turned to speak.

This was it. He's now going to—

“Is it true,” Kile asked, “that this used to be called the Urum River? And that the Bern is on the east side of the peninsula, and while they do eventually join into one, most of their lives are spent entirely separate? If so, I think it is sad that such significant waterways have been reduced to sharing one name.”

Farilane stared. She was at a loss for words. Then she smiled.

He smiled back.

I can't see him yet, but he sees me. He sees me very well.

The princess found herself bookended by two compelling mysteries: Sheldon, who claimed he knew she was escaping to Dibben because a god had warned Proust—an absurdity she rejected but had no solution for—and Kile, who knew she was leaving on a trip before she did. Rather than feel frightened, Farilane was delighted. She loved mysteries, and these two riddles had embraced her with affectionate hugs.

She felt it then with a sudden clarity equal to seeing dawn's first light. *There will be no argument, no demand for information when we arrive. We will march off without a word, not because these two unlikely companions don't care what's happening or why, but because . . . they both know more than I do.* Farilane smiled again. *This is going to be more fun than I thought.*

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE MYSTIC WOOD

When the ferry docked, the passengers hurried off. The wealthy rode out on horses, often with a wagon in tow. Those who were less affluent led burdened packhorses. The poorest travelers carried but a sack or basket. Farilane watched the crowd of barge patrons as they mingled with those on shore, forming into two distinct groups: those who knew each other and those who'd just met. They all followed the well-worn road that hooked north toward Merredydd. As they moved past, a few cast curious looks at Farilane and her companions. No one paused to inquire. After all, the three of them were on foot and carrying only a few small packs. They simply weren't worth noticing. Shrouded by her old traveling cloak, Farilane appeared as one of the many impoverished wayfarers. Sheldon, in his filthy, ragged clothes was legitimately pitiable. Only Kile, in his unstained cape and tunic, appeared the odd man out. They likely thought he was a well-to-do merchant with his servant and his servant's wife. Farilane looked at Sheldon and shivered at the thought.

"What?" he asked.

"Nothing," she replied.

All land traffic east of Percepliquis went north because anyone headed south to the port city of Vernes traveled by river. There was nothing to the east. Toward the rising sun lay only the uninhabited scrub fields of the lower province of the Instarya peninsula. Too stony to cultivate, it was used mostly by poor Percepliquin shepherds, who went to the effort of ferrying their flocks across the river to graze. There were no flocks that morning, no shepherds or dogs, just the short-cropped grass of an overgrazed landscape.

A few miles beyond would be the east branch of the Bernum and across it nothing but a wilderness of forest. Hopefully somewhere within its trees was hidden a remote monastery called Dibben.

As the parade of Merredydd-bound travelers and their dust cloud disappeared over the hill and behind trees, the ferry began its return trip. Farilane, Kile, and Sheldon stood alone. No one moved. No one spoke. Farilane was required to start the next act. She climbed away from the river, up the slope to the top of the bank, where she stopped. There, with one foot on the worn trail and the other in the ragged, abandoned pasture, she straddled the line between the known and the unknown, the safe and the dangerous. She waited. Kile and Sheldon followed, then stood to either side.

If I just start walking, will they follow? She was confident they would.

Each appeared to need this trip for different but undisclosed reasons. Farilane included herself in that assessment. They all held secrets, each pleased with the others' lack of scrutiny or concern. With no idea what lay ahead but a growing suspicion she might need one or both of these men before the trip was done, the princess felt it best to begin with at least the appearance of honesty. Farilane took her pack from Kile, lifting it off his shoulder. "What Sheldon said is true," she told him. "I am forbidden by the emperor from leaving the city. I know Sheldon doesn't care, but I cannot ask you to break imperial law. If you come with me now, Kile, there is the possibility you could share in my punishment. If you want to return, I will understand. To be honest, doing so would be the intelligent choice."

"Why is it that you defy the emperor?" Kile asked. No shock, no anger, only casual curiosity.

"Aside from the fact I can't abide authority?" She thought for a moment and considered telling him the truth. *Does it really matter anymore? At least for me, this trip is a shout in the fog, a wish in the wind.* Farilane had been on countless such ventures, and none had ever culminated in achieving her goal of finding the treasure at the end of the rainbow—*The Book of Brin*. Even if she found it, the triumph was an esoteric achievement important possibly only to her. With the death of Virgil, her cheerleader and best ally in the hunt, Farilane found her determination wavering.

And then there was her birthday. The party idea was frightening. Why would Estermon *require* her presence? This was no ordinary thing.

Matrimony? The thought terrified Farilane. *I won't see you again until my funeral or your marriage*, he had said. At this point, the trip might be a race. All of it made too much sense. As Proust had pointed out, Farilane was the problem heir, the unwanted daughter who made an embarrassment of herself by being too smart. *That's what got you in trouble. Your brilliance proved an irresistible temptation. Reading ruined you.* A husband would put a stop to all that. No more adventures. Her grand quest would end with the yoke of a ring and the shackles of children. *What happens if I refuse?* This was a pretty idea, a child's thought. The emperor would have his way. He always did.

The words of Proust resurfaced. *And now that you've discovered the true purpose of the Horn of Gylindora—a footnote in time that might not only save humanity from an awful war, but could also provide you with a path to significance—what is your intention? . . . You want to be a hero like in the old stories you've read.*

If her future was to become wife and mother, how much more important would success be beforehand? After more than a hundred miles logged, she had yet to achieve a single goal. Would it all fade into the hazy blur of a wild but pointless youth with no achievement to anchor it?

"The future of the empire is in peril," she replied then. "The Horn of Gylindora was the key to victory in the Great War, and it will be needed again. But not only is that key lost, most don't know it ever existed. If I can find and return it to safekeeping for the day it will be needed, then . . ." She sighed wistfully. "Then perhaps my life will have been worth something."

Farilane cast her gaze at each of them, studying their faces. Each was a mystery: one masked within layers of built-up dirt, the other clean, friendly, and comfortable, but wearing a mask nonetheless. Each had volunteered to join her on a trip before she knew she was going, proving there was more at play than the facts she had at hand. One or both might be plotting against her. *But to what end? I am the princess, but I am also worthless. I will not inherit the throne. My children will not rule. I can't even arrange to build a house for books to save what little legacy I have. And if they think to blackmail the empire with my life, they are in for an awful surprise.*

Farilane had long suspected that the reason she'd been allowed to indulge in her wild adventures abroad was that her family cherished a secret hope that something would go wrong, and she would simply disappear.

This is my last chance—to succeed, or to provide the perfect birthday gift to my family.

Farilane loved a good mystery, and here she had three: the search for an ancient relic of immense power lost in the dusts of time; an awkward, ignorant carpenter who was also the chosen representative of a miracle-working cult leader; and the successor to her best—recently deceased—friend who had known her better than anyone. She could no more refuse this opportunity than a young bird could refuse to fly. And there was one more thing: an additional ethereal sensation that she couldn't fully categorize or understand. This journey felt drenched in portent, each step she took carried an awkward weight, as if she bore more than her body.

"So tell me," she said to Kile since she knew Sheldon had made his decision with full knowledge of the facts and needed no second chance to bow out, "do you still wish to come with me?"

Kile looked up and after a brief observation said, "The sky is blue."

"Yes, it is," she replied, unsure of what he was getting at.

"And look there." He pointed. "See that beautiful white cloud? And listen to the birds. Isn't their song beautiful?"

"Yes, Kile, it's summer. Birds sing in the summer."

"Exactly." He nodded. "Too nice a day to spend inside. This is the sort of day you want to go out, stretch your legs, and see the world."

"Are you saying you still want to come?"

"Faced with a day such as this, I don't see how I have a choice."

"You're a very odd man, Kile."

He nodded gravely.

"I like that."

Farilane looked back across the river at the profile of the world's greatest city. From where she stood, the rising sun behind her shone a brilliant light on the tall towers and golden domes, making them glint and shimmer. All of it seemed unreal—a dream made manifest in the world by the will of those who dared great things and refused to accept defeat.

How long before they discover I'm gone? How long before my grandfather sends the Teshlors to search for the runaway bride?

She turned around and looked east. The sheep-sheared pasture did not extend far. In less than a quarter mile, they would be in the tall grass and thickets that would make their journey a labor.

“No road east,” Kile pointed out the obvious. “Have you ever gone this way before?”

Farilane shook her head. “I’m not sure anyone has. Not far beyond this pasture, at least.”

“Then let us tempt fate and shake hands with eternity,” Kile said with a gleeful tone. He picked up a dead stick, snapped off the branches, and using it as a staff, he led the way.



“You *can* swim, right?” Farilane asked the two of them.

After several hours of walking through thick, torturous brush, they had managed to cross the Instarya peninsula and arrive, as expected, at the former Bern River. While the river wasn’t horribly rough—no rapids or boulders—it had a current and was wide and deep enough to require a challenging swim. Farilane was confident in her own ability, but less certain about Sheldon and Kile. Out in the sun and fresh air, Kile appeared delicate, almost fragile. Much to her own irritation, she found herself liking him more than she wanted, more than she would have expected. Usually, she made *the replacement* suffer for a good six months, at least. After that, she remained indifferent for up to a decade; however, she already found herself worrying about Kile’s safety. Not a good sign.

But then, does it matter anymore?

“Do you mean to say . . .” Sheldon looked at the river, his face lengthening as his mouth hung open.

“There’s no ferry for this branch,” she explained, “because there’s no need to cross here. The far side is the province of Rhulynia. The only thing in Rhulynia is Vernes, which is far to the south. There’s nothing on the opposite bank but a massive forest. So the question remains, can both of you swim?”

“Yes,” Sheldon replied, though his eyes suggested he might be overstating his confidence.

Kile didn’t answer. He stared at the river for a moment, then dropped his pack and without a word walked down the slope toward the water.

“He doesn’t know how to swim?” Sheldon asked.

“I don’t know,” the princess said. She dropped her own pack and followed after Kile.

The scribe stopped at the edge of the bank and stood staring at the wide flow of swirling water. A wayward branch and a big green leaf boated on the surface, serving as heralds of the speed and power of the current. Kile remained silent, just staring. She thought he might be scared, but looking at his face, she didn’t see fear. His expression was pensive, solemn, reflective.

Maybe he is scared. He might be mentally praying. I have no idea what his religious beliefs are. If I couldn’t swim—even if I only sort-of could—that river would terrify me. The path to the land of the dead was said to be a river. This was a literal one.

“You okay?” she asked.

He nodded, still with the contemplative face and eyes that remained on the water. “Been a long while since I’ve been here. This isn’t the first time I’ve had to cross this particular stream.”

“Oh?” Farilane was surprised. Kile didn’t look like a world traveler. That he had been in West Echo was shocking—assuming that hadn’t been a joke. She refused to think of it as a lie.

Why? If it isn’t true, then it’s a lie. Simple as that. Why am I making excuses for him? I shouldn’t like him this much. It’s not healthy.

Still, the look on his face pained her. Whatever he was thinking, it was a sad thought.

He’s filled with mysteries. That’s part of why I like him. Anyone new is a fascination, a puzzle to be assembled, but there’s more here. Kile feels like a whole new sort of puzzle.

“Not too much has changed, really,” Kile said. “Of course I didn’t swim it here. I was a bit farther up that way.” He pointed north. “At a rocky point, near the fork of the Gula River. The water there is swifter, and it was earlier in the season.” He looked at the water. “Still just as cold, I imagine. Did you know that the water comes down this way as snowmelt from Mount Mador?”

“Does it?”

“It does.” Kile peered at the forest beyond. “The forest over there—it’s not the safest place. Unlike those in Rhenydd, Maranon, or Instarya, all of which have been cut down over the centuries for fuel or lumber, the trees of

Rhulynia remain virgin old-growth. One of the few remaining untouched by man since time began.”

“What do you mean, it’s not the safest place?”

“I’ve heard things.”

“What kind of *things*?”

“You know, tabors, raow, leshies, stuff like that.”

Farilane had never heard any of those words before. “What are you talking about? What’s a tabor?”

Kile turned to face her with a sad smile. “Nothing.”

He turned and walked back up the bank toward where Sheldon remained with the packs.

Farilane followed him. “Are you all right?”

Kile nodded. “As good as I’ve ever been.”

She had only known him for a few weeks, but already understood he was saying two things at once: telling a lie wrapped in the truth. She recognized the technique—she did it all the time.

She decided not to pry. “Do you know about tabors?” Farilane asked Sheldon.

He shook his head. “Never heard of them, but that forest is filled with all sorts of oddities: ghosts, witches, and monsters.”

Farilane looked at Kile. “Tell me you don’t subscribe to this superstitious faddle.”

He glanced across the river. “I think I just saw a unicorn.”

She frowned at him. “Don’t you find it odd the way all the stories about dark places speak of evil things? There’s always good and bad wherever you go. If you’re willing to lend a free leash to imagination, why can’t we expect a field of flowers who bake fresh bread for unexpected guests? Or talking birds that delight in entertaining strangers with operas? Why not talking trees that dispense wisdom?”

Kile’s brows shot up and he let out a partially stifled laugh. “Good point.”

She smiled. “Prepare yourselves, boys, the water’s gonna be cold. I hear it comes down as snowmelt from Mount Mador.”



The trip across the river was unpleasant, but not death defying, and Kile proved an able swimmer. Finding a decent landing on the far side became the challenge. The Mystic Wood began mostly with dense thickets of prickly raspberry, blackberry, and cat's claw bushes that tore at clothes and skin. Behind these were small, ratty-looking junipers, with some birch and willow trees standing out from the crowd. The ground along the bank was soft and muddy.

The day continued to be one of those few so grudgingly bestowed: warm, bright, gentle, decorated with flowers and accompanied by birdsong. The morning had slipped away unnoticed, and part of the afternoon had escaped as well, but midsummer meant the days were longer. The three had plenty of light left, and having crossed the river without incident, they were free to push deep into the forest beyond. The day, however, was not without its problems. Gnats and flies made the work of climbing the far bank miserable. Hauling themselves up using tree trunks and branches, they soon rose above the muck. With elevation, the forest shifted to the bigger hardwoods they had previously seen. Soon after, a broad canopy shaded them, limiting the underbrush and making their progress easier.

"How are we supposed to find this monastery?" Sheldon asked, as they walked in a shifting group that tried to remain three abreast.

Farilane swatted at a persistent fly that had tormented her since the river crossing. "To be honest, I don't know."

"You have a plan, then?"

"Extemporizing, mostly."

"What does that mean?" Sheldon asked.

"It means she's working on it."

"Working on it?"

"Results have been good so far, don't you think?" Farilane grinned.

The carpenter-turned-zealot shook his head. "I'm exhausted from all the climbing, scratched from thorns, and I'm being eaten alive by bugs."

"But you're cleaner, aren't you? The swim . . ." The princess studied Sheldon. "You really aren't that much cleaner. How did you manage to swim the river and not . . . that's just strange."

Sheldon frowned and walked on.

They traveled around fallen logs and moss-covered boulders, wary of dangers hidden beneath a carpet of dead leaves. Before long, they reached a deer trail, which encouraged them to walk single file. The thing about deer, Farilane learned, was that they made terrible road builders. The path was not only narrow and littered with tree roots and rocks that served as tripping hazards, it also wove and wandered with no clear indication of destination. Overhead, the midday sun was bright but muted as it passed through green leaves and dappled the forest floor. A multitude of birds sang high above, where they flew and fluttered as dark silhouettes. Squirrels and chipmunks darted loudly through brittle leaves, sounding ten times larger than they were.

“A road,” Kile announced with pleasant surprise.

They all paused and studied the discovery. A broad, grass-carpeted swath led through the forest. Far too wide to be a deer run, it was too uniform and clear of debris to be a dry riverbed, but no tracks were visible, no wheel ruts. The path looked as if someone had cleared a narrow lawn through the forest and was diligent about keeping it mowed.

“You’re rather stingy with your labels, aren’t you, Kile?” Farilane said. “This is a road the way a pig roast is a snack.”

“Which way?”

Since crossing the river, the landscape had forced them more or less south. Studying the road, the princess looked left and right. Right was west and likely led back to the river. “Left,” she said.

With such a luxurious corridor, they once more walked three abreast, heads turning side to side, eyeing the trees and all they might hide. Farilane looked up, hoping to see the sky to judge the time, which she guessed was getting late, but the canopy extended over their grassy path like a tent over a lawn.

Farilane spread her arms out. “This is promising, don’t you think?”

“Does this lead to the monastery?” Sheldon asked.

“Where else could it go? But that does bring up a thought. The only thing I know that’s out here is Dibben Monastery, so why is this called the Mystic Wood and not the Monk Wood, or Monastery Forest, or something like that?”

“Suri lived here.” Kile spoke with his face turned away so that his words were hard to hear—even for the myr princess.

“Excuse me?” Farilane asked.

Kile faced her, looking surprised. “Oh, ah, the first-century mystic, Suri. She was born and raised here by another mystic, a woman by the name of Tura. After the Great War, Suri returned and spent the remainder of her life amidst these trees . . . happy and content. At least I like to think so.”

“*Suri*,” Farilane said. “I know that name.” Kile began to reply, but she raised a hand. “Wait, don’t tell me.” The princess snapped her fingers. “The Battle of Grandford—there was someone named Suri—a witch or something. She was supposed to have magical powers.”

Kile nodded, cleared his throat, and recited:

*“Seven bridges breached the gap, seven spears and thunder,
Poured into the fortress bare, forward walls a’sunder.
Before the dawn, by furnace light, the black bronze sword did gleam.
Suri, Godkiller on her lap, flowed mystic tears a’steam.
A shout, a cry, a mournful wail announced another dawn,
One missing before that hopeful light, one traded hero gone.
In his place, a giant spread a massive pair of wings.
Gilarabrywn beat into the sky. Death to elves he brings.
For us, desperate in our plight, that impossible wing’ed dream.
Saved us all, turned the tide, won the day it seemed.
But for two, the sun’s light dimmed on that long and wicked day,
For Suri, and for her sacrifice, and for the one she sent away.”*

“Impressive,” Farilane said, and meant it. Not just that he had memorized the passage from the epic poem, but for the way he recited it. *No, not recited, he breathed life into the words.* She’d never heard it performed with such power, such emotion. The way he said the last line almost made her cry.

They made excellent time on the greenway. The road would have served as a wonderful court for lawn bowling except that, being so uniform and flat, it would have presented no challenge at all. Despite her feigned ignorance, Farilane had also heard stories of the Mystic Wood, but unlike the others, she didn’t believe the tall tales of mysterious dangers. Still, she hardly expected the wood to be so delightful.

The princess had explored both Durat mountain ranges, visited the Seon Uplands, put her toes in both the Blue and the Green Sea, but she had never found a place as tranquil or as beautiful as this greenway. The grass was a uniform jade, and perfectly manicured. To either side were massive boulders carpeted in equally bright green moss. And now that they were deep inside, the forest revealed its secrets. Giant trees of grand character displayed their plumage like male birds on courtship day. One very old oak looked remarkably like a hand thrusting up out of the soil, the fingers cupped as if holding an invisible wine glass. *Not a human hand*, Farilane realized, *too many fingers*. Most trees had dark trunks, some a deep black, while others were stark white and so bright they appeared to glow. On the rare occasion that a shaft of sunlight pierced the leafy ceiling, the illumination performed marvelous magic tricks of light: the beams appeared as solid bars of gold.

“Be getting dark soon,” Kile reminded them.

“How can you tell?” Farilane asked, looking up and seeing the same dim shade of green.

“Has to,” he said, stretching his back. “Was well past midday when we crossed the East Bernum, and we’ve been walking for hours. We should look for a decent place to camp. Any dry clearing with a stream or creek nearby would be good.”

Farilane began peering off the greenway for potential campsites, then she stopped.

“What is it?” Kile asked. “A campsite?”

She shook her head. “That tree.” Farilane pointed off the trail.

“What about it?”

“I’ve seen it before.” She was pointing at the oak tree—the inhuman hand holding the invisible wine glass.

“Princess, this is a forest,” Sheldon said. “We’ve passed a fair number of trees and most look alike.”

She shook her head. “It doesn’t look *like* a tree I saw. It *is* the tree I saw.”

“I saw it, too,” Kile said.

Farilane stared at Kile. “We’re going in circles.” She looked up. The canopy blocked the sky. No telling which way was which now, and it was getting darker. “We’re lost,” she said.



Realizing that the greenway was a circular path getting them nowhere—and having no idea which way to turn—they decided to pitch camp on the grassy road at the base of a particularly tall sycamore as the light rapidly diminished. The bright silver bark made it stand out, and the series of evenly staggered branches offered a convenient ladder. Night was coming on. If she hurried, Farilane was certain she could climb the tree, see the sunset, and determine directions.

“You two set up the tents,” Farilane announced, wondering for the first time if Sheldon had one. She had obtained a tent for Kile but hadn’t anticipated the need for a third. Sheldon had a pack, but she thought it unlikely that he had thought to bring so much as food. “I’ll climb up and see if I can get our bearings.”

She dropped her sack, threw off her cloak, and with a running leap, she caught the lowest branch. She swung her legs up and began the ascent. With the lower body weight and center of balance afforded to females, combined with the increased agility derived from her Instarya heritage, climbing was the one physical thing Farilane could do well, and she was proud of it. The sycamore was wonderfully easy to scale. It reminded her of a spiral stair, until she arrived at the upper reaches. Near the top, the branches were densely packed, but they were also thin and weak. She struggled to inch up, scratching her bare arms as she squeezed through small gaps. A wind swayed the tree, and reliable handholds and places to put her feet became disturbingly difficult to find. Each rung on this woody ladder was more perilous than the one before, and she worried whether the next set of branches would hold her.

I’m good at this, she tried to assure herself. *Everyone knows elves are adept at this sort of thing*. When a branch snapped and she nearly fell, doubt crept in. *I’m only one thirty-second elven*.

She could no longer see or hear the others but had yet to poke her head above the forest’s roof. From her frighteningly high perch, her view of the world was worse than ever. The leaves at this level were thickest and her

sight reduced to inches. Wind blew. She could hear but not feel it except in the sway, which made her stomach feel unpleasantly light.

I must be near the top. My head is in the attic. I need to go just a bit higher.

More wind. The tree creaked and swayed violently. She squeezed her hands around what once had been the trunk but now was only the thickest branch. Her fingers completely encircled it, which did nothing for her sense of security.

Kolby wouldn't have made it this far.

This was cold consolation, but it made her feel better.

Stretching up, she took hold of the next woody twig. The thing felt so horribly small in her hand.

This can't hold my weight.

Shifting her hips, pulling on this new anchor, she very slowly drew up her lower foot and placed it where her hand had previously been. Then, with a deep breath, she shifted her weight and gingerly pushed down on that leg. The branch bent but didn't break. Instead, her foot was wedged tight in the "V" of a branch, which was fine with her. Pain she could deal with. Falling was another matter entirely. With muscles shaking from both strain and concern, she hoisted her body higher. She felt it, then—not the dreaded sway, but the wind. The air lightly brushed her skin. She still couldn't see anything. The leaves were right in her eyes, but the hair on the top of her head danced.

No longer in the attic, I'm in the roof. One more flight.

She had to be at the top, but while the sycamore had appeared so big and tall at the base, Farilane had cause to suspect it was no higher than any other. To see above the trees might require her to stand on the top branch, and she knew she wasn't elf enough for that. She'd need sparrow blood.

But another step, I can do another step. I have to.

"Stay strong, little sprout," she told the next limb. "Pinch my foot all you like, but please support my weight."

This time she took two separate higher holds. The branches were supple and weak, but plentiful now that she was cresting the tree's crown, so she grabbed handfuls. Disengaging her bottom foot she lifted it slowly, wedging her toes in the V of the next limb. Pressing down, pushing up, she felt the branch bend half over. She heard a snapping, a soft crack, but the green

wood held. After one slow, long, shaking upward push, Farilane's head emerged above the forest canopy and into the fresh, cool breeze. Until that time she'd had no idea how soaked in perspiration she'd become. With her head in the breeze, she felt the cold kiss on her forehead and cheeks—a glorious chill.

I've done it! I made it.

The wind blew. The tree swayed, and she felt as if on the end of a whip. Her balance shifted. With no other choice, she pressed harder on the little twig where the majority of her weight rested. She felt it bend deeper, but the tiny branch held. "I love you, little limb."

She felt a rush of achievement, a sense of conquest and victory, but all her elation was snuffed out in the following instant when she looked at an opaque sky. Thick, dark clouds covered the world to such even perfection she could have been inside a building. No sun, no bright spot, all gray, and there would be no stars that night.



Dropping back down into darkness, Farilane descended to find a small campfire but no tents. Kile and Sheldon had canvases out and unrolled, but no more. They both jumped when she dropped to the ground.

"A little nervous, are we?" she asked, seeing the apprehension in their eyes.

"We heard noises," Sheldon explained, and pointed into the dark wood past the sycamore. "Something moving out there."

"It's a forest. That happens. Probably a squirrel in the leaves. They sound bigger than they are."

"Did you get our bearings?" Kile asked.

She shook her head. "All clouds."

They both nodded, accepting the news in silence as if it fit some preordained script.

Kile was standing over the unrolled tent, looking at it as if the canvas were a beast he was preparing to battle. So few people ever surprised her, and he was making a habit of it. For most of the trip, she had been trying to decide whether he was indeed as brilliant as she suspected. Then he tried to

erect his tent upside down. She watched as he began pegging the four corners, bottom side up. She let him do it. At first, she was too amazed, but then she became entranced with the suspense of wondering when exactly he'd discover his mistake. Just before he finished the fourth peg, it turned out. He stopped in mid-swing of the mallet, looked at the bottom of the tent, and then up at her as an embarrassed smile filled his face. "Oops."

She nodded. "Oops."

Farilane had her own tent up in minutes, which was good, since it was night by then and their small fire provided only a tiny island of light. Sheldon surprised her by having a tent, and a fine one at that, with a clever central pole that came in pieces and screwed together. The whole shelter was decorated in stripes of blue and gold.

"Nice tent," she said.

Sheldon looked at his little lodging and cinched his shoulders tight, biting his lip, then explained. "It's not mine."

This was more than obvious. "Proust?"

He nodded.

"Strange choice in colors. They're almost imperial." She stared at Sheldon, but the man said nothing more. The fewer words spoken, the less chance of slipping and giving something away? *I really shouldn't be so suspicious*, she reprimanded herself. *Not every shadow harbors a villain. And this is Sheldon Faust, the woodworking mouse.*

By the time night trapped them in a world of darkness, they had their domiciles set and a healthy fire going. Overhead, Farilane heard the trees creak in the growing wind. In the firelight, the sycamore's bark shone bright. They each dug into their packs, tilting the mouths of each sack toward the flames to view the contents. While Farilane loved the adventure of travel, she was not a fan of camp food. There was never time to cook, nor room to bring anything good. Her brother, father, and grandfather indulged in a rich, sedentary life, eating all manner of exotic meats and sweets, a diet that displayed its virtues in ample waistlines. She, forced by the realities of her near-constant travels, lived on a diet of nuts, roots, boiled eggs, spinach tarts, and cheese that kept her as miserably slim and tanned as a laborer.

"Anyone else getting low on water?" Sheldon asked.

Farilane pulled her skin from the disarrayed gear pile. The bladder felt light. "We'll find water tomorrow," she assured him.

“I didn’t see any streams on this road.”

“Obviously, we’ll be leaving this greenway as soon as I can determine a direction.”

“Back toward Percepliquis or—”

She frowned at him over the top of her food sack. “We just started this adventure, Sheldon. I don’t give up so easily.”

“Yes, but do you know in what direction the monastery lies?”

She looked at him for a brief moment, then said, “I have some ginger wine. I’ll trade half for a honey-oat cake if anyone is so endowed.”

“How about a handful of dried plums, walnuts, and cheese?” Kile asked.

“What kind of cheese?”

“Maranonian.”

“White or yellow?”

“White.”

“Deal.”

She handed over the wine and took the cheese with a greedy grin.

Crack! Something in the trees made the sound. They all froze, eyes wide, looking at each other, listening.

“Is that what you heard before?” Farilane whispered.

They nodded.

“Squirrel?” Sheldon asked, hopefully.

“Squirrels don’t crack branches.”

Crack! The sound was distant, but deliberate. Not the fault of wind or age. Something was moving.

“Coming from out there,” Farilane said and nodded her head at the darkness beyond the sycamore.

Slowly, quietly, Kile grabbed up the stick he’d been using all that day as a staff. He didn’t stand but laid the wood across his lap.

Farilane had only a small knife that she’d used to cut food. So accustomed to having a Teshlor or two along, she’d never considered bringing a weapon. Not that it would have mattered. She had no martial skills and guessed that the scribe and the carpenter were equally ill-equipped.

“What do you think it is?” Kile asked.

“In a forest this size?” Farilane replied. “Anything.”

“A tabor?” Sheldon asked.

“Who knows?”

A low growl rumbled out of the dark—deep and loud.

“That doesn’t sound good,” Kile said, his eyes wide and fixed on the darkness.

“A bear, then?” Sheldon asked. “A bear won’t approach a fire, right?”

“I’ve heard bears before,” Farilane said, slowly taking her knife out of her pack. “That sounded bigger.”

“Bigger than a bear?” Sheldon asked, his voice coated in concern.

“What’s bigger than a bear? A tabor? Are those afraid of fire, too?”

“I don’t even know what a tabor is!”

Farilane spotted Kile taking a strong, two-handed hold of his walking stick. She wasn’t certain what he might do with a stick against a giant bear or a tabor but thought it noble that he believed he could do something.

Crack! Thump! The sound was louder, closer.

Everyone got to their feet.

“That sounded like a log breaking,” Kile said.

Rolling out as low thunder, another growl rumbled, the sound so powerful it shook leaves.

“Torches,” Farilane muttered and grabbed up one of the larger sticks they had gathered and set aside for the fire. Stripping the Maranonian cheese of its covering, she wrapped the cloth around one end of the stick and doused it in oil from her lamp bottle, then—

Breathing.

Farilane heard the sound but guessed no one else did. Too faint, too soft for them, and so much more disturbing than the cracks.

“Eyes!” Kile announced, pointing out, but also up.

Certain he was mistaken—*How can anyone see eyes in the dark?*—she looked, then stared, baffled to spot a pair of illuminated red eyes peering back at her from the black. *Reflecting the fire?* She hoped so. The thought of eyes bright with their own light was terrifying. These were frightening nonetheless, signaling that either the creature was ridiculously tall or crouching up in the trees. No matter how she tried to solve the riddle, all answers were disturbing.

The forest . . . I’ve heard things . . . all manner of monsters . . . Maybe it is a tabor!

With just a touch to the flame, Farilane's torch caught fire.

The eyes vanished.

"I'll light the way," she told him. "If it threatens, you kill it."

Kile looked at her, shocked.

"Or hit it, at least—try to scare it off."

"Are you insane?" Sheldon asked. "You're *not* going out there, are you?"

"Never show fear," Farilane said. "It only encourages your enemies."

"What should *I* do?" Sheldon asked.

"Watch the fire. Don't let it go out."

Together, Farilane and Kile moved away from the firelight and into the wall of trees. She stayed close to him both for her safety and his. Teshlors were capable of fighting blind, but she didn't feel scribes were so well trained.

"There may be more than one," Kile whispered.

They stepped off the greenway and onto dead leaves and twigs. The moment they did, a violent series of cracks, whacks, and splintering rips erupted, as something huge bolted through the trees directly at them. Kile raised his staff. Farilane held the torch high and gritted her teeth. Then the tumult faded. The breathing was gone. The eyes were no longer visible, and the only sound came from the campfire and Farilane's heart hammering in her ears.

Kile stared into the darkness. "What was that?"

"Tabor," Farilane said, shrugging.

"Really?"

She glared at him. "It had red eyes, snapped logs, was twenty feet tall, and breathed like an old man chasing a young girl. What do you think it was?"

"We scared a twenty-foot, red-eyed tabor?"

Farilane started to laugh. "I guess. What is a tabor, anyway?"

Kile shrugged. "I don't know, but we showed it who was boss of the forest. Won't mess with us again." He slapped his stick into the palm of his hand and winced.

"We are a regular group of *brideeth eyn mer*, aren't we?"

Kile raised his brows. "Do you know what that means?"

"An elven term. Not positive, but I think it means a nasty person."

He nodded. "Close enough."

The two retreated to the circle of campfire light, where Sheldon held a stick of his own, a short, splintered one that had been gathered to stoke the fire.

"What were you going to do with that?" Kile asked.

The carpenter shrugged. "Wave it around like I knew how to use it."

Kile and Farilane both nodded. "As good a plan as any."

"Maybe we should take turns keeping watch?" Kile asked.

Farilane nodded but inwardly doubted such a thing would matter. This was supposed to be a hike to a monastery in the safe heart of the empire. Now she was lost in a forest of monsters with two men she barely knew.

Maybe this is the trip my family hoped for. Maybe this is my final mistake.

She lay down, pulled up her blanket, and listened to the pops of the fire.

At least I'm not lying in a bed, coughing up blood and wheezing my way into Phyre. No one may remember me, but I will enter the gates of light with my boots on.

CHAPTER NINE

THE GREENWAY ROUND

They woke to the pour of rain.

Not a nice rain, either, Farilane thought. *This is what they mean by bitter rain.*

Less a shower and more a squall, the droplets landed hard and cold, thrown by a spiteful wind. It was late spring, but this outburst had all the evil fury of a winter storm. The limb of a fir tree cracked under the torment and fell like the wing of some giant bird. It landed ten feet from their camp. Overhead, leaves flew in circles, and the trees swayed like drunks at a crowded party. The three quickly broke down the camp in an effort to stow their tents before the wind ripped rope from peg. Everything was soaked. Farilane had a puddle at the bottom of her pack. She rolled her tent, forcing water from the folds. The rain's gray curtain limited sight to only a few yards, but worse was the splashing and spraying that kept her blinking and wiping.

"They got in the food," Sheldon shouted over the wind. He stood holding one of the larger packs, staring at its contents.

"What's that?" Farilane asked.

"Chipmunks, I think. They ate through the bottom of the bag. I didn't even know chipmunks liked vegetables. They got in the cheese, too."

"What's left?"

"Not a lot." Sheldon dropped the sack on the ground, revealing the gnawed hole in the bottom of the bag.

"Chewed through the waterskins as well." Kile brought the bad news and the deflated bladders. "We just went from being low on water to being

out.”

“Better to have been visited by chipmunks than whatever that other thing was,” Farilane shouted back.

They all stared at the trees for a moment. The face of the forest—a sheer green curtain that swayed with the wind and had appeared so pastoral the day before—now displayed a malevolent side. *The forest . . . I’ve heard things.*

“Which way?” Sheldon asked. He didn’t sound scared, but he didn’t sound happy.

Farilane studied the trees. “Let’s put the wind at our backs and look for a side trail.”

“Good plan,” Kile told her with a wet-faced smile.

Sheldon did not appear so confident as he hoisted his pack with a scowl.

Farilane led the way, walking close to the left of the greenway. Kile strode on the right, and Sheldon plodded down the middle, hunched over with the weight of his wet gear. Farilane peered as deeply into the woods as possible, searching for even the smallest deer trail or water flush. She saw nothing but dense foliage. The wind and rain slapped their backs with a chill hand. They had only traveled a few hundred feet when the wind attacked now from the front.

“We can’t have made a half circle already,” Kile grumbled.

“The wind just changed,” Farilane said. “It happens.” She shook her head. “This is a most disagreeable forest.”

For the next few hours, they walked and searched but found nothing. All the while, the wind came at them. Eventually, they spotted the fallen branch, mashed grass, and burnt circle of their previous night’s camp. Coming to a stop, they all stared at the familiar sight with miserable frowns.

“You saw nothing?” she asked Kile.

“Can’t even find where we entered onto this greenway,” Kile said.

“Isn’t it possible to determine direction by the moss on a tree?” Sheldon asked, his tone tinged with frustration. “It always grows on the north side, isn’t that right?”

“Yes,” Farilane replied. “And spiderwebs are most often found on the south side.”

“So why don’t we—”

Farilane curled a finger inviting him to follow her. She led Sheldon to the base of the sycamore she had climbed the night before. All the trees had moss *circling* their bases. And one rock was entirely surrounded by spiderwebs.

“Is that normal?”

“No,” she said.

“And the way the rain managed to stay in our faces even while we obviously walked in a circle?”

She shrugged. “Just going to have to push randomly into the undergrowth, I suppose.” She pulled their big, blackened pan from the sack and set it on the grass, where it rang with the sound of raindrops.

“What are you going to cook?” Sheldon asked, hopeful but confused. “The chipmunks ate everything.”

“She’s not cooking,” Kile shouted over the roar of the rain. “We’re out of water, remember?”

Farilane smiled at him. “If we’re going to hack our way through the understory of this forest, we’ll need water. We can fix the bladders, I think. I have needle and thread and wax in my pack. And with all this rain it won’t take long to . . .”

The downpour of rain that had been a constant drumming and crash since they awoke, stopped. All that remained was the patter of water slipping off drenched leaves.

Farilane looked at her pan. Not even a quarter full. “I’m starting to not like this place.”

Kile looked at the walls of trees to either side of the greenway. “Don’t suppose it matters where or what direction we try?”

“Not that I can see.” Farilane was still staring sadly at her pan.

With no noticeable arc in the path, Kile picked a side. The thickets were dense—too tightly packed to push past. Thorns made the prospect of climbing or forcing their way through a bit too disagreeable. Kile and Sheldon hacked at the brush, trying to clear a path while Farilane went about gathering what water she could off the trees’ leaves, even going so far as to wring out her clothes into the pan.

The men returned, looking tired. She offered them the water and fished out what food the rodents had missed. Together, they shared a modest meal.

“We’ve got a good path going,” Kile reported. “And I think I see a clearing not far off.”

“Great. Can we push through?” Farilane asked.

“Maybe, but the brush is thick. Gets thicker the farther we go.” He thumbed his stout staff, stained green on one end.

After the meal, all three shouldered packs and pushed into the heart of the forest. Just as Kile reported, the brush was horribly dense: a wall of stiff, leafy plants, small trees, and a lattice of thorn bushes. Farilane found a stick of her own and did her best to swing it but found little room to do so. In the end, they got through by sheer force. Branches and thorns tore their clothes and skin. Farilane’s legs were lacerated, her arms slashed. One big thorn caught Farilane across the cheek. Touching the wound, she came away with blood. They continued to push forward and finally punched through to a clearing.

“There.” Kile grinned.

They each smiled at the accomplishment, but Farilane felt something wasn’t right. The clearing wasn’t wide, but it was long like a road . . . a green, grassy road.

“We didn’t . . .” Farilane stepped out of the eaves into the long narrow field and began to walk, and then run, down its length.

“Princess!” Kile shouted. “Wait!”

The two chased her.

Farilane didn’t need to run far. Only a few yards down the green corridor, she found the sycamore and fire ring.

“That’s a bit of bad luck, isn’t it?” Kile said. “We must have cut through the middle of the circle. I had an even chance and picked the wrong side.”

The light was fading. They had spent another day with nothing to show for it except a total lack of food and water.

“We’ll get an early start tomorrow and go the other way.”

Farilane nodded. She wanted to accept that would do it. Sensibly and logically, it had to, but the princess had begun to wonder. *Spring often suffers strange weather. The clouds last night that prevented me from seeing the stars heralded the rainstorm today. Chipmunks were known to defile foodstuffs in camps if caution wasn’t taken. In such a canopy-shrouded forest, moss and spiders might not have a need to stick to one side or the*

other. All of these things are explainable, nothing strange, but taken together . . . *And a circular path in a forest? How does that happen?*

Kile needed less help this time in setting up his canvas abode, but a fire wasn't in the works. Everything was soaked through. Finding a surviving wedge of cheese, they broke it into thirds. In the growing dark, they sat, taking their time eating and listening to the drips of residual rain playing in the trees.



Farilane was first to hear the whispering. Voices spilled out of the dark, out of the woods on the far side of the trail. She was certain they were speaking words, but too faint, too drowned out by the noise of a waterlogged forest to make out. A conversation was underway deep in the dark, a discourse between several, and Farilane suspected the discussion was about them.

"Is that . . ." Sheldon began. "Do I hear . . . whispering?"

"Think so," Farilane said, shaking out a blanket she'd wrung hard and hung on a branch, hoping against the odds that it might dry before she was forced to crawl into her sodden tent. Sleeping soaked had to be the worst part of travel. At least it used to be. After an all-day hike through rough terrain with only a bit of cheese to eat and no water at all, she faced an introduction to a whole new category of *worsts*.

"Shouldn't we be concerned?" Sheldon asked. The carpenter sat in front of his colorful tent with his knees-up, watching the darkness.

"About voices whispering in the darkness? In this place?" She almost laughed. "I should think so."

"So what are we going to do?"

"Well, there are three of us. Kile does have his stick, and I have these little fellows." She brandished her switch and the knife she was using to trim it. "Meaning we have nearly nothing in the way of offensive power or defensive ability. We are also tired and short on food. So, unless either of you has something clever to suggest, I'm thinking we sit here and hope nothing eats us."

"That's not much of a plan."

“It’s not like I’m bragging.”

“What’s that?” Kile pointed.

They all looked and discovered a faint light deep in the trees.

“Is it moving?” Sheldon asked. “I think it’s moving.”

“Yes, but left to right, not at us,” Farilane concluded and stood up. She slipped her knife away, and holding her switch low at her side, she moved toward the trees.

“Where are you going now?” Kile asked.

“We could use some help.”

“Have you considered what type of person wanders this forest at night? And I’m not certain *person* is even the right word.”

“So far, this forest hasn’t offered many opportunities. Don’t think we can ignore one when it arrives carrying a light.”

Kile stood up.

“And where are *you* going?” she asked.

He looked at her, surprised. “Best not to get separated. Traveling alone in the dark in this forest is pretty much a guarantee we’ll never see each other again.”

Sheldon jumped up. “I’m not staying here alone. Should we take the tents?”

Farilane looked back. “Why? It’s not like we’ll lose them. We can’t get free of this spot no matter how hard we try.”

With sticks in hand, the three moved single file into the trees. While still having no idea what direction they traveled, Farilane at least understood that this was the *other* side of the greenway, the outside.

The light was still there. It bobbed slightly, as if held by someone walking. That was the good news; the bad news was that the light had a bluish-silver tint, which ruled out a torch or lantern.

What light emitted a blue glow?

Farilane had read about *foxfire*, or *fairy fire*, a strange phenomenon where plants or fungus glimmered with a blue-green light. The fungus wasn’t hot, it just glowed. This might be that, except it moved.

Firefly?

Possible, but they were the wrong color. They were more yellow-green. This was a stunning blue-silver, and even at a distance, was clearly bigger than a fly. Farilane watched as the light disappeared behind tree trunks and

reappeared on the far side. As they drew closer, the light grew larger. No sound followed it. Farilane didn't find this terribly odd, given that the previous day's downpour had soaked the forest floor, helping muffle even their own movement. As they chased the light, however, the ground grew wetter. Soon, they were slogging through standing water and muck. Farilane found keeping up with the light a growing challenge. Then, just walking became a problem.

In retrospect, she was pleased that she saw the danger before it was too late, but also embarrassed that it took that long. She stopped trying to chase the light when she felt her feet sink into the muck to her calves. "Stop," she told the others. "This is a trap." With effort, she managed to dislodge her legs, and then retreated. Another few yards, and the effort to pull one leg free would have forced the other one too deep to rescue.

"The light is luring us."

"Where?" Sheldon asked in a small voice from the darkness behind her.

"To our deaths."

"Oh." The word was a muffled puff of air.

Farilane trudged back the way she'd come, only to find more deep water, more sucking muck.

"Princess?" Sheldon called. "Do you need help?"

She couldn't see him in this forest beneath a clouded sky and below a dense canopy; she couldn't see her hand before her face. "No! Stay where you are. Don't come to me. Don't anyone come to me."

With her switch, Farilane probed the solidness of the land around her and found only more muck. Blind, she had no way to tell which was the best route, and the wrong path might kill her.

I'm not as clever as I thought.

She looked for the light, hoping to use it as a point of reference despite its movement, but it was gone. All around her was absolute black. The totality of it was so disorienting that she felt a bit dizzy. No horizon to line up with. Uneven shifting ground made standing more challenging. *I don't want to fall. I'll lose all direction if I do. And what if my arms plunge into that muck? Will I be able to retrieve them? And at what cost to my legs? This is bad.*

No Teshlors. No net, she remembered, and already she'd literally put her foot in it. Farilane took a breath. She needed to calm down. *It's just mud . . .*

Or is it? In the dark, this slime could be anything. The water did feel oddly tepid for such a chilly night. A creative mind, she discovered, was a gift and a curse.

“This way,” Kile called out of the dark.

“What way is *this way*?” she asked.

Kile didn’t answer, at least not with words. Instead, he began to whistle a merry tune. She’d never heard it before, and at that moment the melody was more beautiful than the song of a nightingale. The intricate lilting composition proved Kile to be an expert whistler. She faced the music and stepped—once, twice, three times—and then her feet met firmer ground. After a dozen more steps, she blundered into Sheldon. Together, they followed Kile’s whistling through the trees, some of which they found the hard way. Before long, they escaped back to the green ring they once thought to be a road, coming out remarkably close to their tents.

“How did you do that?” she asked Kile, spotting him in the meager moonlight that clawed through the overhead clouds and leaves.

“Whistle?”

“No—how did you find your way back so well?”

He held up her spool of thread, not nearly as neatly wound as it had been. “You said you had needle and thread in your pack. I borrowed it, tied one end to a branch, and let it out. Lucky you stopped when you did. I was almost at the end of my tether. Hope you don’t mind. I suppose I should have asked permission fir—”

She kissed him. She had aimed for his cheek, but he turned in surprise at her approach and she caught his lips. “Thank you.”

“The thread did all the work,” he told her, his voice halting and awkward.

In that one off-balance moment, in his shock and surprise, she’d caught a glimpse behind that careful mask. A cloud of a different sort drifted over his face, casting a shadow too deep to penetrate—a false wall had slammed shut. A strange sense of unease radiated from him, a feeling that both reassured and frightened her. This was not a simple scribe, or a bumbling scholar, or a naive intellectual. All of that was the mask, and she wondered if Virgil had known who he’d paired her with. In one instant, Farilane had learned more about this man than she had in all the hours she’d previously spent with him. At the same time, she had also glimpsed the enormity of

what she didn't know. The man wasn't an idiot, or brilliant. Kile was more than both. He was multitudes, which was why she had found it impossible to classify him. He fit no pattern, refused to slip into any preformed mold. Kile wasn't a single mystery or a puzzle. He was many. And for the first time, she suspected that some of the answers to his true nature might be dangerous. This only made him more intriguing.



The next day began much as the last, but instead of rain, they woke to fog. A thick, white cloud enveloped the world in a dreamy state of ethereal unreality, just as frustrating as it was beautiful. Sheldon suggested waiting for the mist to burn off, but already Farilane had a strong suspicion that wasn't going to happen. Not there. Not in the Mystic Wood. Not unless she wanted the fog to stick around—then it would disappear.

They had only been out of water for a matter of hours, but the idea they had nothing to drink created a nagging desire beyond necessity. With daylight, such as it was, they ventured back into the wood in the direction of the previous night's adventure, careful to use Kile's thread trick, and searched for the bog, hoping the water might be drinkable. They never found it. Instead, they came upon dense thorn bushes of the sort to shred a deer.

Packing up the still-damp tents, they set out once more along the greenway, searching for a more inviting place to veer off. Remembering they had gotten to the loop by way of a deer trail, Farilane reasoned that while it might be hard to see, it had to be there. Farilane decided to search for the "hand tree," since it was the first landmark she had noticed. She hoped that meant it was nearest the deer trail. She looked for the old fingered oak but wondered if she'd even see it through the mist. Clouds, rain, fog . . . It made absolute sense for one to follow the other and yet . . . *what are the odds of such a series of unfortunate events plaguing us in perfect measure? Correlation doesn't prove causation*, she reminded herself, *but it doesn't rule it out, either*.

There's a good chance we might actually die here. Happy my-birthday, Granddad! Condolences, almost-fiancée.

Lost in her newly found lose-lose scenario of possible outcomes, Farilane spotted a woman standing in the middle of the pathway. For a brief moment, the princess was certain she was seeing things. The looping path had become their personal space, and seeing someone on it was tantamount to finding a stranger in one's bedroom. It didn't help that the figure appeared out of the mist, a hazy apparition that grew more solid as they approached. The woman was dressed in green cloth that draped and wrapped but had no buttons, no ties, no belt. She wore no shoes. Her long red hair cascaded all the way down to her hips, her lips matching it in color and standing out on pale skin. She stood, arms at her sides, watching them approach. She was alone.

Farilane, who was in the lead, stopped to take stock—two ladies in a fog trying to understand each other. For all the princess's ability to gauge a person by appearance, Farilane was lost. This situation was too bizarre. Nothing made sense, and references were few. The woman was young, perhaps late teens or early twenties, her attire foreign. Even the fabric was odd, a strange shimmer revealing itself along its folds, and the color was rich and vibrant beyond any dye. She wore the color of new leaves over old. *And that hair!* The princess had never seen its equal. Thick, full, and long, it draped her shoulders like a hooded cape. She watched them with the single-minded focus of a falcon, and while she was smaller than Farilane, the princess sensed a threat. Not a difficult presumption given the peculiarity of a young woman alone in a remote forest who showed no sign of concern at their approach.

There's obviously something more here—a lot more. What am I missing? Does she live here? No traveling gear or clothes. She's native to this place? Is she the one who maintains this path? Unlikely she mows in that gown. Doesn't look afraid of strangers, so perhaps not alone. Family? Is she part of a clan living in this forest? A daughter of a woodsman tribe? Are they just behind her in the fog, armed with spears and shields? Why is she out front? And why doesn't she appear surprised to see us? Perhaps she is a . . . who am I kidding? I've got nothing. This is too strange.

"Hello?" Farilane spoke first. *Does she even understand Rhunic?*

The woman narrowed her bird-of-prey eyes and tilted her head as if seeking a better angle to see them by.

"Who are you?" Farilane ventured.

An uncomfortable pause lingered. Still tilting her head, the woman began to approach, her eyes fixed on Farilane.

“Don’t move,” the princess whispered to Kile and Sheldon. “And don’t say anything.”

Step after step, the redhead’s bare feet made no sound upon the grass. The woman came to within arm’s length, where she continued to study Farilane with a bold intensity that violated every rule of polite behavior.

“Your eyes . . .” the woman said, her voice simple but with an odd accent—some mash-up of northern rural with something unexpected, something Farilane wasn’t able to nail. “They are green.”

I’m an idiot! Farilane chastised herself. In self-defense, she admitted that eye color was not usually the first thing people noticed about a stranger, but still! *The woman has green eyes!*

“You are myr,” the redhead said.

“So are you.”

The lady of the wood nodded. Then she glanced at Sheldon and Kile. “They are not.”

“No.”

Again, she tilted her head, squinting as if she was trying to visually drill inside Farilane’s head. “Does your family hate you?”

This is not going to be my typical conversation—suppose I could have guessed that. “These two are not my family.”

The redhead looked irritated. “Not them.”

“Oh, ah . . .” Farilane shrugged, considering the question seriously. “I can’t say my family and I get along, but *hate* seems a bit harsh.”

“My family hated me.” The redhead began to circle Farilane, her eyes scanning up and down her figure. The princess felt as if a bee hovered round her head. “Hated me for being myr. My grandparents sold me to a workhouse soon after I was born. Didn’t want a granddaughter with green eyes.”

“My whole family has green eyes.”

“But they still don’t want you?”

“No.” Farilane sighed. “Not really.”

The woman took note of Kile’s stick. “Are these your guards? We had guards—at the workhouse. They beat us. They beat Danna to death. She had black hair and brown eyes, like them. I didn’t care about Danna. She

was mean. But then they whipped Aldaria. Beat her in front of me. *She* had green eyes—green eyes, and gold hair . . . like you. I loved Aldaria. That’s why they beat her. Wanted to break me. I didn’t break.” The strange woman, who was behind Farilane by then, stopped circling, leaned in close, and whispered, “*I exploded.*”

The woman’s tone had gained a crisp aspect, an icy edge, and Farilane quickly said, “These are not guards. They are my friends.”

“Friends?” she said, as if she didn’t understand the word, and her gaze once more moved to the others—no, to Kile.

“What do you mean by *exploded*?”

“The workhouse. The guards. All the other children—including Aldaria—were gone. They sent soldiers after that. They’re gone, too. Not entirely my fault. I was very angry, mad at the workhouse, at the guards, the soldiers, my grandparents. But more than anything, I was furious with myself. *They* hadn’t killed Aldaria. *I* did that. Didn’t mean to. Just happened.” She began to circle Kile. “Are these men soldiers?”

“No, not soldiers,” Farilane said, not liking the way the woman’s attention had turned so fixedly on Kile. He became her new obsession. She circled him instead.

“I don’t like soldiers,” the woman said, staring at Kile.

“They aren’t soldiers. This is Kile.”

“Kile? What is Kile?”

“He’s a scribe. He writes things. Do you know what writing is?”

She glanced at Farilane, an annoyed look. “Not what he *does*. What he *is*?”

This made the princess pause for a moment, wondering if she was missing something in the conversation. The woman was odd, but having mastered language, she should be cognizant of the concept of races. “He’s a man.”

The redhead took a step closer to Kile, and as she had done to Farilane, she peered deeply at him. After reaching some judgment, she shook her head. “No, he’s not.”

“He’s not?”

The redhead shifted her focus to Sheldon. “And this one is hiding. Why is he hiding?” Her tone once more turned sharp.

An overpowering sense of danger emanated from the lady in green, as if she held an invisible bow outstretched and nocked with an ugly arrow that she pointed at one then the other. The tension of that quivering string vibrated the air. The green-gowned lady had issues with men, and the more she focused on them, the greater the tension became. "I'm Farilane, of the Imperial House of Nyphron, Princess of the Empire, and we are a bit lost. Do you know which way lies Dibben Monastery?"

"No," she snapped. Her gaze was back on Kile, her head tilted down this time as she studied him with a sinister glare.

"Excuse the rudeness, but I think perhaps you do."

This caught the redhead's attention. The woman turned to face Farilane. *That worked . . . I guess.*

The redhead moved toward her, an unpleasant sneer on her lips. "What are you going to do, princess? Have your soldiers beat me?"

"Of course not. And they aren't soldiers. I mean, just look at them. Any army that suffered soldiers like these would beg to be conquered."

"But you're lost. No food or water. You're desperate. People do crazy things when they're scared. You don't want to die out here, do you? Don't want to be eaten by chipmunks, right?"

"Chipmunks don't eat people."

"So sure of that, are you? This is a weird forest. Strange things happen here."

Can't argue with that.

"This is part of the empire," Sheldon said, asserting himself, stepping forward bravely—but stupidly. "She is the princess of the realm in which you live. Farilane is your ruler."

Farilane cringed. *That's not likely to go over well.*

The woman's sight locked on him, her expression darkening. "This is the Mystic Wood. It lies in no realm but its own. This is a free place where no one has ever bent a knee to anyone, and no one is beaten for disobedience."

"No one is beating anyone here," Farilane said, putting her hands up, but slowly. She had the idea that the redhead was a wild thing, easily spooked, and . . . *I exploded.* "Could you please just tell us how to get out?"

"Follow the road," the woman said.

Farilane rolled her eyes. "It runs in a loop."

“No, it doesn’t. This path takes you where you need to go. Apparently, you need to go in circles.”

The woman turned, and without another word, walked away, vanishing into the fog. Farilane gave up on civility. She needed answers. “Wait here,” she told Kile and Sheldon and trotted forward into the mist hoping she wasn’t about to fall into a pit with sharpened spikes.

“Hold on. Wait!” Farilane called, but all she found was fog.

Then she heard whispering. The princess slowed down to listen. Two voices were speaking to each other. Carefully she crept forward until she could make out words.

“We should go.”

“No, she told us to stay.”

Dumbfounded, Farilane walked forward to find Sheldon and Kile, right where she’d left them. Startled, they spun, puzzled to see her coming up from behind.

“How did you do that?” Kile asked.

Farilane sighed. “The loop seems to have gotten smaller.”

“And the woman in green?” Sheldon asked.

The princess raised her hands in helplessness. “No idea.”

CHAPTER TEN

THE TRUTH ABOUT LIES

“Interesting lady, don’t you think?” Kile said, as if this sort of thing happened all the time, but in this instance, the encounter was particularly entertaining.

“More like frustrating beyond all reason.” Farilane stood, hands on hips, frowning into the fog.

“She’s doing this to us.” Sheldon was looking into the fog while rubbing his arms and bouncing slightly on his feet as if he needed to urinate. “This is all magic. Some sort of mystic magic. That’s why they call this the Mystic Wood. *She’s* the mystic.”

“There’s no such thing as magic,” Farilane declared, and both men stared at her. Sheldon, she expected. Kile was the surprise. “*You* believe in magic, Kile?”

“Of course.” His tone was so accepting, as if she were making a joke.

Farilane sighed and drooped her head. “So I suppose you also believe in the gods, and other assorted fairytales?”

He rolled his eyes. “Spoken that way, you’d make anything sound silly.”

“But magic? Seriously?” The princess dropped her pack on the ground and loosened the toggles from their loops.

“The problem, I suspect, lies in the word,” Kile told her. “To you, magic apparently means something that is impossible.”

Farilane opened her satchel and searched for her spare undertunic, nodding as she did. “And to you?”

“It means something not readily understood, like reading. Those who don’t understand it consider it magic.”

“But reading isn’t magic. Anyone who thinks so is merely ignorant of facts.”

“You don’t consider reading to be mystical because you understand it, and in your mind, magic is impossible. Therefore, reading can’t be magic. But now consider this path we’ve been following. It makes no sense, does it? It is, therefore, something that shouldn’t be—at least as far as our understanding allows. But since it exists, that makes it magic.”

“Or maybe it’s simply something we don’t yet understand.” She used the tunic to wipe sweat from her face. The day was warm, and her little sprint after the Green-Clad One had left her with stinging rivulets running into her eyes. “And if we do learn the how and why of this path, does it then stop being magic?”

“To us, yes.” Kile said this with a pleasant smile, as if they were together in a cozy room sipping chilled tremble nectar, discussing philosophy, and waiting on dinner.

Farilane shook her head and jammed the tunic back in the pack. “See, that’s where you lose me. Something either is, or it isn’t. A bird is always a bird. A tree doesn’t change its fundamental reality because we *understand it better*.”

“Everything changes, Your Highness. In time, everything becomes something else, and that includes birds and trees.”

“But that’s the result of time, not understanding.”

“And yet time allows for understanding, doesn’t it? A boy sees his father as a god, then grows up and realizes he’s flawed, mortal, and foolish. Then he has his own children and discovers his father isn’t foolish at all, but still isn’t a god. Understanding changes the reality of a thing—at least insofar as we perceive it—even if that thing itself doesn’t change.”

Farilane considered this but failed to find a response. He had a point not easily disproved, but one she wasn’t willing to accept without further consideration.

“The sad part is,” Kile went on, “the more we learn, the less magic there is in the world, and the less enchanting life becomes.”

“I don’t see how this is helping.” The carpenter stood with arms folded, a scowl on his face. Despite his river swim and suffering through the rain shower, he’d managed to remain as dirty as when they first met.

“I’ll tell you what magic is,” Farilane declared. “That no matter what, Sheldon manages to stay so filthy. That *has* to be magic.”

Sheldon huffed and folded his arms. “I’m thirsty. Really thirsty and quite hungry. We need to find a way out of here.”

“Indeed we do.” The scribe faced Sheldon square on, sharing his untroubled, almost carefree smile.

Looking at the two, Farilane was reminded of the theatrical masks of comedy and tragedy used at the Imperial Theater.

“You’re our resident expert on magic, Mister Faust. How would you suggest we solve this riddle?” Kile asked.

The grubby little man swished his lips from side to side, casting his focus to the hazy trees. “It’s all fog, isn’t it?”

“I don’t think that has ever been in dispute,” Farilane said.

“No, not just the mist—all of it. The trees, this path, the lights, and the monster in the night, all of it is a fake curtain hiding the truth.”

“You mean an illusion?” Farilane said. “But how could it possibly be an illusion? We’re all seeing it, hearing it, touching it.”

“Let’s not get ahead of ourselves.” Kile took a step toward the trees, his head tilted up. “We’re still working on the *What*. We can ponder the *How* later.”

“I don’t understand,” Farilane admitted.

“Which means we are still ignorant and therefore dealing with magic. So let’s go with that, shall we?” He grinned at her.

The princess threw up her hands. “You’re making no sense. You want to solve a problem, but you insist on starting from an impossible base point. If this is magic, why don’t we just ask the trees to dance out of our way? You’re being absurd.”

“Mister Faust?” Kile said. “How does one break an illusion enchantment?”

“Don’t believe in it,” he replied.

Kile looked at Farilane, stuck out his lower lip and nodded. “Seems reasonable, don’t you think?”

“No, it doesn’t. None of this is reasonable.” She lifted her pack onto her shoulder. The bag was ridiculously light, reminding her it contained no food or water, which in turn reminded her this was no trivial game they played.

“You can’t just *believe* your way out of trouble. What are we going to do? Just say there’s no forest and then the trees will all melt away?”

“I think it may take a bit more than just *saying* it. Yes, it will require much more than that.” Kile nodded and walked off, strolling down the grassy path, retracing the route they had already explored a dozen times.

“Where’s he going?” Farilane asked Sheldon, who shrugged.

When they caught up with him, Kile was back at their old camp, and Farilane had a sinking feeling they would never be rid of the place. The whole predicament was feeling more and more like a prison.

Kile pointed at the sycamore side of the trail. “We heard a monster on this side—the red-eyed tabor, remember?”

Farilane and Sheldon nodded.

Kile turned and pointed to the other side of the greenway. “Over there is where we saw the light that lured us into the bog.”

“So what?” Sheldon asked. “We know all that.”

“But until now, we didn’t know we were dealing with magic. And with understanding comes a new reality.”

Farilane rolled her eyes and shook her head. “No, it doesn’t. Reality is reality. It doesn’t change.”

Kile once more smiled at her, and she realized it was the sort of expression an understanding parent or teacher might extend to a frustrated child. She’d seen that look on Virgil’s face when he tried to explain the “truth” about the gods. She didn’t care for the condescending attitude in either man. They saw her as an innocent young woman, convincing them that they must know more than she.

“Your Highness, you are very good at problem-solving. I’ve seen it. You take small clues and use them to form solutions. All I am asking is for you to do what you normally would.”

Farilane opened her mouth to interrupt. Kile raised a hand, stopping her. “*But* pretend for a moment that magic is real and factor that into your reasoning.”

She shook her head. “Starting with false facts will result in a pointless answer.”

Kile smiled. “Humor me, then. Treat it as a theoretical puzzle if that helps. Where’s the harm?”

Farilane sighed. “Fine. It’s not like we are running out of time or anything, not like we are literally dying of thirst.”

“Good.” Kile grinned. “So if, as Mister Faust says, this is all a phantasm”—he gestured around them at the trees and the pathway—“what might you deduce from our situation?”

Farilane thought a moment. It was not an easy shift. She felt as if she had been sprinting hard and then asked to immediately run in the opposite direction—backward. She would have stumbled even with her inherited elven traits if this were a physical challenge. But Farilane was practiced in mental gymnastics. For years, she had enjoyed playing games of strategy, and as few could challenge her, she played against herself. This was like that, and it took only the span of a deep breath to reorient.

“All right, if this is an *illusion*,” Farilane said in a tone that let them both know she did not agree with this premise at all, “something must have created it. If something created it, there must be a reason. Murder comes to mind, but as there are so many easier and more direct means of killing the three of us, I would rule that out. Manipulation then becomes the obvious answer. This comes in two flavors: to make us do something we wouldn’t normally, or to prevent us from acting on a plan. Since we’ve been stuck in a circle, it seems likely that someone is trying to stop us from either passing through this forest in general, or it is possible the intention is more specific and trying to stop us from finding Dibben Monastery.” She looked at the two sides of the path. “A monster on this side and a pretty light on that one suggests that whoever is creating these things doesn’t want us to go in the direction of the red-eyed tabor. Which of course means that’s the way we should go. But if all this were true—if magic does exist—I would expect to encounter another illusion stopping us.”

“Agreed.” Kile adjusted his pack, took a deep breath, and stepped off the greenway into the trees on the monster’s side.

“But magic doesn’t exist!” she shouted after him.

This did nothing to halt his determination, and Farilane was forced to follow him or face the possibility of their becoming separated. Sheldon, confronted with the same dilemma, chased after her, and soon they were all deep in the trees. They had only gone a few hundred feet when they reached an impressive cliff. The forest floor fell away into a sheer rocky precipice

that plummeted a dizzying two hundred feet, at least. At the bottom, Farilane could clearly see jagged rocks protruding like fangs.

“What do you think, Mister Faust?” Kile asked, placing a foot on the edge. “More fog?”

Sheldon nodded. “It’s not real. It can’t be.”

“What are you talking about?” Farilane said. “Why can’t it be real?”

Kile shifted forward.

Farilane grabbed his arm. “What are you doing?”

“It isn’t real. Mister Faust just said so.”

“Are you insane? We can all see there’s a cliff here. Who are you going to believe, your own eyes or Sheldon Faust, who was suckered by a shyster named Proust into believing my great-great-great-great-grandfather was a god?”

“Your Highness, look. There’s no river cutting this canyon, so how was it made? And notice how ridiculously deep it is. At the very least, if it followed normal rules, swelling ground water would have made this into a lake. And the rock is all wrong. We’re looking at granite, but this forest is on limestone. This cliff, this hole, none of it makes sense.”

“Cliffs don’t have to make sense,” Farilane said. “They’re cliffs. You step off the edge and you die.”

“That’s what it wants me to think.”

“Kile, it’s a hole in the ground. It doesn’t know you exist.”

“It’s not enough to say it is an illusion,” the scribe said, and shifted forward again.

“Don’t!” Farilane shouted, gripping his wrist tighter and stretching out his arm. He looked back with an absurdly innocent expression. *He’s doing that puppy thing again.* “I don’t want you to die.”

Kile smiled. “I thought we weren’t friends.”

She scowled. “We’re not . . . *but* you have potential. That whole *things-change-with-understanding* stuff was intriguing. Even Virgil never locked an argument on me like that.”

“But it didn’t convince you that magic exists.”

“That’s a big leap.” She looked down. “Pun intended.”

“Your Highness,” he said gently, “we can’t survive for more than a few days without water. We need to do something.”

“True, but I suggest we cross suicide off that list, for—I don’t know—logical reasons?”

“Life is a gamble, isn’t it?” Kile told her. “The trick is to wager wisely, to balance risk with reward. Isn’t that right?”

She let go, staring at him, shocked to hear her own words thrown back at her. *How did he . . . Virgil must have told him.*

Free of his imperial anchor, Kile started to move forward again, then paused and held out his hand. “Give me the spool of thread.”

Puzzled, and fearing that if she didn’t do as he asked, he might jump, Farilane dug in her sack. She handed the spool over.

Kile unwound a bit and gave her the loose end. “Hold on tight.”

She knew she didn’t have two hundred feet of thread, and the tiny spool of slender string couldn’t hold any weight. “What am I supposed to—”

With the spool in his hands so that it could unravel, Kile stepped off the cliff.

Farilane screamed as she saw him fall. He plunged to the bottom, where his body shattered like an egg on a kitchen floor, impaled on the jagged rocks. Kile’s lanky frame lay grotesquely twisted. Scarlet blood splattered the face of the canyon floor. No sound came from him—no movement.

Farilane stood, staring in shock. “Oh, Sweet Mother of All!” She muttered the ancient phrase without knowing or caring where it came from or how it spilled from her lips. She said it over and over as she began to shake. Her legs weakened. Fearful of falling, she sat on the edge of the cliff, trying to breathe, rocking with the effort. *He’s dead. Kile is dead. Why did he do that? He’s dead!*

It hurt. Seeing him broken on those rocks she felt pain, a sharp stab of loss.

I just met him!

Something about that made it worse. She’d found something special, something new and unique, but before she had time to appreciate it, the thing was lost.

Don’t care too much for them. If you do, you’ll either die or go insane.

Staring down at his body, Farilane was certain her father had gotten it wrong; there was no *either-or* in that formula.

Then she felt a tug.

Farilane had forgotten she still held the little thread. It didn't matter she could see the length of it dangling, swaying in the breeze.

Tug, tug, tug.

Something was pulling on it.

Tug, tug.

Gentle at first, the jerks became more sharp.

How can I be feeling—

Tug, tug, tug.

This can't be—

Tug, tug.

Farilane's eyes widened. *Three tugs, a pause, then two more. That's our knock!*

Farilane looked down at the scribe's body, bewildered.

Tug, tug, tug, pause, tug, tug.

Who you gonna believe? Your own eyes or a thread?

She looked back at Sheldon.

"It's only fog," he told her.

Farilane stood up, gripping the thread tight. "But magic isn't real."

The thread insisted otherwise.

I'm not risking much, am I?

Farilane stepped forward. She couldn't bear to look down. Instead, she stared up at the trees.

"Oh, bother it all," she muttered. *I'll be doing everyone a favor, including myself. For once, I might as well be magnanimous.*

One step. Two. Three. *Where is this—*

She fell.



Farilane had just enough time to regret her decision. *I just killed myself because I believed the ravings of a scribe and a carpenter, both of which are—*

She hit water and plunged into a deep pool. Expecting rocks and instant death, she hadn't taken much of a breath. The shock of cold was another

unpleasant surprise that did nothing to help. She flung her arms out and kicked her legs hard as she fought for the surface.

I'm not dead! How very odd. Or wait! Perhaps I am. People who die—or nearly do—report falling into a river. They hit water and are swept toward the afterlife. Never believed in that tall tale either, so how ironic is it that I—

She cleared the water and gasped for air. Raking hair back from her eyes, Farilane found herself in a small pond at the base of a little waterfall. No canyon, no jagged rocks, and no afterlife stream carrying her to loved ones. She swam in a pool in a tranquil glade. Kile, looking like a drowned rat, sat on a rock still holding one end of the thread that continued tethering the two.

“Welcome to the realm of unexpected possibilities,” he said, smiling at her as if this was all some grand joke.

“Sweet cackling serenade,” she muttered, then paddled over to the edge and pulled herself out. “I thought—I thought . . .” She couldn’t get the rest of the words out. They clogged her throat. She was shaking uncontrollably but didn’t feel cold. The empty pain of loss was replaced by a fullness that made her feel a bit nauseous.

An explosion of water threw up a spray behind her as Sheldon Faust hit the pool.

Farilane tracked the course of the waterfall, less than fifty feet high. “How is that possible?”

“It’s not,” Kile replied, as Sheldon’s head reappeared. “That’s what makes it magic.”

“Magic,” she muttered. The word felt like a sick profanity. She struggled to locate an answer, one that might explain what had just happened—what had been happening. She found nothing.

Which means we are still ignorant and therefore dealing with magic. So let’s go with that, shall we?

“But then . . .” she began. “That also proves someone doesn’t want us to be where we are, right?”

Kile nodded. “Sensible as ever.”

“Which, of course, prompts the question . . . where *are* we?”

They were still in the forest, or at least, in *a* forest. Farilane wasn’t making any more assumptions. The world had just taken a left turn, and

everything felt out of whack. They should be dead, but instead they were lounging in a lush pool of fresh water as birds sang overhead in sun-dappled leaves. "It's pretty."

"Yes, very," Kile said.

Sheldon dragged himself out of the pool. "Let's not do that again."

"Agreed." Farilane squeezed the excess water from her clothes, then bent down for a drink. The water was clear and cool, and she gulped mouthful after mouthful. She would make herself sick if she didn't stop, but stopping was as challenging as not scratching a bug bite. Matters would only get worse, but in the moment, it felt so good.

Kile busied himself winding the thread back onto the spool that he had, after everything, managed to retain. He took an odd degree of care in the work. *Kile and his magic thread*, Farilane thought. *This really can't get any more absurd now, can it?*

"Sorry I didn't believe you, Kile." She offered this apology as a courtesy, an acknowledgment that his choice had been the better one. But her heart wasn't in it. She couldn't shake the feeling that he'd cheated. She just couldn't figure out how.

The scribe looked up from his industry. "You shouldn't have believed me. You're sensible and magic isn't."

"But how did *you* know? How did you know it wasn't real?"

He shrugged. "Ever heard the saying that if something is too good to be true, it likely is?"

She nodded.

"Well, everything has two sides, now, doesn't it? For light there's dark, top has a bottom, and if some things are too good to be true, then there must be some things too awful to be real."

"That's a flimsy argument to bet your life on."

"Let's not forget Mister Faust's endorsement. The man is a walking tower of wisdom and integrity."

Sheldon flung his wet hair back with a grimace that reminded Farilane of a pretentious cat dragging itself out of a tragic attempt to catch a meal in a bird bath.

Farilane nodded. "Oh yes, he's a stunning example of hidden intellect."

When they had each drunk their fill, reluctant to depart a fresh water supply, they followed the course of the river down a series of winsome

cascades. Free of their prison loop, each of them was eager to find new horizons—or even *a* horizon. Reaching level ground, they passed through a veil of younger trees and stepped out of the forest into a lovely field of spring flowers. Sprinkles of white, pink, and purple frosted the pale-green grass that swayed with a gentle breeze.

“Look at that,” Farilane said, but there was no need. They all stared across the meadow at a hill. Upon that height, a huge wooden building sat. Four stories tall, the structure was a ragbag of architectural oddments. A series of steep thatched roofs was broken up by numerous gables, tower spires, and hooded canopies shading random terraces: themselves a bewildering mishmash of tilted beams and archways. The whole appeared as some fantastical vision of a rustic forest lodge with aspirations of grandeur. “Dibben Monastery, I presume.”

With the afternoon sun on their backs, they crossed the meadow, plodding through knee-high timothy, clover, buttercups, cowslips, and dandelions. Farilane didn’t think she’d ever appreciated a wildflower meadow quite as much. Even the springing grasshoppers that she was never a fan of, nor the little clouds of tiny gnats that gathered in moist gullies, could sully the trip. For the first time in days, she could breathe. Each breath was flavored with the comfort of baking grass and perfumed with blossoms that, for once, didn’t leave her depressed. Roses, orchids, lilies, and carnations—those were funeral flowers. These innocent yellow buttercups and purple meadow sage blossoms were victory flags celebrating life, the prize for avoiding death.

Farilane still didn’t know *What* had happened. Nor the *How* or *Why*, either. All of it, the entire journey through the forest and the escape, had been exiled to that hazy corner of her mind where she banished bad dreams. The form the memory took was one of evaporated residue, murky and indistinct. Her mind—unhappy with the possibilities—swept the experience under her mental rug, and declared, *Out of sight, out of mind, out of unpleasant new realities*. Kile might find a world without magic less charming, but Farilane had discovered an enchanted world to be anarchy. If you take away the rules, nothing is certain, and everything flies apart. How Kile and Sheldon continued to act as if nothing world-changing had occurred both baffled and intrigued her. But that wasn’t new. Those weren’t the least bit alike, but they shared a common strangeness, an odd

acceptance of the bizarre as routine. She'd never met any one individual so extraordinary, and here there were two. She had found a five-leaf clover, and beside it, another.

As the three neared the opposite side of the meadow, it became clear there was more than one building, and each of them shared the same style, but none of them were as large as the central structure. The hill was reached by way of a long earthen ramp with a slope so modest a man could easily push a laden cart up the incline. This seemed to be a pointless advantage, for she saw no evidence of cart use, only a single trodden line of trampled grass that hadn't had enough traffic to find dirt. Smoke rose in plumes, distant doors clapped, hammers echoed, and goats bleated, but she saw no people until they reached the top of the ramp. Once on level ground, Farilane spotted the monastery's inhabitants. They came in all sizes: tall, short, plump, stout, lean, and various versions in between. All of them were dressed alike in simple, undyed wool tunics belted with flaxen twine, overlaid with plain scapulars topped by cowls. So crude and loose-fitting were the frocks that, with their hoods up, Farilane was unable to tell the difference between men and women.

In her century-long search for literature, Farilane had visited many monasteries. No two were ever alike. Breckon Moor was absurdly tranquil but nevertheless unfriendly to strangers, as if the outside world had no business intruding on their paradise. The Isle of Blue, being little more than a rock in the Blue Sea, suffered vicious storms that made its residents irritable and brooding. Farview, perched on a snowy mountain crag above the source of the Bernum River, lent its occupants an icy disposition. Far to the north, the Winds Abbey suffered from isolation and, with it, a fear of outsiders. Whitehall, in the south, ideally located along the lucrative trade route between Vernes and Haston, might have been the most open and social of the monasteries if not for the constant plundering by pirates that left the monks distrustful and surly. Thinking about it, Farilane realized that none of the Maribor monasteries were pleasant places. Each were inhabited by wretched, disagreeable shut-ins who worked with the speed and enthusiasm one would expect of people who hated their lives and lacked deadlines.

Already Farilane saw how Dibben was different. Besides being larger than all the other monasteries, the place was as alive as a spring beehive.

Monks hurried about, swinging their arms and fanning the bottom of their tunics in their haste. They rushed over the wooden walkways and up the various stairs or along the covered terraces that connected the primary buildings. They carried sacks, pots, and armfuls of wool and wood. Some stood on ladders, trading out rotted thatch for fresh, while others weeded vegetable gardens.

Then the monks spotted her, and everything stopped. As with a herd of deer, one head rose and turned, then they all did, and silence descended on the hill. A bluebird sang in the field and was answered by another. Wind brushed grass and rustled the dry thatch—a sound Farilane hadn't noticed before, but which now dominated.

"Um . . . hello?" Farilane offered, as she led the way like the lead goose in a minuscule chevron.

No one replied. Few moved.

Scared? Surprised? About to pounce and murder us? What?

She wasn't certain how much communication existed between the various abbeys, but even a little would be too much. The Princess Farilane myr Nyphron had become notorious among the Monks of Maribor. She'd pilfered from or defiled every scriptorium and forbidden archive in every monastery she had visited. Upon arrival, as soon as the monks informed her which hallways and doors were off limits, she went there—usually with a sack. It was difficult to reject the demands of the imperial princess, and as her reputation spread, precautions were taken: Archives were hidden; monks grew forgetful of where the repositories were, and some creative abbots claimed their books were dangerous—even cursed. Only the power of their god kept the bound codex sedated. Removing a tome from its shelf would result in the book coming alive and devouring any would-be thief on the spot. No allowance would be granted for rank. Despite these tall tales of terror that were told with such sincerity that Farilane became convinced the monks believed in their own legends, she was never deterred. She hadn't found a single book with a bite but admitted she hadn't found every tome.

Dibben was one of the few monasteries she had not previously visited. Not many people had, and Farilane now understood why. The Mystic Wood protected the hill on all sides. No moat or high wall could act as a better deterrent to unwanted guests than the enchanted wood that guarded Dibben. This extraordinary defense, however, might now be to her advantage, as

word of her exploits might not have reached this isolated isle within its leafy sea. Just to be on the safe side, though, Farilane planned to lie.

“Excuse us,” she addressed any and all. “We’re lost. Got turned around in the forest—more than once, actually. We’ve run out of food and were hoping for a little assistance. Is this a House of Maribor?”

The men previously hammering thatch crept down their ladders. Others fanned out, moving for a better view as they studied the strangers. None approached, which suited Farilane just fine; none spoke, which did not. The silence felt horribly awkward, and with it, a tension began to rise. A door creaked and clapped, and a balding man stepped out onto a balcony. He beheld them with a serious face, then with one hand lightly prancing on the railing, he moved to the steps and came down.

“Are you the abbot here?” Farilane asked.

“I am,” the man replied. He was tall and thin, and although his head was losing hair, his chin was gaining it. Not a proper beard, it might have simply resulted from the fellow’s neglect of shaving for a week. His eyes were interesting, but not in the way the forest mystic’s had been. These were brown, not green, but they also were calm, almost sad, like a cloudy day over a quiet lake. “And who might you be?”

With a friendly smile but not a moment’s hesitation, Farilane declared, “I’m Prudence Hawfinch, of the Merredydd Hawfinches.” She stole the name from a perfectly pleasant seller of flowers, a myr whose father was human and mother was Fhrey. In such an arrangement, the child was forced to retain the human surname. The *real* Prudence had never allowed the slightest hint of embarrassment to show. Instead, she always announced herself with an overabundance of pride, and Farilane mimicked her now. “Beside me is Kile—”

Here she hesitated, covering the pause with a cough as her mind raced over this potential pothole. A woman who is not the imperial princess would never travel in the company of two men who weren’t relatives. Holding her cloak tight to hide her imperial emblem, she landed on the only sensible solution. “He’s my husband.”

She held her breath, waiting for a reaction from the scribe. He made none, once more displaying his odd acceptance of the bizarre as routine.

“And this?” The abbot looked at Sheldon.

Hoping Faust would be just as accepting of her exaggerations, Farilane introduced him. “Ah, yes, this is Shelly, our . . . servant.”

The abbot nodded slowly as if appraising her words, rerunning them in his head, looking for errors. That’s how Farilane read it, but the guilty, she knew, always feared discovery.

“And you are down from Merredydd?” he asked Kile.

“Yes,” she answered for her husband. “Bound for Vernes when we went astray.”

“You walked?” Again, he spoke to Kile, but her newly appointed husband deferred to his newly declared wife.

“Puddles and pots! Of course not,” Farilane said, and laughed as if it was the funniest jest ever. “We have a small boat. We stopped for a picnic, and there was this utterly charming little bunny—you know, the sort with the white puff-tail? Well, I foolishly tried to feed it a bit of celery, and of course it ran off. They told me not to, but silly me, I chased after it . . . right into the forest. I only stepped a few trees inside, but instantly found myself at a loss on how to get back out. I wandered, and poor Kile and Shelly came looking. I shouted and shouted. Even still, it’s a wonder we found each other. When we did, the three of us realized we were hopelessly confused as to which way the river lay. Can you believe that?”

Not at all, I suspect, Farilane thought as her heart trotted. She wasn’t scared. Monks were docile people, but as with any bet, there was excitement. She had bluffed. Now came the wait. *Are you going to rebuke, accept, or maybe just guffaw your head off? I know I would. It’s obvious I’m not a Prudence, and Kile is wearing a scholar’s robes and clearly isn’t my type. The only one who fits his role is Sheldon. Shelly the footman, valet, or hired hand; I really should settle on one.*

“How long were you in the wood?”

Farilane was so pleased at the question that indicated he’d swallowed her bait that she almost missed the odd tone. Rather than sympathy, his question was laced with concern, perhaps even fear.

She looked to Kile. “Three days, was it?” She needed her mute husband to assert himself a tad or the charade wouldn’t hold.

“Yes . . . three days . . . I believe . . . and two nights.”

“You must be famished.” The abbot spoke this time with the proper sympathy, but underneath and around the edges of those words Farilane still

sensed a bit of apprehension. Her notion was confirmed by the way the abbot then looked to the forest as if the trees were closer than before.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

DIBBEN

Not a single monk other than the abbot spoke to them. They didn't talk much to each other, either. When they did, the conversations were short and delivered via whispers. After brief introductions to the monks, the abbot gave a series of orders by way of hand gestures and words spoken so softly that even Farilane's myr ears managed to catch only six: *hildreth*, *sunrise nook*, *vespers*, *supper*, and *thorlac*. Farilane had no guess at *hildreth* or *thorlac*. *Vespers*, she'd heard of before and believed it was something monks did or performed routinely. *Sunrise nook*, she was fairly certain was a place—and a pleasant, cozy-sounding one. But it was the word *supper*, that she found to be the most welcome. Supper was how the monks and other rustic folk referred to an evening meal. Not as big as the midday dinner, supper often consisted of a *sup*—a stew or soup—created from the leftovers of the earlier feast. Farilane didn't care what they called it. She simply hoped to be invited.

After delivering instructions to the others, the abbot escorted them deeper into the complex. They didn't go to the big structure but to a small building with an open-air terrace where hanging baskets of green plants swayed above clay planters of creeping vines. Up close, Farilane was able to better see the timberwork of the roof supports. What had appeared haphazard at a distance was impressive, decorative, and functional. Not a nail or a bit of metal had been used. The result was an artwork of woodgrain and texture. At the center of the little veranda stood a table and chairs. The woodworking craftsmanship carried through the exquisite six-piece set, which was undeniably superb. Farilane looked to Sheldon for

comment. The joiner hardly glanced at the furniture and remained silent, perhaps cautious of saying anything that might contradict her growing fictional work.

Normally, Farilane would have taken this time to analyze her hosts and surroundings, searching for hints of danger or clues useful in manipulating the monks to achieve her goal. Instead, she studied the food. Wooden bowls of strawberries, cheese, shredded lamb, and bread were still being placed on the wool table runner. In the center, a big one-handled jug was surrounded by a ring of small upside-down cups, all of them on a wooden dish that looked capable of spinning. Seeing and smelling the food pushed all other thoughts away.

When was it I last ate? What was it I ate? She faintly recalled having divided a tiny bit of cheese among the three of them, but that was days ago—two at least. Left standing before the table, staring at the bowls, Farilane found herself repeatedly swallowing saliva as she anticipated the taste of the steaming lamb, so dark it must have been simmered in a sauce. *What kind, I wonder? Spicy hot? Sweet with honey? And what's in the jug? Oh, tell me what's in that jug? Water, wine, mead, nectar of the gods?*

With the arrival of the dishes and two more monks, the abbot waved for everyone to sit. Hooded heads bowed, and beneath them came a unison of muttering—half soft talking, half gentle singing. “We praise you, Our Lord Maribor, for this bounty you have provided us today.”

Even starved as she was, Farilane was struck by the words. They were nothing but a trivial prayer by the ignorant to a nonexistent god, but something about the adoration made it sound treasonous. No gratitude was extended to Estermon the Second who, unlike the mythical Maribor, was their true lord and the actual source of their bounty. Farilane had never heard such a prayer, but she'd never visited a monastery incognito before. She had always been the imperial princess, flanked by one or two Teshlors.

The disconcerting litany was instantly forgotten the moment the abbot gave the word to eat.

Farilane had already noted the lack of tableware, which was not surprising. Everyone had knives, and most used scoops or spoons fashioned from shells, curved stones, or carved wood. She'd never seen a two-prong fork outside Percepliquis, although even there, it was exclusively used as a serving utensil. The novelty of the fork to convey food to mouth was only

seen inside the palace. Fingers and torn bread were the primary substitutes outside the city, and if there was a proper etiquette for dining with monks, Farilane would learn it next time. She snatched the bowl of lamb and scooped wonderfully hot, sticky clumps of roast onto her plate. With three fingers, she shoved a wad of stringy meat into her mouth, and while she chewed, her hands went in search of cheese.

“Hildreth is our cheesemaker,” the abbot informed them.

In a delicious stupor caused by the explosion of flavor in her mouth, Farilane barely noticed the abbot indicating the monk seated across from him. As it turned out, Thorlac and Hildreth were the names of the other two dining with them. Hildreth was a stocky, middle-aged woman cursed with a large nose and a shadowy mustache, but she had beautiful dark eyes and a propensity to smile while hiding her teeth. Thorlac was an elderly man with wrinkled, sagging features and quivering hands. His eyes were not pretty. They also never left Farilane.

After biting into an overlarge wedge of orange cheese, Farilane nodded and grunted her approval at the woman. After two solid mouthfuls of food and a swallow of what turned out to be lukewarm water in the jug, Farilane’s mind reengaged. “Unusual forest you have here.”

“In what way?” Thorlac asked, a bit too quickly.

He had anticipated the subject, if not the question. The monk had placed a bit of cheese on his plate but hadn’t touched it or anything else. *He’s not here to eat.*

Farilane considered the blunt route of asking, “So what’s with the crazy woman in the forest?” but discarded that for the more subtle, “That green path that goes in a circle, how is it maintained? More importantly—why?”

The three monks looked at each other, appearing perfectly innocent, but making a bit too much of the show.

“It’s sad to say but we don’t know much about the interior of the Crescent Forest,” the abbot explained. “We gather wood from its eaves, but as we do not hunt its animals, we have no need to explore its depths.”

“Isn’t curiosity a reason?”

“No, curiosity is a crime.”

This surprised Farilane. Not merely that anyone would be against discovery, but that they felt free to establish laws of their own. “How’s that?”

The abbot sat back from his plate and dabbed the corners of his mouth with his sleeves. “Curiosity is the doorway that invites filth into a pristine mind. Everything right and good is provided through the words of Maribor. All else is unnecessary confusion that leads to idle contemplation that in turn leads to evil thoughts, which breed evil actions.”

Farilane knew the abbot’s “words of Maribor” referred to the Codex of Maribor, the compilation of specific books of antiquity into one monastically approved volume that included *Treatise on the Gods*, *Meditations of Maribor*, *Book of Nyphron*, and *Fables*. This was the foundational text of the Maribor Monks: their instruction manual, much of which was reputed to have been derived from *The Book of Brin*. The abbot had substituted *words* for *codex*, Farilane assumed because words were not illegal, and the abbot was wisely suspicious of his visitors.

“All right, fine—I guess—but why did you call it the *Crescent Forest*? I thought it was known as the Mystic Wood?”

Again, came the covert looks tossed and caught between the three.

“Why would it be called the Mystic Wood?” Thorlac asked, expertly stealing her next question.

That’s what Kolby would call a riposte, a shift in direction, forcing me to deal with an unanswerable question, allowing for an attack.

Farilane was not surprised to see the ambush come from Thorlac. He appeared to be the hired intellectual muscle at the table.

“Whereabouts in Merredydd do you hail from?” His tone lacked the honey that sweetened the abbot’s words. The sound of his voice was more like determined footsteps on gravel, the question thrown out like bait on the end of a fishing line.

“We don’t come from Merredydd.” Farilane nibbled the bait, testing it.

She watched the ghost of a smile turn up the corners of Thorlac’s lips. “But you said you came from Merredydd.”

“We did.” Farilane ate a strawberry, enjoying the game, watching the confusion build, and then added, “But we do not *hail* from Merredydd.”

At this point, she saw two moves for poor old Thorlac: he could restate his question, relaunching his attack from a weakened position, or give up the line of inquiry altogether and regroup.

Farilane didn’t give him the time to decide, treating her non-answer as an answer. *My turn*. “I’ve always been fascinated by the Monks of Maribor.

Your order was started by someone named Bran, wasn't it?"

"Bran the Beloved." Hildreth spoke up for the first time, nodding as she did in a grandmotherly fashion far more disarming than Thorlac's aggression. She followed this with a dreamy voice, as if she were a teenager swooning over her first crush. "He brought us the words of his master, Brin, and taught us to understand them."

A very carefully worded way of saying he taught you all to read. Farilane felt an itch to blurt out that she, too, was a lover of literature, and they were all kindred spirits, but that would likely get her nowhere. The monks hadn't managed to survive the centuries by being trusting fools.

Farilane had the momentum, but she also had to eat. Hunger won out, and she paused to fill her mouth again. The decision provided her opponents an opening.

With Farilane unable to speak, the abbot focused on Kile for his new attack. "Did you find anything out of the ordinary in the forest, aside from this looping path?"

Farilane stopped chewing as she waited for his reply. He needed to make one, but how much damage might he do? The name of this game was *Information*. The one who obtained the most, while giving away the least, won. He could reply with "no," but such a blunt, unfriendly answer would likely foul the waters in which Farilane also fished. Openness—or at least the appearance of such—begat openness.

Kile took a moment to wipe the brown sauce from his mouth, showing no indication of alarm at being called to the front line. Then, as if inspired by a life on the stage, he pursed his lips together, squinted at the clouds, leaned back in his chair, carefully tapped a finger to his lips, and began a contemplative humming. This went on so long, even Farilane wondered at the possibility the man had genuinely forgotten the events of the last few days. "Yes," he said at length. "But since I'm not a woodsman, a squirrel is a novelty to me." He smiled, employing the very same innocent expression the three monks had earlier displayed.

Farilane swallowed, and only then did she grasp the absolute genius of his strategy. He had stalled in magnificent fashion. *Kile gave an answer, revealed nothing, and he didn't even lie.*

"There's a monument in Percepliquis to a famous member of your order," Farilane said, resuming her place at the forefront of the

conversation. “His name was Seymour Destone. Sadly, the tribute says almost nothing about the man. I was wondering if you could tell me about him?”

The monks stared at one another, puzzled. More than this, Farilane noted a mild hint of concern at their own ignorance. Either Kile had impressed them so much they upped their acting performance to match, or they were genuinely mystified. Frustrated at her own inability to guess truth from lie, Farilane risked another bite. She left the field open to them, but no more pointed questions were thrust. As far as Farilane could tell, the competition had ended in a draw.



In her genius, Farilane had failed to anticipate the obvious. When it arrived, she found herself in the unaccustomed and unpleasant state of surprise. The monks had assigned her and Kile to a single bed for the night. The bed, located in a tiny room in one of the outer buildings, was not designed for two people. Space on the mattress would be cramped. While not an issue for an honestly married couple, it posed a degree of awkwardness for the two of them.

Farilane dropped her sack with a sigh, her shoulders going slack. “I’ll take the floor.”

Kile peered to one side of the bed and then the other. “What floor?” The monks were not ones for excess, and the bed was nearly wall-to-wall. “We can lie side by side, and so long as you promise not to ravish me in the middle of the night, I’ll promise not to snore.”

She smiled, then narrowed her eyes. “How can you stop yourself from snoring?”

“Can’t—but I can *promise*.”

“The same would apply to my end of the bargain, wouldn’t it?”

Kile nodded. “For a good night’s sleep, I’m willing to take that risk.”

Closing the door behind them had locked their knees against the frame, and they both stood trapped at the foot of the bed.

“Good news is,” Farilane began, “we won’t be spending much time here. Monks wake up early, but they also retire early. By moonrise, we

ought to have our run of this place.”

The building they were to sleep in was honeycombed with numerous identical tiny cells. Sheldon was housed in another in the same building, and Farilane had taken care to note which door he was behind. In the middle of the night, she couldn’t afford to knock on the wrong one.

The sun was down, and dusk left them little light to work with. Farilane climbed onto the lumpy grass mattress and lay as far to one side as possible. “We should try to get as much sleep as we can. It will be a long night.”

Kile crawled up beside her. Without enough room to lie shoulder to shoulder, they turned back to back. The princess folded an arm under her head to act as a pillow. Neither she nor Kile bothered with a blanket. The night wasn’t cold, and the heat of their pressed bodies was more than enough. Farilane could hear and feel Kile breathing against her as darkness settled in.

“You did well out there,” she told him softly. “I didn’t make it easy, but you rolled with things.”

“I just followed your lead.”

“It’s not that simple. You’d be surprised how few are capable of keeping up. And your expert use of thread was amazing.”

“Years of practice makes it look easy.”

This made her smile. Her best friend had recently died, and she felt alone in a world that with every passing minute seemed increasingly harsh and unforgiving, but Kile made her smile. He did so with the ease of one . . . *with years of practice*.

As the darkness increased, as the feeling of him rose and fell against her, a sense of intimacy grew. Lying back to back in the blind quiet made it easier to talk. “I can’t figure you out, Kile,” she whispered to the dark.

“What’s to figure?”

“I hardly know you, but it feels as if you know me all too well. You understand far too much about—well, everything, really.”

“Sounds sinister.”

“That’s just it. I don’t think it is.”

“No? Why not?”

“I’m almost two hundred years old. Of course you know that because you know everything except how to properly pitch a tent, which I now realize was just an act.”

“Oh now, that *does* sound sinister, but what does your age have to do with it?”

“Well, in my two centuries, I’ve known many people but loved very few.”

“It’s not healthy to love when you live so long.”

“Which is just one more thing you shouldn’t understand but do.”

“Sorry.”

“Don’t be. It makes it easier to explain. You see, I push people away for that reason. I keep up a fortress to safeguard my feelings, and it takes someone special to unlock my doors, to make me care about them. Even so, it requires decades to make an impression on these hard walls of mine.” She took a breath and felt her back press against his, felt his heat warm her. “I hardly know you, Kile, but when I saw you fall, when I saw you land on those jagged rocks—it hurt. Not a pinprick, mind you, but a vicious stab. The sort of pain a slice of pie would never help. This makes me feel guilty and, to be honest, a bit frightened.”

“I suspect the guilt comes from believing you’re betraying Virgil’s memory. But what are you frightened of?”

“I make a habit of understanding people at a glance. I try to decipher who they are by assessing their clothes and mannerisms. Always thought I was pretty good at it, but I’m a novice compared to you. With a glance, you seem to know my whole life, and not just the public parts. What’s more, you appear to know my actions even before I do. You knew to pack for this trip; you knew I was starting to worry about your level of intellect, so you pretended to be a fool with that tent. And you knew that I would follow you off that cliff with just a thread of evidence. When I spoke to him, Proust pretended to be some kind of seer. He made assumptions about me like some roadside fortune-teller. He did it to impress me, to persuade me to do what he wanted.”

“Is that what you think I’m doing?”

“Maybe. I’m too cynical to think you’re my fairy-godfather, but I can’t figure out what you want. No one, absolutely no one in two hundred years—not Virgil, not Jona, not even my mother—ever understood me as well as you appear to, and after only—what—six weeks? Worse yet, the things you know—like I said, I pride myself on gleaning much from very little—but

you know things you shouldn't. Things you can't. You see me the way I see me, and that is very frightening indeed."

Silence followed. Silence, heat, and breathing.

"Okay, now I've made sleeping in this bed really awkward, haven't I?" she said.

"Is this where you ravish me?"



Kile woke Farilane with a gentle hand on her shoulder. "Princess," he whispered, "we have grave robbing to do."

She opened her eyes to the dark room. A partial moon revealed the edges of the door—not much to see by, but good enough for a myr to make an educated guess about the landscape. Farilane had been dreaming, the fragments dissolving like delicate sugar candy on her tongue. Her mother had been on the bed beside her. They were talking . . .

The dream had been a re-enactment of the last conversation mother and daughter had had—only different. For one, Lydia looked healthy. In place of the shriveled old woman, she had become in her final years, in the dream, Farilane's mother was her quintessential self—gray-haired and with motherly wrinkles of middle age—the way Lydia always appeared in the princess's mind's eye. She was still dying; Farilane knew this in the way she always understood inexplicable things in dreams. And they weren't in the palace. No servants intruded with pillows, or teacups, or inquiries about bedwetting and the need for linen. Farilane and Lydia were alone in a tiny room with a wall-to-wall bed. The conversation, however, was the same.

"My sweet child," Lydia said, with that same sad smile that had branded itself on Farilane's soul. "I'm so sorry."

"For what?"

"For leaving and for never telling you the truth. I hope you can forgive me."

"The truth about what?"

She shook her head. "They don't want you to know. They believe it will be easier, but maybe it will just be easier for them."

Farilane had no clue who *they* were, and at the time, as a child of only twenty-eight, she had imagined so many awful *theys*: criminals, political figures, monsters from the dark.

There are reasons, of course, justifications that sound just and sensible when spoken, but the heart doesn't understand arguments. Mine doesn't. All I can offer is this: Don't allow being a princess to become a burden or a chain. Forget being proper. Do what you like. Wait on nothing. Listen to no one. Go out into the world and live each day to the fullest. Be adventurous. Be reckless. Defy everyone. Then when your last day finally comes, you can take solace in a life well lived and regret nothing.

"Why are you telling me this?" Farilane asked, but the sugar candy melted, the dream fading into cobwebs too tenuous to hold on to, and the princess was left with the words still in her head: *Be adventurous. Be reckless. Defy everyone.*

Farilane felt Kile moving on the mattress beside her.

Maybe I should have ravished him.

The princess had spent decades surrounded by men who were not only physically perfect but were also as dashing as they come—all of whom worshipped her. The scribe was not at all her type. *But what is my type?* The question stood out in the dark, perhaps because of the dream or possibly due to the sense she hadn't lived as full of a life as she might have. For in all the years she had spent in the company of gallant men, she'd never fallen for one. She respected, cherished, and admired each, but she had never allowed herself to love. And while her brother Nordyan was free to turn his bed into a brothel—each child he might have conceived being one more bit of insurance for the future of the empire—the twin sister was expected to be chaste. The rules were unfair, which left her little justification for honoring them. And yet, she did.

The true measure of a knight, Kolby had said, isn't their skill with a weapon, but adherence to the code we live by. For that, Her Highness is a walking illustration.

Farilane didn't want to be an illustration, walking or otherwise.

Forget being proper. Do what you like. Wait on nothing.

Kile got to his feet with an old-man grunt and a growl against the chill.

Maybe my type isn't a god but a man whom I can't figure out, one who keeps me guessing and makes me laugh.

“Oh dear, I’ve lost my shoe,” Kile muttered.

And who loses his shoes in a room with a wall-to-wall bed and uses the grandmotherly phrase, “oh dear.”

Together, they managed to escape the little room and creep out into the hall. Farilane tapped on Sheldon’s door with only the pads of her fingers. The door opened an instant later, and the carpenter looked relieved to be free of his cell. Without a word, they tiptoed to the exit and slipped out into the moonlight of the monastery’s courtyard.

“Where to?” Sheldon asked, as the cool, damp air clutched them.

“The temple,” Farilane and Kile replied in unison, then smiled at each other.

“It’s the biggest building,” the princess explained. “In Percepliquis, priests are often buried under temples. I’m guessing the monks follow a similar tradition.”

“And if the horn is in the tomb,” Kile added, “they would want it in the most secure place, and the temple is in the center of this complex.”

Farilane nodded her agreement and approval, and she promptly led the way around to the main walkway.

As she’d hoped, the grounds of Dibben were empty. The monks had all entered their respective burrows, leaving the cluster of wooden buildings abandoned. In the moonlight, the numerous high-peaked roofs, fanciful flaring gables, and ornately carved pillars appeared beyond mystical. The whole place was dreamlike. Nothing existed that served a mere function; everything displayed a sense of wonder and interest, as if each door and every porch strut had been created by an artist working on his life’s achievement. The whole of the place was obviously designed, each building placed in such a precise location that, were she an owl flying high above, Farilane imagined she would see a symmetrical pattern that included the curved walkways, bushes, bridges, and cultivated trees. At the center rose the temple—at least that’s what Farilane and apparently Kile assumed it was. Several stories high, the base was made of stone, but what caught the eye was the steep, multi-gabled, thatched roof and square tower rising from it.

Climbing to the porch, they faced the front doors. As with everything else here, they were carved. The left bore the likeness of a howling wolf,

the right one had a great feather quill in an ink bottle. Iron rings the size of barrelheads hung at their centers.

“Are these knockers or used to pull?” Kile asked.

“We aren’t knocking,” Farilane said, and grabbing hold of the quill door, she pulled. To her delight and shock, the door swung open. “Trusting fellows, aren’t they?”

There was light inside. A fire burned in a central pit, surrounded by twelve pillars that held up a complex framework of beams. The floor was covered in thick, richly decorated carpets, the walls in panel illustrations framed by wood timbers. The images depicted figures from mythology: Suri the Mystic, Raithe the Martyr, the White Wolf, the tree Magda, Gronbach the dwarf, and of course Persephone and Nyphron, who were real people. Farilane searched the flickering shadows for the keeper of the fire but saw no one. She did spot a set of wooden stairs going up and one of stone heading down.

She looked at Kile. Once more, they spoke as one, “Down.” Again, the two smiled at the coincidence.

“Did you two rehearse this last night?” Sheldon asked.

“What we did last night is none of your business,” Farilane said, and grinned suggestively.

This solicited a shocked look from Sheldon, which would have lasted longer if Kile hadn’t appeared just as surprised.

They crossed to the stairs. On the way, the princess pulled down a lantern suspended from a chain and lit the candle inside from the central fire, then led the way down.

The stair spiraled, corkscrewing deep into the hill. At the base was a tall, narrow door built of bronze. The symbol embossed on the face suggested the monks never expected anyone of imperial authority to reach that place. The image depicted a crime: a bas-relief of an open book.

Farilane was certain the door would be locked. It had a latch, but when she lifted it, she heard and felt a clank, and the door swung inward. *They rely on the forest*, she thought. *No one ever gets this far.*

Holding up the lantern, the princess entered, took five steps, then gasped—nearly dropping the light. “Havers and faddle!” she exclaimed as the candle’s illumination revealed just a small portion of the room. “It’s a bibliary.”

“A what?” Sheldon asked.

“A home for books,” Kile explained.

Farilane moved into the center of the chamber and rotated in a circle, overwhelmed. The whole of the room was full of books. Three stories of shelves lined the walls, made accessible by ladders. Freestanding shelves and cleverly tilted desks held even more. Some of the books were as large as she was, others not much bigger than her thumbnail. Many were codices, others free scrolls. Never had Farilane seen such a collection. “Incredible.”

Moving to a table, she put down the lantern and brushed her fingers over the raised spines of a row of books, confirming they were real. The one she stopped on was *Proverbs of the Soul* by Girard Hily.

“When I die, if I am rewarded with paradise,” she said, “this is where I will come.” She moved about the room, her eyes glazing over as they skipped across the titles. Her breath grew short as she realized some were written in different languages. The characters were much the same, but the words were in Belgric or old Fhrey. “Astounding.”

“We are still looking for a tomb, correct?” Sheldon asked.

“What?” Farilane said, turning and taking a breath. “Oh, yes—the tomb.” She gave a mournful glance at the upper reaches of the room, a wistful look usually reserved for old men meeting a beautiful young lady. *If only I had found you earlier.*

“Sheldon,” Kile said, “give me a hand.” Together, the two dragged aside two tables, revealing a gorgeous inlay of floor tiles depicting a vase, a hammer, and a book. “There’s a seam—a gap here that goes around.”

Intrigued, Farilane managed to draw away from the stacks and study the floor. The design of the three objects was stylized, more symbols than representations. Moving through them was a fanciful script that read: *Heroes are those who refuse to create or become victims.*

“That’s a quote from *The Book of Brin*,” Farilane said. She retrieved the lantern, knelt down, and ran her hands across the words. The “O” in *those* and the “O” in *or* were bigger, indented. Pressing on them, each pivoted to reveal they were rings—hooks to pull on. “These open.”

Kile grasped one and Sheldon the other. Together, they lifted trap doors that swung free and folded over. Beneath them, a broad stair descended into darkness.

Raising her pilfered lantern once more, Farilane ventured down. At the bottom of the short stair was another chamber. This new room was small and round, made entirely from stone. The walls were painted with images of people and places, a panorama of the forests and fields surrounding them. Farilane recognized the view. If she stood in the field outside of Dibben, and if the monastery were replaced with a primitive, walled settlement, this is what she would have seen. Here, too, were words. A caption ran along the top of the circular painting: *Dahl Rhen was a grassy hill nestled alongside the Crescent Forest, where a log lodge and several hundred mud-and-thatch roundhouses were protected by a wood-and-earthwork wall. Looking back, I realize it was a crude, tiny place where chickens and pigs roamed free, but it was also where the chieftain of Clan Rhen lived and ruled. And it was my home.*

Across from the stairs, three statues of unblemished alabaster stood: two men and a woman, all in humble clothes. One man held an amphora, the other a book, while the woman clutched a hammer to her chest. In the center of the room were three stone caskets.

"Here," Kile said and lifted the lid on one of five small pots that ringed the room.

Coming over, Farilane saw it was a lamp. Taking the candle out of the lantern, she ignited the oil. Then, while she studied the walls, statues, and coffins, Kile lit the other lamps, fully revealing the chamber.

"This is definitely a tomb," Sheldon said, his eyes focused on the caskets, his tongue licking his lips. "Do you think it's here? Which box is it in?"

Ignoring him, the princess approached the statues. "Do you think these are meant to be real people or representations of ideas?" she asked.

"Real people," Kile said. "I would venture they are who lie in this tomb."

"But who are they?" She moved to the statue of the man with the book. "This one could be either Brin or Bran."

"Not Seymour?" Sheldon asked. "I thought we were looking for his tomb?"

Farilane shrugged. "Could be Seymour, I suppose."

"You don't recognize them?" Kile asked.

"You do?"

“Yes.” Kile approached the stone trio. Gently touching the statue of the woman, he said, “This is Roan of Rhen, daughter of Reanna, Persephone’s miracle worker.” Pointing at the man beside her holding the vase, he continued, “This is Gifford, her husband, renowned for his heroic ride to Perdif in the Battle of Grandford. And this fellow with the book is their son, Bran.”

“Wait . . . Gifford?” Farilane looked skeptical. “The Perdif ride was done by Griffin the Great. The founder of the Teshlor Knights.” Farilane looked again at the statue. “I’m sorry, but this doesn’t look like the greatest warrior who ever lived.”

“I thought the founder of the Teshlors was someone else. Wasn’t there a person named Tesh?” Sheldon asked.

Farilane chuckled. “You’re confusing the disciplines with a person. The Tesh is the original set of seven schools of martial arts. Two were added later and are known as the Lor. Hence, combined they comprise the skills of Tesh-lor, of which Lord Griffin was the greatest.”

Sheldon looked confused. “Lord Griffin? Who is that?”

“Emperor Nyphron bestowed the honorific on him at the close of the Great War for his many acts of heroism.”

“What acts were those?”

“Oh, there are countless tales of his adventures. He slew dragons, killed giants, dispatched a terrible witch, turned the tide of many battles with the elves, and saved an untouchable fairy queen who bestowed upon him the greatest sword the world has ever seen.”

“I think you have been misinformed.” Kile said.

The princess smiled. “Don’t worry, I haven’t lost my mind. It’s all havers and nonsense, but the Teshlor believe it despite not a bit of proof. And don’t try to argue with them. Griffin is too deeply ingrained in their creed. He, they believe, is also the founder of the Teshlor Code: the knightly virtues that demand proficiency, courage, honesty, integrity, faith, generosity, respect, and sincerity—with an obviously huge emphasis on faith.”

“Strange,” Kile said. “I actually heard that the Teshlor Knights were first conceived by the then soon-to-be Emperor Nolyn, along with Amicus Killian, and Jerel DeMardefeld.”

“They reestablished what has become the modern order,” Farilane explained. “But the techniques and traditions trace all the way back to the pre-imperial age and, well . . . Griffin the Great.”

“I see,” Kile said.

“I don’t,” Sheldon said, prowling around the caskets. “How do we get these lids off?”

Turning her attention to the stone boxes, Farilane saw they, too, were marked with the same symbols: a hammer, a vase, and a book. “I’m guessing the one with the book is the best bet, and the only way is to lift and slide off the top. Sheldon, you grab the foot. Kile, take the head. I’ll take the center.”

Following her directions, they each found a firm grip and lifted. The stone lid was as heavy as it appeared, and while Farilane had hoped to catch her side and help ease it to the floor, the weight was far too great. In a moment of panic, they all let go, and the top of the casket fell and hit the floor with a loud, echoing *boom!* The stone cracked, and half the lid flopped over, making still more noise.

Just then, through the still-open door at the base of the stairs, a half-dozen monks entered the room, looking aghast at the shattered casket lid and then at the three of them.



“I know this looks bad,” Farilane said.

In her head, she ran a list of potential lies: *We couldn’t sleep. We thought we heard something. My tunic got caught on the edge of this lid.* Nothing useful. She looked at Kile and Sheldon, who showed no signs of help.

Among those who soon entered the tomb were Hildreth, Thorlac, and the abbot, which didn’t bode well for their future. No chance these three just happened to be passing by the temple in the middle of the night and heard the noise.

Farilane gave up. With a slump of her shoulders, she came clean. “We were looking for something.”

The abbot nodded. “It’s in there.”

“It is?” the princess replied, shocked not only at his reply but by the calm, casual, even friendly way he said it. She expected shouting, raised fists, and red faces. None of the monks appeared even slightly perturbed.

Farilane looked inside the casket and not surprisingly found a shrouded body, but along with it was a wrapped bundle on the figure’s chest. She reached in, hesitating, giving the monks time to react, as she fully expected them to stop her or at least yell their disapproval. No one moved or spoke as Farilane lifted the bundle, and in full view of all, she unwrapped it. Even before she was done, almost as soon as she picked the parcel up, the princess knew what it was, and it wasn’t the Horn of Gylindora.

“It’s a book,” Sheldon said, disappointed and more than a little vexed. He slapped the side of the casket and turned in anger.

Farilane studied the tome. It was in excellent condition. The cover was fine calfskin, though not nearly so refined as most new codices. There was no title or author visible on the outside. Expecting interruption, condemnation, or sheer anger from the monks, she opened the book to silence and stillness, and read the first sentence.

In the days of darkness before the war, men were called Rhunes.

Farilane nearly dropped the book.

“Sweet cackling serenade!” She stared down at the pages in her hands and began to shake. “It’s *The Book of Brin*.” She looked up at Kile. “*The Book of Brin!* The original!”

“Written in the hand of Brin himself almost two thousand years ago,” the abbot told her.

“It can’t be,” Farilane said, though every standing hair on her body told her it was. “It’s in such good condition. The ink . . . it’s so vibrant and clear.”

“We’ve taken good care of it.”

“At the risk of sounding like an ass, leaving the book in a coffin with a decomposing body isn’t really taking good care of it.”

The abbot seemed about to smile. The same expression fluttered across the other monks’ faces. “And yet . . .” The monk spread his hands, which appeared all the more impressive with his long, loose sleeves.

“Okay, sure . . . can’t argue with results. Do you . . . would it be all right if I were to spend some time looking at this?”

“Of course it’s yours. It belongs to you.”

“It . . . Really?”

The abbot nodded. “Forgive me for saying, but you are the Princess Farilane, are you not?”

“It was the hair that gave me away, wasn’t it?” She glanced at Kile. “I really should look into dyeing it, or maybe it would be easier to just shave it off.”

This brought surprised looks from Hildreth and Thorlac.

“As a descendant of the Empress Persephone, who—as a member of Clan Rhen, was a cousin to both Brin and Bran the Beloved—it is your rightful inheritance,” the abbot said.

Farilane nodded. As she did, a smile grew on her lips. “I’m going to be up all night.”

CHAPTER TWELVE

UNEXPECTED CONSEQUENCES

Breakfast was a spread on the same veranda where they'd eaten supper. The mood between the diners was far better, and the food just as good, but Farilane struggled to eat. Excitement had stolen her appetite. She had spent the remainder of the night reading, voyaging by lamplight through handwritten pages penned by a legend. Only Kile's logic—that she could not continue her expedition of discovery if she died from starvation—managed to lure her to the table. Even so, she brought the book.

As the older tomes tended to be, the volume was overly large, but it was unlike anything she'd found before. The binding was exquisite in its simple complexity—a contradiction of ideas that formed an unexpected harmony. The method of sewing a series of folded pages was so basic, so obvious, as to be genius; yet the needlework remained exacting, intricate, and extensive enough to profess a labor of love. The pages were made from vellum, but not the exquisite uterine variant that Farilane chose for her own writing. These were simple materials, each page varying in color, the edges ragged.

The lettering didn't follow any modern style. In place of the constrained, interlocking Monastic Script or even the cramped penmanship of Falkirk de Roche, this writer worked in a luxury of space. The letters were wide, and ample space was left between words, even more so between lines. And paragraphs stood out as veritable islands on the creamy sheets, making reading an airy joy rather than a struggle against eye fatigue. No two pages were alike. The ink and handwriting varied—often on a single page, even within one sentence. Farilane was certain the author remained the same, but she could see where the writer was tired, low on ink, or had

switched to a fresh quill. This was not a workshopped manuscript created in an ideally conditioned scriptorium by a well-trained but indifferent monk. This was a document alive with evidence of journeys, turmoil, boredom, and on some pages, spilled meals. Moreover, many pages were dog-eared, some had notes or even underlined passages, and a few showed evidence of having been wet. Whatever doubts the princess had harbored about this being a fake were long buried. And if she could trust history in those instances where it held hands with myth and legend to span remote gaps in time, this bound set of calfskins in her arms was the world's first book, created by the inventor of written language. This was square one, the foundation, and because it was written in-era by an eyewitness to contemporary events, it was the most reliable and authoritative account possible. In her hands, Farilane held the truth.

While the princess was a fast reader, she'd only had enough time to read a small percentage of the book. Even so, she had already stumbled on a remarkable discovery. The treasure literally fell out of the book: a folded bit of parchment that had been trapped between the pages. From the clean trim of the note, Farilane knew it to be newer than the whole of the book. The lettering was also different. The folded parchment was a letter addressed to Nolyn and Sephryn and signed by Bran.

"Does that thing say where the horn is?" Sheldon asked, his mouth full of jam-laden biscuit.

Farilane had the book propped up on the edge of the table. As she carefully ate a raspberry muffin so that the crumbs fell wide of the pages, she glared at anyone who set a glass of anything liquid near her. "Not yet."

"What a waste of time," the carpenter said, then slumped in his seat and huffed.

"I'm just pleased we are still welcome here," Kile stated, smiling at the abbot, Hildreth, and Thorlac. "We did break that lid."

"How did you know I was the princess?" Farilane asked the abbot.

"You are a tad famous, Your Highness," he replied. "Even more so among the monasteries. We've been expecting you—actually, a bit worried about what was taking so long."

"If you had sent word this was here, I'd have made Dibben my first stop. How long have you had it?"

“Abbot Dibben—the founder of our abbey—brought the remains of Bran here many centuries ago and built this monastery over his grave. No one has disturbed his rest until now.”

“So this letter addressed to Emperor Nolyn and his wife has been here for how long?”

“One thousand, seven hundred, and eighty years.”

“We had no idea there was any such thing in the book,” Hildreth said, holding a steaming cup of tea before her lips.

“That’s a pretty long time for a letter to go undelivered, and sadly it’s too late for Emperor Nolyn. Sadder still since it appears to have been an apology. It begins, *I’m sorry, my friends, for waiting so long, but you will both outlive me by centuries . . .* and yet that still wasn’t enough time.”

Thorlac nodded. “It’s possible, I suppose, that Bran never told anyone, wanting it to be found after his death. Or perhaps he wrote it in his last hours. They say he was found with a pen in his hand.”

“What about Brother Seymour Destone?” Sheldon asked. “Is he buried here?”

“You asked about him before,” the abbot said. “We’ve never heard of a Brother Seymour Destone.”

“Have you ever heard of the Horn of Gylindora?” Farilane asked.

The monks all exchanged inquiring glances, then all shook their heads.

Sheldon huffed again and grabbed another biscuit.

“What about the woman in the forest?” Kile asked.

This ignited expressions of concern. The abbot drew himself up, pushed back his plate, and placed the tips of his fingers together. “You speak of Ruby Finn.”

“Who is she?” Farilane asked.

“She is a myr from Merredydd. Her mother was a Fhrey from an affluent family who are very proud of their heritage, having descended in an unbroken line from Orphe and Plymerath. She made the error of falling in love with a human man. Such things are not allowed in the conservative circles of the high Instarya. Her parents refused to allow the union and hid their pregnant daughter in a village outside of Percepliquis. When Ruby was born, she was given to a man who promised to make her, and the family’s shame, disappear. This individual was in the business of selling children. He paid for Ruby to be raised by a poor woman, and then when

Ruby was five, he sold her to a workhouse in Rodencia. They called her Ruby because of her hair. The last name came from her owner.”

“How did she get here?”

“Ruby worked as a slave until the age of twelve, when she witnessed her best friend being beaten near to death. What happened next is a bit hard to explain.”

“She exploded?” Farilane asked.

The abbot’s brows rose, then he tilted his head back and forth and side to side. “In a fashion, I suppose. You see, as best we can determine, Ruby Finn possesses the ancient power of the Art.”

“Magic?” Farilane asked.

The abbot nodded. “She likely didn’t know it herself at the time, and certainly had no idea how it worked—but she knew she wanted the men at the workhouse to stop. The result was a smoking crater where the slave shop had been. Ruby killed thirty people, including her fellow slaves and her best friend. Terrified and confused, she ran. The community saw Ruby as a demon child and hunted her. She defended herself the only way she could and killed all who approached. Afterward, she came to this forest to hide. She’s been here for several years.”

“If all this is true, you must be terrified.”

The abbot shook his head. “We’ve spoken with her. She’s a bit like a wild animal, perfectly safe so long as you don’t spook or threaten her. Truth is, Ruby is actually quite protective of us these days. You see, she never meant to hurt anyone. Didn’t know she could. It was all an accident.”

“Excuse me, Father,” said a young monk, approaching the table.

“Yes? What is it?”

“More visitors are coming. The tower has spotted riders approaching from the west. A troop of what appear to be Teshlors, and . . .”

“And what?”

“And they are flying imperial colors, Father. Either Prince Nordyan, Prince Nyrian, or the emperor himself is coming here. And it would seem the First Minister is with them.”

“Were you expecting a family reunion?” the abbot asked Farilane.

She shook her head and snapped the book closed. “Nor do I want one.” She jumped up and looked at Kile and Sheldon. “Let’s get out of here.”



They raced to their dormitory, rushed in, grabbed their packs, then rushed out. Still empty of food or water, the sacks remained light. When Farilane had discovered the monks were welcoming, she had hoped for an extended stay—several days, at least. She had more questions. What more did they know about Bran? How did he die? Was Kile right about the other two in the tomb? What might they know about Falkirk de Roche? All those answers were lost—one more opportunity erased by her annoying family.

“Where are we going?” Sheldon asked as they rounded the wall, leaving the monastery grounds.

“We can’t outrun Teshlors on horseback,” Kile said.

“We stay low in the tall grass,” Farilane explained. “Make our way back to the forest. We ought to be able to lose them in there, especially if we can find that greenway again.”

“Back in the forest?” Sheldon complained even as he dove into the wildflowers.

They were only a few hundred yards distant when Farilane heard the thunder of hooves come rolling in. They paused, lying flat, and peered across tassels of tall grass as the line of horsemen arrived at the monastery. With their human eyes, neither Sheldon nor Kile could see, but the princess counted four Teshlors, the First Minister, her brother, Nordyan, and his servant Stephen, as well as a handful of wranglers in charge of three pack animals. *Only three? Where are the wagons?* Her brother always traveled in lavish style. *He must be in quite the hurry, otherwise he would have demanded a bridge to be built over the Bernum and a proper road constructed to Dibben to accommodate his entourage.*

“This is our chance,” Farilane declared. “If we can make it to the trees before they come out, it’s a good bet we’ll lose them.”

“Why are we running from your family?” Sheldon asked.

“Because I’m not supposed to be here, remember? I told you I was defying the emperor. I’ll only be locked up in my chambers, but they will likely imprison, or hang, both of you.” This was almost certainly a lie, but the princess didn’t feel that detailed explanations were warranted or

sensible. The safety of the forest was still more than a hundred yards away, and Teshlors were excellent riders. “Stay low. Move fast.”

These two commands clashed. Speed required standing. They did their best to trot bent over, but the packs interfered with their legs. Unless they were on their knees, the grass wasn’t tall enough to hide them. Farilane made a snap decision, betting speed would be superior to stealth. “Just run!” she ordered. Gripping tight to the book and letting her sack swing wildly, she bolted for the trees.

They are dismounting, saying hello to the abbot. If we can close the distance to the tree line while they aren’t looking, we stand a good chance of—

She heard shouts. Farilane was certain she recognized the voice of her brother. *Dammit! I’m not the only myr here.*

The princess clutched the book in the crook of her right arm, which freed her left to help her sprint. All the pretty flowers lashed her legs, and uneven ground threatened to trip her. They were nearing the bottom of the slope that started at the monastery. Ahead was a pretty hardwood grove open enough to be dappled by sunlight. Holly bushes and chalk-white trunks of peeling birch trees called to them. Beyond those, the grass and flowers gave way to fiddlehead ferns and fallen, moss-covered logs. On the far side stood the dark, dense-packed trees of salvation.

“Keep going,” she gasped, with no real understanding of where the others were. “Almost there!”

From behind she heard the horses.

Farilane leapt a rotted log, charged up an embankment, dodged an unexpected rock, leapt a branch, and darted around a bush. By then, she could hear the jangling of a bridle, the loud puffs of a horse breathing hard, and the drumroll beats of its hooves.

Sensing the rider coming up on her left, she tried to veer right, but she couldn’t outrun a horse, nor could she best a Teshlor of the First Order. Especially not this one.

With no more effort than a father lifting his newborn daughter, Ethan hoisted her off the ground and pulled her up in front of him. As he did, Farilane caught hold of one of the reins and jerked hard, twisting the horse’s head around. Still at a gallop and blind to what lay ahead, the animal

struggled to turn. The horse hit another log, slipped, and then toppled. Both riders were thrown into the fiddleheads.

“Stay away from me, Ethan!” she ordered as she rose. Her left hip had struck part of the log, and she gritted her teeth against the pain. More importantly, the book had flown from her hand, and now it was lost in the ferns.

“Your Highness, please,” Ethan pleaded as he got to his feet. “The emperor demands you return immediately. Your brother is—”

“I saw him,” she said, backing up, searching through the delicate leaves for the book. “The little weasel. What a grand adventure. Why hunt fox when you can run your sister to ground?”

“Why are you being so obstinate? They only want you to be on hand for your birthday. They are planning a big party for your two hundredth and don’t want you to miss—”

More horses approached. Enzo had Kile across his saddle, and the young knight Layton had a tight hold on Sheldon, neither resisted. Behind them came Nordyan and Martasen Dray, who looked as ridiculous on the back of a horse as any rat would in a saddle.

“There you are!” Nordyan exclaimed, throwing his hands up and shaking his head. “Of all the stupid things. You’ve forced me to ride through mud and thorns and . . . and . . . you’re an idiot! That’s what you are. Father is livid, and the emperor is fuming.”

“Why?” Farilane shot back with pretended innocence. “I haven’t gone far, just went for a short walk in the woods across the river.”

“A walk! You’re risking—” He stopped himself and glanced around as if wondering whether everyone had heard him. Then he turned to the rest of the knights and raised his voice. “After her birthday, she can go wherever she likes, but for now . . . for now . . . tie her up!”

“What?” Ethan said. “She’s the princess. She’s your sister. Why—”

“She’s a pain in my ass is what she is. If she chooses to defy the emperor, then she can be treated like a criminal. Besides, she’ll get away again if you don’t. I can’t afford to let that happen. Too much is at stake.” The prince looked down at himself and brushed his clothes. “Look at this. I’m covered in mud and haven’t had a decent meal. All because—” He saw that Ethan hadn’t moved. “Do as I say, knight!”

Ethan's face drooped, his mouth hung slack, his eyes confused. "I'm—I'm sorry, Your Highness, but—"

"Don't apologize—just do it!" the prince ordered. "I want to get out of this hideous forest."

Ethan returned to his horse, Trident, who was back on his feet, and pulled a short leash of cord from the bag. "Could you put out your hands?"

"For Ferrol's sake, tie them *behind* her back. She's myr. Tying her wrists in front will do little good."

Farilane could see the anger heating up in Ethan's eyes, his jaw set tight as he approached her like a reluctant puppet. "Could you please turn around?"

It pained her to see how much this hurt him. She nodded and promptly turned, putting her wrists together behind her back. "It's not your fault."

With her back to Ethan and the rest, Farilane faced the dark trees of the forest, where stood a woman with red hair and green eyes, watching them.



"Swords," Ruby Finn simply said. Still clad in the shimmering green gown, with lips matching her hair, and pale naked arms, she had the look of a deer spotted in a field: noble, elegant, and supernaturally still. "*These* are soldiers, aren't they?"

"Ethan, stop! Don't move," Farilane barked without turning. Her eyes remained fixed on Ruby.

"But your brother—" Ethan said.

"There's a chance we will all die if you don't do exactly as I say."

Ruby smiled at that with all the warmth of a cat. "I was young then. I didn't understand anything. I can be *far* more *precise* now." She took a step forward. "He plans on binding your hands. That's not good."

Farilane had never believed in magic. Her conviction that it was all superstition and ignorance was at its max until Kile had jumped off a cliff. That little trick had cracked her foundation and deeply shaken her confidence. Ruby Finn had been at the heart of it all. The princess still wasn't giving in to the mumbo-jumbo parade, but she also wasn't about to risk Ethan's life on less than a sure thing, and Farilane was no longer sure.

“Who is this woman?” Nordyan asked, riding up with First Minister Dray by his side.

“She’s—”

The First Minister spoke over her. “This is Ruby Finn, Your Highness.”

“Don’t you look all fancy,” Ruby said to Dray. “You’re with them?”

“I am, Ruby, and you need to go back into the forest and stay out of this.”

“She has green eyes,” Ruby gestured at Farilane. “She’s like me, and these soldiers want to bind her. She doesn’t want to be bound. She’s very unhappy. I can feel it. And she’s scared. Frightened of what will happen if they take her—just like Aldaria was.”

“No, Ruby, it’s not like—”

“Oh, for the love of Ferrol!” Nordyan erupted. “I don’t know who you think you are, missy, but I’m the Imperial Prince Nordyan myr Nyphron, and this is my sister, who has disobeyed our grandfather’s orders to stay home. And she’s going back, right now! If I have to take out a stick and beat her with—”

In a straight line, moving left to right, a series of fifteen hardwood trees directly behind the woman in green exploded. Their trunks burst with deafening cracks and their leaves caught fire. In the resulting firelight that played on each of their faces, Ruby addressed Nordyan and replied, “I am Ruby Finn.”

A moment later, Nordyan himself caught fire.

“Ruby!” Dray shouted, and instantly the flames engulfing the prince went out.

Nordyan screamed, fell from his horse, then lay shivering on the ground. Ethan stepped between Ruby and Farilane, shielding her. The remaining Teshlors dismounted, drew steel, and circled the fallen prince. Ruby appeared unperturbed by their attention or their weapons.

She glared at Dray. “Don’t get between me and them. I don’t like you that much.”

Farilane thought the whole thing might be a show, an illusion, but looking at her brother, she saw his face had the appearance of a sunburn, and much of his hair and eyebrows were missing.

“Ruby!” the abbot of Dibben Monastery shouted. He led a troop of monks across the field at a trot. “This is *not* allowed.”

“This is *my* forest,” she replied. “I make the rules here.”

“They’re not in the forest,” the abbot shot back.

Ruby looked behind her at the flaming trees. “Close enough.”

“You can’t fight all of us,” Thorlac shouted as he and several other monks ran up.

Farilane backed away from everyone and nearly fell when she tripped on—*The Book of Brin*. The tome was laying in the ferns, absolutely no worse for its flight. She picked up the book, then searched for Kile and Sheldon. They remained unbound on the backs of the Teshlors’ horses. Abandoned by Ethan, Trident was only a few steps away and showed no sign of injury from the tumble. Kile made eye contact with her, and just as with the temple and the stairs, she knew he understood her mind.

“What’s going on?” Nordyan demanded in a shaken voice.

“Nothing important, Your Highness,” the First Minister said. “A local squabble, I assure you.”

Farilane inched closer to Ethan’s horse. The mount was well trained by the Teshlors, but he and the princess were old friends.

“A local squabble! I was just set on fire!”

“And will be again,” Ruby said. “Along with all these other guards who —”

“No!” Farilane halted just as her hand caught Trident’s reins. “They aren’t like that. These soldiers are special. They are Teshlors.”

“What does that mean?” Ruby asked.

Farilane looked at Ethan. “It means they are good.”

“They would kill me right now if they could, but they fear any act might cause me to explode the prince—and rightly so.”

“They are sworn to protect him. Just as they are sworn to protect me. It’s called loyalty.”

“This one was going to bind you.”

“But not hurt me.”

“Ruby!” the abbot called, his hands up as he shouted. “This doesn’t concern you. Just go back into the forest, and everything can go back to the way it was.”

“Oh, I don’t think that’s going to happen!” Nordyan growled. “Magic is illegal in the empire—and she just attempted to murder me!”

Farilane had seen enough. This was a pile of tinder the size of a mountain, and her brother and Ruby were shooting sparks at each other. Any second the place would *explode*, and she was the center of it all. The green-eyed disobedient daughter. Without her, Ruby would have no one to defend; without her, Nordyan would have no one to arrest.

With a nimble jump, she leapt onto Trident, and with a word of encouragement and a clap of her heels, the warhorse cleared the ring of Teshlors and monks. Ethan could have stopped the horse with a whistle. He didn't. She never really thought he would.

Kile and Sheldon chased after her as all three raced across the open field.

She'd done it. The Teshlors, the monks, and her brother would be safe. *No princess, no need to fight.*

Then she noticed a flash and a terrible roar and crash behind her.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

MERREDYDD

Farilane rode Trident into the trees on the north side of the field, guiding the horse toward what appeared to be an open corridor—a road or perhaps a trail. Most likely, the gap was but a false inlet that would soon reveal itself to be a dead end and force her to backtrack. Still, it was her best and possibly only option for a quick escape. Behind her, shouts, cries, explosions, and a whole host of indecipherable sounds filled the world.

“Your Highness!” Kile shouted.

She slowed Trident to a walk. Turning, she spotted both Kile and Sheldon galloping at her.

Behind them, neither the monastery of Dibben nor even the meadow was visible, hidden behind the staggered stands of trees. A stab of worry and regret pained Farilane as she thought of Ethan and Enzo. “I thought . . . I didn’t think that they would . . . dammit.”

Kile drew up alongside her. “I don’t think they’re dead, Highness. Teshlors are remarkable that way. And they still have five horses. After they subdue Ruby Finn or she escapes, they’ll go back to the monastery, unload the pack animals, and come after us.”

“Do you really think any of them are still alive?” Sheldon asked.

“Don’t say that!” Farilane snapped.

“What? Why do you care? They were going to tie us up and—”

“They were only going to tie *me*.”

“To start with, sure. But I doubt that’s where it would have ended.”

“The knights are honorable men,” she insisted.

“Honor to them is serving the empire, and the prince threatened to beat you.”

“He didn’t mean it. Nordyan was frustrated and tired. He gets that way. He’s not a bad person. He would never hurt me.”

Sheldon smirked, and Farilane was shocked at the assertive change in the meek little carpenter from Warica. Less than a week before, he’d been too tongue-tied to speak, but now he considered himself to be an expert on the Teshlor Guild, and he seemed to think he knew her brother better than she.

“Where are we going?” Kile asked.

“Oh, that’s easy,” Farilane said as she urged Trident to a trot. “Merredydd.”

“Why there?” Sheldon asked.

Farilane slapped the front cover of *The Book of Brin* that she still carried before her like a baby. “That’s where my great-great-great-grandmother lives . . . I think.”

“You *think*?” Kile asked, appearing comfortable on Enzo’s horse, Pristine, whose mane was always carefully braided.

“She’s rumored to be a bit of a recluse, and we imperials have never been the sort for family picnics. She would be in her mid-eighteen hundreds, which is late middle age for a Fhrey. But if Proust is right and the life span is diminishing—she’d be pretty old. It’s possible she might be dead.”

“Who exactly are we talking about?” Sheldon asked.

“The Empress Dowager Sephryn, wife of the second emperor, Nolyn.”

“Oh, her,” Sheldon sounded less than impressed; his tone was absolutely dismissive, as if he and the empress were old not-so-much friends. “Why are we going to see her?”

What was it with him? Ever since they failed to find the horn in the crypt, he’d seemed different. The fearful servant had been replaced by a contemptuous cynic.

“If you need a reason beyond the fact that she was alive and present when the horn disappeared . . . Let’s just say I have a long-overdue letter to deliver.”

The gap in the trees was not a dead end, and soon the path ahead opened to hills that granted free rein to the horses. Off to the left, Farilane found the

river again. The Bernum was narrower here than at the place they had crossed, with a deeper, rockier embankment. All this confirmed to the princess that they were well north of Dibben, but still a few miles south of the Gula River fork and the city of Merredydd. Deprived of a road and forced to guess their best path meant that what could have taken a day would require two. All that morning and afternoon, they stayed in their saddles and saw no living thing save birds and a pair of deer. As the sun began to set, Farilane led them into a wood to the west. Going deep, they were forced to walk the horses the last few yards to where she found a small suitable clearing on a bluff just up from the river. Most of the surrounding trees were pines. Their thick boughs would serve well.

"The trees will block the light of our fire, and we have plenty of fresh water," Farilane explained, as she tied Trident to a tree.

"But we have no food," Sheldon grumbled.

"Wouldn't be so sure about that," Kile said, tossing back the flap on one of Pristine's saddle bags. He reached in and fumbled around, withdrawing his hand as if he'd performed some trick. "Salted beef!" he proclaimed.

"Careful," Farilane warned. "Enzio likes the spicy variety, and he adds his own hot sauce, something his mother used to make—and I'm fairly certain the woman was a sadist. Also, I would guess you'll find wine in there. He always has a couple of bottles, special orders them from a little village in the southeast. He can't stand western vineyards, and he insists that Avrlyn wines suffer from too rich a soil. 'Bad dirt makes good wine,' he always says, and everything in the west is spoiled rotten. Now, if you're interested in something stronger . . ." She clapped the bag on Trident. "Ethan usually travels with a pint of Old Robin rye rolled up in his bed clothes. Not the best stuff but fine in a pinch."

Kile began unbuckling Pristine's saddle. "You've been in pinches before?"

"I live for pinches." She paused as a dozen memories paraded past. "Yes, I've celebrated more than my fair share of scrapes."

"I'd say today qualifies as one," Sheldon muttered as he, too, worked to relieve his horse of its burdens.

Farilane fished in the bags, found the bottle, and tossed it to the carpenter. "Careful. It's not the smoothest liquor, but what it lacks in quality, it makes up for in potency."

They had a campfire going and bedrolls laid out before the day's light faded. The knights didn't normally carry tents, and none were found among the supplies. They did have plenty of food and drink, and the night was warm and filled with stars. Farilane spent several hours reading, lying as close to the fire as was safe. Sheldon remained fretful but calmed as he took tentative swallows of the rye, sips that grew more adventurous when the moon rose.

"I would think you know that story by heart," Kile said, lying beside her with his long legs stretched out toward Sheldon. The carpenter took no notice of them as he focused with drooping lids on the half-empty bottle of Old Robin.

"It's the differences that I find compelling." She flipped back a page and pointed to a passage near the bottom. "Listen to this . . . *He was handsome, brave, strong, and sixteen. Neither one of us knew what we were doing. We didn't care.* This is the author describing an intimate love for the boy named Tesh. The passage, and others like it, have been completely omitted from all subsequent copies that I have studied. The question is, why? While it's possible scribes edited this out from a bias against male-male affection, I think they trimmed it for another reason."

"Which is?"

"I'm all but convinced that Brin was female, and these passages confused them to the point that they felt it was an error to be corrected."

"How do you know Brin was female?"

"Because I'm only halfway through and I've discovered several passages that strongly suggest it, and of course, there's the handwriting, which is clearly feminine."

"You can tell that?"

"I've done a study of graphology." She smiled self-consciously, realizing too late that this might not seem as normal to him as she might have wished. Farilane then wondered why she cared what Kile thought of her. Never before had she worried about anyone's opinion. She knew that most found her irritating, arrogant, critical, self-absorbed, and insensitive, so there was nothing to be gained by seeking others' approval. Also, as there was no taking it back, she pressed on unabashed, "On average, men have bigger hands, which usually results in a wider gap on the right margin—as most people are right-handed and like to keep the heel of their palm on

the page for stability while writing. A woman's script is generally neater, more open, easier to read, and contains more curves and arcs as opposed to straight lines. I've determined these variances are mostly due to the prevailing cultural differences between the sexes. The notion that women *should* be friendlier and cleaner in their daily lives can cause them to unintentionally strive to meet this ideal. Men, on the other hand, are not held to the same standard. Quite the opposite. They are expected to be messy and indifferent, so as a result, their writing often is less careful. It looks cramped, hurried, and displays a certain consistent degree of contempt for the reader's efforts to understand them."

Kile smiled, and Farilane wondered why. *Was it humor, the precursor to a laugh?* His eyes didn't say so. They didn't roll or look away.

I'm talking too much. The thought intruded on Farilane like a dispatch from an estranged relative—that largely maligned part of her mental makeup that sought respect, appreciation, and affirmation. She wanted Kile to like her. *What happened to putting him through his paces? My tradition of torturing the new guy?*

He lay close to her, the fire on one side, the heat of his body on the other, keeping her more than warm. The stars and the moon shone from above. The only flat note was that of the clearly disgruntled Sheldon Faust whose mood had gone from poor to awful company. But the carpenter was suffering from a long day's ride and a tumultuous encounter with Ethan's bottle of rye, and he was showing distinct signs of falling asleep.

She thought of Kolby and Ethan, gods among men, whom she had slept alongside on dozens of similar nights. Never once had she thought, *What would I do if he offered to share one of those bottles of wine with me, or his blanket, or both? Or if he put his hand on my back, letting it rest there casually, as if he had the right? What if he suggested we go for a walk in the moonlight?*

Since she was a princess, no man had ever dared such advances. And since she was Farilane, no Instarya had, either. But Kile . . . there was something different about him, something she couldn't place, and that excited her. He had coaxed her to jump off a cliff once already, and at least part of her hoped he'd convince her to leap off another.

Farilane hadn't eaten, but she had no appetite. Her stomach was acquiring knots and a nervous tension.

Sweet crackling serenade! It's Kile the scribe! Thin, gangly, awkward, big-nosed, small-eyed, passive-to-a-fault, Kile. I don't care if Sheldon passes out. I'm going to be reading this book all night. And if either of them dares to touch me, I'll break their fingers.

Oh damn! Now I'm being too quiet.

Farilane let her forehead drop onto the book in frustration.

"Something wrong?" Kile asked.

"Just tired, I guess."

"Tell me about it," Sheldon chimed in a bit too loudly. "I hate sleeping outside. I hate bugs and the dew. I wish I had my tent." He turned over on his side, hugging the little bottle to his chest.

"Your Highness?" Kile said gently, quietly.

Farilane looked up. "You can call me Farilane, Kile. I won't have you brought up on charges of disrespect. Besides, there's no one here to take you into custody."

Kile's brows rose. "Virgil still called you *Highness*, and you knew him for decades."

"Do you have a point?"

Kile stared at her for a long moment, looking decidedly uncertain of himself. *He's trying to read me the way I try to read him. I thought he was fluent, but perhaps we are both foreign languages.*

"Ah . . . no, I only wanted to ask, what do you think happened back there? I mean, you don't believe in magic or gods. So how do you account for it? How do you rationalize the greenway, the cliff, Ruby Finn, and the exploding forest?"

"At the moment, I don't. I'm not the sort to jump to judgment. I'll look into the matter a bit more. But I will grant you this trip sets my philosophy on its heels."

"So you do allow for the possibility that magic can exist?"

"Of course. I'm not as rigid as all that, you know. Not above admitting I'm wrong—if I am. I find it curious that I've lived a month short of two hundred years, and this is the first I've seen of it. But stranger things have happened. I haven't seen an elephant, either."

"You are remarkably sensible," Kile said.

She waited, but he didn't say more, which surprised her. "For a woman?"

“For a woman—what?” he asked.

She opened her mouth, then stopped. The confusion in his eyes was her answer.

“You would make a magnificent empress,” Kile said.

“No one has ever said that to me. And you would be wise to never say it again.”

“Why?”

“For your own safety. You see, I am unique. Never before has there been a twin in the imperial line. There hasn’t even been a sibling—at least not that anyone knows about. Despite living for centuries, emperors have never had more than one child. This, I feel, is the footprint in the snow, the bloodstain on the sheet. I am unwanted, not merely because I’m a daughter, or an extra, but something far more inconvenient—I’m a threat. A danger to the empire, to the succession. Estermon the Second is dying. There is a fear that once he passes, if something were to happen to our father, it wouldn’t be clear who gets the crown. I suppose they might even feel that I would use my popularity with the Teshlors to challenge Nordyan.”

“Would you?”

She smiled. “No. My father has made known that Nordyan should follow him. It would be wrong of me to defy him merely because I can.”

Kile’s face tightened as if she had said something hurtful.

“Something wrong?”

He shrugged. “Just tired, I guess.”

They both looked to Sheldon, who, this time, replied with a snore.



Merredydd had always struck Farilane as the home of pretentious cousins, a family born from an overly educated uncle who boasted of what he could do while never accomplishing anything—a trait passed down with pride. This certainly hadn’t always been the case. Merredydd was once nicknamed the Point of the Spear in recognition of its role as the foremost fortress in the Dherg War. While Alon Rhist remained the Instarya headquarters, no other elven encampment saw as much action in that conflict, and no other received as much recognition. This, Farilane felt, only

made matters worse. It lent credence to their creed. The result was a pretty house built on a generous foundation that required expensive maintenance.

In ages past, there would have been no easy way to reach Merredydd from the east side of the river. They would have had to cross farther north at Grandford or attempt to swim. This had been intentional. The five fortresses of the Dherg War—Seon Hall, Cryllion, Blythin, Merredydd, and Alon Rhist—formed a “curved shield” line against the dwarven forces. These bulwarks had been constructed to keep people out, but like any great hero lost in an age of peace, Merredydd grew fat and lazy. The lean, stalwart fortress was still there, its gray walls and towers dominating the bluff overlooking the river. But around it, like a middle-aged paunch, grew a city of luxury. Brightly painted stone buildings with a fondness for arches, quarter-domes covered in green-patinaed copper, and crenellated walls formed a rash along the hillside and river embankment. The city planners had aimed for classic elven architecture but missed. The result became the contemporary Instarya’s interpretation of ancient elven design, which then became a style unto itself. Centuries spent amid human culture had irreparably altered the frontier elves’ view of the world and of themselves. Merredydd was also home to the largest congregation of narrow-minded separatists in the world. The entire province had been overrun by western elves, predominantly Instarya, fleeing the multicultural growth of Percepliquis. So it was with great amusement that Farilane noted that the city’s fastest-growing population was its mixed myr, and its architecture a blend of human, elven, and Dherg influences.

Careful to keep her traveling cloak closed, Farilane led them into the province of Instarya by way of the Sikarian Bridge. Farilane was told the span mimicked its namesake, Merredydd’s first governor, by being not much more than efficient. On the far side, they faced the daunting task of a steep uphill climb. Erosion was held in check by massive retaining walls draped in curtains of ivy, fuchsia, and bluebell flowers. Behind the walls, roads zigzagged upward, each lined with flowers, ancient, curated trees, and people.

Lots of people.

“Is there some sort of festival going on?” Sheldon asked over the noise of the crowd as they passed by another temporary street stand that helped to

bottleneck the roadway. This one sold a variety of youth elixirs that came in timid, serious, as well as cinnamon and honey flavors.

They had given up trying to navigate on horseback and left their animals at the gate station stables, where the princess paid enough for the horses to be pampered for a week. By then, the afternoon was getting on toward evening, and Farilane—who had infrequently visited the city—was still trying to get her bearings. “I’m afraid it’s always like this,” she replied as she dipped her shoulders to get past a pair of gawking shoppers. “I believe they call it summer.”

“Do you know where Sephryn is?” Sheldon asked, chasing her.

Farilane shrugged. “I’m pretty sure.”

“She’s your grandmother, and you don’t know?”

Farilane spotted another road cart and decided to avoid the whole mess by ducking down a narrow side street that led under an archway toward an upward set of stairs. “I stumbled on where she lived by accident, but I haven’t met her.”

“Seriously?” Sheldon sounded shocked.

“You find that odd?”

“Yes.”

“So do I,” Kile said. “You’ve struggled so long to uncover the past by digging up long-lost artifacts, yet never availed yourself of a living relative’s memory?” Kile came alongside her as the two of them started up the stairs together. “Sephryn was born in the fourth year of the empire. She would have been thirteen the spring Persephone died and Percepliquis was dedicated. The woman knew the sound of Nyphron’s voice, lived in the era of imperial warfare, met many of the surviving heroes of the Battle of Grandford, and witnessed the birth of the Teshlor Guild. The former empress is a wealth of information greater than any book, and you’ve never talked to her?”

“I wasn’t allowed to. When I was a child, no one mentioned her name in my presence. Only after I ventured outside the palace did I learn that she was famous. When I asked my family about her, they told me she was dead, and that I shouldn’t waste time on the past. You can imagine how that bit of advice went. I questioned anyone I thought might know anything. No one had seen or heard of her in generations. She had lived in the palace while her son ruled, but shortly before his death, she had vanished. Her sudden

disappearance was what did it. Nothing is more attractive to me than a mystery. That's when I became interested in old books and the truths hidden in them. Over time, I became more and more certain Sephryn was still alive. After all, a legendary empress doesn't die and leave no record of her passing."

A fellow with a single-axle cart laden with bolts of cloth started down the long, narrow stairs, forcing everyone climbing to stop and press against the opposite wall.

"And you never looked for her?"

Farilane smirked. "I'm sorry, haven't we met? I'm Farilane, the obsessive-compulsive princess. Of course I did, but I couldn't find any hint of where she might be. Figuring my family was hiding something, I presented my case, and they admitted their deception and confirmed that Sephryn was still alive."

With the fabric salesman out of the way, Farilane, Kile, and somewhere behind them, Sheldon Faust, resumed their climb. Reaching the end of the steps, Farilane found the street at the top less crowded but more snobbish. Those that traveled this higher thoroughfare did so in sedan chairs and were likely to be blond, blue-eyed, and well-dressed. With height, the buildings also grew in pomposity. In front of them loomed The Classic Asica, a three-story tailor shop with a marble pediment and detailed entablature. Its sign depicted figures in draped costumes. Before the tailor shop's grand entrance was a giant marble sculpture of a needle and spool with a delicate whipping thread connecting the two. She paused to marvel at the work. Though she lived in the greatest city in the world, she hadn't seen anything that compared to this sculpture. Farilane was convinced all the truly great artisans had been lured away from the capital. Rather than creating art that immortalized paragons of imperial virtue, captured human ideals, or sought to educate through beauty, the empire's talent spent their efforts on sculpting advertising for trade goods.

"So, that's when you found her?" Kile asked.

"No. Actually, I stopped looking." Farilane frowned. "According to everyone I spoke with, my great-great-great-grandmama doesn't want to see me. She's nearly as old as the empire—from a different age—and apparently, she doesn't approve of outspoken, willful princesses who dress like a legionnaire and gallivant around with single men. My family—

displaying a rare moment of compassion—sought to spare me the pain of rejection. As you said, Sephryn is a living legend, and they could see I had come to idolize her. And that was part of the problem. I didn't want to blow the dust off a legend to find a real person. Truths are important, but we all have our sacred treasures, and I had no desire to destroy my childhood fantasy.”

The tailor shop's neighbor was a public house, which according to its sign board that depicted a foaming cup, either sold frothing drinks or was a barber specializing in fine cream shaves. After a day of hard travel and now a steep uphill climb toward Merredydd's aerie heart, the princess opted for a rest. Ducking inside, she spotted an empty corner with built-in benches and a wrought-iron table. The inlaid-tile floor was clean, and colorful banners decorated the beams of the ceiling.

“Nice place,” Kile observed.

“A whole legion could have a brawl in here and not damage a thing,” Farilane said.

“Thank whatever deity you're partial to for stopping!” Sheldon gasped as he dropped his sack and flung himself onto the bench, where he pooled like a warm stick of butter. “I admit it. I am not in the best of shape. Is everything uphill in this city? They do sell drinks here, right? Please tell me they do.”

“Unless it's a barbershop,” Farilane replied.

“What?” This time Kile and Sheldon harmonized, but both failed to notice.

“Never mind,” the princess said. “And yes, I believe they do sell drinks—food, too, if we're lucky. There's only so much one can put on a symbol-based placard. If only reading and writing weren't viewed as witchcraft, we might know for certain.” Farilane put her own sack beneath her feet. *The Book of Brin*—which hadn't left her side since she'd received it—stayed on her lap beneath the table. “Can you imagine the improvements? Whole menus might be posted right out front so that we could differentiate *this* place from *that* before even entering.”

“And what would the criers do for money?” Sheldon asked. “There are hundreds. Think about how many people would become beggars because of your writing.”

“If I were empress,” Farilane stated, straightening up as if she were giving a speech. “I’d make it mandatory that everyone learn to read and write. Then, instead of screaming in the rain, criers would have careers penning proper announcements that could be posted every morning. Think of the peace and quiet—not to mention the opportunities in the parchment and ink industries.”

“How long before the streets were littered with old parchments?” Sheldon continued in his new role as group pessimist. “What a mess you’d make.”

“Street cleaners would take care of that—one more job made available. See how it works? Lose one miserable drudgery and replace it with a dozen better opportunities.”

A thin boy in an oversized green tunic, which matched the color of the public house drapes, walls, and custom-painted cups, arrived. They had their choice of cold ham or fresh lamb, red wine or yellow ale, and dark or light bread.

“See, another opportunity!” Farilane pointed at the boy as he walked away with their choices. “Imagine if he had a list he could show us and a slate he could use to mark down our requests. Without being forced to remember what we asked for, mistakes would be impossible.”

“No disrespect, Your Highness,” Sheldon said, “but I think you’re insane.”

She frowned and looked to Kile.

The scribe smiled. “He has a point—I mean, you’re not normal.”

The princess smirked. “No . . . I suppose I’m not, am I? It’s just that sometimes I . . . I don’t know. I have flashes of—well, it’s as if I can see how the world could be, how it ought to be, but it’s always this impossible goal, a dream just out of reach. Do you have any idea what I mean?”

“Yes.” Kile nodded. “Yes, I do.”

By the time drinks and food arrived, so, too, had a large group of apparent travelers. Farilane counted twelve in total: eight men, four women. Three of the women she guessed to be wives, one a daughter. They took the only available table able to accommodate so many, which happened to be directly across from Farilane and her companions. The travelers were a loud, excited group that brought the boy in the green tunic running.

“What are the odds of you being recognized in this city?” Kile whispered.

“Almost nonexistent. I’ve been here but a few times and only briefly. I don’t like Merredydd. Reminds me too much of my family.”

Farilane and Kile had the lamb and wine, which she found to be wonderful, but then again, she was starved, and everything tasted great when one was famished. Sheldon had the ham and mentioned it was not the best, but he cleaned his plate down to the juice.

“So, what’s our next step?” Kile asked. “Where do we begin our search for this *antique*?”

Farilane wiped her mouth with a green napkin. “I tracked her to the Old Fortress. That’s where they all originally lived. After the Great War and while Percepliquis was being built, almost everyone stayed here in Merredydd, which was nothing more than a citadel at the time. Nyphron remained on-site to oversee the construction of the new capital, but Persephone and her son lived here. The empress’s presence created a sphere of influence that drew others. Sephryn is the daughter of Moya, a close friend of Persephone, after whom Sephryn was named. They say Sephryn and Nolyn fell in love here as children—that they were destined to marry—possibly betrothed at birth.”

The large group at the other table had ordered the ale and were on their second round, getting loud enough that Farilane was forced to raise her voice so that Kile, seated next to her, could hear. “Our best bet will be to search out her childhood home. It’s possible the estate has remained in her family’s possession since her father was full-blood Instarya.”

Loud clapping came from the neighboring table.

“Someone is having a good time,” Farilane said, giving up trying to hold a conversation and sitting back to let her meal digest.

“ . . . yes, the father of the gods! Do you know another Erebus?” one of the men at the other table was saying as he slammed his cup down hard on the table, causing its contents to spill onto the woman next to him. Due to her calm acceptance, Farilane confirmed her earlier assessment that she was his wife. The princess added to that profile the note that the husband had a drinking problem that the wife had suffered for quite some time. “He’s down in West Echo—or was about a year or so ago.”

“Why would the patriarch of the gods be in Belgreig of all places? Wouldn’t that be Drome?”

Farilane couldn’t quite see the other speaker. He was on the far side of the first, and she could only catch glimpses when the drunk husband rocked forward or back.

“No, it was Erebus, they say. He saved this little village in a valley down there, a little piss-puddle called Tur.”

“Saved it from what?” one of the wives asked—not the one with the drunk husband, but the pretty one who held hands with her daughter as if afraid at any moment she might be stolen.

“Pirates, goblins, something like that. The West Echo coast is always being ravaged by something.”

None of them, Farilane noticed, ate food. *This must be a celebration—a birthday party, or promotion for one of them—or perhaps just a weekly social event for a group of friends.*

“How do you know any of this?” the hidden man asked, sounding suspicious, which instantly made Farilane like him more.

“Traders come up the river from Vernes with the stories.”

“And that’s all it is—stories.”

“How did the god save them?” the daughter asked this time.

Seemingly fed up with the man’s skepticism, the drunk husband turned and faced the girl, clutching his wet cup before him with both hands. “Well, dear, down that way, the wretches living along the coast are always suffering one plague or another. They’re out on the outer reach, you see. Used to be the dwarven king up in Linden Lott kept his realm safe, but the dwarven clans got divided with the death of the old king, and Rhinehart, the one everyone thought might unite the Belgic Kingdom . . . well, he embarrassed himself in Haston. The whole kingdom has withered and grown too weak to defend itself.”

“You were in Haston, weren’t you?” Kile asked Farilane.

“Shush,” she told him with a finger to her lips.

“Now this little village called Tur, well, it suffered the worst. A scourge of marauders took to visiting twice a year and taking nearly all their food. These invaders even made demands. Ordered the villagers to make them things, and if they weren’t done on time, the marauders would kill their

sons. Even when the villagers made the deadline, the marauders took their daughters.”

“Clayton!” the ale-stained wife snapped. “Don’t frighten the girl.”

“Sorry. The point is, this village was helpless until a stranger arrived and moved into the old blacksmith shop, whose owner had been killed just a month before.”

“Is this the god?” the girl asked, her eyes widening.

The man raised a hand. “I’ll get to that.” He took a swallow, pausing to lick some of the spill off his wrist. “So this stranger starts up the forge and begins making weapons. These weren’t no ordinary ones either—they were magic. Swords that could cut through mature tree trunks with a single swoosh!” He sliced through the air, nearly spilling his drink again, and causing his wife to move farther away.

“The stranger then handed out the things he made: swords, spears, shields, helmets, and the like to everyone in the village. So the next time the marauders came to demand their tribute, the villagers burst out of their homes, butchered all of them, and set fire to their ships. Afterward, the people asked the stranger who he was, and he told them an amazing story. He explained how he had lost the love of his daughter because of something awful that he’d done, but that she promised to forgive him if he proved himself worthy by going about and helping others to fix the world. If he did something worthy, she grants him a white feather as a token of her approval. He puts them in a satchel, and he says that when it’s full she will forgive him.” The man leaned across the table toward the girl and spoke so softly that if Farilane hadn’t been a myr she might have missed it. He said, “Just then, as the man was leaving the village, a thunderclap cracked in a clear blue sky and from it fell a white feather that landed in the stranger’s hand, proving his story true.”

“And did this stranger then claim to be the god Erebus?” the cynical man asked.

The husband frowned. “No, a Monk of Maribor visited the place only a few months later, and he put the pieces together.”

“So he never even gave his name, this god of swords and feathers?”

“Yeah, but it was obvious the god was in hiding, so he wouldn’t give his real name.”

“What name did he give?”

“He called himself Kile.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

SEPHRYN

“There are a lot of people named Kile, Your Highness,” the scribe said as they left the public house and resumed their climb, slipping into the flow of the street traffic.

People on the right side of the road traveled uphill. Those on the left went down. Strange how everyone always fell into this pattern: groups following other similar groups until a flow manifested, but always an opposite flow establishing itself. Farilane began to wonder if it had anything to do with people at all. *Maybe all life—all of nature—is confined to certain necessary patterns: one going this way, the other going that.*

“Honestly, I have never known another person named Kile, but that’s not to say you’re wrong,” Farilane admitted as she led them under the archway of a bridge they would eventually cross when they got up to that street. “But didn’t you mention living in West Echo recently? Out on the southern tip? Isn’t that right?”

“I don’t recall.”

“You don’t recall saying it or living there? Because I distinctly remember the words coming out of your mouth. It happened during that foolish boast about working with Orintine Fallon.” She waved a finger in the air. “No, not *working with*, you made it sound as if *you* had *dictated* to *him*. Isn’t that, right?”

“I feel you are remembering our conversation a bit differently than I.”

“But you did recently live in West Echo?”

“As you mentioned, reading and writing are illegal in the empire. I went where I could find work.”

“West Echo.”

“Possibly.”

“Was it a little village named Tur?” She stepped to the side of the street, *out of the flow*, turned to grin at him, then focused on his pack. “Are there feathers in that bag?”

Kile frowned. “There are spicy cured beef strips made by a maternal sadist in this bag and a bottle of wine apparently from an eastern vineyard.”

“Uh-huh.” She continued to stare. “And is that all that’s in there?”

“If you don’t believe me, please look for yourself.” He held out the sack.

Farilane looked at it. She almost took it, then shook her head. “No thank you.”

“So you believe me?”

“I wouldn’t go that far, but as we are on our way to shatter one romantic fantasy, I think I’ll hang on to the idea that you are a god in disguise. You know, just in case things go sour, I become depressed, and my heart needs a reason to keep beating.”

“You’re making fun of me now.”

“I am,” she said and reentered the flow.

Like hawks riding thermals, they circled the city, rising higher and higher. With each revolution, the distance around grew shorter until they were up against the austere stone base of the original elven fortress. The whimsy of colorful shops and the crowds of laughing revelers broke up at the foot of the gray stone. As if moving through a graveyard, people grew quiet and spoke in low, reverent tones, when they spoke at all. Despite the years, the citadel of Merredydd continued to inspire awe. The oldest elf in the city couldn’t recall its construction, and the battlements of Merredydd had not changed in a millennium. If the bloated city was the sad belly-fat of a retired warrior, the citadel was the eyes through which greatness still shone. The stronghold stood as a touchstone—a substantive link to the myths of the past—with walls that had seen war on a scale unknown in the modern world. This had been the home of heroes.

The gate lay open. Along with a handful of others, Farilane, Kile, and Sheldon slipped into a courtyard lined with marred wooden posts long ago used for sword practice by the famed Instarya warriors. She was confident

these were not originals. The replicas were weathered to appear older than they were.

Acting as the seat of the governorship and administrative offices for the province, the stronghold had been treated as a shrine. It was the closest thing in existence to the legendary fortress of Alon Rhist, which had played such a monumental role in the Great War before being destroyed in the conflict. Merredydd was known as the sister fortress to Alon Rhist, which was fitting. Alon Rhist was named after the leader of the Instarya, and Merredydd was named after his younger sister, who had been named after her mother. The two strongholds even shared similar layouts.

All of this information had been gleaned by Farilane from previous visits since the Instarya were keen on boasting about their home. Unpleasant as it was to stand and listen to a pompous pedigreed Fhrey extol the virtues of his birthplace, Farilane had managed to see past the inflated praise. *This is very close to how it would have looked to the defenders of Alon Rhist during the Battle of Grandford—minus The Classic Asica, of course.* She wondered if an edict from the governor's office had forbidden such mercantile mercenaries from setting up shop in the sacred heart of the city. Sikar had ruled the province for most of its existence, and such a reign left a solid stamp. His quirks became revered traditions, and from everything Farilane had heard, the veteran of the Great War was the proud sort who wouldn't appreciate exploiting a reputation for coin. There was one exception, and Farilane had shamefully taken advantage of it the last time she had visited the city.

She had booked a tour.

A business that worked out of a shabby shack not far from the river's edge offered guided tours of the Old Fortress, with its highlights being the Governor's Mansion; the dungeons; the Assembly Dome, where demonstrations showed how the chamber was designed to amplify a speaker's voice; a blacksmith's shop said to be similar to the one where Roan of Rhen once toiled; the home of the first empress, Persephone; and across the street, the one-time residence of Tekchin, Moya, and their daughter, Sephryn, the second empress. The tour entered the ancient home of the first empress and second emperor, which was decorated with modern replicas of ancient furniture and utensils, but no one was allowed in the other house. Someone still lived there. The tour guide never said who, but

he strongly alluded to the resident's identity. By then, Farilane had long since decided to honor Sephryn's desire for privacy.

The sun had set by the time the three of them reached the street at the top of the hill where Farilane's previous tour had terminated. Shockingly crude and narrow, the thoroughfare was paved in rough stone that made even walking hazardous. *Humble* did not adequately describe the modest street that, if transplanted to Percepliquis, would fit most appropriately in the lower-dock neighborhood where immigrants to the city lived in discarded shipping crates. The interior of Persephone's one-time home was dark. The tour had been daylight-only, for no flames were allowed inside the landmark building. Yet, just as Farilane had hoped, there was a light in the building across the street.

"That's it." She pointed at the modest house at the end of the simple lane. The two-story, traditional Fhrey-style building was made of dark beams and white daub set over a first-floor base of mortared stone. Its whimsical shutters, ornamented with a column of carved hearts, remained open, and a window box overflowed with yellow and blue flowers. Within the big lower-floor window, they could see the illumination from a flickering hearth fire.

"That's what?" Sheldon asked, peering forward with his now consistent disapproving squint.

"I think that's where Sephryn lives."

"You don't know?"

"It's an educated guess."

All three of them continued to stare at the flickering window as a growing wind raced down the street, dusting up old leaves and playing havoc with the wind chimes that the tour guide had once claimed were a gift to Persephone from Suri.

"Are we going to knock, or just wait to see if she wanders the streets at night?" Sheldon asked, his voice dropping into the range of sarcasm.

"You know," Farilane said, "I remember you being more respectful when we first met—terrified of me, even."

"That was before we jumped off a cliff together, broke into a monastery, stole a book, then ran for our lives. After seeing how the sausage is made, I am understandably less impressed."

“We didn’t *break in*. There was no *breaking*. And they *gave* me this book.”

“What a wonderful consolation prize that was.” Sheldon frowned. “We still have no horn.”

Something wasn’t right. She felt as if she had come home, dropped her pack, walked to her desk and sat down, only to realize she’d never heard her bag hit the floor. She’d let go of it, knew it had to land with its usual thud, yet she was distinctly aware there had been no sound. Something was *that* out of place, but she couldn’t identify what. Farilane began tracking the source of the discrepancy. It wasn’t the house, or the street, or the wind chimes, or the clapping door—it was Sheldon. He was the pack. Something about what he just said was—

“So *are* we going to wait to see if she wanders the streets at night?” Kile asked.

The princess rolled her eyes. The mystery of Sheldon and the Silent Pack could wait. For every bit of significant insight, Farilane often suffered a host of useless mental alerts. This was likely one of those. “Fine. Let’s go knock.”

Paving stones formed the walkway, nothing but simple squares. A few were loose and rocked. The door was equally modest, being made of old wood and wearing scars of age, including a slight warp so that it struggled to line up with the frame. She rapped on the door. They waited. Farilane looked at Kile and Sheldon, then knocked once more.

The door opened, just a crack. Two eyes peered out—green eyes. “Yes?”

“Hello,” Farilane said, trying to sound cheery, something she knew she was not good at. “We—ah, I’m looking for Sephryn of House Nyphron.”

“Were you on one of those tours? I’m sorry, but this house isn’t open to the public.” The door closed.

“I’m here to deliver a letter from Bran,” Farilane said to the imperfect, warped wood.

The door opened again, this time wide enough to reveal an elderly woman with thin white hair and troubled eyes. She took a moment to study Farilane, then she spotted Kile. The old woman’s eyes went wide. She took a long breath, swallowed, then as if she were surrendering to an arrest, she stepped back. “Come in, Princess.”

“You recognize *me*?”

“I do now. I’ve . . .” Her sight pulled back to Kile. “I have been expecting you.” The old woman turned and retreated toward a rocking chair near the burning hearth. “I just didn’t think it would be today.”

They all entered, and Sheldon closed the door.

“Please sit down, all of you.” The old woman took a seat, folded her hands in her lap, and smiled most insincerely. “Why don’t you introduce me to your friends, dear?”

Farilane allowed the redirection, partly due to being a guest, and also because if this was the empress dowager, she deserved the courtesy. “This is Sheldon Faust, a carpenter. And Kile, he—well, I could tell you what he does, but you might have him arrested if I did.” She grinned at the joke. No one else did.

There was a knock at the door. Sheldon, being the closest and not terribly bright, opened it. Farilane caught sight of what looked to be a soldier of some sort. His heritage was distinctly elven, and he wore a uniform, but he wasn’t a city guard, Teshlor, or legion. She expected Sheldon to react with shock and fear, but the man presented a distinct expression of irritation.

“Good evening, I’m Halcyon myr Milyon. I need to speak with the empress dowager.”

“I’m fine, Halcyon,” Sephryn called across the room. She leaned forward in her chair and waved. “I was expecting them.”

So the empress dowager has a personal bodyguard, Farilane surmised, an elven protector.

The guard nodded, then took a moment to look around as if he didn’t entirely believe her. “Very well,” he said, and he allowed Sheldon to close the door once more.

“Sorry about that,” the woman in the rocking chair said. “He keeps an eye on me.”

“Because you’re . . . you are Sephryn, yes?” Farilane asked.

The old woman looked at Kile, and again she swallowed hard, as if admitting her name was an act of courage or stupidity. “Yes. I’m your very great-grandmother, dear. And this will be a pitiable first meeting, but that’s what you get for never visiting.”



The home of the empress dowager was old-fashioned, with the square lines and hard furniture of an era when lavish living was impossible to imagine. A single copper pan and two delicate clay pots hung from a single rafter beam. A lone dirty plate and rumpled napkin remained on the nearby table—itsself such a battered antique, it must have started life as the previous front door. The floor was the same stone as the hearth, and a massive log formed the mantel. Above it were mounted an unusual bow and an exquisite sword. This was more a poor farmer's cottage than the home of a one-time empress. Also, from the single chair, candle, and place setting at the table, Farilane guessed the empress dowager lived alone.

“So you're Nyrian and Lydia's daughter,” Sephryn said, as she rocked in her chair before the fire where the two women and Sheldon now sat in a half circle. The flickering light of the fire played on their faces. “You clearly got your mother's looks—her mind, too, I hope. Can't say I'm a fan of your father, or either of the Estermons for that matter.” The woman rolled her eyes and added a distressed shake of her head. “What a horrible name for a baby, and they did it twice! I just don't understand that. I mean, I realize that Callopia didn't want to continue the naming convention Persephone had followed: Nyphron, Nolyn, Nurgya. But *Estermon*? What kind of name is that? Besides, I, for one, thought the tradition was a wonderful tribute to Persephone's legacy—one of the few she has left. But Callopia didn't see it that way. She was a . . .” Sephryn struggled.

“Bitch?” Farilane offered.

“You met her? No, you couldn't have. She died centuries before you were born.”

“You just had that look of searching for a polite way to say something awful.”

Sephryn smiled. “Ah yes, I've heard that about you.” Then her expression darkened to one of sadness.

They had finally come to it. This was the part where Sephryn revealed the reason she had sworn her family to silence, preventing anyone from speaking to Farilane about her. The princess braced herself. “What?”

Farilane asked, expecting the obvious retort: *You ought to know, honey, being a bitch yourself.*

The princess waited for the verbal slap, and whatever else might follow.

Sephryn replied, “You’re not only smart and honest, but you are also direct.”

Farilane re-ran the comment in her head, looking for the slight, but she couldn’t find it.

“My mother would have loved you. So would Persephone.” Sephryn looked once more at Kile, and she put a hand to her mouth to cover trembling lips.

What’s going on? Farilane asked herself. She felt as if a whole separate conversation was happening somewhere in the background. What was worse was that this silent discourse appeared a far more interesting one. Being *direct*, Farilane considered asking outright, but refrained . . . for now. Better if she was willingly told, better still if something slipped because they thought she was oblivious. Then she would get the truth rather than an excuse. “It’s true, then? You knew the first empress?”

Sephryn nodded. Her eyes brightened, and a genuine smile spread across her face. “She was my aunt, my namesake, my godmother, and for a time, my best friend. I was the daughter she never had, I suppose, and she doted on me. We all used to play on the street out there.” She gestured toward the front door. “At least we did in the cold months. Persephone used to say that a Fhrey fortress was no place to raise children. So, when the weather warmed, we traveled down to see Suri in her forest. A shady place of cool breezes and laughing brooks. Fribble-bibble, she used to call it—the spirit of the river that made it laugh. Everything in that wood was joyful.”

“The Mystic Wood?”

“That’s what they call it now, but back then it was known as the Crescent Forest, Dahl Rhen, or just home. We kids knew the truth of it: it was Suri’s forest—the enchanted grove where the hawthorn grew and gourgans knew better than to set foot.” Sephryn gave Farilane a mischievous smirk. “She could do magic, you know? *Real* magic, not the sleight-of-hand stuff. Fireflies danced to her songs, trees told her gossip, and long ago, she made dragons. When you were with Suri, it seemed anything was possible. When she died, that idea passed out of the world. Magic went with her. Now . . .” She made an almost-laugh, a sad sound.

“Now it’s been so very long, it’s hard for me to believe in it anymore. It’s as if that whole time was a dream. Today the world is gray, but once it had color.”

Sephryn looked into the fire, her eyes drooping, a frown pulling at the corners of her lips. “They’re all gone: Persephone, Nyphron, my mother, father, Aunt Roan, and Uncle Giff. My beloved Nolyn and Nurgya, and Bran . . .” She focused on Farilane. “You said you had a letter from Bran. Was that the truth or just a clever ruse for getting your toe jammed in my door?” Her eyes shifted between Farilane and Kile.

Whatever intrigue is going on, it appears to include Kile—she never looks at Sheldon. Although Sheldon—the bag that never thuds—has his own separate puzzle to work out, which hardly seems important now in light of this new brain-twister. “No, I have the message. I found it in this book.” Farilane drew *The Book of Brin* out from under the protection of her cloak.

Sephryn’s eyes grew wide. “That’s Brin’s book! I haven’t seen that in . . . I don’t know . . . over a thousand years, at least.” She reached out, and Farilane nervously let it go. “I learned to read using this. All of us did. In the summers within Suri’s forest, we were wild things. But in the winter, Nolyn and I would spend the snowy months at Bran’s home, seated before the fire with his mother. We sounded out the words as we went on journeys to fight demons in lost dwarven cities or fought in battles at the gates of Alon Rhist. I wondered what happened to it.” Sephryn ran an affectionate hand across the mottled leather cover, opened it, and thumbed through the pages, looking increasingly confused.

“Something wrong?” Farilane asked.

Sephryn shook her head. “It’s just that . . . this book—it’s, well, it’s very old. Nothing I have from back then still . . .” She glanced at the mantel. “Well, hardly anything still exists. Audrey, my mother’s bow, managed somehow to survive, and the Fauyld, my father’s sword, is still with me. But this book . . . although it is made of vellum, it’s in excellent condition.”

“Do you think it’s a fake?”

Sephryn looked shocked. “Oh, no. This is Brin’s book. I’d swear to it. See here?” She pointed to a page marred by a purple stain near the bottom. “I did that with a glop of strawberry jam when I was eight. Bran nearly killed me. He loved this book. After his parents passed, it became his obsession—mostly, I think, because it was the one thing he truly shared

with his mother. His way of being part of her world. She was always so busy working on problems for Nyphron and the new city.

“Bran didn’t see her much, except in the winters when we gathered around the fire and read the old stories. Teaching him to read was important to her—after all, Bran was named after Brin. Roan and Gifford died relatively young—well, by today’s standards, that is. They were both in their fifties, which was considered an achievement back then. Still, Bran was only twenty-eight when his mother passed away, so this book was like the part of her that he could still have and hold. I imagine that when he read the words, it was his mother’s voice he heard in his head.” She laid her palm on the cover. “And of course, there was the mystery that he always sought to solve.”

“Mystery?”

“Brin’s death,” Sephryn said, sounding surprised. “You know about that, right?”

Farilane shook her head.

Sephryn’s brows rose. She glanced at Kile, then back at Farilane. Neither seemed to offer insight. “Bran’s parents were there at the end. So were mine. They all saw it happen. Brin went off the balcony at Avempartha, over the Parthaloren Falls. Her body was obviously never found, but someone else was with her up on that terrace when it happened. The reasonable assumption was that he killed her, but no one ever discovered who it was or why he did it. According to all our parents, Brin was this wonderful, innocent woman, beloved by all.”

“Woman?” Farilane gave a glance to Kile, who remained standing near the door, stone-faced. “The general belief—by the Monks of Maribor—is that Brin was a man. You know who the Monks of Maribor are?”

Sephryn nodded. “I’m acquainted with the group. Bran went on a crusade to teach the world to read, but, sadly, the Monks of *Maribor* fall short of Bran’s abilities in many ways.”

“You object to the god Maribor?” Farilane asked.

“The *goddess* of mankind is Mari, not *Maribor*. The monks misunderstood the passage where Brin wrote the words Mari-born, thinking they were one word. You see, Mari-born refers to mankind—those born of Mari. Maybe Brin wrote the words too close together, or perhaps the monks

saw what they wanted. Regardless, they apparently joined these two, creating the masculine name Maribor. Which suited them fine.”

“Interesting. A pattern is emerging,” Farilane said. “In addition to Maribor being male and Brin being a man, they also teach that Brin fought demons, traversed the underworld, and returned to tell about it.” Farilane expected to elicit a laugh from the empress dowager. Instead . . .

Sephryn looked away, not at Kile this time. Her focus was the floor, but her eyes tensed.

“What’s wrong?”

“It would be a mistake to assume the monks got everything wrong.”

“You can’t be referring to the myth of the Underworld Odyssey?”

Farilane stared at Sephryn skeptically. “That has to be made up. It’s the most ridiculous part of Brin’s story, which curiously was never written down.” She pointed at the book in the empress dowager’s hands. “I haven’t actually read that whole book, so are you saying it’s in there?”

Sephryn shook her head.

“That says a lot then, doesn’t it? That tale was obviously an effort on the part of subsequent religious fanatics who endeavored to create a narrative suitably fantastic to provide the necessary awe and grant them the authority required to construct and wield outlandish claims that can’t be challenged because, after all, this Brin person actually spoke to the gods—didn’t *he*?”

Sephryn placed the book down next to the sickly green plant on the little table between them, stood, and then walked to the hearth where the fire was dwindling. “I was like you when I was younger. Only believed in what I saw. You have to understand that I grew up with all these stories.” This time she waved a hand at the weapons above the mantel. “My mother and aunts, they told me such crazy things. Demons, dragons, magic, . . .” She glanced once more at Kile. “Gods. I never knew what was real and what was invented to entertain a child. It frustrated me that even after I had grown up my mother insisted all of it was true. Along with her bitterness toward my father and her drinking, it became a wedge between us. My father had no problem with any of it, something I never understood until . . .”

“Until?”

“Until the day the emperor was murdered. That’s when I discovered all sorts of truths—most of them unpleasant, the worst being that demons from

the past still walked among the living. By then, it was too late. You see, the moment I realized I had never been lied to, I understood why my mother was the way she was. My father always told me to overlook mom's outbursts. He said, "Everyone's awful when they're sick." I insisted she wasn't sick, but he corrected me, saying that aging was a disease. And he was right. Eventually, long after she was gone, I saw what my father had—how my mother had been suffering, lashing out in pain. He knew he would see her again, and that she would be whole once more, as if she'd only suffered a momentary fever. My father would be able to hug her, and the two exchange apologies for all the weak moments of their lives. He would be able to do that." She made a sad smile. "By now, I suppose, he already has . . . but I . . . I . . ." Sephryn wiped her eyes. Still before the hearth, she grabbed up the poker and stirred the coals. "Anyway," Sephryn said, facing the fireplace, "I didn't believe any of it either, but it's true. All of it. You'll see."

Farilane didn't, but she wasn't about to let it distract her. *There's more here, much more than fairy tales.* "You were there, then? When Nyphron died?"

Sephryn stopped fussing with the fire and placed a hand on the mantel for support as if she were suddenly dizzy. "Yes . . . yes, I was there."

Kile moved to the empress dowager's side, then turned to Farilane. "Why don't you show her the note from Bran?" he said, taking hold of Sephryn's hand. Slipping an arm around her waist, he helped her back to her chair.

Is that the first time he's spoken since we entered?

Farilane found it significant that he interceded just then. *These two definitely know each other. But how? Did Virgil speak to the empress dowager and . . . no, Virgil didn't know Sephryn. But something is going on. Sephryn knew it was me because I arrived with Kile. Her eyes said so. Was she also expecting Sheldon? Didn't seem that way. It is as if Sheldon is invisible to her. But none of this makes sense because I was the one who decided to come here, and I did so at the last minute. How could she be expecting us?*

Farilane drew the note from the book and handed it to Sephryn.

"Have you read this?" the empress dowager asked.

“Only the first couple of lines. I may be a book thief, but I draw the line at reading living people’s correspondence.”

“Thank you,” Sephryn said. “But I think you deserve to hear it. Might even help.”

Help what? Farilane wondered.

Sephryn held the letter a tad farther away than was normal. Apparently, even myr suffered sight problems with age.

Dearest Nolyn and Sephryn,

I’m sorry, my friends, for waiting so long, but you will both outlive me by centuries, so I hope, despite the odds, that perhaps time itself will allow these words to reach you. I’m sorry I disappeared, sorry I never sent word. Back then, after Suri’s death, it was dangerous to go near Percepliquis. Now as a result, I have so much to tell you, but I know I won’t have the chance. I fear my life on Elan is quickly coming to a close, but I must tell you this . . .

I have been to Avempartha. I have stood on the balcony from which Brin fell, and I believe I’ve solved the mystery of the murderer on the balcony. I know who killed Brin. What’s more . . . I have met him.

I am writing this to you from a chamber within Borappathin, a ruined fortress on the west coast of the Green Sea that is older than Alon Rhist, older than Drumindor, or anything in the elven realms. I am told it was built for the First War—the only such structure on this side of the sea—and it is part of the long-lost ancient world our people once fled from in terror. I’ve been told this stronghold was commanded by a riva, which—if I understand correctly—were the generals of Uberlin’s army who became the first raow. The very stone of this place is stained black, saturated in evil. It is a toenail of the ancient world caught on the tip of the new—an infection point where evil seeps into a virgin world. And it is here that I now believe I will

die. Falkirk remains optimistic, but Dibben no longer trusts him, and now, even I have begun to wonder if something evil has taken hold of my old friend.

So while I would love to tell you of all my travels and accomplishments since I fled Percepliquis, I know I don't have the time. Dibben has enacted defenses on this chamber, but even his power is not likely to protect us. Certainly not here. I doubt Suri herself could. So forgive me for skipping decades of my life and getting to the point at hand.

Aunt Seph noted that Brin wrote feverishly in the week between her return from Phyre and her death, yet none of the pages that my mother found in the wagon was new. The Book of Brin ended with the victory at Grandford. I've always wondered what became of the rest. Sephryn, do you remember how your father said the Fhrey who pushed Brin over the rail was holding a pack? And that neither Tekchin nor Rain found it when they went to the balcony to look? The question has always been whether the killer sent it over the rail with Brin or kept it. Persephone said Brin went to the balcony that day to record the events of the challenge as they happened. I always believed that the missing writing of Brin was in that pack and contained the rest of the story—the important parts—the history of the war's end and her trip through Phyre; what she, alone, found in Alysia and the Sacred Garden, and why she was killed.

I now know that the pack survived the encounter, and that inside it was The Second Book of Brin.

I am kicking myself for not writing down the stories we were told as kids. I asked my mother to, but she always refused, saying she wasn't a writer. I think she felt that adding to Brin's book was a betrayal of her friend's memory—that, somehow, she would be stealing Brin's accomplishment. I should have

done it, but it wasn't important to me until after Mom and Dad's deaths, and, you know how it is. We heard the stories as kids, the highlights, but not the timeline, not what came first and what followed what. Not the in-betweens, and not the things inappropriate for children. I always felt that if I could find The Second Book of Brin, it would solve everything. But now, I am out of time, and it's too late to write what I know.

If any of us get out of here, and by the will of Mari or Elan, or the hand of Malcolm, this letter manages to reach either of you, I pray you will take up this burden to find the lost Book of Brin, or at the very least write down what you remember of the stories. But if you do hunt the missing book, be careful, for it is guarded. This is what I didn't understand, didn't expect, but should have. The one who killed Brin still walks the face of Elan. I won't say 'still lives,' as I don't believe he is alive—not in the sense we understand. Also, be warned that Mawyndulë—the Fhrey Miralyith that Nyphron spared in the Great Challenge—is with him, and I am certain he plots revenge against the emperor and plans to obtain the Horn of Gylindora.”

Sephryn turned to get more light on the page, then held it farther out and then closer up.

“What’s wrong? Is that where it ends?” Farilane asked.

“No, but this last part, it’s hard to read. Bran’s handwriting gets worse as it goes on. Near the bottom, it’s a mess.”

“May I?” Farilane asked, reaching out. “I’ve spent about a hundred years deciphering old handwriting, some of it pretty atrocious I must say.”

Sephryn handed it over, and Farilane saw that near the bottom the last few lines were indeed scribbled with disregard. More than that, they were marred by a dark, ruddy-brown stain that ruined the whole lower third of the page. Farilane wondered if Sephryn understood the significance of the blemish. *Bran did not come to a peaceful end*, she thought.

After studying the hastily scrawled and blood-blurred lettering, Farilane made her best guess and read aloud, “*They are coming. I*

think . . . something, something . . . don't have time to . . . something, something . . . Falkirk is . . . remember . . . Second Book of Brin is underneath . . . in the hidden chamber . . . where the . . ." Farilane stopped. "That's it."

She handed back the letter. "Do you know what Bran meant by the Horn of Gylindora?"

"Hmm?" Sephryn looked up from the page, her face weighted in sadness. "Oh, yes, of course. It's the instrument given to the first fane of the Fhrey by Ferrol as a means for them to peacefully transition power."

"Not too peacefully," Farilane said. "Two people do have to fight to the death."

Sephryn shook her head. "My father told me that the challenge between Zephyron and Lothian—the one just prior to Nyphron and Mawyndulë—was the first time a real battle had ever taken place. Prior to that, the horn was a sort of formality. Navi Lon and Ghika were anointed successors, and although the horn was blown, the fight was conceded. Alon Rhist ascended to the Forest Throne during the Dherg War when no one else wanted it. The same was true with Fenelyus." Sephryn held the letter in her quivering hands. "How did you get this?"

"We found it buried with him beneath Dibben Monastery—a little community on a mounded hill outside the Mystic Wood."

Sephryn looked at Kile once more as her eyes teared up. "So, he was buried back home, on Dahl Rhen, beside his parents, above all his ancestors. Thank you for that."

Kile nodded.

The princess watched the open exchange and realized that the two were not even trying to conceal their association. This made the act of puzzling it out no longer fun and quite unpleasant. Farilane felt insulted, as if these two were playing a joke on her. "All right, enough of this. It's clear the two of you know each other. Also, since the empress dowager was expecting me, Kile must have sent advance word of our arrival. I admit I don't know how you managed that. Given Kile's unusual behavior since the start of this adventure, I can see he is much more than he appears. I have long suspected something unusual about him but haven't yet puzzled it out—short of him being a god in disguise, of course." She smiled. "All of this is fascinating on a certain level, but I'm short on time. An army of Teshlors is hunting me

and given that everyone seems to know I was coming here—even before I knew it myself—I can assume those following me will arrive soon. So if you don't mind, I'd like to get to the point at hand. I'm here in the hope of finding the Horn of Gylindora so I can save the empire and possibly all of mankind. Legend holds that it disappeared at the time of the Emperor Nyphron's death—an event you, my great-great-great-grandmother, were at. So I was hoping you could explain what happened that day and what became of the horn. You do know, don't you?"

"Yes," she replied. "I know. I know all of it."

"Wonderful." Farilane grinned, clapped her hands together, and leaned forward in her seat with interest. "Please tell us. And since I'm positive that Kile knows all of this already, maybe he can root around in the pantry and find us some cakes and perhaps a bit of tea."

Sheldon also leaned forward, and to her surprise, Kile actually did walk over to the cabinetry and begin to search.

Sephryn set down the letter, and asked Kile, "Can I? May I tell them the truth?"

"Yes," he replied. "Your time of secrecy is over."

Sephryn nodded, sat back, brushed out her skirt, and took a deep breath. "On the eight hundred and thirty-third anniversary of Persephone's death and the founding of the capital, Nyphron was murdered in public, in daylight, in the city's center, and the horn was stolen. Both of these acts were done by the same person, and the killer was never caught, never brought to justice, but I wouldn't say she was never punished." Sephryn shook her head. "She has been, and will be, punished for all eternity."

Farilane straightened up. "It was you?" She looked at the mantel at the great bow of Moya. "During the ghazel attack . . ."

"I put an arrow—no—I put *the* Arrow through his throat."

"Why?"

"My son, Nurgya, had been stolen from my home, the nurse who cared for him brutally murdered. The kidnapper instructed me to steal the horn from the palace, which I did. Then I was told I also must kill the emperor in exchange for my son's life. But it wasn't until I saw Nyphron about to kill his son, my beloved Nolyn, that I let the arrow fly. Only . . ."

"Only what?"

“Only it was all a lie. It wasn’t Nolyn that Nyphron was about to kill. My son was safe. And it wasn’t the horn that I stole. I damned my eternal soul for nothing. And now I will never be able to tell Nyphron or my mother how horribly sorry I am.”



Kile returned with stale crackers, cheese, and weak wine that he set on the table beside *The Book of Brin*. Farilane promptly picked up the book and glared at him, as if Kile had set a rabid dog beside an infant. Then she turned to the empress dowager, softened her countenance, and asked, “Who was it that kidnapped your son?”

Sephryn laid her hand on Bran’s letter as if it were the hand of a dead friend. “Bran was right, but the letter was far too late in reaching us. Mawyndulë, the son of the last fane—the ruler of the Fhrey—arranged the whole thing. It was Mawyndulë—using magic to make himself look like Nolyn—that I saw about to be killed by Nyphron. He was the one who took my son, tried to kill the real Nolyn, forced me to steal the horn, and he murdered my friend Seymour Destone.”

“Why?”

“Near the end of the Great War, Mawyndulë murdered his father in an attempt to assume the throne. In doing so, however, he broke the Law of Ferrol that prohibits Fhrey from killing Fhrey. As a result, he was banished from their society, making him ineligible to be fane and barring him from ever entering the afterlife paradise of Alysia. But then he blew the horn. It didn’t recognize that Mawyndulë had been banished. All it cared about was that Mawyndulë had Fhrey blood. If he had won the challenge against Nyphron, Ferrol would allow him to reenter Fhrey society and avoid punishment for his crimes due to an ambiguity in the law. Of course he lost that fight. But with Nyphron dead, he can challenge again. Assuming he can get his hands on the horn.”

“But you said it wasn’t the horn that you stole.”

“It was *a* horn, but not *the* Horn of Gylindora. Nyphron didn’t accidentally become the first emperor, you know. He was no fool. He took precautions against just such a thing and hid the real horn in a very safe

place. You see, when Nyphron was killed, we faced a terrible problem. Nyphron was not only the ruler of humanity but also the fane of the Fhrey. According to Fhrey law, when a fane dies, the horn must be presented to the Aquila, the Fhrey high council, to allow for a challenger to blow it. That would mean Nolyn would need to fight a Fhrey challenger, possibly a Miralyith—a Fhrey who practiced the Art. If he failed, there was an extremely good chance that the Fhrey might then resume the war—except that by then Suri was long dead, and there were no new human Artists. The Fhrey would have replenished much of their population by then; they would have many Miralyith, and they would also have gilarabrywns—invincible dragons that can lay waste to whole territories. If we neglected to present the horn, and so long as no one with Fhrey blood blew it, and no one from Erivan crossed the Nidwalden River to learn that Nyphron had died, they would never know. We considered it irresponsible, even reckless, to let Nolyn blow it.”

“And he agreed?”

“We never told him.”

“Who is this *we*?”

“My father, Sikar, and I. You see, what I’ve just told you, my husband never knew. He died without realizing he was ruler of mankind but not entitled to the crown of emperor. The day after my wedding and Nolyn’s coronation, my father and Sikar set out after Mawyndulë. They spent years hunting him.”

“They never found him?”

“They must have,” Sephryn said. “Mawyndulë killed them both.”

She stood up and once more crossed to the mantel. “A Teshlor arrived with the news, and it was then that my son—Nurgya, who was emperor by then—and I realized that the horn was in danger again. He secretly sent me back here to Merredydd. Less than a month later, my son, an avid swimmer, drowned in the imperial baths. The palace showed signs of having been ransacked. Luckily Nurgya’s son, Estermon, was miles away and safe in the company of Teshlor Knights.”

“And the real horn?” Sheldon asked. “Is it still safe?”

Sephryn looked at Kile.

The scribe nodded.

Sephryn held her hands out toward the weapons above the hearth. “Nyphron gave it to the two people he and Persephone trusted the most to hide and protect it. The Last Galantian and the Last Shield.” Staring at the hearth, Sephryn began circling the room, touching the stones that made up the wall, counting them as she went. Eventually she stopped and with a little effort dislodged a stone halfway up the wall. Removing it, she revealed a pocket from which she retrieved a metal box. Returning, she placed it on the table and began wiping the dust off.

“This is a gemlock box,” she said. “A special one commissioned by Nyphron, designed by Roan of Rhen, and created by the best Belgriclungreian masters. Its one purpose: to keep the Horn of Gylindora safe from Mawyndulë.”

“How does it do that?” Sheldon asked.

“The whole of it—inside and out—is engraved in Orinfar runes, making it impervious to magic. In addition, it is made from Roan’s *steel*, the strongest metal known to man. The walls of this box are so thick and the metal so strong that the power required to force it open without the key would also result in the destruction of its relatively fragile contents.”

Sephryn sat down once more. “This is the last thing my father gave me. This is what my son sent me to guard. This is why I have stayed hidden here in Merredydd, in this empty house, for centuries—waiting.”

“Waiting for what?” Farilane asked.

“For you.”

“You said that before, but I don’t understand. I thought—well, it seemed that everyone was purposely refusing to tell me anything about you. I didn’t think you wanted to see me. And how is it you knew I was coming? Did Kile tell you?”

“Yes.”

“How did he do that?” She faced Kile, who showed no intention of speaking. “He was with me all the time, and I didn’t make the decision to come here until we were on our way.”

That sad look stole over the empress dowager’s face once more. “My dear, he told us all that you’d be coming here the day you were born.” She looked at Kile then, and her face tensed, and when she spoke, her voice shook. “I knew her birthday was coming up. I just didn’t know she’d be here tonight. I had things planned. I needed to get more wood for the fire,

and to replace the candles in the bedroom—important things like that.” She bit her quivering lip, tears welling in her eyes. “At least they seemed important yesterday.”

“I’m sorry,” Kile said, then frowned. “I wish I could change things, but I can’t.”

“I know. I’m just scared, that’s all. I don’t know what will happen.” She wiped her eyes with shaking hands. “And you can’t tell me, can you?”

Kile shook his head. “Even I have limitations.”

“What’s going on? What are you two talking about?” Farilane asked. “How could you know I was going to come here the day I was born?”

“By these ten events you will know my prophecy is true,” Sephryn said, as if she were reciting something. Once more, she spoke to Kile. “I was number seven, I believe.”

Kile nodded.

“What prophecy?” Farilane felt the tension rising in the room. This silent conversation had taken on a disturbing tone. As if hearing the draw of a blade leaving a scabbard, she felt the anticipation of something terrible, yet they all sat quietly around the warm hearth fire and the table set with untouched cheese and crackers.

“Where is the key?” Sheldon asked. “The one that opens the box. Is it here, too?”

“No,” Sephryn said and picked up the poker once more. This time she didn’t use it on the fire. Instead, she crossed to Sheldon and handed it to him.

The carpenter refused to accept it, but he said. “How long have you known?”

“Since the moment you spoke. It’s the same voice. I could never forget that voice.”

The silent pack! Farilane realized. It was how he sounded. The manner in which Sheldon spoke. The disrespectful manner that occurred since leaving the monastery—no, even before that. It had grown more obvious once they failed to obtain the horn, but even before, when they met at the ferry . . .

“He said you were on your way to Dibben Monastery and would be trying to sneak out because the emperor forbade you to leave. He explained

that in your haste and need for secrecy, you would neglect to invite me as you had promised."

All this from a man who previously struggled to say more than I ah . . .

"I've wanted to kill you for so very long," Sephryn told Sheldon. "But now, in a way, we're linked. You and I share the same fate."

"No, I will succeed at becoming fane, and I *will* force Ferrol to readmit me to the fold. But thank you for finally delivering the horn. I suspect the key will be far easier to locate."

Sheldon raised his hands, and a blinding bolt of white light shot forth, passing through the empress dowager's chest and striking the far wall where it shattered stone and caught a wooden beam on fire. When the light vanished, the princess saw the Empress Dowager Sephryn collapse to the floor with a six-inch hole burned through her.

The door burst open, and Halcyon myr Milyon entered. Sheldon got to his feet and raised his hands once more. The elven bodyguard was still advancing with his sword when he died from another blinding flash.

Then Sheldon faced Kile, who promptly got to his feet.

"I don't know who you are," Sheldon said. "And I have to admit, I've *almost* grown to like you, but I can't leave any witnesses."

"No!" Farilane screamed, and as Sheldon once more raised his hands, she stepped between the two an instant before the blinding light came.

The force struck her square in the chest, where she still clutched *The Book of Brin*. Absurdly, the last thought she had was not for her own life, or Kile's welfare, but how angry she was with herself for not having dropped the book first.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

GOING HOME

When Farilane woke, it was morning, she was in a bed, and beside her, in what appeared to be a very uncomfortable chair, was Kile. Dark circles lined his eyes. His hair was a mess, his clothes rumpled. The princess struggled to breathe. Her chest felt as if it had been hit by a Grenmorian war hammer.

“Kile?”

“Yes, Your Highness?”

“What in the name of Rel happened?”

“We survived.”

She managed to roll her eyes, which to her surprise didn’t hurt. “Thank you. That was the one point I wasn’t clear about.”

The door to her little bedchamber opened, and a woman stepped in with a tray of food. Seeing Farilane looking back at her, she promptly dropped it on the floor. The crash and clatter were instantly followed by two men in armor bursting into the room. The princess recognized both.

“She’s awake!” Kolby shouted, his tone flush with relief.

“I told you it wouldn’t kill her,” Ethan said. “Take more than a slap to do in our princess.”

More footsteps could be heard, and Nordyan burst in. He, too, looked as fresh as a daisy that hadn’t known sun or water in a week. He stared at her from the doorway, took a breath, and ran a trembling hand through his hair. “You all right?”

“No—not really,” Farilane replied. She hadn’t even tried to move. She knew it wasn’t a good idea. Every inhale made her wince, and they had her

trussed up in thick bandages that made her feel like a constrictor snake was trying to let her know theirs was more than a friendship.

“What’s wrong?”

“Broken ribs, I think. Hard to breathe.”

“Had them many times,” Kolby said. “You’ll get over it.”

Nordyan sat beside her on the bed. He placed his hand next to, but not on, hers. “Thought we lost you there for a bit.”

“When was that?” she asked.

“When the knights dragged you out of that burning house. You looked dead.” He glanced at Kile. “You both did.”

“Sephryn!” Farilane’s eyes went wide as in her mind she once more saw that horrible blinding light shoot through the empress dowager.

“She’s dead,” Nordyan said, leaning in as if expecting the need to hold her down.

Farilane’s hands spread out across the quilt, feeling around. “The book! The box?”

“He took the box,” Kile told her. “But . . .” Reaching down, he pulled up a leather-bound codex. He placed *The Book of Brin* on the bed.

Farilane grabbed it away and paid for the act with a horrific stab of pain. Still, it was worth it. Her brother, father, and grandfather weren’t to be trusted with chalkboards, much less a one-of-a-kind foundational treasure. She dragged it to her lap and ran fingers over the cover.

Farilane stared at it. “I don’t understand.” She remembered stubbornly clutching it to her chest as she tried to stop Sheldon. A blaze of light had hit her square on the book’s cover—the same sort of blaze that seconds before had put a hole the size of an apple through Sephryn’s chest. The impact created a brilliant flare that filled the house with white light. She had heard a loud crack and then remembered flying backward as that giant’s hammer struck her.

“I think there’s a reason that book is in such good condition,” Kile said. *We’ve taken good care of it*, the abbot had said.

“The monks of Dibben Monastery,” she muttered. She focused on her brother. “They’re magicians.”

Nordyan smiled and nodded. “Yeah, I figured that one out myself. Not hard to do with fireballs flying.”

“That’s right!” Farilane gasped. With the empress dowager lost and the book found, she managed to recall the battle outside the monastery. “I’m sorry I ran like that, I thought—”

“You did the right thing,” Ethan said. “You got out of the way.”

“A bit farther out of the way than I would have preferred,” Nordyan said.

“But it would have been harder with you there,” Ethan concluded.

“How did you manage?”

“The knights protected me,” Nordyan replied. “And the monks protected them.”

“The *monks* protected *you*—the imperial prince?” Farilane said. “I’m not sure which is more curious: that the pious and subversive Monks of Maribor are actually wizards, or that they defended members of the imperial family, which was responsible for outlawing them.”

Nordyan shrugged. “Grandfather is going to scream himself hoarse when he finds out.”

Farilane looked into Nordyan’s eyes. “You’re not mad at me?”

“You’re my sister. I’m always mad at you.” He reached out and ruffled her hair. “Doesn’t mean I don’t love you.”

For a moment that lasted longer than she would have expected, Farilane stopped feeling the pain in her chest. Breathing no longer hurt because she’d stopped doing it altogether. *It isn’t fair he should do that to me when I’m like this. A knight would never hit a foe when they’re down. I’m wounded, and the bastard has the indignity of stabbing me like that.* Never before had Nordyan, or any member of her family save her long-passed mother, ever admitted to caring about her. And no one had ever said *those* words—not to her.



Farilane was embarrassed to admit that her ribs were not broken, just badly bruised, and much of the pain had been caused by over-zealous bandaging. She did have a nasty black, yellow, and blue mark on her chest in the vague shape of a *Book of Brin*-sized rectangle, but once the bandages were off, she felt better, and she was able to breathe again.

Most of the knights were out searching for Sheldon. Although only supposition on her part, Farilane believed there really had been a Sheldon Faust, and that she had met him that first day in the palace. Farilane was also fairly certain that Proust was none other than the infamous Fhrey Miralyith, Mawyndulë, who had used magic to impersonate Sheldon when they met at the ferry. Recalling his dreadful words, *I can't leave any witnesses*, Farilane assumed the real Sheldon had met an early end. Farilane didn't hold out much hope of the Teshlors finding Mawyndulë. Given the fate of Tekchin and Sikar, and having seen firsthand what happened to Sephryn, she secretly hoped they didn't.

Discovering that Farilane wasn't broken after all, her brother put into motion plans to return to Percepliquis. A wagon was obtained and a coffin built for Sephryn's body. She would be transported back for a proper interment in the family crypt. A second wagon was outfitted for Farilane. She was certain this was less for her comfort and more to prevent any more unscheduled departures. Nordyan was weirdly intent on getting her back home, a fixation that she felt transcended his desire to placate the emperor.

Kolby stood guard outside the door to the bedroom. Kile, however, was nowhere to be seen. He had stepped out soon after she woke up, and she hadn't spotted him since. This was frustrating as she had a number of questions: some urgent, others important, and a few potentially life-altering. Farilane had witnessed the impossible several times now. There could be no doubt that: water ran uphill, the sun failed to rise, and Farilane was struggling to make sense of it all. She had all the pieces to a puzzle yet couldn't make it work. The fault didn't lie in how the pieces fit together so much as in the picture they threatened to create. She didn't want to see it. Every fiber of her being fought to rationalize solutions that might keep the universe from upending, not so much from the anxiety it would cause, but more from the sheer mess it would make. The worst aspect to the whole thing was that she faced the possibility of having opened a door to a new reality without a means to explore it. Her whole life had been spent in the mundane world of what she could see and touch, and she feared having blundered into a place of limitless possibilities without a ship to sail its seas. Farilane was no Ruby Finn, and she knew it.

Trapped in bed, she whiled away the hours reading *The Book of Brin* and thinking of Sephryn. The empress dowager was one more opportunity

lost, another frontier left undiscovered. The amount of wealth left on the table was more than depressing. Even such a tiny glimpse into the empress dowager's character had revealed a person she could have been friends with—someone who might have understood Farilane and taught her things. *Why had everyone tried to keep us apart?* At the very least, the legend hadn't come up short. But now she was gone—murdered by . . .

Farilane had no idea.

Other than having accurately identified the perpetrator as a vague name historically attached to an even hazier figure, she struggled to understand what she had witnessed. As far as anyone knew, the ghazel language had no words for *love, forgiveness, surrender, bread, pretty*, or a host of other fundamental terms. She had always wondered how they had managed to function—to think—without such basic words to capture necessary ideas. Now she knew what it must be like for she, too, had no language to articulate what she had experienced. So Farilane made a decision. Rather than trying to explain the unexplainable. She would temporarily fill the gaps until she found the proper words. Kile was the key to unlocking—

The key!

The princess screamed.

Once more, Kolby was in the room in the space between two heartbeats, with two of his swords drawn. This she expected. The surprise was Martasen Dray, who rushed in right behind him.

“What’s wrong?” Kolby asked, searching the room for threats.

“Emperor Estermon!” she shouted. “He’s going to be killed. And not just him. We need to get back—now!”



Far from protesting her abrupt demand, Nordyan embraced it. He ordered everyone back to Percepliquis immediately. After a grab-and-dash flurry, Kolby Fiske, Ethan Yardley, Enzo Edon, and Ransara Soto took the mattress corners and hoisted the princess, bed and all. They carried her downstairs and through the living room of what, Farilane only then realized, was the home of Empress Persephone. Being that the bed was narrow and the door wide, they conveyed her straight out the front to the street. They

quickly settled her inside a waiting covered wagon, but not fast enough for her to avoid seeing the still-smoking remains across the road. Sephryn's home was a charred ruin. Only the blackened hearth and a few stubborn beams remained standing.

What was the cost of that fire? How many priceless treasures lost?

The knights secured the bed to the wagon, adjusted the canopy, and spread blankets out over her.

"No cookies and milk?" she asked Kolby as he tucked the blankets in around the mattress.

He smiled at her. "It's good to hear you mocking me again."

"It's good to be mocking you again. And I am sorry about dodging all of you. Mean Mister Dray was being such a bad sport."

"The emperor must be planning an expensive party. You should be pleased your family is thinking about you, for once."

"Pleased?" She smirked. "It's a little scary, don't you think? Nordyan actually said he *loved* me."

"Noticed that myself." The Teshlor shrugged. "Maybe your family is finally seeing what we knights have always known."

"Which is?"

"That not all the stars are in the sky."

"I wasn't nauseated until now. Thanks for rounding out my set of ailments."

Kolby grinned, then turned to step off the wagon.

"Kolby?" Farilane asked as an odd thought crossed her mind.

"Highness?"

"What are you doing here?"

"Getting you ready to—"

"No. I mean, how did you get here so fast? My brother, Ethan, and Enzo I can understand. They were chasing us, but how did you and Ransara get to Merredydd? You were just in Percepliquis. Word would have had to be sent, then you'd have to travel here, but you were at my door when I woke up. Have I lost time? Was I unconscious for days?"

"No, Your Highness, I was the one who pulled you from the fire."

"How's that possible?"

"Because I was already here."

"I don't understand."

Kolby lowered his head. He ran a hand across his face, erasing the grin of a moment ago and replacing it with a look of guilt. “When news of your absence was discovered, I was dispatched—Ransara and I—to protect the empress dowager.”

“Really? Why? From what?”

“From you.”

“Me?”

He shrugged. “That’s what I was told. But we were too late.”

“Too late? The trip from Percepliquis is two days at the most. If you set out the same time as my brother, you’d have been here long before we showed up.”

“There was a storm. You must have noticed. High winds, lots of rain? It flooded the Bernum and washed away the ferries. We couldn’t cross for days. Ransara and I got here the same night you did. We were coming up the street when we saw the flash of light inside the house, followed a moment later by a second, and a third, and then the whole place started to burn. Went up surprisingly fast.”

“But if you couldn’t cross the river, how did Nordyan?”

“They were already on their way before I got orders—must have just got over before the storm hit.”

“But they still would have needed to cross the East branch of the Bernum. The storm that stopped you would have stopped them, too.”

Again, the knight rolled his shoulders. “Can’t tell you. Wasn’t there.”

“Nor can you tell me why they sent you to save the empress dowager from *me*? You must have thought that strange.”

“Not my place to question the emperor, but yeah, I thought it strange . . . until now.”

“Kolby, I didn’t kill her.”

“No.” He shook his head. “Nor did I save her.”

He turned away and climbed off the wagon. A moment later, with an ugly jerk, the wagon rolled.



Riding in a wagon was as pleasant as sledding over rocks. And while Farilane's ribs were not broken, they continued to protest. The constant hammering of the axle over bumps and holes left the princess gritting her teeth and moaning as she read. This was her one solace. The book had worked as a distraction, but she was near the end, and instead of answering questions, it raised a host of them.

She discovered that in the monks' *Codex of Maribor, The Book of Brin* had been cut apart and reorganized into what was believed to be a more sensible progression, with which—Farilane now understood—the monks had taken liberties. A small section concerning the pantheon of deities that appeared near the end of *The Book of Brin* was moved to the front of the *Codex*, expanded, and given its own title, "Treatise on the Gods." In this *new and improved* volume, Brin's contemplations and doubts about the nature of the gods were erased in favor of a cleaner narrative. The new story declared that Ferrol, Drome, and Maribor created Elan's elves, dwarfs, and men, while their sister, Muriel, created the world's flora and fauna. She also gave birth to the evil one, Uberlin, son of their father, Erebus. The only way the monks could fathom this development was to claim the father had raped the daughter. Given that this event launched a war that set sons against their fathers, it must have seemed reasonable to the monks that these were the indisputable facts of the case.

The second portion of the *Codex* had been penned by Falkirk de Roche, in the form of interpretations on *The Book of Brin* known as "The Meditations." They covered the basic rules to live a proper life in the grace of Maribor. "The Meditations" formed the true foundational core of the monks' creed, the most referenced and dynamic part of their book. In some copies of the *Codex*, Farilane had found additional "meditations" added by venerated members of the order, who helped further define the growing complications and even some annoying contradictions that plagued the doctrine.

"The Meditations" section was followed by the "Treatise on Nyphron"—sometimes spelled in the human vernacular as Novron—which described events that led up to the Great War, including the famous epic poem "The Battle of Grandford." Farilane was pleased to see that it closely—though not entirely—matched the original penned by Brin. After that came the fables that included "Gronbach and the Treasure of Neith" and

“The Evil Dwarf of the Crescent Forest,” which Farilane herself had re-written. Back when she dreamed of helping to usher in an era of literacy, the princess had taken the liberty of cleaning up the fable’s archaic language style and modernizing the text, in the hope that children could read them as literary primers.

Nowhere in the *Codex of Maribor* was there any mention of the Underworld Odyssey. Farilane was only familiar with that particular myth through various bits of ancient folklore, which varied widely from one monastery or village to the next. The princess had only found a few accounts recorded in ink. The most prominent and enduring version came from the Belgic Kingdom, and it told of a band of great heroes led by the future king Rain who entered the afterlife in search of the Sword of King Mideon.

Given Sephryn’s assurances that the myth was true, Farilane theorized that the story had grown in folklore, having been planted there by Bran. She speculated that as he had traveled the world establishing literary monasteries, he had also answered questions and relayed the old stories his parents had told. These additional accounts of the Underworld Odyssey were likely never added to the official *Codex* by the monks because they would have conflicted with both the “Treatise on the Gods” and their own by-then-unshakable belief that Maribor and Ferrol were male.

The Book of Brin ended with an unsatisfying conclusion. The humans had won the Battle of Grandford but not the war. Farilane knew the rest of the story, as did everyone. Nyphron had won leadership over the Fhrey and ended the conflict after single combat against Mawyndulë, but she lacked the details. Some argued that the elven high council asked Nyphron to challenge the son who had killed his own father. This idea had its own problems, but it was far superior to the absurd notion that a troop of heroes had died, traversed the afterlife, and returned. This frustrating gap of detailed information was an unrelenting itch in Farilane’s mind. But a remedy existed.

There is a Second Book of Brin! Farilane remembered the words from Bran’s letter. It was no longer in the book, and she feared it had burned with everything else. Still, she had her first clue in as grand a quest as there could be. For the first time, Farilane felt akin to Bran. This one-time religious zealot and primitive dogmatic icon had transformed into a fellow

book hunter and bibliomaniac. She understood him—saw Bran as she saw herself. He was the son of famous parents, obsessed with reading, writing, and seeking the truth through ancient texts. But he was one step beyond her. Farilane had sought part one, while Bran had located part two. Her counterpart and soulmate was pointing the way to the ultimate hunt. Somewhere was a mythical stack of pages so rare that no one had ever read it, and none knew it existed. Farilane had an adventure waiting beyond her wildest dreams: an ancient, never-before-seen book hidden in a secret chamber and protected by some terrible mysterious guardian. No matter what her family had planned back in Percepliquis, this was the best birthday present she could hope for.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

HOMECOMING

Farilane was back on her feet before they reached the imperial capital. She insisted on walking a bit the first day, then more the second. By the time the funeral procession for Empress Dowager Sephryn rolled into Percepliquis, Farilane was able to take her proper place with her brother alongside the black-and-purple draped wagon. With them was the honor guard of four Teshlor Knights and First Minister Dray, which made quite a sight. They drew crowds of hushed onlookers and helped spread the news of a great one's death throughout the city. Kile was still nowhere to be seen.

"He did come back with us, right?" she asked the knights.

"I think so," Enzo said.

"Anyone speak to him?"

The four glanced at each other. No one had.

"I only saw him that first day," Kolby reported, "when he was in the chair next to your bed. Looked about as good as an old snowman on the first day of spring." The others nodded agreement.

"Was he hurt? Was he burned?" Farilane tried to remember, but everything that first day was a bit hazy.

They all shook their heads. "He just wouldn't eat anything, and we couldn't get him to leave the room. All he ever did was stare at you and on occasion shake his head. After you woke up, I never saw him again."

More people arrived as word spread, not only of the funeral, but who it was that had died.

This was no ordinary death march because this was no ordinary death. While her family and the palace staff had worked hard to keep Sephryn a

secret from Farilane, the rest of the world knew of her. They likely didn't know much, probably far less than Farilane had discovered, but it was enough. The woman in the box wasn't a woman, she was—as far as anyone knew—the second-ever myr, Sephryn's husband being the first. She had lived over eighteen hundred years, and much of the empire reflected her influence. Persephone and Nyphron had created the empire, but Nolyn and Sephryn transformed it from a harsh, warring, military entity into a peaceful civilization of art and beauty. The two had acted as symbols of unity between the Instarya and the human citizens, encouraging tolerance and empathy that formed a culture of broad-mindedness and reduced tensions. This in turn, resulted in a blossoming of ideas, discoveries, and innovations—the fruits of different cultures working together.

Behind the procession, a parade rapidly formed, beginning with what Farilane guessed to be every Teshlor in the city. The guildhall must have emptied the instant that news of Sephryn's arrival reached their doors. Nolyn and Sephryn had formed the knightly order and created the Teshlor Guild. The empress dowager had also fought alongside them in the ghazel invasion, wielding her legendary mother's famous bow. A bow that was now ash, Farilane realized. The Empress Sephryn had been the last living founder of the knightly order, and Teshlors were nothing if not loyal.

The procession reached the palace, where several city officials, much of the staff, and all of the bureaucracy—including Farilane's father—stood on the steps. The wagon and everyone with it stopped. In the silence that followed, Farilane could hear sobs coming from the crowd. *Who alive in this city knew Sephryn?* Farilane looked to see who it was, then noticed more than one person wept. Dozens openly cried, and as she searched the crowd, Farilane saw others shedding silent tears.

They didn't know her. They only knew of her. The empress dowager had famously lived much of her life in a tiny brick house on Ishim's Way, where she fought to improve the plight of the empire's citizens. Three hundred and forty-six years after she abandoned public life and left the capital to safeguard the horn in Merredydd, they not only remembered—they cared.

Nyrian descended the steps toward them.

"Is the emperor all right?" the princess asked.

"Of course, he's—"

“We need to talk.” Farilane gave a pointed look at her brother. “A family meeting. Now.”



Farilane always thought the Celestial Room had the best name of any chamber in the palace. And she didn't understand why it was used so infrequently. This small, cozy space located in the residence was intended for the imperial family to have a place to relax beyond the sight of curious eyes. Even servants were forbidden to enter. The last time Farilane had been there was when she and Nordyan were children. She recalled sitting on the floor before the fireplace, trying to reassemble a wooden ball puzzle while Nordyan played with paints. Their mother, Lydia, knitted something—Farilane couldn't remember what—and their father . . .

Farilane struggled to think, then realized he wasn't there. He never was.

“Is this the first time you've been in here?” Farilane asked him.

“Of course not.” Nyrian looked at her with that familiar almost-irritated expression, the one that had dominated her youth—at least the portion where she saw him. Then puzzlement hazed his features. “Why do you ask?”

She shook her head. “Just curious.”

This answer did nothing to alleviate her father's annoyance. He likely took it as a thinly veiled insult. It wasn't, but she could understand his mistake since she had been prone to doing the same for decades.

If words were blades, her grandfather had said, *you'd have no need for bodyguards*.

What he apparently didn't see was that without a blade, words were the only thing she had to defend herself. Unfortunately, at times like this, she couldn't prove her sincerity by tossing aside her weapons.

As the three of them gathered in a tiny triangle on the plush carpet in the center of the room, her father frowned and asked with all the command of a patience-exhausted parent, “What is it you want to speak about?”

Farilane waited until Nordstrom, the day steward, closed the door, then she gathered herself. Everyone had a weakness. Farilane's was her family, and no one made her more uncomfortable than her father.

Her brother, Nordyan, was the brat she used to wrestle—and usually beat. Not that she'd done that recently, but it left a mark in the form of a respectful relationship where serious conversations were only awkward. Her grandfather was a far greater problem. No one in the entire world enjoyed speaking to Estermon, but there were basic systems in place for meeting the emperor. Her father had no such protocols or guidelines, and after two hundred years, he remained part parent, part stranger. Nyrian existed in a netherworld of what ought to be, and what was, and she was never certain which rules to follow. *Do I hug him, shake his hand, or introduce myself? Good evening, sir, you might be surprised to discover I'm your daughter. Yes, I said daughter—that unhappy little side effect of a little too much effort on your part to sire an heir.*

Farilane made a mental note: *Put the blades away.*

They waited. She hesitated.

In the end, she looked away and focused on the spot where she had once solved the riddle of a child's wooden puzzle. "I made a mistake. I unknowingly led Mawyndulë to Sephryn and the Horn of Gylindora. Now she's dead, he has the horn, and Grandfather's life is in imminent danger."

Her brother was the first to react, yet his comment was hardly helpful. "Mawyndulë? Who's that?"

Her father was either equally puzzled or he simply pretended to be. "Wasn't that the name of the fellow Nyphron was supposed to have killed at the end of the Great War?"

"Nyphron never killed him," she clarified. Not knowing if they were feigning ignorance, she questioned whether she was being helpful or simply pedantic. Farilane felt it best to err on the safe side, since she often assumed too much of people, and that bit of charity was rarely rewarded.

"Mawyndulë was allowed to live. Then, in the year eight hundred and fifty, he returned and exacted his revenge by murdering the first emperor during a ghazel invasion, which I now suspect, was also instigated by Mawyndulë for that purpose. He also tried to steal the Horn of Gylindora but failed."

Her father and brother looked like she'd just asked them to swallow an entire pig that was not only raw but still very much alive. Farilane had hoped that perhaps they knew more on the subject, and that she'd been kept in the dark for reasons that started with her being a daughter rather than a son. This did not appear to be the case, and once more the assumption that

people were as intelligent as she proved to be false. Farilane realized that a little more detail was needed.

“Mawyndulë is a Miralyith, an elven sorcerer—a powerful one. I expect he’s bald and in his mid-eighteen hundreds, although he has proved he can look like anyone. But he might have a problem sounding like them. He either is, or was, posing as the cult leader Proust, and most recently as Sheldon Faust, a carpenter from Warric, whom I suspect is now dead. In addition to murdering Nyphron, Mawyndulë is also believed responsible for the deaths of the Last Galantian Tekchin, and the former governor of Merredydd, Sikar, both of whom went in search of him after Nyphron’s death. Now Mawyndulë is back, and because of my stupidity, he has the horn. His next step will be to kill all of us. He’ll start with Estermon because the horn is in a locked box, and the emperor has the key dangling from a chain around his neck.”

Her father nodded, sighed, then looked at Nordyan. “You were sent to stop all this.”

“I tried. So did Kolby Fiske. You can’t fight fate.”

“You knew!” Farilane said, part of her feeling vindicated at guessing correctly, part furious that they’d kept it from her. “Of course you did. How else could you have found me in Merredydd so quickly? How else could you have sent Kolby to protect Sephryn before I even thought about visiting her?” Pieces fell into place. “That’s why you hid her from me. That’s why the name Sephryn was never mentioned in the palace when I was a child. And when I finally heard about her—when I asked—I was told she was dead. And when I learned otherwise, I was told she didn’t want to see me. You were trying to fight fate.” Farilane recalled what Sephryn had said and repeated it out loud, “By these ten events you will know my prophecy is true.”

This caught both of their attentions but neither spoke.

“You were trying to stop it, to break it, to prove it false. What is this prophecy, and who made it?”

“We need to speak to the emperor,” her father said.

“We *need* to get the emperor out of the palace,” she demanded. “Spirit him away to an undisclosed location and hide the key around his neck.”

“Won’t help,” Nordyan said.

“What are you talking about?”

“Didn’t help Sephryn.” Her brother looked disgusted. “Fate is a river too powerful to be diverted.”

“Don’t say any more,” their father snapped. “This is a matter for the emperor.”

“Sephryn said she was number seven in the prophecy,” Farilane repeated in a determined tone. “Is Grandfather number eight?”

“Be silent, I said!” Nyrian raised his voice, shocking both of them. “Come with me.”



Farilane acted the dutiful duckling, following at the rear of their tiny file as her father led them through the palace’s corridors at a brisk pace. To either side were white marble walls, and beneath them, a dark, polished floor of mosaic design. They soon came to Memorial Hall, where the corridor walls were decorated with relief images. Commissioned shortly after Nyphron’s death as a memorial to him, the scenes depicted moments from his life: his days as a youth at Alon Rhist; his conquests as a Galantian fighting goblins in the Durat ranges; the Galantians defending Dahl Rhen from a band of giants; the Battle of Grandford, where Nyphron nobly defended Persephone in the high tower; Nyphron riding a chariot across a field in the Battle of Big Meadows; and the most famous of all, the scene of him slaying the dragon-like gilarabrywn on the hilltop as the setting sun made his armor blaze. Notably absent was the scene of his death, where his daughter-in-law murdered him with an arrow through the throat just as he was about to kill Mawyndulë who was posing as Nolyn.

Next came the coronation murals. Each ceremony, from Nolyn to Estermon the Second, had been accurately depicted by artists of the day, and they forever captured a history of the city’s progression. As she passed, Farilane thought she recognized a face in the paintings that she’d never noticed before, but this was no time to admire art. At the end of Memorial Hall was their destination, a place Farilane had managed to avoid for most of her life. Her father turned left at the four-way intersection, and he moved past the Teshlor honor guards, Arturus and Maddock, who stood as still as statues, and entered through the five-story gold doors of the throne room.

This chamber beneath the golden dome was universally accepted as the center of the world and the heart of the empire. Interspersed between tall narrow windows, statues of every emperor, sculpted from white Hinterian marble, lined the rotunda. At present, there were five, with room for many more—the newest and whitest being Estermon the Second. The floor beneath the dome was polished stone, inlaid with a map of the known world that stretched from Desolatia to the Ba Ran Archipelago, most of which was colored to indicate the areas controlled by the imperium.

All of this, grand as it was, remained secondary. The room was dominated by the stone throne. Across from the entrance, the grand chair formed much of the far wall. The back of the imperial seat rose up and spread out into the underside of the dome like the tendrils of a great tree or the many appendages of a disturbing polymelia creature. To Farilane, the sculpted branches—intended to symbolize how the imperial throne was connected to the farthest reaches of the empire—always appeared like the veiny surface of old skin. Her brother once admitted he thought it looked like a spiderweb. Neither impression struck Farilane as wholesome or comforting—but maybe that wasn't the aim.

Just as white and cold as the marble version, the real Estermon the Second stood talking to the First Minister beside the great chair. Both halted their conversation and looked up the moment the three entered. The princess expected a tirade from the ruler of the world and for once was happy to be last in line to greet him.

“So it's happened, then,” the emperor said. Not at all a question, the words were as perfunctory as a greeting but as morbid as if he inquired about the terminally ill.

“That's what I've been told,” Nyrian said, without so much as a bent knee, a bow, or a “Grand” or “Serene” anything.

If Farilane weren't already aware something serious was transpiring, this lack of formality would have terrified her. Even so, there was a massive gulf between suspecting and seeing one's parents panic. And while neither Estermon nor her father had begun wailing, this was as close as she had ever seen them come.

So the dispensable daughter was kept in the dark after all.

As the group approached, the emperor looked at Farilane and remained focused on her. She saw an intensity in that stare, yet she was unable to

classify the expression. Powerful, certainly, but she couldn't claim its source as hate, or fear—not with any confidence. All she could determine for certain was that he fixated on her with a single-minded obsession that suggested she was not an extra in this play.

For Farilane's part, she searched for and spotted the chain and the little key that still hung around Estermon's neck. *That's what Mawyndulë is after, and he'll stop at nothing to get it.*

The idea that anyone could breach the palace and murder the emperor felt preposterous, and yet the ancient Miralyith had killed an emperor before, as well as two—no, three—legends. Oddly, but perhaps most disturbing to Farilane, was his masterful acting in the role of Sheldon the carpenter for days while they traveled together, without her ever suspecting. *I had a blind spot*, she consoled herself. *I didn't know magic was real.*

Magic is real! The idea made her woozy, the way any earthquake might.

"Shouldn't the Teshlors be *inside* the throne room?" Nyrian asked.

Estermon broke his grandfather-granddaughter stare to address his son. "You think that would do it, do you?"

"Are you just giving up, then?"

The emperor put his hands behind his back and turned. "Martasen, give us the room."

Though the emperor's back was turned, the First Minister took a knee before leaving the imperial presence. They all waited, listening to the singularly loud clap of his footfalls echo, and in that long pause, Farilane felt the immensity of the chamber as never before. The emperor did not turn back until he heard the doors boom shut, leaving the four remaining members of the House of Nyphron alone.

"You know what you have to do," Estermon said.

"I know what you want me to do," Nyrian replied.

"It's not what I want!" the emperor shouted. His voice, old as it was, peeled off the empty chamber, returning twice.

Like a bell, Farilane thought, *but not the celebratory sort. That is the kind of chime that warns of peril.*

"You will do it. Tell me you will do it."

They all looked at Nyrian.

Farilane had the distinct impression Nordyan knew what they were talking about, and she felt more than left out. This wasn't an accident or

oversight. They all knew she was ignorant of the affair at hand; this was purposeful. The *why* troubled her. She also wondered what had changed. They could have ordered her to leave with the First Minister. She had been allowed to stay . . . *why*?

“Don’t do it, Father,” Nordyan said.

“Just a few minutes ago, you were the one going on about how fate was inevitable.” Nyrian snapped, clearly not happy with all the unsolicited advice. “Farilane should leave.”

Now they think of it. What in Rel is going on?

“She has a right to know,” Nordyan said.

“This has nothing to do with her,” the emperor declared.

“How can you say that?”

“Because it doesn’t.” Estermon dragged his imperial mantle across the floor as he took the three steps to stand before the princess. Then, for perhaps the first time ever, he touched her by placing his hands on her shoulders. Both hands trembled, and their pressure amounted to the weight of twin sparrows. “It’s important that you remember that.” He said this staring deep into her eyes in an act so wholly unprecedented and contrary to two centuries of rigid indifference that Farilane went stiff with fear. “None of this is your fault—nor is it the fault of your father or brother. We are all victims here.”

“Victims of what?” she barely whispered, as there was a sudden lack of air in her lungs. “What is this prophecy?”

“You’ll find out soon enough—everyone will. No good can come from revealing this secret in advance.” He gestured toward the door, his hand wearing the diamond ring that Farilane now imagined weighed more than the old emperor’s whole arm. “Please, leave us.”

“Your Grand Imperial Serene Eminence, I—”

“Congratulations,” the emperor said. “That might be the first time.”

“The first time for what?”

“The first time I have ever heard anyone address me with that absurd mouthful of blandishments and genuinely mean it.”

She would have laughed if she weren’t so disturbed that Estermon the Second was making a joke, which was as disturbing as biting into an apple and hearing it scream. “A powerful elven sorcerer—a Miralyith named Mawyndulë—will be coming after the key you have, and he will kill you to

get it. But he must be stopped because he already has the lock it opens. He has the Horn of Gylindora.”

“I know,” the emperor told her. His ringless sparrow of a hand patted her shoulder in a most unsettling, grandfatherly manner. “Now please leave us.”

The princess looked at her father and brother, but both refused to meet her eyes.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

THE FIRST MINISTER

“Well, that was surreal,” Farilane told Arturus and Maddock after the door to the throne room closed. She started to leave, then stopped and spun back. “The two of you need to be wary of—” She stopped. Her eyes narrowed as she studied them. Arturus and Maddock had earned the honor of guarding the emperor each morning by virtue of seniority and conduct so exemplary that it stood out even in an order of meritorious men. In addition, both were big, taller even than Cedric, and they had squared shoulders like the crossbeams on a ship’s mast. They made a fine pair as they looked enough alike to be brothers.

They weren’t. Maddock hailed from the northern backwater port city of Rionillion, while Arturus was a homegrown country boy from southern Rhenydd. Although both were now revered elders in their late fifties, Farilane remembered when they first joined the Teshlors as boys. She was there when they passed their final disciplines and earned their emblems. Young, handsome, and dashing Arturus and Maddock had been companions at her side on many daring adventures, just as Kolby and Ethan were today.

Farilane stepped close to Arturus and whispered in his ear, “What are my favorite colors?”

“Green and red,” he replied matter of factly.

“Why?”

“Because they are the opposites on the color wheel from the gold and blue of the imperial crest.”

Farilane nodded and then shifted to Maddock. “What was the name of my cat, the one that you fetched out of a tree for me when I was a child?”

Maddock looked confused. “You’ve never had a cat, and given that you pride yourself on climbing trees, you certainly would never ask anyone to rescue it *for you*. Besides, you were one hundred and forty-three years old when I was born, making it impossible for me to have known you when you were a child.”

Again, the princess nodded.

“Why the questions, Highness?” Arturus asked.

“Someone is going to try to assassinate the emperor. He is a sorcerer and can appear as anyone.”

“Is that true?”

“It is. Be wary.”

“We will, Your Highness.”

Farilane marched up the corridor, turning left rather than right, tracing as direct a path as possible to the Office of the First Minister of the Empire. She ignored his three secretaries, who scrambled to get clear of their desks before she reached the minister’s door. None of them was successful, and she threw the door wide, stepped in, then slammed it shut, locking it.

Martasen Dray was once more caught seated at his ridiculously large desk, its size accentuated by the lack of anything on it. He promptly stood. “Your Highness?” he said, sounding surprised, but not concerned.

On her previous visit, Farilane hadn’t bothered to take note of such subtle clues. Now her senses were on alert.

The office, so tidy that it was almost empty, was an unequivocal giveaway, but on her last visit Farilane had been misdirected by Dray himself. *How could I not? The man is a sight! That, too, should have been a clue. How obvious is his freakish peculiarities, how deviant, how ugly he is.* Nothing captures attention like the repulsive. People self-consciously stare at the grotesque.

That’s how so much of it is done, Farilane realized. *Misdirection—look here, not there.*

This time, she looked everywhere.

Nothing decorated the walls. Not pictures, not tapestries, not even a map of the empire. The throne room had the world inlaid in tilework on the floor, but the First Minister—the man charged with wielding the knobs and levers that ran the empire—didn’t have so much as a sketch. Of course there were no books, scrolls, pens, or ink. Such things—while certainly useful to

one such as he—were outlawed. There was a hearth filled with three unburned logs stacked in a perfect pyramid. Four oil lamps mounted in sconces illuminated the windowless room. The only furniture was the desk and the chair the minister was sitting in. The desk, large as it was, appeared to serve no purpose at all, except as an elbow rest and companion to the chair.

Farilane advanced, then stopped when her thighs touched the edge of the desk. “How did you get this job?”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Beg all you want. I won’t give it. Answer the question.”

“Your grandfather appointed me.”

“How’d that happen?”

“I’m pretty sure he pointed at me and said, ‘You are the First Minister.’”

Farilane leaned forward and rested her knuckles on the surface of the desk. “You know what I mean. *Why* did he pick *you*? Where did you come from? What exceptional skills do you possess to make the emperor reject all others and place you at the top of the imperial food chain?”

“I think it best to ask him, don’t you?”

“Obviously not, as I am asking you.”

“I can’t tell you the mind of the emperor.”

“See, I think you can.”

Reaching into her belt, she pulled forth her trusty field book. Opening it, she retrieved the sharpened graphite stick and flipped to the proper page. Walking to one of the bare walls she began to draw symbols.

“What are you doing?”

“Decorating your walls. They seem empty.”

“You’re writing. That’s illegal.”

“I’m not writing. These are symbols not letters. Feel free to arrest me, but you’d better do it before I finish, or I suspect you’ll be joining me in prison.”

Farilane was writing quickly, using big markings as she side-stepped her way along the wall. She got to the end and kept going around. When she got to the third wall, the First Minister moved out from the safety of his desk. Farilane drew the symbols faster, growing excited at what would happen if she managed to finish. As she rounded to the fourth wall, Martasen Dray used his long sleeves to wipe two of the markings away.

Farilane stopped. "Problem?"

"What do you want?"

"Right now, I'd really sort of like to see what happens when I complete this circle of Orinfar runes." She grinned. "I never thought they were real, but then, I never thought magic was real, either." Using the graphite stick, she made a circular motion in the air that encompassed Dray. "You don't normally look like that, do you?"

"You think I chose to look this way?"

"Yes, and it's genius. No one who can alter the way they appear would ever choose to be ugly. But by doing so, you make it so no one would suspect. And this room . . ." She turned, opening her arms to include everything. "It, too, isn't how it appears. This is all for show, but it's too orderly. No one tasked with your job could possibly function in such pristine surroundings. I'm guessing I'm standing in an absolute mess. And an illegal one, I imagine."

Farilane put the graphite stick back in her book, and the book back in her belt. "Does the emperor know? Is he aware how you helped my brother cross the Bernum River, when the same storm prevented Kolby from reaching Merredydd? Does he know how Ruby Finn recognized you? Does he understand you're a Monk of Maribor, and that the monks are magicians?"

"I am not a monk."

Farilane sighed. "Fine. Be that way. Doesn't matter. But I'll tell you what does. Mawyndulë is coming to kill us all. He'll begin with the emperor, then my father, and finally Nordyan and me. Once the line of Nyphron is gone and he has the emperor's key, he will unlock the box he stole, take out the horn, and blow it. The elves across the Nidwalden River will hear that horn and come to see what happened. As the horn was not presented to the Aquila properly, I suspect there's going to be an altercation of old-world proportions. You know—dragons, earthquakes, the sort of things born of magic. Problem is, the empire no longer has magic. We are defenseless against it, and I suspect we'll fare badly in the rematch. Unless, of course, magic still exists within the imperium." She folded her arms and stared at the First Minister. "Ruby Finn is proof that human magic still exists. And it is fairly obvious that the Monks of Maribor are what *The*

Book of Brin refers to as Artists. And you're one of them. Tell me, Minister Dray, can you explode trees with a snap of your fingers?"

"If I could, shouldn't you be terrified? If I were, as it seems you are alleging, a powerful—what did you call it? Artist? Shouldn't you be fearful that I might snap my fingers and destroy you to preserve my secret?"

"Not at all."

"Why is that?"

"Because you're on our side. Because when Ruby Finn set my brother on fire, you were the one to put it out. Because the monks fought to protect Nordyan and the Teshlors. And because in all the years you've been minister, you've never done anything remotely malevolent. You aren't here for nefarious reasons. You're here to protect the empire, and apparently, the imperial family."

"Interesting theory, but if that's the case, why are you writing on the walls of my office?"

"I came here to tell you it's not enough—you're not enough. We need more help."

For the first time, Martasen Dray looked puzzled.

"Mawyndulë is over eighteen hundred years old. He grew up learning magic the way Teshlors learn the sword. You're no match for him. None of us are. At least not when we're alone. Call them in, Martasen. Call all of them in. It's time for the empire to remember magic."



Holding a mug of watered wine and balancing a plate of pastry-wrapped venison complete with a killer blueberry smear, Farilane struggled to open the door to her chambers. She had an established habit of grabbing meals and eating them in her rooms, but since returning from Merredydd, it had become less a habit and more a necessity. Farilane couldn't imagine relaxing enough to eat anywhere else. Not that she ate much anymore.

Hard to have an appetite with a knife at your ribs.

That's what it felt like. A sense of dread she herself had championed. Whenever she spotted someone who looked too at ease, she reached into her bag of historical horrors and related some awful magical nightmare.

Lightning bolts hitting people but not quite killing them; fireballs and flying icicle daggers; and her personal favorite for the occasion where she found sentries dozing: creatures that ate the faces of people who fell asleep.

She wanted everyone as jittery as she was. If she didn't hear people scream in terror because someone dropped a plate, she knew they were all doomed. It was little wonder then, that the moment she popped open her chamber door that her venison pastry, smear and all, fell from her hand.

Kile winced as the plate broke against the floor. "Hello, Farilane."

She ignored the mess and stared at him. Kile had been seated at her desk, but he stood the moment she entered.

She looked around the room carefully. Nothing was out of place—which was to say, nothing was different from when she had left. Farilane allowed herself to breathe again. After two quick inhales, she swallowed half her wine, wishing she hadn't picked the watered-down version. "You scared a century off my life." She stepped over the mess, closed the door behind her, then finished the rest of her wine. "You might not be aware"—she wiped her mouth—"but we're expecting a visitor, and we aren't certain when he'll be showing up or what he'll look like."

"I guessed as much." Kile gestured at the walls, where an unbroken ring of symbols was painted at chest height. "Your redecorating was a hint."

Following her recent meeting with Martasen Dray, Farilane had spent hours meticulously drawing the dwarven symbols. This required the elimination of certain bookshelves, and due to a growing sense of impending threat, she hadn't been careful about how she cleared them. What was once a cluttered chamber of neat stacks was now a debris field with a narrow path.

"You like it?"

"Very stylish."

Farilane sighed as she looked down at what was to have been her meal.

"Sorry about that," Kile said.

"Doesn't matter." She crossed the room to meet him at the desk. "My appetite has once more run off."

"That's too bad." Kile moved out of her way, letting her have the chair. He shifted to the window and looked out at the blue sky, where a flock of sparrows flew. "The weather has been quite nice lately, don't you think?"

"Oh, yes," she replied. "Splendid, especially after that cold spell."

Kile nodded. “Seemed like summer was never going to get here, didn’t it?”

Farilane nodded, then slammed her palms on the desk and screamed, “Where in the name of the three nonexistent realms of Phyre have you been?”

“Around,” he said sheepishly.

“Around?” She blinked. “You’ve been around? I nearly died. Sephryn did die, and now we’re facing a massively powerful sorcerer who will likely annihilate all of us, and you’ve been . . . *around*? Did you know that our First Minister is also a sorcerer, or Artist, or whatever? And why in the name of Maribor’s bearded grandmother did Sephryn let Sheldon get that horn? She *knew* who he was, and yet she trotted over and just pulled it out. She had seemed sane enough just seconds before when she was talking about prophecies and such. I’m sure you know why. Care to share?”

Kile only stared.

“Didn’t think so. No one does. Is this future-forecast something only men know? Because all of them appear to be privy. Not me, though. I’m only the imperial princess. Never once has anyone whispered, ‘*Psst!* Hey, Princess, come here so I can tell you about this funny little list of cataclysmic disasters headed our way!’ We traveled together for more than a week, and you never mentioned a word of it to me . . . why?”

“I shouldn’t be here,” he said and took a step toward the door.

“Don’t you dare leave.”

“I can’t answer your question. Not yet.”

“Then why *are* you here?”

Kile stared at the door as if he needed to escape.

“Why are you here, Kile?”

“I wanted to ask you a question.”

“Really? I was starting to think you had all the answers.”

“Not this one.”

Farilane took a breath. She folded her arms, then took another. “What is it?”

“Did you know that *The Book of Brin* was enchanted such that magic couldn’t harm it? So that nothing can harm it?”

Farilane looked at the book still resting on her desk.

That's what he was doing when I came in. He was looking at The Book of Brin.

"Honestly? I don't even know that now. It's not like I've been trying to set fire to the pages."

Kile nodded. "That's what I thought." He wiped his face. "I kept trying to convince myself that somehow you knew, that—being smart—you had figured it out somehow. But every time I ran through it, no matter how much I wanted to find an excuse . . . I couldn't. There's just no way you could have known—not to that degree of certitude, not enough to step between me and Mawyndulë . . ."

Farilane had no idea why this was a topic for discussion. Of all the things on the giant table between them, her simple and feeble effort to frustrate Mawyndulë's attack wasn't worth the time. "If it makes you feel better, I hardly thought about it at all—before or since."

Kile took a deep breath. "No . . . no, that doesn't make me feel better. No, not at all."

"What's this all about, Kile? What happened that night in Merredydd? How did we survive? How did you escape without a scratch? How did Mawyndulë get away? And what's all this about a prophecy? I know you know. You're supposed to be my friend. A friend would tell me."

Kile bit his lip. "That's just it. I'm not your friend. I'm not anyone's friend."

He walked toward the door.

"Kile," she said. "Kile! Don't leave me!"

He stepped around the venison and left the room.

Her attention settled on the broken plate of food.

No one screamed when it fell. We're all doomed.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

BIRTHDAY

The rug shop wasn't the worst place Mawyndulë had lived. Urlineus, that trash heap in the Erbon jungles, was worse: the heat, the damp, and the bugs. No amount of Art was capable of compensating. Yet even Urlineus wasn't the worst. That award went to the decaying fortress of Borappathin. Bran was right. That blackened ruin on that ravaged seacoast was a nightmare. Never once atop that precipice did Mawyndulë experience a good night's sleep, never once did he feel at ease. Something wasn't right about that place—a lot of things, as it turned out. By contrast, the basement of Wegan Weaving was a cozy paradise. At that moment, however, it was far too crowded.

Few things irritated Mawyndulë as much as being neck-deep in humans, yet for the last few years, he'd been forced to swim in a sea of them. Setting up shop in Percepliquis made sense, but it also made his skin crawl. That he was eating, sleeping, and breathing inside a slithering hive of humans—and the very worst sort at that—taxed his sanity. He kept his faculties by keeping his distance. Carving out a sanctuary beneath the rug shop, he endeavored to minimize his interactions by working through a few subordinates. He chose the most loyal, which invariably meant the worst: the stupid, the weak, the frightened, and the most desperate. Those yearning for a change that they had no means to bring about on their own pledged their very souls to him. Being worshipped ought to have brought some satisfaction, but what joy could be had in the adoration of insects?

Mawyndulë, as Proust, sat on his chair looking at his colony of ants, who looked back, waiting. This wasn't his whole colony. These were the

officers, those so magnificently mindless as to receive the reward of his presence, the prize of hearing his words directly. Mawyndulë never bothered to learn their names. He gave them new ones instead, epithets easier to recollect. There was Hairy, the fella with the long hair and wild beard, and Malodorous, who loved the sound of the title, proving the vacancy behind his eyes. Mahogany got her name by virtue of the peg-leg Mawyndulë himself had provided. Mooshie hadn't a single tooth in his head, and Hopeless was named for obvious reasons. Mawyndulë's two favorites were Rhapsody and The Ragman: the girl so dubbed due to her ridiculous enthusiasm, and the fellow by virtue of his fashionable attire. Having lived as Sheldon Faust for less than a week, Mawyndulë felt a special connection to the disgusting carpenter who believed bathing to be bad for one's health. During Mawyndulë's adventure, The Ragman had been ordered to stay hidden inside the basement. Mawyndulë couldn't afford anyone seeing two Sheldons. Rhapsody had instructions to satisfy any of The Ragman's needs. Mawyndulë had meant food, drink, and the odd blanket. But seeing the awkward unease between the two of them, Mawyndulë now suspected more had been administered. Rhapsody was zeal incarnate, and The Ragman hungered for more than food.

It's like dealing with only partially domesticated pets. Had my errand taken longer, would there have been litters of humans wailing in my oasis? Might they have chewed the furniture?

This led Mawyndulë to speculate on the disturbing idea that one, or possibly all, of his human army had sat in his chair.

"Master," Hairy said through that monstrous wad of whiskers, "you were gone so very long. We were terrified—frightened that you had been taken—that the sentinels or the Teshlors had arrested you."

"Or worse," Mooshie sort of said. With him, there was always a moment before Mawyndulë managed to translate the slushy noises into words.

"Some of us were frightened," Rhapsody snapped in judgment. "Others knew better."

Mawyndulë often wondered if the lot of them were worth the effort. Ironically, he'd created this syndicate of the senseless to gather intelligence. Improbable as it was, they did a fair job, not only at collecting useful news, but also at expanding the organization. He'd started with just a few—

figured five to be enough, but never specifically said so. Being idiots, they invited others. Turned out, the city was full of fools.

People in pain sought to off-load it. When something truly awful happened, they knew it couldn't be merely bad luck or a simple accident, as most trivial things were. No, pain of that magnitude required a powerful balm. The necessary curative lotion came in the form of seeing someone pay. Didn't matter who, just so long as someone was adequately punished. Hurting someone else managed to suck out at least some of the anguish by sharing it, spreading it out—or so it seemed. Mawyndulë also noted that a great many citizens of Percepliquis suffered. Although it was the wealthiest city in the world, there were those who, for various reasons, had no seat at Fortune's table. A tent community of the destitute surrounded the capital. The poor wandered the streets by day asking for handouts. All of them had stories—bad ones, painful ones. Mawyndulë merely applied the healing balm that elves were to blame.

Mawyndulë had jumped on the lingering animosity between humans and Fhrey. Emperor Nolyn and Empress Sephryn had quelled much of the friction between the races, but differences between people were always good medicine, and his was an all-purpose cure. Husband died of fever? Elves. Wife ran off? Elves. Lost your job? Elves.

Mawyndulë always took a moment to twist the logic to fit the crime, but not too much. *Everyone knows elves carry disease. It's common knowledge that elves use magic; one of them probably cast a spell on your wife. It's obvious that elves are ruining the city. Little wonder businesses are failing. It's a miracle anyone has work.*

He didn't need to try hard. People wanted to believe. How good it must have felt, what a weight lifted, to know it wasn't the result of their stupidity, laziness, poor decisions, or even the frighteningly faceless whims of an indifferent world. No! Their troubles could be traced to a source that could be fought. And that sort of message just felt better the more people it was shared with. Two were helpful, ten was encouraging, but a thousand proved it true. A thousand people couldn't all be wrong.

Mawyndulë honestly had no idea how many people had listened to his message. He didn't care. All of it was smoke, allowing him to move unseen and to work his magic in plain sight. And he'd been successful—so far. On

his lap lay the box he'd taken from Sephryn. He hadn't set the thing down, and he wouldn't until he'd blown the horn inside.

"Ragman," Mawyndulë said, instantly halting the whispers his pets exchanged.

"Yes, Master?"

"Can you open this?" He held out the box. "You are a tradesman, right? Do you have a pry bar or something that could crack the lid? Any ideas about how to frustrate the hinges into letting go?"

"Frustrate the hinges, Master?"

"Can you open it or not?"

The Ragman swallowed stiffly, then he looked closely at the container but didn't touch it. "Master? Are you certain it's a box?"

"Are you calling me an idiot?"

Sheldon acted as if Mawyndulë had struck him. The others merely gasped.

"No! No, Master, not at all. I merely meant, well, it looks solid. I can't see a lid, or a hinge to insult, much less frustrate."

Mawyndulë lifted the box and looked at it himself. Sheldon was right. The box was a solid block of metal. And it had proved to be utterly impervious to the Art, just as Sephryn had said.

"Dherg," he muttered, shaking his head. "I need to get that key."

"Master?" The Ragman said, confused.

"You are going to help me, Ragman."

"What can I do, Master?" Rhapsody asked, sneering at Sheldon.

Mawyndulë stood up. "I will be going away again—perhaps for a very long time. While I am gone, this is the word of Novron as has been revealed to me: Rise up from the streets. Use the multitude of hands Novron has supplied. Let not the evil Uberlin, who slew our savior, win. Prove to the world that Novron is the son of Maribor, and that the elves are servants of evil. Rise up and unite the hearts of Man. Spread the word that Novron was human and that elves are a blight, a disease sapping our strength."

Mawyndulë meant this as a general goodbye. He did not expect to return. Once he had the key and blew the horn, the Protection of Ferrol would blanket him with invulnerability. None could challenge him save a blood descendant of the previous fane, or in lieu of that, someone who also blew the horn. Mawyndulë would never allow anyone else to get near that

instrument, and he planned to end the bloodline of Nyphron long before putting lips to horn. If all went as planned, in two days, he'd be fane. Mawyndulë suspected there might be some disagreement with the Fhrey leaders about his withholding the horn, but once Mawyndulë explained his intent to free the Erivan Fhrey and wipe out mankind, he felt confident they wouldn't protest long. He would be fane—ruler of the world. What became of his band of street freaks did not concern him.

Still, he could tell Rhapsody felt he was speaking specifically to her, and for a moment, Mawyndulë felt a concern that he was putting spark to tinder with no idea from which direction the wind blew.

She's no one, he assured himself. The girl is poor, ignorant, and without resources. Despite her exuberant fanaticism, she has no power. Even if she managed to cause trouble, it would be in my favor. Confusion and division would make exterminating their kind that much easier.

And so it was that before he left the captains of his army of ants, Mawyndulë stepped forward, placed his hands on Rhapsody's shoulders, and added, "I want *you* to build my church. Replace the Aguanon. Throw down the images of their elven god, shatter their statues, and rededicate that pagan temple to Novron. Only by worshipping him properly can we purify ourselves and receive the rewards due us. Make me proud, Mayda."

Her real name had come to him in that moment, and he'd said it as a punctuation—just a bit of fun drama. But as with everything associated with Rhapsody, the result was over the top. The girl fainted dead away.



A pounding at the door to Farilane's chamber jolted her awake, letting her know her birthday had started, that she had slept late, and that—the pounding not being *his* knock—Virgil was still dead. None of this made her happy to be a year older. And by the violence of the hammering, she guessed this might already be the best part of her day.

Farilane was quick to the door, having once more slept in her clothes. Virgil used to call the military-grade leather tunic she favored her pajamas. He often made fun of her for going about the city in her nightdress. *Have you no shame?* he used to say.

Why am I thinking so much about Virgil all of a sudden? Maybe because his appointed replacement just abandoned me.

Or maybe I just miss Virgil.

Maybe I miss them both.

More pounding hit the door. “Princess!”

Happy birthday to me!

She pulled the door wide and found Kolby and Ethan standing in the corridor, looking worried. “Hi, boys. Love the pounding. You’re probably not even aware I was sleeping.”

“Something’s happened,” Kolby said. “We were ordered to secure the princess—”

Snatching her field book off the nightstand, Farilane raced out, forcing the Teshlors to chase her.

She’d been expecting an attack for days. Mawyndulë had not impressed her as the patient sort, and with him being so close to his goal, she imagined any additional wait would be agony for him. *It’s easier to endure hunger when there is nothing to eat, but more difficult to resist the temptation with a slice of cake in your hand.* Farilane had done what she could. Warned her family, the staff, and the knights to be on their guard. And she had strategically drawn the magic-blocking symbols where she felt them best employed. *If only I could have painted them on every wall. No—chiseled the symbols on every surface. No—built a wall around the city and chiseled . . . No—actually made the wall around the city out of the symbols themselves. That would have been ideal, but I didn’t have that kind of time.*

Farilane was also unsure whether there was a limit to the symbols’ reach. Assuming she could do it, would it be possible to draw the Orinfar in a circle around the known world and banish magic forever? Distance usually ruined most things: Arrows could only fly so far; shouts and screams were limited as well, and the heat from a single fire could never warm the world. The symbols’ influence would not be infinite. Having zero experience and but a sheen of knowledge on the subject, she felt it best to keep her efforts simple. The largest space she had attempted was the throne room, where the emperor was known to spend his mornings. *But is it too big a space?* As she ran, she cursed her own ignorance. *It is too big. I should have ringed the throne. Better yet, I should have done both—but would that have created an adverse effect? Were the markings cumulative,*

like the heat of a fire? Or maybe a toggle, like the turning of a key in a lock? Would one have canceled the other? Burned the palace down?

When she arrived, Farilane's heart sank. The entrance to the throne room was naked; neither Arturus nor Maddock was at his post. The door was open a crack, the flickering light of interior sconces bleeding through the gap. Hardening herself against what she might see, Farilane pushed the metal door and felt it swing inward.

Her expectation of a murder scene was not disappointed. A body lay on the ground in a pool of blood not far from the dais.

Kolby and Ethan arrived an instant later. Although they were normally content to follow her lead, the sight of the body changed the rules. Farilane had seen them this way before. Their inner Teshlor breaking the surface, they worked as a perfect team, no discussion needed. Kolby stayed to defend the princess while Ethan rushed ahead, hands on swords. Neither knight drew steel. There was no need.

The body wasn't the emperor.

Estermon the Second stood beside the throne unharmed. He appeared shaken, leaning heavily on the chair to steady himself. Next to the body, Maddock stood with his sword out, blood on the blade. Aside from the dead man on the floor, the chamber was empty. No threat visible.

"Who is it?" Farilane asked as Ethan blocked her view.

"The sorcerer you warned us about." Ethan moved aside, revealing Sheldon Faust still in the oversized wool tunic she had met him in. "This is Sheldon, right? The carpenter you traveled with—or rather the magician you said posed as a carpenter?"

Farilane stepped forward, staring at the body. His face rested on its left cheek, giving her a clear view: same eyes—still open—same oily hair, same filthy tunic—now stained in blood. One hand was splayed palm-down on the tiled floor. The other gripped a simple kitchen knife. She looked at her grandfather still holding tight to the throne. "What happened?" she asked.

"He looked like my guard until he entered the room," Estermon explained. "Then he changed into—this. Came at me with a knife. You see it there." He pointed. His whole arm shook. "Then the knight slew him just in time. I was almost killed. Where are your father and brother? I summoned all of you."

Farilane looked behind her at the door. It remained open. No one was in the corridor—no one at all. “Did Nyrian and Nordyan have their doors pounded on as well?” she asked Kolby.

“I don’t know. We were—”

“There ought to be a host of palace guards here by now. And that’s not the only thing that’s strange.” Farilane looked back at the body. “It shouldn’t be Sheldon.”

“How’s that?” Ethan asked.

Farilane pointed to the walls of the rotunda. “I drew dwarven symbols in a circle around this chamber—just in case. I was concerned it was too big an area to be effective, but apparently not.” She looked at Estermon. “That’s why he changed after entering. The symbols broke the spell that made him look like—” She paused. “But he shouldn’t look like this. Mawyndulë is a Fhrey Miralyith. He’d be in his late second millennium and most likely bald.”

“How do you know what this Mawyndulë looks like?” her grandfather asked, his tone disagreeable. His tone was usually disagreeable, and that morning he had a reason to be. “You can’t know. No one has seen him in a thousand years.”

That was hyperbole. Someone had certainly seen Mawyndulë in the last thousand years, but the point was valid. No one in that room knew what he looked like. “Mawyndulë was a Fhrey. We know what a Fhrey looks like, and the Miralyith were known to shave their heads as a mark of their tribe. Appearing as Sheldon was a guise formed of magic, but that can’t exist in here, not with the runes up, nor should it continue after death—at least I wouldn’t think so. We should be staring at an elderly bald elf, instead of a filthy carpenter from Warica.”

“You’re only guessing about all that. This *could* be him. According to your own logic, it has to be.”

The emperor had her there. While it seemed unlikely, that didn’t make it impossible. *Was it feasible Mawyndulë never disguised himself at all?* This could be the Miralyith’s true appearance. Instead of a master magician, Mawyndulë could have been a consummate actor. Only . . .

“There are other problems,” she said, mostly to herself.

Farilane’s mind worked to catch up. She felt as if she’d been kidnapped, blindfolded, and thrown into a lake, and her brain struggled to understand

by piecing together tiny clues. Only . . . only . . .

“What?” Kolby asked.

“Mawyndulë is a powerful wielder of magic,” she replied.

“So?” the emperor asked, with his usual disdain.

“So”—she bent down beside the body—“why come at you with a knife?”

The emperor huffed. “Because you drew marks on the walls that prevented the use of magic. Isn’t that obvious?”

Farilane stood up and nodded. “That’s right. It is obvious, isn’t it?”

She walked back across the throne room to the open door, then paused a few feet away to study it. In her mind’s eye, she imagined Mawyndulë in the guise of a guard walking in. He’d be confident that his magic would prevent anyone from knowing the truth. Then the illusion would dissolve like salt in water, or pop after the fashion of a soap bubble. “He would have known that or figured it out the moment he stepped inside. If I were him . . .” She looked at the wall to the right of the door. The Sheldon who had traveled with her was right-handed. *That would be the dominant-hand side, the easiest for him to reach first with confidence.* “I’d have tried to remove the symbols.” She looked at Kolby. “I didn’t have time to chisel the marks, and I didn’t think His Serene Eminence”—she dipped her head toward the dais—“would allow it, so I just drew them on with graphite. Mawyndulë could have smeared one out of existence with the palm of his hand, broken the defense, and killed everyone with a snap of his fingers.” She focused on Ethan. “You saw what Ruby Finn did, right?”

Ethan nodded.

“Compared to Mawyndulë, she’s a child. So why opt to use a knife?”

“He obviously didn’t know about the markings,” Estermon said. “By the time he did, it was too late, and he panicked. I could see it in his eyes as he came at me.”

Again, Farilane nodded. “Okay, but if he didn’t know about the markings—if he expected magic to work when he entered—why’d he bring the knife?”

Estermon shook his head and sighed. “All this speculation is pointless and tiring. The matter is rendered moot. Mawyndulë is dead, and I’m safe, but my old nerves have suffered. I want this over. Where are Nordyan and

Nyrian? Why haven't they come? You two." He pointed at Kolby and Ethan. "Go find out what's wrong."

They bowed and made to leave.

"Wait," Farilane said, peering closer at the perfectly marked, unblemished symbols on the wall.

The Teshlors shouldn't have stopped. Their emperor had given them orders, but Farilane was pleased to see them pause. "There are still two more things that don't make sense."

"Oh, what is it now?" the emperor asked.

"These two symbols nearest the entrance." She pointed with a circular motion.

"Are they wrong?" Kolby asked, a note of concern in his voice.

"No," she said. "They are perfectly accurate."

"So what's the problem?"

"I didn't draw them. They aren't in my handwriting."

"And the other thing?" Kolby asked.

She turned back. "Grandfather," she addressed the emperor in a way she never had before in her life, but she saw no surprise, "you're unnerved. That's clear by the way you're leaning on the throne, the quaver in your voice, and the shake of your arms, but if that's true, why aren't you sitting down?"

"What?" He sounded irritated.

"Is there something stopping you? Something in the way? What is that in your chair?"

They all looked at the emperor's mantle that appeared to have been wadded up and left in the seat.

"That's just my cape." He dismissed it with a wave. "It's hot in here."

"Are you sure it's not covering something? Something the size of a bread box? Something that magic wouldn't be able to shroud?" The princess turned to Maddock. "You've been awfully quiet. Tell me, my old friend, what are my favorite colors?"

The Teshlor stiffened in panic. The response was so unlike a knight that Ethan drew steel. Maddock, still holding out his bloody blade, panicked and swung. The stroke was clumsy. Ethan avoided it and brought his own sword down. The blade cut deep. Starting at Maddock's neck, it snapped his

collarbone, continued through his sternum and on into his chest, where his ribs halted the blade.

Ethan jerked back his weapon, shocked at his own success.

“The armor!” Ethan protested. “I shouldn’t have . . .”

Maddock, eyes wide and mouth gaping, collapsed to the floor.

“It went right through,” Kolby confirmed.

Maddock coughed blood, lurched, then went still.

Kolby and Ethan both looked to Farilane, and with hope that they hadn’t just murdered an innocent, asked, “Is that the sorcerer?”

“Only one way to find out.” The princess pulled the field book from her belt and taking out the graphite stick—which was far shorter than it used to be—she began drawing a new set of symbols, this time in a circle on the floor. The throne room must be some sort of illusion, just as Dray’s room had been.

“This should clear things up, I think.”

“Stop that nonsense right now!” Estermon ordered.

Farilane ignored him as she scooted around the tiled map of the known world, drawing large pictograms over the various provinces, working from the Belgric Kingdom across Maranonia and into Rhenydd. She was creating an arc that would easily encompass the throne.

“You two!” Estermon shouted. “I order you to stop her.”

“You two?” Farilane laughed as she shuffled on her knees into Warica. “Isn’t it strange how *Grandfather* doesn’t know your names, nor did he remember Arturus and Maddock, who have guarded his door for years? What’s wrong, Grandpapa? Age catching up with you?”

She knew the marks by heart now, and she made the big circle of the eighth symbol over the face of Melenina. She scrambled into Hinterlandia and across the Nidwalden River to the elven Province of Erivan.

“That’s far enough.” The voice came from Estermon, but it wasn’t his.

Looking up, the princess saw a bald Fhrey in a silken gown standing beside the throne.

“You’ve been such a pain. Goodbye, Princess.” Mawyndulë raised his hand, muttered a word, and the same bolt of white light shot from his palm.



Farilane had long known Teshlors to be capable of a form of precognition. Part of their ability appeared to be an eerie fluency in body language that granted them advanced insight into an enemy's intentions based on the way they stood, their shifts in balance, and the tightening of their muscles. The other had to be a form of remarkable intuition developed through a ridiculous number of hours spent in grueling practice. Regardless, the princess was a fan of their anticipatory talents but never more so than at that moment.

Without hesitation, Kolby lunged between the Fhrey Miralyith and Farilane.

The Teshlor had no book to protect him and took the full blast of that white-light assault. The beam struck him on his breastplate and filled the chamber with a brilliance that blinded all. When the light went out, Farilane was thrilled to see Kolby still on his feet. His armor had a hole, but the knight was fine.

The tattoos!

"Damn the Orinfar!" Mawyndulë growled.

"And damn you," Ethan declared.

With both blades still naked in his hands, he charged the dais.

All around, Farilane heard loud cracks and pops as one-ton blocks of stone were ripped from their positions in the wall and flew at arrow speed. The impact of one would have killed a man. Ethan was hit by four. Blood sprayed. Armor crumpled. Swords fell, ringing against the tile. And Farilane's friend died, pummeled and crushed.

Kolby wasted no time. He grabbed the princess, keeping himself in harm's way, and pushed her toward the exit. But the big golden doors slammed shut. Their sound shook the room, the following echo keeping the memory of the moment alive.

Farilane knew that nothing possessed enough power to open them again. Kolby grasped this as well, and together they turned to face Mawyndulë. To Farilane, he looked like a human in his forties, except that his cheekbones were higher, more pronounced. His ears were narrower at the top than the bottom, his eyes less round and slightly tilted. And he was bald.

This is Mawyndulë. This is the one who killed Nyphron, Sephryn, and in the Battle of Grandford, the great Arion—mentor to Suri.

“As you can see, I’ve learned how to deal with the tattoos. I had hoped to erase all of you together: all of Nyphron’s children with one stroke. But I can see that centuries of luxury have made you tardy little brats. I suppose I can’t have everything. You’re pretty, for a human, Farilane. It’s a shame, but it has to be. Goodbye, princess and good knight.” He laughed at his own jest, which gave Farilane just enough time to speak.

“If you kill us, you’ll never get the horn.”

Mawyndulë blinked, then smirked. “I’ve already got it.” He hooked a thumb at the throne. “Smart of you to realize I can’t hide it except behind a real cloth.”

“That’s not the horn.”

“Of course it is.”

Farilane forced herself to chuckle as convincingly as she could, uncertain whether her bravado was good enough. “Do you honestly think Sephryn would just hand over the horn to you like that? She knew we were coming before we got there. She knew who you were. And she hated you. Are you so stupid as to think the empress dowager, who fought in the ghazel invasion, would simply hand the horn over like that?”

Mawyndulë’s eyes darkened. She had his attention, which had been her intent, but it was gained at a cost—sort of like slapping a bear in the mouth. Too much slapping and the bear wouldn’t listen to reason. And there was also the chance that the bear was incapable of reasoning at all. It was time to distract him with something shiny.

“If you don’t believe me, prove it to yourself. You have the key now. Open the box.”

Farilane was rolling dice here. She had no idea if Mawyndulë had the key. She really didn’t know much of anything, but every word was another second gained, another chance to roll more dice. Meanwhile, Kolby stood firm as her human shield, forcing her to shout over his shoulder.

Mawyndulë glanced at the seat of the chair, then walked down the steps of the dais toward the body of Sheldon. As he did, Sheldon faded away. In place of the carpenter’s corpse lay Estermon the Second, minus his mantle. Maddock also disappeared, revealing the real Sheldon Faust, and the reason Ethan’s blade had struck no armor. The carpenter wore only his wool tunic.

The throne room as a whole changed slightly. The lighting was different. It took Farilane a moment to notice that a wall-sconce lamp was

out—the one nearest the door. Beside it she saw that two of her graphite markings had been smeared beyond recognition.

Mawyndulë bent down and jerked the necklace from the emperor's throat, then returned to the throne. Like a magician working a party trick with a tablecloth, he snapped away the mantle and exposed the box beneath—the same one Farilane had seen in Sephryn's home.

"You should run," Kolby whispered.

"He can hear you," Farilane replied.

"I can, indeed," Mawyndulë said, with a chilling glee in his voice. As old as he appeared, and as ancient as Farilane knew him to be, his voice carried all the giddiness of a child.

He lifted the box, fumbled with the little key. Rotated the container and fumbled some more.

"Problem?" Farilane asked.

Mawyndulë threw the box down. It struck the floor hard, made a pathetic attempt to bounce, then fell over the edge of the dais steps. It rolled down and stopped. "This isn't the horn!" he growled through clenched teeth while brandishing the key.

"Of course not," Farilane said. "Didn't I just tell you that?" She could see the bear about to roar, watched his claws fan out.

She threw the dice again. "But you have the key, right? All you need is the real box: the one with the horn, and I have it."

"You're lying."

She had no defense against that argument. This would either work or it wouldn't. She switched from dice to cards, and she was about to play the one matching pair she had. The first was that she was confident that Mawyndulë had used magic to monitor her on her twelfth night at the cliff; the second was that The Hole, the inner sanctum where she'd found the pages, had been protected by Orinfar symbols, making it impossible for Mawyndulë to see *exactly* what she had found.

"I'm not now, but I did at our first meeting. Your instincts were right. I found the horn in Alburnia."

"You told me you found a book. You even talked about it with Kile. I heard you. I've been watching you."

"I did find a book, but that's not the *only* thing I found. You didn't see me in the last chamber, did you? Ever wonder why? There were Orinfar

runes down there. Yes, I mentioned the book to Kile, but I didn't tell anyone about the box. You don't watch me all the time or you would have seen me studying it."

This was a big gamble but a logical one.

"If you had already found the horn, why did you go to Dibben?"

"I didn't know I found *the horn*, not back then, at least. All I knew is that I had *a box*. A box that I couldn't open. Did I suspect? Sure. But the only thing I was certain about is that I had an important relic, the extravagance of the hidden vault made that obvious. There were a lot of details I still needed to find out. No instructions were inscribed on the box. I tried to ask the emperor about it, but that didn't go well. I wasn't about to take the word of Proust, either, and I saw no reason to let him know the true nature of my search as he sounded a bit too interested. I needed more information, answers that I suspected could be found in *The Book of Brin*, which we found at Dibben, and I was right. Bran explained everything."

"Where is it?"

"Knowing you were coming, I hid the box. No one else knows where. No one can find it but me." She forced a grin of supreme confidence. "Go ahead and kill me, but if you do, you'll say goodbye to the horn. As you know, I'm pretty good at taking precautions, and you gave me plenty of time."

"How long will it take you to get it?"

There it was: the bridge to paradise, the words she had hoped to hear, the goal she'd been playing toward. She needed to sell it. "Why should I?"

Mawyndulë looked at Kolby.

Farilane was pulled away from the knight and flung across the tile. Kolby ran for her, but a shard of stone rose from the floor directly before him. He slammed into the wall, stunning himself. The stone spilled out and encased him in a cocoon of rock.

"Farilane!" he shouted. "Farilane!" His cries faded to faint, muffled sounds as the chamber he was trapped in sealed shut.

"I'm not positive," Mawyndulë said, "but I think he has less than thirty minutes of air, so I hope that's enough time. And, Princess, I know all about you. How you gamble with lives. You embarrassed Lord Rhinehart. He backed down, but you were bluffing. You didn't have any orders from the

emperor, and you didn't command two legions. You didn't have so much as a cohort behind those hills."

Farilane could hear the indecipherable shouts of Kolby as if he were in another room on another floor. Behind her, the way was still blocked.

"Don't try anything. I won't be bluffed."

The great golden doors opened.

"And, Princess, I *will* be watching *and* listening to you."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

THE GAMBLE

“Everyone stay out of my way!” Farilane shouted as she ran down the deserted corridors of the palace. “I’m going to my chambers! Anyone who can hear me, tell the First Minister—on pain of death—that no one is to enter the throne room except me! Do you understand? No one!” She hoped someone heard, believed they did, but with so much on the line, the difference between *certain* and *almost so* was a wide gulf.

There ought to be a host of palace guards here by now. All seven legions should have been jammed into that wide corridor lined with ancient frescoes. The emperor was just murdered, and no one has shown up to so much as offer condolences.

There was a reason.

Of course there’s a reason. There’s a reason for everything!

Two jumped out at her, volunteering to be the most obvious. Either everyone knew exactly what was going on and the palace had been evacuated for safety or everyone was dead—and not just in some normal slit-throat manner. The lack of blood and bodies meant that they had been *erased*, as Mawyndulë had so ominously put it. He might have snapped his fingers, and *poof* no more anyone.

Is that possible?

A month ago, she would have said no. Prior to entering the Mystic Wood, Farilane’s response—if she were honest with herself—would have been a gut-busting guffaw followed by several minutes of lighter laughter, a bit of harmless ridicule, and the occasional giggle. After seeing Ethan crushed by stone blocks, Farilane wasn’t certain she’d ever laugh again.

Now the hourglass is running out for Kolby—and here I am, walking as slowly as possible.

She took a breath, trying to get a hold of herself. The princess didn't know how knowledgeable Mawyndulë was with the layout of the palace, but she took no chances and followed the direct route to her rooms.

I'm all out of ideas . . . except one.

Reaching the door, she flung it wide, dashed in, then slammed it shut.



Mawyndulë lost sight of Farilane the moment she entered her chamber.

While frustrating, her disappearance wasn't alarming. The princess had obviously lined her personal chambers in Orinfar markings just as she had lined the throne room. Anyone with half her intelligence would have taken that precaution. Just knowing he had the ability to pry into her bedroom with the Art should have prompted her to put up the dwarven drapes. Such a thing didn't constitute a breach of trust. Also, her personal chambers were the most sensible place for her to have hidden the horn. While concerning, her beeline didn't shout betrayal like rushing to the Teshlor Guildhall or summoning the palace guard. All she did was go to her room.

He continued to watch the door and listen, but he heard nothing beyond some shuffling coming from the far side.

The clairvoyance and clairauidience were tricks he'd learned in his youth. The latter he'd been taught by the ancient Miralyith Jerydd as a means of maintaining communications over long distances. The former was taught to him by Trilos. While powerful, the abilities were limited. It wasn't like he could think of someone and see them. The magical weave possessed no location threads. He could focus on a place he knew and hope to spot the individual. The same was true for his ability to listen in, although harder to accomplish because he'd need to hear voices and be able to identify them. None of this had been a problem when he and Jerydd had *talked* because those had been two-way communications. Spying had always required a bit of luck.

Mawyndulë didn't think there were other exits from her chambers but . . . *she might have climbed out a window.*

The princess wasn't a fool. Mawyndulë would even go so far as to say she was quite intelligent. She had to know that if she delivered the horn, his next step would be to kill her, and then find and murder her father and brother. So the odds were good that she would try to evade him. But Mawyndulë knew the princess. He'd studied her for several years, followed her exploits, and knew she had a weakness—the Teshlors. She didn't simply love them. She wanted to be one. And she would sacrifice herself for them just as they would for her.

Then, as he was starting to suspect he had misjudged her, the door to her chamber opened, and the princess appeared back in the corridor, holding a stone box. She headed directly for the throne room, making no unauthorized side trips. Within minutes, she arrived, the treasure clutched in her arms.

Mawyndulë was so pleased, and even a bit surprised, at her total capitulation that he almost failed to notice the change in the room.

Power had entered. Something was amiss, but he couldn't tell just what. He peered at her.

The princess stared back.

"There's nothing in that box, is there?" Mawyndulë said.

Farilane shook her head. She let the box fall. The lid broke open on the marble floor, revealing an empty interior.

Mawyndulë felt he was missing something. The pieces weren't fitting properly. *Farilane wouldn't just give up. She's too smart for this.* It's time to call her bluff.

"Say goodbye to Kolby." Mawyndulë flexed his fingers, but Farilane was quicker. With a clap of her hands, the stone encasing the Teshlor shattered.

Kolby staggered, gasping for breath.

"Get out! Now!" Farilane ordered.

Kolby hesitated, then the floor itself threw him out. The golden doors immediately slammed shut after his exit, once again echoing ominously. But this time, Mawyndulë hadn't been the one to shut them.

"You're not the princess." Mawyndulë waved a hand, stripping away the princess-illusion.

Before him stood the First Minister, Martasen Dray. But the bureaucratic animal was gone, and in his place stood a man with piercing eyes and an unflinching stare.

“What do we have here?” Mawyndulë asked. “A human Artist? I thought you all died out centuries ago—limited by your feeble lifespans.”

“Suri says hello,” Dray replied.

Mawyndulë stiffened at the name. Nearly two thousand years had passed, but he couldn’t forget her—the Rhune Miralyith who had batted aside his assaults as if he were an infant, and who would have killed him had he not already blown the horn.

“Suri is dead.” He practically spat out the words.

“But her spirit lives on. She knew this day would come—when the peace she had fought so hard for, that others had died to achieve, would be threatened. And so, we waited. We waited for you.”

Mawyndulë smiled. “I’m not the child I once was. I finally got a proper teacher. You’re no match for me. You couldn’t even best that child in the forest. The one who liked to pop trees.”

“You’re right,” Dray said. “I’m not strong enough to defeat you.”

He stepped back and spread out his arms. “But we are.”

The walls of the throne room dissolved, leaving only the pillars to hold up the dome. Between each pair of columns stood the robed figure of a monk. Mawyndulë recalled some of them from Dibben. Others he’d never seen before.

“This is where your story ends, Mawyndulë,” Dray told him. “Where Suri’s legacy finishes what she started.”

Mawyndulë shook his head. “I don’t think so.” He took a moment to turn fully around and observe the circle of Artists.

“You think you can beat all of us?”

“No,” Mawyndulë replied.

“Then—”

“You can’t afford it.” He smiled at Dray. “You can’t afford to kill me. The cost will be too high. If you attack, I will take this entire city with me. The whole of Percepliquis will be destroyed. Every last Fhrey, myr, man, woman, child, dog, goat, flea, and tick will be killed. All the buildings wiped out. The entire capital of the world gone, and with it, the bloodline of Nyphron.”

He stared at Dray, and the First Minister stared back.

“You know I’ll do it. What do I have to lose?” Mawyndulë slipped the chain holding the key over his head. “I have this. It’s not what I wanted. It’s

not what I came for, but it's something. The emperor, and his father before him, wore it every day of his life, which can only mean one thing—it opens the container that houses the horn. I just have to find it." Mawyndulë lowered his hands slowly. "So I get to leave here with this consolation prize, and you get to keep your city, and the lives of your imperial family. Everyone wins . . . sort of."

Mawyndulë moved down the steps of the dais toward the golden doors. He paused, facing them, his back to Dray. "Unless of course you want to see if I can really do it. Do you, Dray? Do you want to see how powerful I am? Suri destroyed the entire city of Neith. I have to admit, I'm curious what that was like. I'm envious. I want to feel what she did—to strum Troth. To really hit the Big Chord and see what it can do. What do you say, Dray? Shall we play a song?"

The golden doors opened.

"How disappointing. Not today, I guess. But I'll be back. You know I will, and the next time I'll be ready for you."

Mawyndulë passed through the exit into the corridor where Kolby and Enzo stood to either side of Farilane.

"It's a shame," he told her sincerely. "*You* really should be the empress. Everyone else is an idiot."

CHAPTER TWENTY

THE HORN

Princess Farilane had never once been accused of being a hugger. While often exuberant—and prone to laugh, sing, and even dance when the moment took her—she simply wasn't the sort of woman to greet friends or family with an embrace. She'd wondered where such tendencies came from. *Family*, she supposed. Hers had never been close, which explained a lot but not everything. That morning in Memorial Hall, however, Farilane forgot herself. The moment she saw Nordyan, she gave him a tight, around-the-neck squeeze that pressed their cheeks together.

"I thought you might be dead," she said into his ear, holding him captive.

Their grandfather *was* dead, and so was Ethan. But the constant dread—that fear of the unknown doom that had plagued the palace for days—was over. At least the waiting was. Grief would be sticking around a while longer.

Mawyndulë was gone. Despite efforts on the parts of Teshlor Knights and Dibben Artists, the Miralyith had managed to disappear somewhere along Braxton Street near the Grand Circus. A search was underway. Farilane had no idea what they would do should they find him. Perhaps they hoped to force the Fhrey to open ground where they could battle safely. Mawyndulë didn't appear that stupid, and Farilane wasn't holding out much hope for a capture.

When she let Nordyan go, he pulled back, looking as if he might cry.

I'm missing something, she thought, seeing the glassiness of his eyes. Hugging was one thing, but this reaction was something entirely different.

Nordyan wasn't prone to displays of affection. No one from the House of Nyphron ever was. Green eyes and a lack of sentimental attachments were their bloodline's hereditary traits.

Farilane searched the crowd of faces for their father, thinking he was dead, but she spotted Nyrian nearby. The emperor-to-be was fine, not a mark on him, and at that moment stood speaking to Martasen Dray, who had reported the news of Mawyndulë's escape. Neither looked happy. Nor did Kolby, who had returned with Dray.

"You admit, then, to deception," Nyrian was saying to Dray as Farilane and her brother pushed through the crowd of servants and soldiers who had flooded into Memorial Hall in the aftermath.

"After the manner in which you frame it, yes." The First Minister spoke in his usual prudent manner, with a lovely sprinkling of politically precise wording.

"Is there another way?" Nyrian clearly believed there wasn't. The question was a shove, a dare that begged Dray to take a swing. Her father wanted to fight.

"Not one you would understand," Dray replied.

That was not the reply Nyrian wanted to hear, and fearing a dangerous confrontation, Farilane pushed forward. "What's going on?" she asked.

"Did you know he was a . . ." Nyrian made a rolling motion with his hands, begging for a word that didn't exist in his understanding of two separate languages.

Ever the helpful daughter, the princess began, "Artist? Magician? Wizard? Miralyith? Cenzlyor? Magic wielder? Sorcerer? Conjur—"

"Yes!" he blurted, as if only to stop her unending enumeration. "Did you know?"

"I figured it out a few days back—yes."

She didn't know what he was thinking, just that it was bad.

"I'm glad you're alive," she said. Then, breaking with family tradition once more, she hugged him.

Her father stiffened. He took her by the arms and moved her away, refusing to meet her eyes.

"I did what I had to," she said in her own defense. "I ordered the First Minister to call in his associates. I am responsible for their involvement. If you need to blame someone, you can blame me."

“The office of the First Minister takes orders only from the emperor—not princesses.”

“I knew Mawyndulë was coming,” she said. “I knew—well, I suspected—the sort of power he possessed. In the old stories, Miralyith were considered godlike. All the palace guards and even the knights wouldn’t be enough. We needed magic to fight him. I demanded that the First Minister call in reinforcements—because I knew we’d need them. And we did. We would all be dead otherwise.”

“I know that,” Nyrian snapped. He was angry.

With me? With Dray? With the disruption to his morning tea routine? What?

Just as with her newfound appreciation for embraces, her father was revealing a different side of his personality. The fact that he had one was the first shock. In the past, Nyrian had demonstrated the emotional range of a fence post with the quirky unpredictability of night following day. Farilane was still struggling to leap that hurdle, and she wasn’t ready to fathom the source of his displeasure. In many ways, he appeared angry with being angry.

Nyrian gave a frustrated glance toward the open door of the throne room, and with that clue, Farilane understood. *He’s emperor now—at least he will be once they clamp that crown on his head.* By dying, Estermon had dropped a massive stone boulder in Nyrian’s arms, one not allowed to touch the ground. *He’s trying to get a grip.*

“Does anyone know how that unpleasant Fhrey got into the palace?” Nordyan asked, coming to her rescue, their father’s, or both.

“Yes, Your Highness,” Kolby said. “We found honor guards Maddock Jameson’s and Arturus Brushwick’s bodies along the pathway between the Teshlor Guildhall and the river. Their throats were slit.”

“How is that possible? They were knights.”

“We found them mostly submerged in stone, as if the pavement had turned liquid and then solid once more. They were trapped—helpless.”

“Mawyndulë killed them,” Farilane said, “then he made himself look like Arturus, and Sheldon Faust like Maddock. When they reported to their posts, as they did every morning, I suppose they just walked into the throne room.” Farilane looked around at the crowd. “But where was everyone? This corridor—the whole palace—was vacant.”

“That was the First—” Her father stopped himself. “That was *Dray’s* doing.” He dragged out the name as if it were a vulgar word.

“I ordered everyone out,” Dray responded in his measured tone. “Sent the knights to secure the imperial family. Farilane went the wrong way.” He shifted his attention to Kolby, his eyes asking for an explanation.

The knight glared back. “Estermon the Second is also a member of the imperial family, is he not? Protecting the emperor should have been our highest priority—besides, she’s fast.”

“It’s done,” Nyrian declared with a cutting motion of his arm, ending the debate before it started. He was the acting emperor now, though the informality of the conversation suggested the new reality had yet to sink in. Such a free-for-all discussion would never have been tolerated in the presence of either Estermon. That Nyrian had allowed it, proved that he was also struggling with the new normal.

“I still don’t understand what happened,” Nyrian said. He glanced at Dray, the shape of his lips soured, then he promptly turned to face his daughter instead. “How did Dray replace you?”

“Days ago, I told Dray to expect an attack by Mawyndulë,” Farilane said. “I told everyone, actually. Reminded them so often, in fact, that if I hadn’t been the imperial princess, people would have thrown things at me. I obtained Dray’s permission to line the throne room with dwarven markings. Mostly because I knew Estermon wouldn’t have agreed.”

“And you knew Dray would because he was one of *them*.”

“If by *them* you mean one of the very few who understood the nature of the threat, then yes.” Farilane waited for a rebuttal. She felt it necessary to push back against the absurd prejudice he held for a valuable ally, but also knew she was being insolent. Estermon would have dismissed her on the spot. Her father said nothing. She liked this pliable pre-emperor but knew his attitude wouldn’t last. In time, he would harden. “Anyway, when two Teshlors woke me to say *something had happened*, I ruled out the possibility that Nordstrom had finally adopted a new hairstyle. I ran to the throne room, knowing grandfather would be the prime target. Finding the route vacant of even the morning servants, I assumed a silent alarm had been triggered. That meant Dray was likely monitoring things closely.”

“Which, of course, I was,” Dray confirmed. “The moment she left the throne room, she told me her plan and how we would do it.”

“How is that possible?” Nordyan asked. “Is Farilane also a magician?”

The princess frowned at her brother. “I told everyone in earshot that I was going to my quarters, and that no one other than I was to enter the throne room.”

“So?”

Farilane rolled her eyes.

Dray took over. “I knew she had protected the throne room and her chambers as well. Both were lined with the Orinfar. When she declared her destination, she was telling me to meet her there—in a place Mawyndulë couldn’t see. By stating that no one else could enter the throne room, she let me know that she would go into her chambers, but that I needed to be the one coming out—looking like her. So I ran there as fast as I could.”

“So you *really are* a sorcerer?” Nordyan asked the First Minister.

That angry look filled Nyrian’s face once more. “This horn,” he interrupted. “Does it even exist?”

“Oh, yes,” Farilane said. “It absolutely does. And we must keep it safe. The fate of the empire, and honestly—I think it’s not an overstatement to say—humanity itself depends on it.”

“We should never have allowed him to leave with that key.” Dray sighed.

“We shouldn’t have allowed him to enter the palace in the first place,” Kolby said.

“You couldn’t have stopped him,” Dray replied. “Steel is no match for magic.”

“So sure of that, are you?”

“Enough!” Nyrian shouted. “What’s done is done.”

“No, it’s not,” Farilane said. “Mawyndulë doesn’t have the key.”

Following a round of bewildered inquiries where the word *what?* dominated, Farilane led the way back into the throne room. She was relieved to see that her grandfather’s body and the remains of Ethan had been covered by sheets. Nothing else had been touched, and she found Sephryn’s metal box on the steps of the dais, right where Mawyndulë had thrown it in disgust. She picked it up and handed it to Kolby. “We’ll need to find a safe place for this.”

“What’s that?” Nyrian asked.

“The horn,” Farilane replied.

“Why give it to him?” Dray asked suspiciously.

“It’s heavy.”

Kolby peered down at it. “This can’t be the horn. The key didn’t fit.”

“That’s because Mawyndulë used the wrong key. This”—Farilane placed a hand on the box—“is a dwarven gemlocked container. Perhaps one of the most secure ever made, and a deceptive one at that.” She pointed to the little keyhole. “See this? Perfect size for a key, but it’s fake. A misdirection that Grandfather reinforced by wearing that key around his neck every day of his life. The question I have, that will now never be answered, is if he knew the key was worthless.”

“How do you know it’s fake?” her brother asked.

“Has to be,” she said, smiling at the box in Kolby’s hands as if it were the perfect partner in a captivating show. “Because that’s not how gemlocks work. They don’t use mechanical gears rotated by the teeth of a key. Should that be the case, we would call them *key lock boxes* or some such.”

“So the emperor never had the key?” Dray asked.

“Oh, no, he had it,” Farilane said. “I’m certain Sephryn—who I suspect arranged all this—insisted that the two be kept apart and that her son guard the key while she protected the box. At his death, that key was handed down from father to son.”

Farilane moved to the sheeted body of her grandfather. She took a breath, bent down, then daintily lifted the sheet, exposing his left, ring-bejeweled hand. *The diamond, she thought, the big one. He was wearing it when he placed his hands on my shoulders. That was the first and last time I ever felt he cared about me.* The memory hurt for so many reasons.

She gripped the ring, hesitating a moment as her fingers felt the cold of his hand. Then she twisted it free. Returning to Kolby, she touched the gem to the lid. The top popped up. Lifting it, she revealed a very old and quite ugly ram’s horn. They all stared at it for a moment, then Farilane closed the lid, as if having it open for too long was dangerous. She then presented the ring and the box to her father. “I think Sephryn’s idea was a good one, but it’s up to you now to decide what to do with these.”



“You don’t have to stay here, you know.” Farilane told Kolby, as the knight continued to stand just inside the door to her chambers, not far from where Kile had once stood—Kile, whom she still hadn’t seen or heard from since he fled with all the urgency of needing to catch a boat. *I shouldn’t be here . . . I’m not your friend.*

“It’s no bother, Your Highness.”

Endeavoring to work at her desk, Farilane found her concentration repeatedly broken by the knight’s slightest movements, her myr sight and hearing being as much a curse as a blessing.

“You’ve been standing for hours. You haven’t eaten. And your legs must be tired.”

Kolby shrugged. “I’m fine.”

The princess, who had been trying to write, paused and put her pen down. She turned, placed an elbow on the corner of her desk, careful to avoid toppling the ink pot, and faced Kolby. “There are other knights, aren’t there? I distinctly recall meeting a few. And you hold some rank among them, isn’t that correct? Why not post someone else here while you eat and sleep?”

“What is it you’re doing?” Kolby asked.

Farilane frowned. “You think me so feeble that I can’t tell you’re changing the subject?”

“No, but I know you love to talk about your work.” He smiled.

“Smarter than you look, Kolby.”

He waited.

Farilane sat back, and holding her arms out with palms up, she presented the tome on her desk. “This is my life’s work: *The Migration of Peoples*. It’s an accurate history of the world, and in many ways, it’s quite similar to this manuscript, *The Book of Brin*.” She pointed to the leather-bound codex, which was also on her desk.

“The one you’ve been looking for?”

“Yes, but it turns out there’s another one, a better one: *The Second Book of Brin*.”

“I suppose you want that, too?”

“Desperately. It was lost the day the war ended, along with its author. But in a letter to Sephryn, Bran told her that he had found it—or at least discovered its location. I don’t know where that is yet, but when I find out,

you can be certain we will be off again. For now, I am making corrections and updates to *my* book. After reading the original *Book of Brin*, and speaking to Sephryn, I see that I have several inaccuracies.” She frowned innocently. “No one’s perfect.”

She stared at the pages before her, then got up and walked to the window. She stood where Kile had and looked out at the city. Imperial Square lay below. Farther out, the many buildings of the city rose one atop another, but beyond them, beyond the river, the hills and trees stretched to the horizon.

“How soon will you be going after this second book?” Kolby asked.

“I should stay to make certain Mawyndulë is truly gone and not hiding somewhere. My father will need help putting his house in order.”

“You don’t want to be here, do you?” Kolby asked.

Farilane leaned on the windowsill and looked out at the endless possibilities that lay beyond it. “I hate funerals.”

“He’s your grandfather, and she’s your grandmother.”

“You left out a few *greats*.” Farilane sighed. “You want to stay, don’t you? Three funerals and a coronation? Pretty big deal, I suppose. How often does such a thing happen? And Ethan was your friend.”

“He was your friend, too, Highness.”

“He was.” She nodded. “You can stay. I’ll be fine without you.”

“Highness.”

When he said nothing more, she turned.

The knight stood as straight and tall as she had ever seen him. “I’ll never let you out of my sight again so long as I live.”

She smiled. “That might prove a bit awkward.”

The joke failed to find purchase against that perfect armor. Then, with words soaked in the sort of sincerity usually accompanied by tears, Kolby said, “No matter where you lead, I will follow, and I will protect you with my life.”

She wanted to make a joke. Felt like she should, if only to crack an emotional window, but the jests that crossed her mind were rendered vulgar and ugly before his simple purity. This was a good man, but that was old news. All of the Teshlors were.

“You have nothing to feel guilty about,” she said, taking an unconscious step toward him. “You weren’t there when Estermon was killed. But you

were with me, and I'm alive because of it. Thank you."

A knock on the door brought Kolby's hand to his hip.

Farilane sighed. "Mawyndulë is not going to knock."

Behind the door, Nordyan stood between two palace guards.

Her brother entered the cluttered chamber and looked around with revulsion, as if it were the first time he'd ever been there.

Maybe it is.

"Father wants to see you."

"Problem?"

"Not with you."



Three days had passed since the death of Estermon the Second, but this was the first time Farilane had seen her father since Mawyndulë disappeared. According to all palace sources, Nyrian had spent the last two days sequestered in his chambers, where only Nordyan was allowed to enter. The emperor-to-be, uncomfortable with ruling without a crown, avoided the throne room, which was still being repaired. Instead, he held court in the Imperial Garden.

Initially, Farilane felt it an odd choice, recalling only that her father held an affinity for flowers. Entering the glass-domed courtyard, lush with flora transplanted from all over the empire, she discovered a wisdom to the choice. The place was beautiful. Massive blooms of scarlet hibiscus and a rainbow of orchids decorated the walls of broad-leafed jungo plants. The peaceful tranquility of the garden acted like a cool breeze on a sunburn. Instead of songbirds, however, Farilane was met with shouts.

"Magic is illegal, and I discover that my First Minister is a—a practitioner!" Nyrian yelled. "I just . . ." He shook his head in lieu of finishing.

"I'm sorry for the deception," Martasen Dray replied calmly. "But as you said, magic is illegal. It wasn't like I could profess my nature openly."

"Your nature! You're a criminal! The only reason—"

Farilane, Kolby, and her brother rounded the abbra berry plants and found her father and the First Minister facing off before an artificial pool

and waterfall. Four wrought-iron chairs were planted in the gravel walkway, but not one was being used. Instead, a crowd stood around the chairs—a smattering of unidentifiable bureaucrats; Nordstrom, who was pouring tea at the side table; and no less than seven palace guards. All of them stood like contestants in some doomed game of musical chairs.

“Ah!” her father exclaimed when he spotted her. “Good, you’re here. You understand this—this *stuff*—better than I do. Better than anyone, I suppose.”

“Is this why I’m here?” Farilane had never before been invited to act as an adviser to the emperor, the First Minister, or even the steward who poured the tea. Being summoned to provide an opinion on a serious matter of state was—

“No, it’s not.” Her father crushed her dream before it had time to blossom into a hope. “But I can’t afford to make a mistake on this. I need opinions, and you’re the smartest person in the empire.”

“Oh.” She stumbled, genuinely surprised. “I thought that was a secret only I knew.”

“This is not a time for jokes, Farilane.”

“I wasn’t joking,” she said, but her father had already turned back to Dray.

“I should have you arrested!” Nyrian punched his palm with a fist. “I should have you executed!”

The First Minister looked the same as ever, and Farilane wondered why he kept his manufactured appearance. While he retained his unpleasant rodent-like features, Dray’s demeanor had changed. His submissive nature—so off-putting because of its obvious insincerity—had been replaced by a polite confidence. He stood straight and unflinching before the soon-to-be ruler of the world.

“I came here to protect you,” Dray countered. “That should be self-evident at this point. If it weren’t for me and my brethren, you and this empire wouldn’t exist. Besides, you can’t arrest me.”

Nyrian narrowed his eyes. “Why is that?”

“The same reason you are powerless against Mawyndulë. You lack the capacity.”

Nyrian’s face darkened as he took a threatening step toward the First Minister. “Are you saying you would defy your emperor?”

“I’m saying I won’t allow you to execute me,” Dray replied. “Your Highness, we are not your enemy. Our only goal is to protect the hard-won peace established between the Fhrey and the human realms at the end of the Great War.”

“That is not your responsibility. You are a subject within this empire. I will decide what is done and what isn’t, and you will obey. You must accept that, or I can’t allow a group with power enough to defy the empire to thrive just across the river.”

“You can’t control the sun or the rain, either, but you get along with them just fine.”

“You’re guilty of practicing magic!” Nyrian shouted. “Either the laws of the empire matter or they don’t!” He spun sharply. “What do you say, Farilane?”

The princess swallowed. There was enough tension in the garden to wither the plants. She thought a moment, then said, “It’s a crime to read and write, but have you seen my office?”

Her father’s face darkened.

“Also, not a joke,” she quickly added. “Look, I’ve been breaking the law for over a century, and the empire hasn’t collapsed. Does anyone even know why we have these laws?” She looked at the blank faces of the bureaucrats. No one said a word. “Mawyndulë is gone but not defeated. He will be back. If he visits again, and we have no means—no *magical* means—to fight him, what good will laws be? On the other hand, I would immediately dismiss Martasen Dray from his duties as First Minister. He has no business administering the empire.” This appeared to ease the fire behind her father’s eyes. At least for a moment. Then she opened her mouth again. “He’s too valuable for that. Dray should be charged with the creation of a guild similar to the Teshlors’. He should create an academy of wizards established to advise and protect the empire from threats such as Mawyndulë. And if anyone ever does manage to blow that horn, they’ll have to guard against the Miralyith.”

No one said a word for several minutes. The only sound came from the trickling cascade of the fake waterfall.

Nyrian took a deep breath. “I will think on this situation some more, and let you know what I decide.” He made a waving motion with his hand that indicated everyone should leave.

“Not you, Farilane.”

When everyone but Nordstrom and Kolby had left the courtyard, Nyrian motioned for her to sit in one of the chairs, and he settled into another. Light entered the glass ceiling and spilled through the canopy of broad green leaves. Once again, the garden was peaceful.

“Your mother loved you,” her father said. “She was human. It was easier for her. The rest of us . . .” He stood up and began to pace.

Farilane didn’t know if she should stand or sit. She stayed where she was and figured he’d let her know if it was the wrong choice.

“It’s important to me that you know . . . that you understand that I like you. I always have, although I can understand that you might not know it. I like you too much, I think. You make it hard not to. You seem more alive than the rest of us. It’s like you have more of your mother in you. She was fearless, too. She married me, after all.”

Nyrian continued to pace, his hands fidgeting with his sleeves. He was leading up to something—something awkward for him, perhaps something he dreaded. The tension in the garden rose again.

“You did a very good thing,” her father said. “Your efforts to defeat Mawyndulë were crucial. Your bravery, intelligence, and cleverness very likely saved all our lives.”

“Are you trying to say *thank you*?”

“Yes, I am. And I want to reward you. Virgil mentioned how you gathered books, even wrote some yourself. He also shared that you were upset that there was no place to keep them, and that after your death, the books might be destroyed. Is that true?”

“Yes, and it would be a terrible loss for these—”

He held up a hand to stop her. “Farilane, I’m going to give you that place. You can have your book building, a public space where everyone can share in your treasures.”

“That’s going to be awkward, since reading is illegal.”

“Yes, but rumor has it I’m going to be emperor in a few days. And you’re right. I don’t know why we have some of these laws.”

Farilane stared at him. “I—I don’t know what to say.”

“You don’t have to say anything. I have an architect coming tomorrow. He and some engineers and a few builders will go with you to pick the

perfect place for this new book palace. Once you approve it, they will start building.”

Farilane was stunned. “That’s wonderful.”

“Good,” her father said. “Don’t stay up too late celebrating. They want to get an early start as they have a number of sites to show you. And Farilane”—he took her hand—“thank you.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

THE LIBRARY

Farilane was up before dawn, leaping barefooted from carpet-island to carpet-island, as she sought to avoid the cold stone. Her progress was hampered by the lack of light and a clear path. The twin chambers of the tiny room, one containing her bed and the other her office, were still a chaotic mess that even she regretted. Despite the disarray, the princess couldn't recall the last time she'd been this happy. Not since she had been a child waiting for the festival of Wintertide had Farilane been so excited. Now, just as then, she had struggled to doze but failed miserably. Tossing and turning in her bed for most of the night, she gave up on any attempt to sleep and tried working on her book. But her mind was a wild animal that refused to be harnessed.

I'm going to have my book house, or should I call it a bochous, bibliary, or library.

She still hadn't settled on a name. *Book house* struck her as the most comprehensible and inviting. Such a virtue would be crucial at the start, when the whole idea would be viewed as strange and unnatural. However, over time, the childish name might prevent her baby from being taken seriously. A mother might be inclined to nickname her child Pretty Boy—cute when the lad is three, but not so much when the kid becomes a man and is being considered for the command of a legion. Farilane envisioned learned scholars crossing the empire to study at her revered and respected institution, and *book house* sounded a tad too on the nose—what a person might call it who never set a foot inside. She considered *leabharlann* which was *book house* in Belgriclungreian. This was marginally better, but also

felt half-measured, noncommittal, and cowardly. Besides, for dwarfs it would still be the infantile *book house*.

Bibliary was drawn from the elven word relating to written dispatches, while *library* was an early imperial word for the little trash heap uncovered in the old palace, where written records no one felt comfortable destroying were deposited. Both words had inherent problems. Farilane liked *bibliary*. It sounded refined, and she enjoyed the way it rolled off the tongue. But it was obviously elvish, making it instantly pretentious, and with the growing animosity caused by the Nyphron Cult, potentially hated. *Library*—well, *library* was a word for a trash heap, a place of unwanted things. Few knew the word anymore, but Farilane did, and it left her still puzzling what to call her new institution even as she prepared to find a spot for its birth.

She wore her usual legion-style *pajamas*, and with nothing else to do but wait, she began cleaning up. She had just recreated her scroll pyramid when someone knocked on the door. Pulling it open, she found three men, all strangers. The foremost, and heaviest, was the most refined. He alone was freshly shaved, his large cheeks still a bit pink from razor burn, lending him that repugnant pig's skin appearance. Nearly bald, he grew what hair he did have and worked it into a swirl like a wig. "Good morning, Your Highness!" he said with enthusiasm and enough volume to make her wince. He was also a hand-talker, as was evident from the way he added a ten-digit flourish to the standard greeting. "My name is Helino. I am Master Architect to the emperor." He turned with a broad sweep of his arm that nearly slapped the man behind him. "And this is our Imperial Engineer, Orvis, and our Master Builder, Ekles. We are here at the emperor's request to take you on a tour of potential sites for your new . . . ah . . . building."

She smiled and nodded.

"We have a cart waiting," Helino pointed out as sweat glistened on his upper lip, his whole face a bit shiny, as if he were a fish freshly plucked from a river.

"A cart?" she said. "I'd prefer to travel by horse."

"I understand, Your Highness, but . . . well, Orvis here gets sick on horseback, and we do have a good many tools we are bringing with us in order to survey the areas."

"That's fine. I can still ride along with you."

“But we also hope to discuss some details and go over maps and such, and that will be impossible with you mounted. But don’t worry. The cart will be quite comfortable.”

Helino presented her with a massive smile. The other two remained silent, watching her. Orvis the Engineer was a thin man with a long face. He, too, suffered hair loss but accepted his fate by shaving his head. Ekles the Master Builder was a stocky, muscular fellow with a thick neck and a boxer’s chin. Being younger by at least a decade, he sported a short crop that bristled. All of them were dressed in tunics, the sort popular among wealthy tradesmen, but these were nondescript and completely unadorned with any personalization. They wore no necklaces, bracelets, or rings—although Helino showed a white band where a ring had been, and Ekles had a bare patch where a wide wrist guard had been routinely worn. Helino’s tunic was pristine white, while the other two shared shirts that were dull blue. One thing Farilane was certain of: The clothes were new.

Why am I making such a big deal about what they are wearing? I’m being paranoid. Of course they’re wearing new clothes. They’re spending the day with the princess. Helino’s sweat is a direct result of being my host and the fear of incurring the displeasure of a notoriously volatile imperial. The only truly strange thing is . . .

Farilane took a step out into the hallway and looked up and down the corridor. “Any of you three see a Teshlor Knight out here? A handsome fellow with three swords?”

They looked at one another, puzzled.

“I’m afraid not, Your Highness,” Helino replied.

So much for Kolby never taking his eyes off me, Farilane thought.

With her field book in hand, the princess followed the trio through the halls to the front entrance where, in the aftermath of multiple tragedies, life went on. Ambassadors, clerks, military officers, petitioners, servants, and the massive host of bureaucrats once more filled the open-air gallery. Stepping into the sun, Farilane realized the day was going to be hot, and she regretted not bringing a hat. The slow plod of a wagon followed by hours wandering empty lots and open fields would likely bake the four of them. Poor Helino would be reduced to a puddle before the day was done.

“Your Highness,” Teshlor Manuel Triora said in greeting at the gate. “Going for a stroll?”

“Picking out a site to build my . . . library.”

“I’m certain I would be thrilled—if I knew what that was.”

“A home for my books!”

Worry crossed Manuel’s face as he looked about the gallery.

“Not to worry, Manuel,” she assured him. “Reading is going to be legal. My father has said so. Can you imagine that? Everyone will be able to read! *You* will be able to read.”

Manuel’s brows rose. “I doubt I have your gifts, Highness.”

She smiled. “Reading doesn’t require *gifts*, just a little effort.”

“Speaking of effort . . .” Helino began.

Manuel glanced at him with that polite irritation the knights covered with a smile. “Shall I call for Mirthlyn to be saddled?”

“Actually, we are taking a wagon,” she replied.

“A wagon?”

Farilane shrugged.

“Manuel Triora!” Nordstrom appeared on the steps beneath the columned porch, waving his arms.

“Yes?”

“The emperor—ah—His Highness Nyrian wants to see you.”

Manuel looked at Farilane and smiled apologetically.

Helino sighed. “We don’t have time to wait. We are already getting a late start, and we have so much ground to cover.”

“I’ll catch up,” Manuel said. “Where are you headed?”

“We will be taking the ferry across the river,” Helino told him.

“Really?” Farilane frowned. “I expected the library to be in the city.”

“We were told you wanted a large building,” Orvis said. “There are only a few vacant spaces in Percepliquis, and most aren’t able to accommodate a grand structure. The pastureland is huge and only a short ferry ride away.”

“And it is only the first option, Your Highness,” Helino explained.

“After you see what we have planned across the river, you’ll be truly impressed and astonished. Ever since your father gave us the authorization, we have been planning every detail.”

“I’ll meet you there,” Manuel said. “With luck, your father won’t keep me long, and I’ll be able to catch the same ferry.”

“Don’t be late,” Farilane told him. “I’ll want your opinion.”

“Nothing but death will stop me.”



“The emperor—ah, your father—explained that you would want a large footprint for a massive building—a *palace* for books,” Helino said. “He suggested that utilizing the sheep fields would also allow you to add gardens—complete with fountains. A whole complex of reading areas could be created along with a tranquil setting.”

Farilane nodded politely, but his words were as flies in winter, possible but out of place.

They rode along on a pair of cushioned benches that faced each other in the wagon. Ekles sat beside her, and Helino and Orvis faced them on the opposite seat. There was no canopy, and the sun beat down. Among their feet was an assortment of bags, ropes, and oddments. Chains rattled with the pavement.

“What are the chains for?” she asked.

“Are you knowledgeable on the subject of surveying?”

“No.”

“Then I doubt my explaining their use would help.”

Farilane ticked off her observations of Helino: his soft hands, complete with stubby fingers and clean fingernails; the way he pulled off one boot to massage his big toe; how he continued to sweat and used a lace-edged cloth to dab at his temples and upper lip. Orvis sat hunched forward and avoided looking at her, spending his time shifting awkwardly, as if he couldn’t find a comfortable position. Ekles fidgeted with his tunic, pulling on the shoulders and around the neck. He sat casually with knees apart, hairy legs revealing crisscrossed bare marks in the tan that ran up his calves. He had something in his teeth and dug for it with a thumbnail.

Nothing more was volunteered about the building plans, which did not surprise her. What did was the score of armed legionnaires waiting at the dock. They parted as the wagon approached.

Seeing no signs of confusion in her three companions—they didn’t even appear to notice the soldiers—she asked. “Are they coming with us?”

“Hmm?” Helino looked over. “Oh, yes. What with all the dreadful events recently, your father insisted you be protected, even on so short a

trip.”

Farilane studied the men. They looked a blur of indistinguishable soldiers: chin-strapped helmets, shoulder and chest armor, leather skirts, spears, and short swords. She wasn’t familiar with the legion the way she was with the Teshlors, but she did spot the boar symbol that designated them as members of the Fourth. Several hadn’t shaved in more than a day, and their feet were muddy. She didn’t find a single face she recognized.

The wagon rolled onto the waiting ferry. The soldiers took positions—ten to either side. As ropes were cast off, Farilane looked back for Manuel but didn’t see him.

“Helino, tell me,” Farilane said, “what other buildings have you designed?”

“I’m certain you wouldn’t know them.”

“You’re being modest. Come now. Tell me. I’m certain my father didn’t choose to gift me a building conceived by a novice architect. After all, this is my reward for saving him and the empire. So go on, impress me.”

“Well . . .” He hesitated, glancing at the others in the wagon. “I did have a modest hand in the design of that building.” He pointed behind them at the temple spires rising above the rest.

“The Aguanon?”

Helino gave a demure smile.

“Well now, that is impressive. The Aguanon is one of the most beautiful buildings in the city. You must be very proud.”

Helino’s smile grew even fuller.

“You also must be a great deal older than you look, since the Aguanon is one thousand, eight hundred, and sixty-three years old. It is, in point of fact, the seventeenth oldest building in Percepliquis, and the first constructed without Belgriclungreian assistance. The dwarfs, who designed so much of the early city, refused to have anything to do with the Aguanon—it being a temple to Ferrol and all. I suppose that’s why you were recruited to design it, right? And all this time an elf from Merredydd calling himself Pathlos Dey Ven has taken credit for your work. Amazing.”

That big smile vanished. Helino sneered back at her. The other two stared—*no, watched*—Farilane intently. Ekles stopped playing with his tunic, his right hand lowering to his side.

“How about you, Orvis?” Farilane went on happily. “What wonders have you engineered? Invented the bow and arrow perhaps? The chariot? Fire?”

“I’ve done plenty,” he replied with a voice she wouldn’t have attributed to an engineer. Farilane hadn’t met many, but most were learned men with genteel personalities, and while they were largely a quiet group as a whole, they needed but a hint of invitation to begin speaking about their work. Once started, they gushed on and on like a spigot.

“Like what?” she pressed.

“Plenty.”

“And have you built *plenty* as well?” she asked Ekles, who rocked his shoulder against hers with the jostling of the river.

“I have.” Like Orvis, his speech didn’t suit a master builder. Men of his sort were lowly tradesmen, who were uncomfortable with power except when barking at the likes of Sheldon Faust. An imperial princess ought to leave him in an uncontrollable stammer. Yet, his speech was like hearing a sparrow growl.

When the ferry docked, the wagon rolled forward, providing Farilane with a clear view. She counted four ferries each moored together on the bank. *All ferries accounted for on this side.* Once more, Farilane looked back.

I’ll meet you there, Manuel had said. *With luck, your father won’t keep me long, and I’ll be able to catch the same ferry . . . Nothing but death will stop me.*

That, or a lack of boats.

Around the landing, more legionnaires were gathered—the Eighth Cohort of the Fourth Legion. The pasture looked like the staging ground for a major offensive. “This is quite the honor guard you have here.”

“An honor well deserved, Your Highness,” Helino said.

The wagon didn’t pause as it rolled up the trail and then turned off, heading south along the river and east across the fields. It wasn’t exactly the same route that she, Kile, and Sheldon had taken, but it was similar in that they followed no road. The soldiers formed up. A fair number remained to guard the dock—and the boats—while the rest walked in front, behind, and to either side of the wagon.

“So, what sort of building are you envisioning, Helino? Are we talking dome here, or perhaps a jerkinhead with some cross hips, a few dormers, and maybe a cupola? Will it have galleries, a single or double string course, a respond? A spandrel, perhaps? And what sort of capitals will the columns have?”

Helino didn't reply.

“You're not an architect, are you?”

Silence.

She stared at the others. “And I'm pretty certain I'm more qualified to be an engineer and master builder than either of you two.”

Silence.

“Given that the three of you appear to have forgotten how to speak,” the princess said, “and because we are nearing our destination, allow me help out. Helino is not an architect, but rather the name of a fine chariot manufacturing business located in Kruger. I'm guessing you borrowed that name because you suspected that I—a princess and not a prince—wouldn't be interested in something as crude and as violent as a charioteer business. That's who you aren't, but who *are* you? Judging by the advanced gout in your right foot—which I'm sure is brought on by a sedentary life and a diet primarily of pork, fish, and chicken—I can narrow the choices down to about four. But if I include your general demeanor, regional accent, and the use of the word *cart* as opposed to *wagon*, I suspect you are none other than Ex-Governor Vicross, formerly of Alburnia. I say formerly because you were recently dishonorably discharged from your position for dereliction of duty and suspicion of treason.”

She turned to face Orvis. “I believe our engineer is being played by Lars Ardmore, legatus of the Fourth Legion, and I'm going to guess our master builder is . . . well, I actually don't know your name, but are you the first prymus serving under Lars?”

The look of concern on their faces gave the answer she was looking for.

“Don't be so shocked,” she told them. “The lack of any actual surveying equipment, the disappearance of Kolby, and the last-minute summons of Manuel made it pretty obvious.”

“You caused us a great deal of trouble with your visit to Blythium Castell,” Vicross said, his voice having lost all pleasantry, but there was still an underlying cheerfulness, a certain glee in his tone.

“We lost everything,” Lars said. “My entire legion has been disgraced because of you.”

“So I’m to be killed?” she said. “And will you then be absolved of your crimes?”

“Yes.”

Farilane nodded, looked down, and nudged the metal links with her toe. “The chains are to weigh my body down, I take it. Good choice. Tying me to a rock wouldn’t work—rope would rot too quickly. You don’t want me bobbing up and seen by a random fisherman. Of course chain will rust, but perhaps not if it is completely submerged. I’m not an expert in metallurgy.” She took a breath. “Does my father know?”

“We are here on his orders,” Helino replied.

“And my brother?”

“Yes.”

Farilane nodded again. “But the Teshlors don’t know, do they?”

No response.

“Best make sure they never do.”

“They won’t,” the ex-governor assured her. “It will be reported and confirmed by the emperor that you went off on some foolish adventure and something awful befell you, just as everyone knew it eventually would. If you take enough chances, your luck is bound to run out. Besides, everyone knows you don’t like funerals. You weren’t even here for your friend’s. No one will find it strange when you disappear.”

“Manuel might,” she said. “Kolby, too.”

“The emperor will assuage their concerns, and being good and loyal knights, they won’t question his word.”

The wagon rolled on away from the river toward a secluded hollow where brambles and brush made a natural blind. Several of the trees were dead.

“Why?” she asked as they moved past the brambles and a willow stump with an ax in it came into view.

“No idea,” Vicross replied. “The emperor didn’t feel it necessary to explain. But maybe it’s because you’re a troublemaker and everyone hates you.”

“And an evil sorceress who plays with black magic,” Lars added. “You think you’re so smart, but did you really believe the emperor would build a

book house for your evil relics?”

“A *library*,” she corrected.

“We wanted to burn you,” Lars continued. “But they said the smoke would draw attention. So, it’s the ax.”

The wagon rocked to a stop, and they pushed her off. They probably expected her to fall, hoped to hurt her, or at least dirty the famed princess, but Farilane landed gracefully. This served only to irritate them.

The dishonored soldiers of the Fourth Legion circled the stump to witness.

“Tie her arms behind her back,” Vicross ordered a black-hooded man.

“That won’t be necessary,” the princess said. She stepped forward, knelt down, and laid her head on the stump.

This silenced the crowd.

Farilane could feel the damp of the grass beneath her knees and the warmth of the sunbaked wood against her cheek.

Nothing but death will stop me.

The hooded man stepped forward and jerked the ax from the wood.

With her cheek still on the stump, Farilane asked, “Who’s the executioner?”

Vicross smirked and shook his head. “So full of questions even seconds before your death.”

Farilane shrugged. “I like to know the name of the person who cuts my hair, too.”

“Sorry to disappoint you. No one here knows, nor ever will know. He was chosen at random, his identity to be a secret forever. Can’t take chances at the death of an imperial.”

Farilane looked up as the man hefted the cleaver.

Her executioner did not handle it well. His hands were not the sort accustomed to weapons. Like the rest of him, they were slender and delicate. Two of his fingers were ink stained.

“I hope you sharpened that thing,” she told him as he stepped between her and the sun, shading her face with his shadow. “I’d hate to have you make a mess.”

The princess lay still then, going so far as to hold her breath.

The executioner raised the ax and with a fluid swing brought it down onto the stump a foot to the side of Farilane’s neck. No one moved. No one

spoke.

“You missed,” Vicross finally said.

Farilane let out a sigh of relief. “Welcome to the realm of unexpected possibilities.”

The executioner tugged off the hood and smiled down at her. “I never answered your questions. I felt bad about that.”

“Who is this?” Vicross asked.

Farilane lifted her head off the stump. “My scribe.”

“Your what?”

“Kile,” Farilane said, “these nice gentlemen are going to kill me.”

Kile shook his head with a sad expression. “I regret to inform you, Your Highness, that you are wrong.”

Farilane pushed out her lower lip. “I have to admit I’m not terribly disappointed.”

“I’ll do it,” the first prymus, formerly known as Ekles, said as he pushed forward. “I’ll kill them both.” He paused as Kile took a firmer hold on the ax. “Or do you plan on fighting me, little man?” He grinned with confidence. “Do you plan on fighting all of us?”

“I’d be careful, prymus,” Farilane warned him. “I have strong evidence that the person before you is very likely a god, and not just in bed.”

Kile blinked as his brows rose in shock.

“Sorry,” Farilane said. “I guess I’m just really happy to see you.”

From under their tunics, Lars and the first prymus pulled daggers.

“Wouldn’t do that,” Kile said. He still held tight to the ax, but not in a threatening manner.

Vicross laughed. “We have five hundred men surrounding you.”

A familiar voice came from behind the ring of soldiers. “Won’t be enough.”

Not entirely a surprise, the sound of Kolby’s voice washed over her like sunshine after a raging storm. She had made a number of assumptions and guesses, but none of them were a certainty until she heard him speak.

“Stand down, all of you!” he shouted.

“By what authority?” Vicross asked. “We are here on the orders of the emperor.”

“Technically, there is no emperor yet,” Farilane said. “My father hasn’t been crowned.”

Vicross glared at her, then transferred it to Kolby. “Again, I ask, by what right are you interfering here?”

“We serve to protect the emperor and his family—even from the emperor and his family,” Enzo Edon replied from the opposite side of the ring, causing heads to turn and faces to darken.

“It’s part of our code,” Cedric Oslow declared from off to the right.

“The don’t-be-an-idiot part,” Ransara Soto shouted from the left. Throughout the crowd, men threw off cloaks to reveal dragon emblems.

Kolby entered the circle. In his hands, he held his big sword. “You have dishonored, misfit legionnaires. I command the legendary might of the Teshlor Guild minus only Manuel Triora, who sends his regrets for drawing the short straw, and Ethan Yardley, who I am certain is watching us from Alysia and wishing he could be here.” Kolby stared at Vicross, then let his glare sweep across the ring of men. “The princess is under our protection. We have sworn to die in her defense, and we’ll kill any that attempt to harm her. Fight us and you will die.”

The ex-governor nodded. “Thanks to you and *your* princess, each of these men already face death sentences for treason. This is our only way out. We have nothing to lose.”

Kile stepped to Farilane’s side. As he did, she noticed his awkward grip shifted on the haft. She smiled at him then, as if they were the only two in that field—as if they were the only two in the world.

In an attempt to win the battle before swords crossed, Vicross, Lars, and the first prymus rushed Farilane with their daggers. Using the handle of the ax, Kile broke Lars’s wrist and knocked Vicross off-balance, but the prymus’s weapon punched into Kile. An instant later, Kolby’s great sword flashed, and three heads hit the grass.

Kile dropped the ax and grabbed his side.

“Kile!” Farilane shouted.

He tried to pull away, struggled to retreat, but she was on him, her hands searching for the wound. She had seen the blade go in. The prymus was an experienced soldier and knew how to turn a knife. Regardless of what organs may have been punctured, Kile would bleed out. The look on his face was desperate. Then, as her hands found the spot, he sighed, and Farilane gasped.

No blood. No wound. The princess found the tear in his tunic where the blade had gone in, but that was all.

As the world around them filled with the clash of metal and the cries of men, the two stared at one another.

“What a fool I’ve been,” Farilane said. “Somewhere in the afterlife, Virgil is laughing at me.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

THE PROPHECY

The sight that afternoon was something Farilane could never have imagined and would never forget. The Battle of Shepherd's Field—as Farilane instantly dubbed it—was perhaps the shortest conflict of its size. Nearly five hundred legionnaires faced one hundred Teshlor Knights. The fight, she estimated, took little more than fifteen minutes. More than two hundred legionnaires were killed. The rest fled. Not a single knight died.

By noon, the one hundred Teshlors had returned across the Bernum River and marched unopposed into the imperial city of Percepliquis and up the Grand Marchway. At their head strode Princess Farilane myr Nyphron. Her long blond hair, lit by the bright sun, whipped in the wind. The full force of the Teshlor Guild, clad in armor and streaked with the blood of their enemy, arrived in perfect formation at the steps of the palace. The imperial guards said nothing—did nothing. They became statues, unwilling to so much as move.

Farilane stood with one foot on the first step, Kolby to one side, Kile to the other. She made no announcement. She didn't need to. Her family knew she was home.

"I take it Manuel delivered the message?" Kolby asked.

"*Nothing but death will stop me,*" Farilane said. "You know, I was the one who invented that particular coded declaration of trust."

He nodded. "According to guild legend, you said it just before the battle up in Fairington against the giant Ozhor."

"According to guild legend? You weren't there?"

“I was eight at the time. I’m just glad you remembered. Didn’t want you to think you’d been abandoned and became so frightened that you fainted.”

She responded with a glare.

He grinned. “I’m surprised you never asked how we did it. How we got there so fast.”

“You were already there,” Farilane replied. “You crossed the night before and waited in the forest.”

Kolby looked disappointed. “But you can’t possibly know how we—”

“Kile told you.” Farilane faced him. “But he lied to you as well.”

“He lied?” Kolby looked puzzled. “How can you know he—you don’t even know what he said.”

“What did he say?”

“He said he overheard—”

“He lied.”

Kolby looked flabbergasted and offered his palms to Kile. “Tell her that —”

“She’s right. I lied,” Kile admitted.

Kolby stared at the scribe, baffled. “You did? But you couldn’t. It happened just as you said.”

“He lied about how he knew,” Farilane explained. “Mostly because you wouldn’t believe him if he told you the truth.”

Kile stood beside her, his head bowed. If it had been anyone else, she might have asked after his health. Farilane didn’t possess the knight’s skill for reading body language, but at that moment, Kile looked sick.

“You haven’t asked about the prophecy,” the scrivener said softly.

She reached out a hand and took hold of his. “I didn’t want you to go away again. And I suspected that was the sort of question that would make you disappear.”

“Farilane, I—” Kile began as the palace doors opened.

Her father and brother came out together. Dressed in the full imperial regalia of blue-and-white robes, gold chains and rings, and velvet trailing mantles, they made their way to the landing. A wind whipped down the Grand Marchway, snapping the banners, robes, and Farilane’s hair. It rustled leaves on the trees of the square and clapped the rope of the flagpole. Everything else was completely silent, and for a moment—just

that moment—the princess felt as if the world had stopped. Inside that vacuum of time, Farilane asked her question.

“Why?”

The soon-to-be Emperor Nyrian refused to look her in the eye as he stood with his arms hanging limp at his sides. He replied in a decidedly weak manner, “I had no choice. None of us did.”

Farilane held back a laugh. If the situation before her were not so sad or so dire, she would have guffawed until she was out of breath. Instead, she punched out with words. “Really? No choice? You’re the absolute ruler of the known world, and you had no choice but to order my death? To have a bunch of filthy thugs murder me in a miserable field and have my body weighted down and tossed in the river? There you go, Nordyan, now you know where my tomb was to be. At the bottom of the Bernum.”

“Lanie, please,” Nordyan said.

She couldn’t stop this time and laughed, then swept out her arm to indicate the ranks of blood-covered knights behind her who filled Imperial Square, each standing inhumanly still. “These men have formally asked that I assume control of the empire.”

Expressions on her family’s face took a dramatic shift from guilty frowns and consoling eyes to high-arched brows and open mouths.

“They argue that by unjustly ordering my death—and commanding that my execution be carried out by criminals and the act subsequently hidden—you have dishonored yourself and the throne upon which you sit. As such, you have abdicated your right to rule, which releases them from their oaths to serve you. Being that I am the only remaining and untarnished member of the imperial bloodline, the crown falls to me, as does their loyalty.”

Farilane moved up a step.

“You wouldn’t dare,” Nyrian said. “I’m your father.”

“When mother died, you told me, ‘Don’t care too much for them.’ I assume you mean *family*.” She took another step.

“Such a thing would mean civil war. It would rip the empire apart.”

“I doubt that. The legionnaires clearly aren’t as particular as the Teshlor Knights when it comes to who they will serve. I honestly don’t think the empire would experience a hiccup, much less a rip. No. If I asked Kolby to execute the two of you right now, I think that would end the whole affair.” She dusted her hands before her. “Problem solved for everyone.”

“Execute? How dare you!”

Farilane’s own mouth dropped open in surprise. “How *dare* I? Are you seriously going to stand there before me and be outraged at the suggestion that I should order your deaths only hours after you did the same to me?”

“You can’t do it!”

“Of course I can!” she shouted at him, then pointed back at the square. “Have you not noticed them? In this situation, one is overkill. There are a hundred knights behind me. With just one word, they will drop you to the marble on which you stand and lay out any who complain.” Farilane looked to Kolby, who stared back at her stone-faced. His expression, while betraying no hint of his opinion or his mind, was beyond grim. Those cold eyes terrified her, and for a moment, she wondered if he’d really do it.

Once more, a hush fell over the world. When she spoke again, it was in a soft, gentle tone, yet she could be clearly heard. “I can, but I won’t because that’s not who I am. These men behind me wouldn’t be here if that were the case. They are honorable and so am I. But I could order your imprisonment. I could ask Kolby to haul you both off to some secure villa and make certain you never leave. If I did, who could stop him?”

“I could,” Martasen Dray stepped out of the doorway.

Farilane pulled her leading foot from the higher step and stared at the former First Minister. “I’m sorry. When last we met, you were on my side—I certainly was on yours.”

“I am not on anyone’s side,” Dray declared in a remarkably conversational voice, as if they were arguing about the chance of later rain. “At least not the side of anyone here.”

“Whose side *are* you on?” she asked, genuinely curious. The man whom she’d once written off as dull turned out to be an onion of infinite layers.

“We follow the Cenzlyor, Suri.”

Farilane’s brows gathered in a furrow above the bridge of her nose. “Unless my information is wrong, the mystic Suri is dead—has been for some time.”

“Yes,” Dray replied. “But we have kept her spirit alive. We are the Cenzars, the followers of the Cenzlyor, guardians of the peace she established nearly two thousand years ago.” As he said this, twelve monks filed out of the palace and formed a line to either side of Dray.

“So all the Monks of Maribor *are* Artists.”

“No.” The former First Minister shook his head. “The monks came later. We have lived and trained in the Forest of Suri for centuries. We watch the world from the shadows, safeguarding Suri’s achievement.”

“The peace between humans and Fhrey.”

He nodded.

“And the monks?”

“Bran came to the forest seeking protection from Nyphron. He was beloved by Suri. She thought of him as a nephew, it’s said. He stayed there a while and became close friends with an Artist named Dibben, who became something of a convert to his teachings. They went east together. No one knows why. But when Dibben returned, he was alone—carrying the body of Bran. Dibben and several of Bran’s followers built the monastery upon the graves of Bran and his parents. We Cenzars—their neighbors—watch over and protect them, as we believe that is what Suri would have wished.”

“Wonderful story, but why are you siding with my father who clearly would like to see you and the rest of the *Artists*—and the monks—treated as criminals.”

“Because we have no choice.”

Farilane gaped again, shaking her head. “What’s with this shortage of *choice*? The last time I heard you speak, you were explaining to my father how your infinite power makes you beyond his control. Yet here, you claim inexplicable helplessness.”

“We follow the teaching of the Cenzlyor. This is what she wanted.”

“And what exactly is *this* that you are referring to?”

“Farilane,” her father said, taking a step forward, his hands reaching out. His tone had lost its anger, even its authority. He spoke like a man—like a father. “Believe me when I tell you we didn’t want this. Your grandfather didn’t, your brother doesn’t, and I certainly do not. I fought against it. It tore me apart to give that horrible order. We even tried to stop it. Nordyan chased after you, but as one might expect, we failed.”

“Stop what?”

Nyrian looked devastated. This wasn’t an act. He was sincere.

“The prophecy,” she said.

Her father nodded, and his sight shifted to Kile, who remained beside her. “We didn’t believe it—not at first, not for more than a hundred years, but things kept happening.”

“By these ten events you will know my prophecy is true.” Farilane repeated Sephryn’s ominous words.

“Farilane, what would you do if a prophet demanded something awful in order to prevent an unimaginable future? You wouldn’t take him seriously. No one would. But what if he proved himself by making a list of things that one by one *did* come to pass?”

“What sort of unimaginable future?”

“The fall of the empire and the destruction of the entire human race.”

She nodded. “Okay, yeah, that’s bad. And what were the ten things?”

“That my daughter would become the only woman to ever win the Teshlor Shield of Bravery. That just outside of Fairington, she would kill the last Grenmorian while nearly being crushed to death. That she would write the definitive modern history of the world and name it *The Migration of Peoples*. That she would be the only survivor of the Vordik Typhoon, a feat accomplished by sailing a ten-foot sloop into a storm that had sunk a fleet. That she would destroy the Belgric Kingdom—”

“I didn’t do that.”

“No? The damage to Rhinehart’s reputation has made it impossible for him to rally his people. Even now, the last remnants of the dwarven kingdom are breaking up. Instead of reunifying, the dwarven lands will soon become the Imperial Province of Belgosia, increasing the empire’s size by one-fifth.”

Farilane lowered her head. “I didn’t know.”

“Of course you didn’t. You also didn’t know you would lead Mawyndulë to the Horn of Gylindora, and that he would kill Empress Dowager Sephryn. We were also told that Estermon the Second would die on your 200th birthday. And that soon after, my daughter would . . .” Nyrian gestured at the knights in the square. “That she would incite a Teshlor revolt against the emperor.”

“Oh.” Farilane’s confidence—her self-assured belief that she stood on the right side of this encounter—was badly shaken. “That’s a pretty specific and accurate list, but it’s only nine. What’s the tenth?”

“That she would establish the Imperial Cenzarium Council and restore the art of magic to the world of men.”

She sighed. “I suppose there’s only one more question left to ask then, isn’t there?”

Farilane faced Kile. He wasn’t looking at her. He wasn’t looking at anyone. At that moment, Virgil’s replacement was utterly fascinated with the architecture of the palace, but in his eyes was misery. This man, who for too long had been a riddle too difficult to solve, was the very illustration of desolate. “What did you tell them they had to do?”

Kile struggled to meet her eyes. “Kill you,” he said.

Farilane had known the answer before she heard it, but the words coming out of his mouth still took her breath. She struggled to remain on her feet as she felt the world begin to spin. “You saved me from Vicross—” Her words came out as a whisper, not because she wanted to be quiet but because her voice had fled. “You saved me . . . but you only did it so that the last two events on the list would be properly fulfilled.”

Kile looked down at the steps.

Kolby moved closer, ready to catch her. “I don’t give a damn about any prophecy.” The knight’s voice was the roar of a deep furnace fire. “I will die before I let them hurt you.”

Kolby drew a sword, raised it overhead and turned to face the assembled guild. “Who here will fight for Farilane?”

The roar that followed could be felt on her back and brought tears to her eyes.

“Who here will die if you must to protect her?”

She felt the combined shout as those tears slipped down her cheeks.

Then it began.

Kolby didn’t say another word, but from the square the knights began shouting: “FAR-I-LANE, FAR-I-LANE. FAR-I-LANE.”

Too loud, she thought. There are only a hundred.

The chorus behind her was deafening. Turning, she found that during the encounter, the citizenry of Percepliquis had turned out. The square was packed. The balconies of the buildings were stuffed, the broad avenue of the Grand Marchway filled. All of them—everyone—shouted her name such that the very stone seemed to vibrate.

When she turned back to confront her family, she expected to see fear or perhaps anger on the faces of her father and brother. Instead, she saw tears on their cheeks. Both looked at her, and never before had she witnessed, nor ever imagined seeing, such pride in their eyes.

Once more, she took hold of Kile's hand. "We need to talk," she told him. Then, to Kolby she said, "Wait here. Do nothing."

"But, Your Highness—"

"That is an order from the princess, and I mean it this time, Kolby. Just wait for me."

"As you wish," he said, but she saw fear in his eyes, the same emotion Virgil had seen that morning in the village of Roch. He was terrified of losing her.

"Come with me," she told Kile and pulled him away.



With the scrivener in tow, Farilane walked away from Kolby, past her brother and father, past Martasen Dray, and into the palace. She didn't stop. Deeper and deeper she traveled through the corridors, the chant following her. They passed down Memorial Hall and entered the one place, aside from her personal quarters, that Farilane knew would be empty—the center of the world, the imperial throne room.

Once inside, she slammed the door, causing it to boom a hollow echo that shut out the voices. Then she whirled on Kile. "Sweet cackling serenade!" she shouted at him. "What's going on?"

"I'm sorry," he said.

"Don't give me that!" She wiped tears and hair from her eyes so she could see his face clearly. Never before had she had such a need to read an expression. "Tell me! Why do you want me dead?" Farilane folded her shoulders in, her arms clutching herself. She felt as if she'd been stabbed multiple times and was growing weaker each second as more than mere blood drained away. She had an increasing sense that she'd already lost this fight—it ended even before she had been born. All that remained was the consolation of being granted the time to understand, to accept. She wanted to sob but couldn't—not yet. "Kile . . . my father told me never to love

anyone—said it would kill me. Well, apparently, he was right, and I didn't listen because you were just so damn enticing with your tilting head, unfathomable mysteries, disarming manner, and keen intellect. I really thought . . . I mean, seriously, I never felt this way about anyone before, and it doesn't hurt that you happen to be a god! But I suppose that's part of it, isn't it? That's how you managed to—to . . . How ironic is that? The two things I was absolutely certain about were that magic didn't exist and that there are no gods!" She threw up her hands up in frustration. "I just . . . I just don't understand. I thought we were friends. I even thought you liked me. We're so similar. I've only known you for a few weeks, and yet we constantly tripped over a shared synchronicity. There's a children's game sparked by saying the same thing at the same time. It's considered bad luck. Apparently, that's true." She wiped her face. "Kile, was it all an act? Is that just what gods do, mess with people, break their hearts? Do you enjoy this?"

Kile shook his head. He didn't look like he was enjoying anything. Eyes tense, mouth tight, he had that sick face again as if he struggled not to vomit.

"Then why? Why do you want me dead?"

"I don't." His eyes locked hard on hers. His gaze seemed to drill deep with a desperate need to prove his sincerity. "Believe me when I tell you that."

"Then what is going on? Why is this happening?"

"It's all my fault."

"I know that!" she nearly screamed. "You and your ten-point predictions! Everyone knew about them. Except me. My mother knew, too, didn't she?"

Kile nodded.

"Everyone knew that I had to die, but tell me, Kile, does anyone know *why*?"

"No." The word came out weak and soft, riding on a lack of air. "Not the whole of it."

"No?"

He shook his head.

Farilane spread out her arms in indignation. "Why not?"

“They wouldn’t understand.” Kile turned away, walking in a circle over to the map of Elan, crossing the Green Sea, stepping through the eastern archipelago until he returned to her. “It’s too complicated for anyone to follow, and it takes a certain sort of mind to even begin to allow for the existence of the sort of ideas necessary. Most don’t have the tools needed to put the pieces together. In all the years I’ve walked this world, I’ve never met anyone who had a hope of grasping the nature of what I do, or how—much less why.” He stared at her. “Until now.” Cupping her cheek briefly with his hand, he added, “That’s been the problem with all of this. Unlike everyone else, you understand.”

Farilane forced her hands to her sides and did her best to stand up straight. She felt as if he was about to pass sentence on her for a crime, and she wanted to take it bravely. “I’m listening.”

“You know who I am?”

“I don’t have any proof.”

“Take a guess.”

“You are Erebus, father of the gods.”

Kile smirked. “Erebus was a city.”

“It is?”

“Brin got that wrong, and the retraction was lost, so it’s an easy mistake to make.”

“Well, you’re certainly not Arkum, but you’re part of that pantheon, aren’t you?”

He nodded.

“Who are you, then?”

“I’ve had many names, Turin, Uberlin, Caratacus—”

“Malcolm?”

He nodded.

Most of these were names she knew, but only as absurdities. They were the titles given to superstitions, the totems and good luck charms that ignorant villagers used to push back their fears of the dark. For her, these ancient words brought a blanket to smother the light of the truth.

“Why Kile? Why that name?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know. It’s easy to say, isn’t it?” He struggled to present a smile. It died a quick death. “Look, I’ve done a lot of terrible things, but I’m trying to fix them. It’s not easy, though. When you make a

mess as big as I have, you look at it and wonder where to start. The person I hurt the most was my sister, and her children suffered horribly as a result, so I started there. I gave them a horn linked to the afterlife. I meant it as a safeguard against infighting. It worked, for the most part, but I made a mistake. Believe it or not, I failed to see this.” He held out his hands to her. “I failed to see *you*, of all things.”

“Me?”

“If only I had.” Kile squeezed up his mouth and took a deep inhalation through his nose. “Twins—they never happen with the Fhrey. Never once. I knew that in the future there would be myr, but at the time I made the horn, I didn’t realize that the hybrid of human and Fhrey would introduce that little surprise.”

“But you can see the future.”

“Yes, although you might be surprised how much there is. You’ve seen the night sky, looked at it your whole life. Are you certain you’ve taken note of every star? I didn’t notice you, at least not until it was too late.”

“Why are twins a problem?”

“There was no provision for them in the functionality of the horn. At the death of the fane, the horn won’t be able to clearly determine which offspring is entitled.”

“Wouldn’t it be the first to breathe?”

“The nature of the horn—its connection to Phyre—requires it to track the moment spirit meets vessel. In the case of twins, that window is too close to call. As a result, the horn will recognize both as eligible. There can be only one heir and one challenger. Two heirs mean the horn cannot be blown by anyone. This paradox will shatter it. One twin must die before the ruling fane passes or the horn will be broken, and the house of carefully stacked sticks I have spent generations building will fall. All the sacrifices made by so many will be for nothing. And there have been a lot of sacrifices.”

“And you can’t just wave a hand and change that? You made the horn.”

“Yes, I did, and it is sort of like a promise, a promise people suffered for. Were I still Uberlin, I wouldn’t care. But if I were Uberlin, I wouldn’t be trying to fix what was broken.”

“And you’re certain of this? I mean, you made a mistake with the horn. Could you be missing something now?”

He shook his head. "Failure to notice a rare event isn't the same as when I study something in detail. And believe me, I've scrutinized this more than any other event."

Farilane nodded, which allowed the monster that was her hair to throw more strands into her eyes. She brushed them back, discovering them to be soaked. "Okay, I see that, but why me?" she asked. Knowing the facts of the matter, she felt unjustly accused. "Why not Nordyan? Will he be that much better an emperor than I?"

"No." Kile shook his head. "Nordyan will be mediocre at best, invisible to the course of time, a mere name on a tomb, and he is exactly what is needed at this particular place and time."

"So is it because I'm a woman?"

"No." A sadness flew across his features. "It's because you aren't the *right* woman."

"I don't understand."

"You would be the greatest ruler the world has ever known. You won't be able to help it. Your term as empress would be the candle burning brightest just before darkness consumed all—and I am not exaggerating when I tell you, it quite literally would. I'm threading a needle here. Now is not the time for one such as you to take the throne. Events must fall a certain way. Some of those incidents, like this one, need to unfold in a precise manner and at an exact time to prevent disaster. A series of awful things must occur to make way for a future good. Like a forest fire that clears old trees for new growth."

"So, I am the forest and you the fire?"

"Yes."

Farilane nodded, then once more casting her hair back, she walked in a tight circle, starting in Estramnadon, crossing the Nidwalden, arcing around Mount Mador, then pivoting back. "I don't have a choice, do I?"

Kile looked surprised. "Oh yes, you do." He said this with sincere intensity, as if he were appalled, even insulted, that she didn't know. "I can't . . ." He bowed his head, then faced her again. "Look, forcing people to do things is how I got into this mess. My approach has always been to manipulate. People do what I want because I arrange the world around them to suit the choices I need them to make. But in your case . . ."

"Yes?"

“As I said before—you *understand*. You perceive too much. Maneuvering you isn’t easy. Worse yet”—he looked sick once more—“I don’t want to.”

“Why not?”

He hesitated for a long while. He looked down at the floor, then out at the Blue Sea. “I’d rather not say.” Just then, she noticed Kile’s lower lip tremble. “So, as a shock for both of us, you do have a choice. I won’t force it. I can’t—which is another reason why your brother is a problem. If given the choice, Nordyan would not choose to sacrifice himself. When I say I scrutinized this juncture, I studied every option—including that one. Furthermore, I cannot kill him. If I cause his death, not only would the world suffer the same terrible fate I’m attempting to stop, but it would happen a lot faster. He’s just as innocent as you are. And, quite frankly, there’s more at stake than merely the existence of humans, dwarfs, Fhrey, and ghazel. The future is darker than you can imagine—it is the nightmare that nightmares fear. I alone see it far in the distance, growing closer every day. And only I can stop it. I must be the one because it’s my fault. In a sense, we are both trapped. So, you get to decide.”

“How long do I have?”

“In order for everything to fall as it must . . . you have tonight.”

“Tomorrow? I must die tomorrow?”

“At dawn.”

“Dawn?” Farilane felt a weight on her chest. Her breath became short.

“Your death will lock the timeline and send it in the right direction. The world will mourn you, and a million tiny reverberations will result and spread out like ripples that will seed the future. If you don’t die, if you see the sunrise, then the window will be missed, and the baseline of the future will change. The cascading events won’t properly line up and none of what is required will occur. Everything will fail. I know it’s hard to understand, but little things have massive repercussions.”

She nodded. “How am I to, ah . . . I mean, in what manner must I . . .”

He shook his head. “Doesn’t matter—just so long as you die.”

“And if I choose to live?”

“Then you will live.”

She put her palms together, nodded, then set her fingertips to her lips. “But everything will be destroyed as a result?”

“Maybe not *everything*,” he replied.

“Will humanity be spared?”

Kile shook his head.

“The Fhrey?”

Another shake.

“So the dwarfs inherit the world?”

“Afraid not.”

She felt as if the air had been sucked from her lungs. “Wow,” the word came out an octave higher than she expected. She forced a fake grin. “You really—you really make my choice fun, don’t you?”

“I’ll tell them to await your decision.” Kile said. “I’ll tell them that the prophet decrees you have the right of choice, and that it will be honored.” He started for the door.

“Kile?” she stopped him.

He turned.

“I’m sorry,” she said.

For the first time, he appeared at a total loss. “Sorry? I don’t understand. For what?”

“This must be awful for you.”

“This must be awful . . . for *me*?”

“I don’t know what it is you did, what crimes you committed, but I can see this penance of yours is beyond horrible. I’d rather be the forest than the fire. Whether you succeed or not, allow me to add my voice to the many who must have thanked you over the centuries for what you are trying to do.”

Kile stared at her, dumbfounded. He blinked, balled his hands into fists, wet his lips, then took a deep and steady breath.

“What?” she asked.

“You are the first.” He turned quickly and headed for the door.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

A BLIZZARD IN SUMMER

Farilane walked in a circle around the world. She took her time. Still, it only required a minute to circumnavigate Elan, to travel from Desolatia and back again. In the end, she stood on Percepliquis, the City of Persephone, the center of the world, and sighed.

Farilane recalled again her mother's words. *I'm so sorry for leaving you and for never telling you the truth. I hope you can forgive me . . . They don't want you to know. They believe it will be easier, but maybe it will just be easier for them. There are reasons, of course, justifications that sound sensible when spoken, but the heart doesn't understand arguments. Mine doesn't.*

"That makes two of us, Mother," Farilane said to the hollow hall of stone statues.

All I can offer is this: Don't allow being a princess to become a burden or a chain. Forget being proper. Do what you like. Wait on nothing. Listen to no one. Go out into the world and live each day to the fullest. Be adventurous. Be reckless. Defy everyone. Then, when your last day finally comes, you can take solace in a life well lived and regret nothing.

"I did as you asked, Mother, but I still have regrets." Her lonely voice echoed off the marble emperors of old. "The world is too big, too wonderful. I never went to Calynia. I hear they have flowers the size of horses. I never saw Drumindor, and I only just learned about Avempartha and discovered there is a *Second Book of Brin*. What a fine adventure it would have been searching for that." She scanned the map at her feet, wondering where the treasure might be hidden.

“And I never fell in—” She caught herself. One hand rushed to her mouth, then the other joined it as if teaming up to prevent the words from coming out—to prevent a lie. Her fingertips trembled against her lips. Breathing was difficult, seeing even harder.

“He says I have a choice, but I don’t. He knows it as well as I.” She stood up straight and turned her head toward the door. “But I won’t make it easy on any of them.”



Princess Farilane stepped out of the palace into the midday sun before the gathered population of the city. She walked past her father and brother, past Kile and Kolby, and stood on the top of the steps, facing the citizenry and the Teshlor Guild.

She took a deep breath and in a loud, clear voice stated, “I will be making a sacrifice on behalf of the empire and all the people of Elan. This offering is necessary to stave off a great evil.” She looked to Kolby. His face was ashen.

No one appeared confused about the nature of the sacrifice. Either more people knew the situation than she ever would have imagined, or the details had been made public while she was inside. Either way, she was happy not having to explain.

Then she addressed the knights as a whole, “I do this willingly. No one compels my choice. I would never lie, and I would never allow anyone to force me into anything. Most of you know me and can attest to this firsthand. And please know how honored I am that you are here and that you would gladly save me if I but asked. Though I have never been one of your number, you have long made me feel welcomed and loved. You have been my friends . . . my family . . . and I love you all dearly.” She took another breath, forcing down the emotions that threatened to choke her.

This was harder than she had expected. She hadn’t anticipated the crowd that had tripled, and she certainly hadn’t imagined she would ever see Teshlor Knights weep.

“I also want to take this moment to explain that from this day forth, reading and writing will be legal in the empire. That books and scrolls will

be treated with care as the treasures they are. That every member of the empire should be encouraged to learn this miraculous skill and those who excel at it should be held in high regard. A grand building—a repository, a protectorate, and a resource for the public use of books—henceforth known as a *library*—will be constructed in the center of this city. Anyone who wishes may go there and read anything they like. My personal collection will form the seeds of this book garden that will, I hope, flourish and grow.”

Without turning, she asked. “Isn’t that right, Father?”

“Yes,” she heard him say.

Farilane’s voice grew solid and strong. “Furthermore, the art of magic will no longer be outlawed. This empire was founded with the aid of the magical arts, and it is only by its virtues that we can keep the empire strong and safe. I therefore announce that First Minister Martasen Dray will establish the Imperial Cenzarium Council, which, along with the Teshlor Guild, will advise the emperor and protect the empire.” Again, still facing the square, she asked, “Isn’t that right, Father?”

“Yes,” Nyrian replied.

“And in my absence, I charge both the Teshlors and cenzars with the responsibility of ensuring these things come to pass and beg them to work together to help support the emperor in guiding the future of this imperium. And that . . .” Having completed her demands, Farilane found her strength faltering. “I know I haven’t always been a sparkling example, but please believe me when I say it has been more than a privilege to be your princess. It has been an honor—one that, to my shame, I never gave much thought to, until now. I feel I could have done more. In the end, I am stunned at how ignorant I was and likely still am. My father and brother deserve your loyalty, and this dream we call the empire is worth . . . well . . . sacrificing for.”

She bowed her head, and when at last she turned around, she was overcome by the sight of tears on every face.



At the sound of the secret knock, Farilane set down her quill and looked up. “Come in, Kile.”

He looked just the same as he had when Virgil first led him in.

Farilane had been up all night. She had so much to do and so little time. Her rooms were still a mess. It would take weeks to reassemble everything into piles of sense. The future librarians would certainly curse her name when they came for her legacy.

She looked at the stars outside her window. "It's late. It'll be dawn soon."

Kile stepped gingerly through the room's treasures and nodded. "No one will do it."

"What?" Farilane asked, standing up. She had long pondered what she ought to wear. People usually didn't have the luxury of picking an outfit to die in. Still, there was only one she'd ever felt comfortable in, so she faced Kile in her legion pajamas.

"No one will serve as executioner."

"No one?" she said puzzled. "Surely I've made someone hate me."

"You did, but the Teshlors have already buried them."

"And there's no one else?"

"Not in this city." Kile said it with pride.

Farilane shook her head in mock disgust. "Where's Mawyndulë when you need him?"

Kile moved to the desk, where he paused to study the pages she'd been writing on. "Last-minute notes?"

She nodded. "Doubt anyone will be able to read them. My hands—they've been shaking a bit. I talk a good game, but, honestly, I'm scared."

"I know." Kile moved close to her and laid his hand on the small of her back. The press of his palm felt warm.

"Is there an afterlife, Kile?"

"Yes." The word was a whisper in her ear.

"Is it wonderful?"

"I don't know. I'm not allowed in."

"But Virgil will be there, right? And my mother, and Jona, and . . . oh, and Brin. I can ask her what's in the *Second Book*, can't I?"

"Perhaps."

Farilane looked at the window and thought she noticed a faint light that made the stars fade. Dawn was breaking.

“You can see the future, Kile, but can you see all the futures? Can you see the one where I choose to live?”

“Yes. Yes, I can.” Again, the words seemed forced out in a gust.

“In it . . . are we together?” She was looking out the window. She couldn’t face him. It hurt too much.

“Yes.” She heard it then. Kile’s voice cracked.

“Is it nice?”

He didn’t answer.

“I’m not going to change my mind, if that’s what—”

“It’s wonderful,” he told her, and she could hear the tears in his voice. “You live for a remarkable thirteen hundred and twenty-five more years, and with you, I find a happiness, a peace, and a repose I never thought was possible. That’s why—that’s why this is so difficult. Right now, you hardly know me. You think—no, you suspect—that I might be that special someone you never thought you’d find.” He shook his head, breathing in air as if his throat were a clogged drain. “But for me, it’s different. You’re right. I’ve seen it—our whole future. I witnessed through frosted glass the gentle times, the tears, the laughter, the children, the moments big and small. Those people out there in the city, they have no idea of the true breadth of this loss. They see the person you are now and mourn, but I have seen the person you become . . . and I’ve fallen in love with her.”

He took her face in his hands. “There are moments in time that are incredibly cruel. The worst occur when true greatness begins to bud but is snuffed out before the blossom. You are the star allowed only to flicker briefly in the morning light, erased by the rising sun.”

“You are my executioner, then?”

Tears ran the length of his face. “I don’t know if I can.”

“You must.”

“I can’t.” He pressed his wet cheek to hers, holding tight.

“The sun is rising.” Farilane thumbed away his tears. “My star must fade.”

Kile began to shake.

“Afterward . . .” Farilane said, “afterward, you can have pie.”

With trembling lips, he dared what no other man had and kissed her. In doing so, he stole her breath away.



Kile walked out of the palace, the first rays of sun hitting the square at the same moment he arrived. No one spoke to him. They knew what he was, what he had done, and they scattered at his approach. Even the knights stepped aside. Having trouble breathing, he paused at the fountain, leaning on it to catch his breath.

Although not a cloud marred the blue sky, thunder cracked overhead. He did not look up, but soon a white feather descended lightly, touching ground inches from his foot. He wiped his eyes clear and stared at it.

Then he walked away.

Two more fell.

He ignored them.

Quickening his pace, he left the city through a growing blizzard of white feathers that blanketed the streets, roofs, and balconies where they remained untouched until the wind blew them away.

AFTERWORD

Well, that was . . . that was, certainly something. Hey all, it's Robin. You might want to take a moment to compose yourself. Don't forget to breathe. If you need a Kleenex, go get one, and if you feel you'll need to step away and come back tomorrow, I'll understand.

Not since the conclusion of *Heir of Novron* have I felt so strongly about the *rightness* of a book's ending. Having run the beta program, I know there are people who don't share my opinion, but there really is no way to give those people what they wanted—which is to have Farilane live. But before I delve too deeply into that subject, let me cover some of the less controversial aspects of this book.

I thought the opening chapter was amazing. I found Farilane to be smart, witty, and adventurous. I knew right away I'd like her. But the best part, especially when looking back, is just how much is packed into that one chapter. Almost every mention is a clue to the book as a whole: Farilane not believing in the existence of gods; the ravaging of a city called Tur; a new cult changing Nyphron to Novron and claiming he isn't an elf; the "incident" in Haston, the search for the Book of Brin (yes, it doesn't explicitly say that's what she's after but we all knew it was); Virgil's subtle remark that told us he knew his time was short; the drop in about the number of generations that have passed since Nyphron died (though I doubt anyone stopped to do the math); the genuine friendship between Virgil and Farilane; the respect that the Teshlor's have for their princess, and of course the mention of pie, which we circle back to right at the end.

There have been books written by Michael where I wasn't expecting a visit from Malcolm/Kile/Uberlin, and, in fact, I even missed his appearance once when he did show up. But for this book, I was expecting to see him "somewhere," and I was thrilled that he arrived so soon—and right in plain sight! I waited with bated breath for Farilane to discover who he was, and I wasn't disappointed with how that played out. For those who haven't read *Revelations*, you'll miss the full impact of the blizzard, but that will just give you a reason to jump into those books.

For *Nolyn* readers, how great was it to see Sephryn again? And for those who suspected—but weren't entirely sure about Mawyndulë posing as Sheldon—the *poker* eliminated all doubt. I loved that we knew exactly who everyone was, while the usually perceptive Farilane was clueless as to what was coming. For those of you who are confused as to why Sephryn gave up the horn, I'll provide a little help. Kile's timeline required the return of magic to the world of men, and the best way to bring that about was to have Mawyndulë face off with First Minister Dray and his disciples. So many moons ago, he told her to hand over the horn when he and Farilane showed up, and that doing so wouldn't result in any disaster. I also love the irony that Mawyndulë had the horn but ultimately left without it. What a doofus!

As the afterword allows me to pull back the veil of the writing process a little, I should mention a few things about this book. Usually, my alpha read results in quite a few changes, but Michael told me before I started that this book was solid, and boy, was he right! There were no substantive changes either because of my feedback or that of the betas, although a few things were *tweaked* because Michael was being a bit too subtle from time to time. It's a tricky business, balancing what you explicitly state and the things you hint at while hoping the reader will put two and two together. Personally, I tend to like the latter, and I "got" what Michael was doing—but there were things missed by the beta readers that left them trying to correct something that, in our opinions, wasn't broken. As I said, Michael did make some adjustments based on their feedback, but he did so with a light hand. If you find yourself thinking, "Well, why didn't Michael just do x, or y, or z?" it's possible that you missed something, or you were just so intent on wanting a happily-ever-after ending that you didn't accept his explanations. It's quite possible that a reread will put things in a different light now that you know where the book ultimately goes.

Which leads me back to the ending. Let me start by saying that I HATE sad endings, so the fact that I enjoyed it as much as I did speaks volumes. I have chided Michael that this may be the book that will end his career, which is ironic because I think it is his best work ever. Without question, it was a heart-wrenching end to what is—for the most part—a fun romp. In many ways, it's not in the same "spirit" as the rest of the tale, and that is probably why some people have had a negative reaction to the book's conclusion. I've heard an earful from the beta testers. Long-time readers

who proclaimed they would never read Michael again. Or people who swore that they would have “thrown the book across the room” except that they were reading on a kindle. And those who described the ending as a “sucker punch.” To some extent, I wonder if the deeds of other authors are partially to blame. There is no doubt there have been writers who will do horrible things to their characters for “shock and awe,” but I can tell you with one hundred percent conviction that it was ABSOLUTELY not the case here. Farilane’s death wasn’t arbitrary or capricious. It HAD to happen. Period. Full stop.

This book is showing a pivotal point in Kile’s development arc. His path to redemption has left many casualties in its wake, and if eggs needed to be broken in the past to make the omelet, so be it. He’s not happy about prior sacrifices, but the stakes have been too high to let sentimentality get in his way. Like Farilane (who is cautioned by her family not to get too attached to humans because they live for such a short time), he had kept his distance from those who have had to die to keep the train on the tracks. But this time it was personal, and it will forever impact him. If Kile had spared Farilane on a technicality, he would have once more returned to his old “Uberlin” ways, and there would be no return from that dark place.

For those who are mourning Farilane’s death to the point of despair, I’ll offer one parting bit of hope: trust in Michael. I think he has proven that, like Kile, there is always a reason for everything. We just have to have faith.

In any case, whether you loved the ending of *Farilane* or hated it, I hope that you found the bulk of the book to be entertaining. To me, this book is pound for pound Michael’s best work. And I hope you’ll feel that your time with Farilane was well spent.

Robin Sullivan
February 25th, 2022

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Carley C. • Christobel C. • Joe C. • Mallory C. • Nathan C. • R. P. C. • Justin C' de Baca • Alec Cabrera • Montse Cacatá: protect your magic — love Dad • Anthony & Lizz Caggiano • In memory of my dad, David P. Calahan, and his love of reading • The Calderon Medina Family • Hilary Caldwell • Jeremy “guns” Caldwell • Joshua Callahan • Marena A. Callahan • Tatiana Calliham • Clay Calvert • Jason Calvert • Annie Cameron • Ross Cameron • Allan Camoirano Jr. • Dustin Campbell • Jim Campbell • Lance Campbell • Matt Campbell • Rob Campbell • Robert Campbell • Kevin Candiloro • Candy & Justin • Clay Cannon • Sean Cannon • Michael Cantrell • The Cantu-Wang Family • James Capezzi • Jennifer Caracappa • Jaelle Caradona • Hector Cardenas • Marnilo Cardenas • Evett Cardwell • Alfredo R. Carella • Greg Carey • Stephanie Carlson • Al Carlton • Ty Carl • Errin Carner • Klaus “The Sheep King” Carney • Dane Caro • Allison Marie Caron • Ian J. Carpenter • Jodi Lee Carpenter • Joseph Carpenter IV • Jeffrey Carr • Jeffrey D. Carr • Ines Carradice • Brian Carroll • John Carson • Jose A. Rodriguez Cartagena • Carolyn Carter • Jennine Carter • Troy Carter • Michael Caruso • K. & L. Carvalho-Silva • Peter Casale • Tricia Cascio • Beth Case • CJ Case • Casey Catherine & Orrin • Anthony Cassidy • Kevin Cassidy • Benedict C. Cassie • Eddie Castro • Nick Catalano • Victor Cata • Rowan Catlett • Terry Catucci • Tammie Causey • JD Cavazos • Tim “Starmarc” Caves • Badea Maria Cecilia • Jacob Cederwall • Jonathan J. Cervantes • David Lars Chamberlain • Douglas Chan • Jaime Chan • Kevin Chan • TS Chan • Bobby Chancellor • David Chanda • Paul & Shirley Chandler • Bernardo Chapar • Maya Hainze Chapman – Niceville, FL • Julia Charlow & Martin Forbes • Bryce & Owen Chasteen • Chris Chasteen • Nikaya Chausmer • Mike Chaussee • Daniel Che • Brian Cheek • Adam Cheer • Brent Chelewski • Cheng Cheng • Richard Chiang • Kristopher Childress • Noel Chin • Leigh Chittum • Tim, Jess, Luke & Naomi Chitwood • Joseph Chong • Charlotte Choo • Chouxherbe • Chris • Nat & Laura Christenson • Christina & Marco • Derek Christman • Amanda Christopher • Danielle Chritchley • Beryl Chueh • Shanna Chugg • Lina Chung • Jim Cicchillo •

Matt Ciccone • Timothy Cichon • For my two favorite readers, Claire & Paige • David Clark • Jenelle Clark • Sierra Clark, aspiring author • Quentin Clauwaert • Adam Clemens • Joshua Cleveland • Andrea Clostio • Richard & Vanessa Rivas Clouston • CMT • Peter Coates • Bethany Cobb • Andrew Cobble • Stephen Cobb • Darcie Cobos • Lisa Cockrell • Nolan Ray Jerome & Kaleb Lee James Cofer • Gareth Coffee • Ben S. Cohen • Larry Coker • Ryan Colbeth • The Colburn/Luedtke Family (Elo, Tasha & Jason): in loving memory of Oma, master fantasy reader • Mathew Colburn • Ab Colby • Antonino Cole • Brandon Cole • Melissa Cole • Ryan Cole • Josiah Collins • Justin Collins • Kevin & Alex Collins • Lawrence Collins • Todd Collins • Collin & Nicolette Coltman • Todd M. Colucci • BJ, Willow & Sharis Colvin • Susie Combs • CompuChip • Seth Condie • Steve Conley • Jim & Michelle Connor • Chris Cook • Elise Cook • Lauren Cook • Michael A. Cook • Ed Cooke • Richard Cooke • Josh Cookson • Jeff Cooney • Ben Cooper • Chris Cooper – Rossville, KS • Michelle N. Cooper • Jashana Copeman • Anke Corbeil • Ashley Corbeille • Sarah Corbeil • For my son, Harrison P. Corey • Trevor Corlett • Abby Corson • Isidoro Cesar & Isaac Cortes • Arletta Kelley Cortright • Kelley Cortright • Rin Corvetti-French • The Corvin Family • Anthony Cossio • Stephen Costanzo • Tyson Y. Cote • Phyllis J. Cotner-Fellous • Brandon Cotten • Chris Couch, UK • Larry Couch • Cougs & Cub – Henderson, NV • For Violet Coulton: all my love – Grangrad • Damon J. Courtney • CovinoAlyssa • Andrew Cowell • Allie & Jonathan Cowles • Joanna Cowles – Cleveland, OH • Theodore D. C. Cox, fellow author • Matthew Coyle • Jacob Crabb • Brian Crabtree • Kathryn & Shane Craig • Greg Crain • Craiu Remus Armand • Bruce Cramer • Jordin Cramner • Jeffrey Crane • Jeremy A. Crane • Clayton Cravath • Charles Crawford • Wendy Crayford • Chris Creech • Preston Creed • Kim CreMeens • Rod Cressey • Ben Crew • Alex Crewell • Hwang Crew • The Crissey Family • Nathan B. Crocker • Austin & Lauren Croft • Jens Cromheecke • Kevin & Cody Cronic • Michelle & Brad Crosby • PL Cross • Tim Cross • Trevor & Justina Crow • Michael Crowe • David Crumbley • Aaron “Crumpy” Crump • Cygnus Crux • Stephanie & Olivia Cudo • Brendan Cueva • Heather Cueva • Roisin Cullen • Mark Cummings • Michael Cummings • The Cunningham Family • Lark Cunningham • Elijha & Marcie Curcie • Sam Curran • Kate Currie • Glenn

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— D —

David D. • Garren D. • Leolani D. • Mikey D. • Giuseppe D'Aristotile • Sapphire D'Chalons • Brian Dabbs • Travis Dacus • Axel Daemar • Daimadoshi_CL • Blaž Dakskobler • Tim Dale • Dani Daly • Elizabeth Daly • Joel Damir • For Cornelis Jasper & Jasper Cornelis Damman • Stephen Damon – Warsaw, IN • David Dangelico • Mike Danielson • Tyler Daniels • Danilo & Trine • Patricio Danos • The Dansie Family: Jeff, Shelly, Tenia, Chartise & Shaena • Ben & Susana Darnell • Chas Daugherty • The Daugherty Family • Graham Dauncey • Elizabeth Dauphinais • Kathrine Davenport • Russell Davey • Michelle David • Rafe W. Davidson – Edmonton, Alberta • Charli Davies • Lee Davies • Colton M. Davis • D. Lynette Davis • The Davis Family • Jennifer Goard Davis • Joanna Davis • Leslie Davis • Lori Davis • Michael Davis • Rocky A. Davis • Terry Davis • Lilly Dawn • For my kids, Austin & Amelia: may you love reading as much as I do — Sarah Day • Michael Dayan • The Dayley Family • Dazzle • DC • Chris de Eyre • Gerber de Lange • Jeffrey de Lange • Wendy de Peuter • The De Stena Family • Dénes Deák • Annetta Dean • For my ducks, Dean, Crowley & Marv • J. C. Dean • John & Joshua Dean – Sturtevant, WI • Kyle DeBuck • Jennifer Deel • Shawna JT Dees • Isak DeFay • The Deitrich Family • Jean Dejace • Alan DeKok • Michael Delaney • Marci DeLeon • Julian Delgado • Tom Delis • Brian Christopher Dell • Mark W. Dell'Orfano • Scott Dell'Osso • Terry Dellino • Sheldon & Brittani Dement • For my daughter, Charlotte Demme • Diane S. Dempsey • Stephen Denney • Paul Dennison • Ken Denny • Ryan Depuy • Alex DeRadke • A. Derda • James Michael Derieg • Spencer Derrick • Deryk, Crystal, Sabryn, Seymoure & Rolo • RaeAnn & Raymond Desmarais • Peter Devine & Gina Jiang • Robert Philip DeVoll • Andrew DeVore • Ginger DeWitte • The Dey Family • Rishi & Zephany Dhuray • Nicholas Diakos • Alison Diamond – Lincolnton, GA • Mark Diamond • Patricia Diani • Matthew Diaz • Paul Diaz • Simon Dick • Samantha Dickerson • Andrew R. Dickie • James R. Dicks • Anthony Dicostanzo • Mike & Carrie

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— E —

Audra Eaket • In loving memory of our sweet baby, Vicious Eapen • Josh Earl • Alli Earnest, fellow indie author • Joanne Easton • Dain Eaton • Mary & Suzan Eaton • The one the only Tyler Ebbighausen • Brandy Eckman • Mark T. Eckstein • Steven Ede • The Edge Family • David Edmonds • Paul Edmunds • Colby Edrington • To Alexander & Evelyn Edwards: keep reading! • Jesse W. Edwards • Suzanne Egan • J.D. & Liz Egbert • The Ege's • Nathan Eggleston • Mark & Phyllis Egner • Martin Eichman & Gabriela Perez • Eimear • Eirella • Evan Eisenberg • Kjetil Vinjerui Ekre • Evan Elder • Kelsey Elder • Eldrin • Alisa Elery • Elizabeth • Mohamed Elkammar • Tyler Ellgen • Jasmine M. Elliott • Joshua P. Elliott • Larry Marshall Elliott • Jared Ellsworth • Matthew Ellsworth • Rachel Elstein • EM • Jamie EMB • Nelson Embrey III • Christian Emden • Michael Emerson • Brian Emery • Emil • Andrew Enano • Travis Enfield • Autumn Engdahl • Angie Engelbert • Alex Engelhardt • Nicole Engstrom • Arista

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— F —

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loving memory of my mum, Winifred Forsyth • Quentin Foster • Josefine Fouarge • Gregory Fougere • Jeanine M. Fournier • Emily Foust • Andrea Fowler • Joshua Fowler • Max Fowler, thanks for the adventures • Anthony Fox • Cathy Fox • Jessica Fox • Larry France • Richard Francisco • Ian J. Francis • Deborah Franco • Mason Frandsen • Dennis J. Franks • Jon H. P. Frantzen • Jeffrey Frederick • Scott Frederick • Ian Tyler Fredrickson • Barbie Freeman • Gordon Freeman • Samuel & Brad Frick • Åsa Frid • R. L. Friedli • Nancy Frieese • Anja Fritsch • Phil Fritzsche • Frodo & Jack • Julien Froment • Darren Fry • Nate Fuenning • Fuentes & Colucci • Johannes Fuhr • Robert Fulford • Daniel J. Fullem • Caitlin Fuller • Melissa Fuller & Will Prier • Mira Furgoch & Riley Sievers • Danielle Furr • Randy Furr & Scott Adams • Nicole Fuschetti • The Fuster Family of Virginia • Arthur Fyles

— G —

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— H —

Andrew H. • Brendan H. • Carol H. • Ellie H. • Justin H. • Matt H. • Nicole H. • Phillip H. • Rachel H. • Trista H. • Kenny Ha • Rachel Haag • Adrienne

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Joanna, Elayna & Edwin Hall • Ethan Hall • Michael D. Halley • Dominik
Halper • Paw Poul Elling Halse • T. Halsey • Noura Hamade • Derek
dedicates this to his grandpa, Ron Hamel • Adam Hamers • Ben, Melissa,
Callie, Brenna & Cooper Hamilton • Heather Leigh Hamilton • Lama
Hamilton • Pamela Hamlet • Jonathan Hamm • Audrey Hammer • David B.
Hammer • Steve Hammonds • Vivian Illiana Hammons • Feildon Hampton
and family • Samuel Hamrin • Hams is my favourite dog • Daddy
Hancock • Matt Hancock, the love of my life • Nate Hancock • Kristian
Handberg • Gregory Haney, may you never give up reading aloud • Dacia
Haning • Emily Hanke • Matthew Hannewald • Jeff Hann • Harley
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Ross Indiana Harris • Tyler Harris • C.C. Harrison • Margaret Harrison •
Kelsey Hart • Ryan Michael Hart • Jeanne Hartley • Michelle Hartline •
Scott Hartup • Sarah Kendall Hartwick, thanks for introducing me to
Michael • Stacy Harty • For my son and aspiring author, Matthias Harvey •
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Tim Hayes • The Haymakers • Timothy Hayward-Browne • Daniel &
Rachel Hazlett • Cole Heap • George Heard • Ervin Hearn III • Stephanie
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Henderson • Chester Hendrix • Björn Henke • Sebastian Henkel • Colten

Henrie • Scott Henryson • Ben Hensey • Mitchell Ryan Hensley • Johnny Hentsch: man, myth, and legend • Ellysa Hermanson • Ted Herman • Gabriel Hernandez • Marcos Hernandez • Tambre H. Herndon • The Herron Bird • Jim Hess • Kenneth Hess • Adrienne Hiatt • Douglas Hickel • Paul & Amy Hickey 2022 • The Hiding Family • Kevin J. Higgins • Patrick High • Haney Hilario • Brian Hill • Bryan, Joy, Alamea, Kai & Millie Hill • Dan Hill, the guy who feeds Flapjack every day • Ethan James Scout Hill • Jenna Hill • Jo Dash Ann Hill • Kenny “The Mountain Nomad” Hill • Mark Hill – Perth, Australia • Robin Hill • Sterling Hill • Pamela and Norman Hilliard • Mark Hindess • In loving memory of Abbie Hinshaw • Daniel Hirsch • T. Hise • Jake HL & Georgia B. • Brandyn Hobbs • MK Hoberecht • Greg Hoch • The Hockaday Family • Michael Hoddersen • Douglas Hoffman • Christina Hoffman • Garrett Hoffman • Maggie Lynn Hoffman • Sam Hogan • Andrew Hogg • Amanda Holden • Chris Holdren • Amy Holland • Bryce Holland • Kristin Holland • Simon Hollingsworth • Jason Holloway • Max Hollowday • Louise Holm • Christophe Holmes • Corinna Holmes • Lena & William Holmes • Tamara L. Holsclaw • Donald Allen Holsworth • Bob Holt • Christian Holt • Trish Holt • Kara Holtzman • David Holzborn • Nanette Homen • Kristiina Hommik • Wai Chung Hon & Mark Sanasie • Danny Hood • Patrick Hoover • Mike Hopkins • Jennifer Hoppe • Sabine Horak • Christopher Horn • Mark Schmaltz Horn • Ira Horowitz • Brian Horstmann • For Sean Donovan Horton, 2nd GS • Paul Horvath • TJ & Stephanie Hove • JR & Kimberly Howard • Mary Anne Howard • Tristan Howard • Angela Marie Howe • Harvey Howell • Katherine Howett • Santiago Hoyos • Jerry & Dorothy Hrdlicka: who taught Jennifer and Michael to love reading • Ruth Huang • Maurizio Huaylla • Phil Hucles • Dan Hud • Christopher Alan Huddleston • Samuel Hudnet • Curtis Hudson • Christian Huffman • Christopher & Megan Huffman • The Huffman Clan: James, Mia, Jones & Taeli • Andy & Emily Hughes • Dundi Thompson Hughes • Jon Hughes • Owen & Olivia Hughey • Caleb Hulbert • Lee Hulbert • Carol & David Humm • For Hunter, Tristan & Keira: I love you! • Rebecca Hunt • Richard & Michele Huntsman • John Hunyor • Asá Hurd • Jaqueline Huth • Jeremy Hylen • Eric Hynes • Hyzie

— I, J —

John Idlor • Curt Iiams • Ikananxiii • Infael • Matthew Infantino • Paul Ingalls • Mike Ingram • David Irgang • Andreas Irle • Torian Ironfist • Jeremy & Stacy Ironside • Jacob Irwin • Debbie Isley • Marion Istrate • Ciro Izarra • Dianne J., daughter of Helen M. • Neil J. • Rima Jabbour • Martin Jackson • Jacob the Persek: det var det! • Catherine Jacqué • Caleb Jagelman • Eden Jagelman • Jan Jakobsson • James • Kyle James • Guisselle, Michael, Allison & Dominic James • Justin James • Kati James • Jamie & Max • Scott Jamieson • Tyler Janclaes • A.A. Jankiewicz • Eric Jansen-Olliges • Eleazar Jarman • Erik Jarvi • Jay Jay • Jaya • Matt Jayko • JDN • Yung JD • Chris Jeans • Joseph Jeffery, teacher-librarian • Michael S. Jenks • Jason Jennelle • Jason Jennings • Tom Jennings • Jeramie • Colten, Whitney & Kennedy Jernigan • Lei Jess • Zura Jijavadze & Nonika Vardishvili – Tbilisi, Georgia • Jill • H.I.M. Jimenez • Jiminx • JNM & RKM • The Joans • Evan Joaquim – Cheshire, CT • For my kids, Jocelyn & Cooper • Joe • Joshua Johansen • R.S. Johansen • Henrik Johansson • Niklas Johansson • Raney John • Drew Johns • Amber L. Johnson • Blake Johnson • Casey, Marissa & Parker Johnson • Chelsey Johnson • Chris Johnson • Dennis Johnson – Sitges, Spain • Eleanor M. Johnson • Erin & Jerrod Johnson • Fred W. Johnson • Collin M. Johnson • Jason C. Johnson • Jeff, Edgar, Steffanie & Cristian Johnson • Jeffrey M. Johnson • Larry “Keith” Johnson • Lynn Johnson • Michael Floyd Johnson • Teresa Y. Johnson • Timothy Derrick Johnson • Tyler Johnson • Jacob & Jennifer Johnston • Tiffany Johnston • Chad, Lauren, Addie, Lily & Mia Johnstone • For Jollin, Christina & Abigail, huge fans of the series • Andrew Jones • Beau Jones • Cody Jones • The Jones Family • Hallie Jones • Isaac Schuyler Jones • Jake Jones • Levar Jones • Michael Jones • Nathan, Jessica & Noah Jones • Peter Alan Jones • R. Nickolas Jones • Stephen F. Jones Jr. • Jon & KK • Jonna, Anthony & DonnaLucia – Aurora, IL • Cameron Jordan • Craig Jordan • David Jordan • Tim Jordan • Darby Jorgensen • P-A Josefsson • Krys Joseph • Matthew L. Joseph • Josh, Bina, Ava & Emy • Andrea Joshua & Henry Moore • Joshua & Emmalee • Josiah • Loretta Joslin • Sunshyne Joubert • Caleb Journot • James M. Joyce • Jennifer Jozwiak • Kala Judd • Samuel Judd • William Jung • Robert Junker • Juraj & Andy • Just a Paramedic • Matthew Justus • Jyoti & Kevin

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Michael J. Sullivan is a three-time New York Times, USA Today, and Washington Post bestselling author who has been nominated for nine Goodreads Choice Awards. His first novel, *The Crown Conspiracy*, was released by Aspirations Media Inc. in October 2008. From 2009 through 2010, he self-published the next five of the six books of The Riyria Revelations, which were later sold and re-released by Hachette Book Group's Orbit imprint as three two-book omnibus editions: *Theft of Swords*, *Rise of Empire*, and *Heir of Novron*.

Michael's Riyria Chronicles series (a prequel to Riyria Revelations) has been both traditionally and self-published. The first two books were released by Orbit, and the next two by his own imprint, Riyria Enterprises. A fifth Riyria Chronicle, titled *Drumindor*, will be self-published in the near future.

For Penguin Random House's Del Rey imprint, Michael has published the first three books of The Legends of the First Empire: *Age of Myth*, *Age of Swords*, and *Age of War*. Grim Oak Press distributes the last three books of the series: *Age of Legend*, *Age of Death*, and *Age of Empyre*.

Michael is now writing *Drumindor*, the fifth book of The Riyria Chronicles. This will return him to the timeline of Royce and Hadrian, two rogues he hasn't visited with since the release of *The Disappearance of Winter's Daughter* in 2018. The final book in the Rise and Fall Trilogy, *Esrhaddon*, is written and it is scheduled to be released in the summer of 2023.

You can email Michael at michael@michael-j-sullivan.com.

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The Rise and Fall

Nolyn • Farilane

Esrhaddon (Summer 2023)

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Age of Myth • Age of Swords • Age of War

Age of Legend • Age of Death • Age of Empyre

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Rise of Empire (*Nyphron Rising & The Emerald Storm*)

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The Riyria Chronicles

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Forthcoming: *Drumindor*

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Hollow World (Sci-fi Thriller)

Short Story Anthologies

Heroes Wanted: "The Ashmoore Affair" (Fantasy: Riyria Chronicles)

Unfettered: "The Jester" (Fantasy: Riyria Chronicles)

Unbound: "The Game" (Fantasy: Contemporary)

Unfettered II: "Little Wren and the Big Forest" (Fantasy: Legends of the First Empire)

Blackguards: "Professional Integrity" (Fantasy: Riyria Chronicles)

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