

# *Brothers*

*By*

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*Ber er hver að baki nema sér bróður eigi.*

*Bare is the back of a brotherless man.*

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# Esland and Environs



# Prologue

(Malar Island, Doray League)

Morning smelled of salt and fish — the Archon housed his mages on the sea side of the palace. Eyes closed, Marcus felt about the chamber with his mind, habit from days when his Master's service had taken him to places less safe. Mada asleep in her shut bed, the faint glow of life in her womb. At the limit of his perception, servants moving in the mess hall. He opened his eyes and rolled out of bed to the sound of the first morning bell. The remnants of his dream — a broken chain, a seagull flying north — faded to mist.

The hall, when he reached it, was almost empty — a dozen staff and two mages, neither from his team. The counter reserved for the mages had bread, oil, eggs, olives and fried fish, as most mornings, but today bacon and beefsteaks as well — a tribute ship must be in from the coast — and a thick soup. He loaded his tray, took it to a table near the door, ate an egg and some bread dipped in oil, got up again.

"Aren't we supposed to leave the trays?"

Marcus looked up, startled—he had not noticed Tiber coming in.

"Some papers in my room I want to look over before the meeting, can finish breakfast while I do it. I'll bring the tray back then."

He turned away from the other mage, went through the door.

Safely back in his room, he looked over the contents of the tray. Steak, bacon, eggs, a chunk of bread, oil, a cup of watered wine. The peppered soup would be too spicy for Mada, but that he could deal with. Facts were not the only things he could filter.

"Mark. You shouldn't."

The shut bed was open, Mada watching him.

"Nobody knows it isn't for me, and you need something you can keep down."

"I need you more. If someone notices and He hears and gets angry at you..."

"Nobody will notice. If the Archon gets angry at me, it won't be for bringing you food. The meat will be good for you and the baby. Let me do something about the soup and you can dip the bread in it."

He closed his eyes, shutting out the worry in her face. The soup showed to his mind as a pale pink, color for taste, a trick learned early in his second year on Doray. The first task his Master had given him was turning wine to brandy.

Five minutes was enough to herd the pepper to the far side of the bowl,

leaving the rest close enough to pure white. He dipped the spoon in at the far side, tasted it, spat it out, spooned the rest of the peppered soup into a cup. Eyes open he tasted what was left, shifted the bowl to the other side of the table.

Breakfast over and the tray returned, the first work of the day was the morning meeting with the rest of Justin's team. Marcus, as the only one with news, spoke first.

"A message from the Legate in the Eslandi capital came on yesterday's boat. We have lost another man — the last we had of the palace servants, bound three years ago."

Justin looked up at him from his desk at the front of the room. "The Archon will want to know what you propose we do." Not for the first time, Marcus wished he had been assigned to a different kingdom.

Before he could respond, Kaeso cut into the conversation.

"What we should have done was to kill every mage in Esland fifteen years ago — the damned prince too. It would have taken all our people and help from the other archons, maybe the Magistrate's people as well, but we could have done it. That would have solved the problem for the next century."

Marcus, grateful for the interruption — and not inclined to quarrel with a man who could kill with a thought — was searching for a polite way to disagree when Justin responded.

"And pretend they were all accidents? What we need to do is get the Eslandi back under control. Quietly."

Kaeso shook his head. "That's been impossible ever since the Eslandi prince spotted us thinning their mages and started hunting down the ones doing it. I was lucky to get out alive; the other two didn't. We're stronger and better trained than the barbarian mages but they have fire too and there are a lot more of them than of us. Now every time we patch the net by bringing in one of ours or binding a local, they notice and deal with him. We'll end up with nothing but bought Eslandi and no way to know which of those we can trust. You can tell that to the Archon, the Archon can tell it to the Magistrate and the Magistrate's truth teller can tell his boss that Aulus checked it down his bond chain. Then it's up to the Magistrate and his people to figure out how to keep us on top of the barbarian kingdoms. Maybe find some way of setting them to fight each other." He fell silent.

For a moment nobody spoke, then Justin turned back to Marcus.

"Write up a report for the Archon. The present situation, your suggestions for how the problems might be solved, your ability until then to filter useful information from what we are and will be getting."

He looked around the room, spoke to Tiber.

"That brings us to your report. Any news from Forstmark?"

The mage shook his head. "Nothing new. They aren't attacking Esland any year soon, not after what happened last time. The ruler still has the Eslandi pretender at court, but he's only a boy."

The meeting continued with reports from other members of the team, first on the other barbarian kingdoms then the doings of the other archons. It did not, to Marcus's relief, return to the problem of Esland.

The notes of the meeting signed and sealed, Marcus returned to his room, changed out of the gold-edged tunic that signaled his status and set off for his usual noon walk — out the front door of the palace, past the market hall on his left, down to the port. A galley was unloading; he closed his eyes, scanned the passengers as they came down the gangplank. If one of the other archons sent someone to poke around Malar Island looking to find, or create, something to discredit Aulus, spotting and dealing with him was up to the Archon's bondmen. If necessary including Kaeso.

This time there was nobody.

On his way back to the palace Marcus stopped by the market to pick up a bag of dried figs for Mada, added a string of gilded glass beads from another stall. He had not been judged sufficiently talented to be bred to a witch, but Mada's bloodline was half gold. That might, if the God favored, be enough. It would be good to have a son to share talent and service.





# **Book I: Eirick**



## Chapter 1

*[Gruneval, Forstmark]*

“Meistari?”

Helgi finished his careful examination of the palace simulacrum and flipped the sandglass before looking up. The boy was standing in the doorway of his own apartment watching him. Not the first time he had watched the mage but the first he had spoken.

“What can I do for Your Highness?”

“Have you seen Jarl — my dog? I must have left the door open when I went out this morning and he’s not anywhere inside.”

Helgi shook his head. “I haven’t seen him, but if he’s still on the grounds I can find him for you. What does he look like?”

“He’s grey — still a puppy, but big.”

Helgi turned back to the simulacrum, closed his eyes, let the miniature expand until the pool of quicksilver at its center became a pond with ducks and a drake, half a dozen armed men, all safely friendly, around its edge. Two of the guards were looking at something, one of them speaking.

He turned back to Eirick. “Your puppy is down by the pool. He seems to have showed up there recently; one of the guards is trying to figure out if he’s from His Excellency’s pack.”

“I’ll go get him.”

“Let me fetch someone to go with you, Highness.”

Helgi turned back to the simulacrum. His lips moved silently. A moment later one of the palace guards came up the stairway.

“Is there a problem?”

The mage shook his head. “Prince Eirick’s puppy got out; he’s down by the pond. Could you go down with His Highness to fetch him?”

By the time the two came back, accompanied by the missing dog, the sand had run out and Helgi was again searching the simulacrum — the palace grounds — for intruders. As always, there were none. He turned the glass again, looked at the dog. Looked again.

“That’s a puppy?”

Eirick nodded assent. “Theodrick, the biggest of Grandfather’s wolfhounds, stands nearly as tall as I do — on all fours — and weighs more than some men. Jarl is one of his get; I named him after Grandfather. He’s still growing.”

Helgi reached out a hand, palm down. The grey puppy sniffed it.

“I’ve heard of Jarl Eirick’s hounds, but I’ve never seen one. They must be impressive — and frightening.”

Eirick shook his head. "They're very gentle; when I was little I used to play with them. That big, you don't have to snarl at things. And they are very intelligent; Jarl won't hurt anyone unless he thinks I'm being attacked. And if I tell him to be quiet he will be — usually."

"Your grandfather gave him to you for protection? I hope the Einvald didn't take it..."

"More for company, I think. Mother and Grandfather are with Jarl Henrik — he's a kinsman of ours — and I hardly ever see them. It's most of a two-day ride to get there."

Helgi noticed the dog watching him, reached out a tentative hand, ran it along the side of the massive head, rubbed under the jaw.

"How did you know that's what he likes?"

"Knowing is what the Einvald hires me to do. I'm a kenner — what they call a perception mage in your language. Or would if your mages were properly organized."

"Tell me about magery, Meistari. It's the one thing my tutors won't talk about. And..."

"And you need to know. Yes. They aren't in the Guild and the Guild gets touchy about anything that even looks like anyone else teaching magery. I couldn't teach you to practice even if you turned out to have the talent, not without your first getting admitted as a lorisvein — what Eslanders would call an apprentice, except that it's apprentice to the Galdraguild, not to a single mage the way it would be in Esland. But there's nothing to keep me from telling you the things about magery that outsiders know. And if, when..."

He stopped, chose prudence. The Einvald had not hired him to discuss with his guest what his prospects were, or were not, for ever sitting on a throne. Even magery was a safer topic.

"To start with, you shouldn't address me as 'Meistari;' if I were a galdrameistari I would be spending my days on something more interesting than watching a simulacrum for any intruders with ill intent that somehow got past the valley wall and into the Einvald's palace. I'm an ordinary galdramann, a full guildmember but not a master. And I'm a galdrakennari, a kenner. You know about how magery is divided up?"

The boy nodded. "Earth, air, fire and water."

Helgi shook his head. "That's the Eslandi system and it's wrong three times over. Not all mages are elemental, elemental mages mostly aren't entirely limited to a single element, and classifying mages by talents doesn't make sense anyway. A fire mage is more likely to be a smith or a caster than a kenner, but not all smiths are fire mages.

"There are four divisions to magery, four quarters of the Guild, based on what you use your talents for. Kenners use magery to get knowledge —

what I do. Not just using the simulacrum to watch for people with ill intent but sensing the mood of a man or a dog, and truth-telling, and lots of other things. Smiths — galdrasmithur — embed magic in objects. The simulacrum is the work of a smith, probably more than one, and so is the amulet you are wearing. I can see a little of what it does — mostly protect you from magery — but I couldn't make one."

Eirick touched his own chest, felt the amulet through the cloth, safely concealed under his loose tunic. But not, apparently, from a kenner. There was a pause before Helgi continued.

"Casters use magic on non-living things, or on living things in ways that don't depend on their life. The mages that melted the pass clear for your father two years ago, before things went wrong, were casters and smiths, channeling the fire from under the mountain into the pass. Nobody had ever done anything on that scale before."

Again he stopped. It had been an impressive project but, considering how things had turned out, perhaps not one to boast of now. Especially to Iolen's son.

"The fourth quarter is the life mages, the galdragraethar. Healers are usually women, so the fourth quarter is where most of the galdrakona are, what Eslanders would call witches. But life magic can be used to help things grow too, and for compulsions. The spells that make sure I can't teach magic to anyone outside my quarter of the Guild were put on by a life mage — Sigrid, back when she was working for the Guild before the Einvald hired her as a healer."

"The tall lady mage?" Helgi nodded.

"Jarl likes her — she was petting him yesterday. I was going to try to find her and ask if she had seen him. But then you found him so I didn't have to."

"Finding things is my job, not hers." Helgi looked over at Jarl, sitting in the doorway watching them, turned back to Eirick.

"Two other things you should know about mages, neither of them a secret. One is that our range is very limited; I can read your emotions, or your dog's, but not someone much farther away than that. To watch all of the Einvald's palace I need the simulacrum. The other is that magery is weak; a fire mage is more like a candle than a furnace. A candle flame in the wrong place can kill you, so fire mages are dangerous, but a fire mage still needs kindling if he wants to get the logs in a fireplace burning."

"I can't call you 'Meistari' and you haven't told me your name, but..." Eirick pointed at the sand glass, run out. Helgi gave him a startled look, turned back to the simulacrum, closed his eyes, spoke.

"Helgi. My name is Helgi, Highness."

"Mine is Eirick."

An hour later, his watch done, Helgi was putting on his cloak to go when Eirick's door opened. The boy spoke hesitantly. "I don't suppose you play chess?"

Helgi nodded. "Almost the only game I can play. Guild rules don't let mages play dice — it's too easy to start bad feelings. And a kenner can't play card games."

Eirick looked puzzled; Helgi answered the unspoken question.

"It's not a game when you can see both sides of the cards."

"If you can see people's intent, read minds, doesn't that help for chess too?"

Helgi shook his head. "I can't read minds — no mage can. I read emotions. That would help me recognize an assassin if one ever showed up but it doesn't tell me what you plan your next move to be or why. Do you have a chess set?"

"In here."

The mage followed the boy through the door into the suite. The room contained a chair, a bench, an oak table with two books and a pile of papers, a fireplace. It smelled faintly of wood smoke and dog. Eirick went through a door on the far side, came back carefully carrying a wooden chess board with a set of carved pieces arranged on it, put it on the table. Helgi thought for a moment. He could, of course, choose to play badly, but that seemed hardly fair to the boy.

"I'm older; would you like me to spot you a piece?"

Eirick shook his head. "You're the guest — you can move first."

Half an hour later Helgi took a final look at the board, tipped over his king. Eirick looked up from the board. "Another?"

Helgi looked at Eirick, smiled, shook his head. "You can beat me again tomorrow if you want. I need to rest; I have another watch later this evening."

"And my Doray tutor comes tomorrow and I still have another ten pages. Not that I really want to know the history of the League's rise, even if it were written in a language I could properly read. It's a hundred years till the interesting part, when the Mage King broke Esland out and real history started."

Helgi, putting his cloak back on, hesitated. "We were talking about magery. Ask your tutor about magery in the Doray League. Then ask me about it afterwards."

Eirick nodded; Helgi went out.

Over the next week the two got in the habit that the first day had established, chatting in the open corridor during Helgi's breaks, playing a single game of chess after his watch ended. The second game Eirick again won, the third, after a long drawn out endgame, went to Helgi.

"I was beginning to wonder if I could ever beat you; you play much better than I did at your age."

"Father taught me. He said it was useful training. Not just strategy but understanding the opponent, knowing which attacks are real and which are intended as a diversion. And the other side, too — knowing how to fool the opponent about what you are really doing."

Eirick fell silent a moment, continued with an odd sound to his voice. "He was very good; I never beat him. But nobody can win all the time."

Helgi bowed his head in acknowledgment.

"Enough bad luck can defeat even the best plan. I was with the advance party, troops and mages, watching to see if the Eslanders had managed at the last minute to set up any surprises. Once the water started flowing past their front door — in midwinter — they had to know something was happening.

"Fire Mountain had been dead forever, since long before I was born; when I saw the steam and then the lava, I couldn't believe it. I even wondered for a moment if it was an illusion. There's no way any mage, ours or theirs, could make a volcano erupt, but there might be ways of making it look as though it was erupting.

"But it wasn't magery at all, just sheer bad luck. I'm sorry; he deserved better. It should have worked."

Eirick looked, for a moment, as though he was going to put a question, didn't. After a moment Helgi spoke again, his voice deliberately calm. "We were talking about magery here and in Esland; did Master Valerius tell you about how they manage it in the League? I was planning to ask you yesterday, but I forgot — too busy trying to figure out how to keep you from beating me."

The boy nodded. "I was going to ask you about that. He doesn't seem to think much of either the Guild or the system in Esland. He said that mages should be servants, not masters, then went back to correcting my translation and explaining about Doray tenses."

"He doesn't mean servants. The Doray spot talent early, earlier than we know how to; it's one of the things they are good at. Once they are sure, they put a geas on the child, binding him to service of the Magistrate or one of the local authorities, the archons. Their mages dress well and eat well, but they're slaves. It's different from how we do it, different from how your people do it, and worse than either.

"I've studied the history of magery — not just Forstmark but other places too. The Doray were the first people to figure out how to train mages; before that it was all wild talents with no control, mostly doing more damage than good. That was what turned them from a city-state to an empire. Diplomacy works better when you know whether the other side

is telling the truth. Having inconvenient people conveniently drop dead helps too. They started by inviting other city states in as allies; by the time they got to their full size, all that was left of the Doray League was its name. The City ran things; everyone else did what they were told."

"They never got to here though, did they? That's why things are different on this side of the pass."

Helgi nodded. "What's now Esland was their northernmost province. It's hard to keep secrets for long; by the time they got to us, we had had two generations and more to train our own mages with the help of runaways from the League cities. We had the advantage of the mountains, of course, but the same thing happened on their other borders as well. The League stopped gaining land, started to lose it. They had gotten too big, taken more land than they could hold, once they no longer had all the mages."

"Which is why the Mage King..."

"Which is why Esland was founded by a mage king. He was one of the Doray mages who decided he didn't like the orders he was getting from the City. Between mages he could trust and people in the province who didn't like being bled white to put a gold roof on the main temple in the City or having their daughters made into playthings for the governors that the Doray sent out, he broke the province out of the league."

"How could he? If he had been bound to loyalty as a child?"

"That was later. The rising in Esland and the rest of it were the reason. The Doray decided that if they weren't going to lose everything they had to make sure that what mages they had were loyal to them. There isn't a lot left of the Doray League now, just the islands and a few bits of coast, but one thing they don't have to worry about is rebellion by the mages. I expect they think our way of doing it is even worse than the Eslandi way — mages not only free but organized."

"If they were the first mages, are they the best? Is their magery stronger?"

"Some things they are very good at, like detecting talent. And they have a lot of strong mages — the League breeds men for magery the way your grandfather breeds dogs for size. Their smiths can do amazing things, but most of it is toys for rich citizens — golden birds that sing, with jeweled wings, and the like. They have a lot of life mages, but they spend most of their time making noblewomen, or the mistresses of noblemen, look younger than they are and prettier than they would be without, or keeping their masters alive when they should have died of old age. Nobody makes war on the League and they haven't made war on anyone else for a century or so.



"A friend of mine was there with some merchants from the city, making sure the people they were trading with didn't use magery to swindle them, one way or another, make them see lead as gold or glass as gems or believe someone they shouldn't. He said the whole place reminded him of one of the golden birds — magical, beautiful, and not entirely real. He had a feeling that someday it was all going to crumble away into dust. I hope he's right."

"So they aren't a threat to either Forstmark or Esland?"

"They could be if they chose — they have a lot of strong mages and a lot of spells. A lot of gold for hiring soldiers too, and ships to transport them. I am sure the Einvald keeps an eye on them and I expect His...the usurper on the Eslandi throne does too, just in case. They are on your border, not ours, so I suppose get more attention from Esland."

"I asked Haldorr, the Kenner, the head of my quarter, about the Doray once. He said the League had decided armies were too clumsy a tool. The soldiers they could hire were no better than the soldiers their neighbors had, but their mages were better and they had a lot of gold. So they use gold and magery to make sure their neighbors don't do things they don't like. He heard a Doray say once that every word spoken in the Five Kingdoms gets, sooner or later, to the Magistrate's ears, and half of them came, if you look back far enough, from his mouth."

"Do they have spies here too?"

"We don't let foreign mages in, so they can't use magery to spy on us. I suppose they could try to bind or bribe merchants from here who trade in their ports down south or in the islands, but there aren't many of those and the Guild keeps a pretty careful eye on them. I expect Valerius reports back to the Magistrate — probably one reason the Einvald has him here, aside from tutoring you and a few others in the language."

A few days later, the conversation shifted to matters closer to home; it was Helgi who started it.

"I wanted to talk to you about something else, about the difference between how they manage magery in Esland and how we do it, because some day you may be able to do something about that."

"You have the Guild, and everyone who does magery has to be in it, and everyone who teaches magery. Is that it?"

"That's part of it. Magery is dangerous — a trained fire mage can kill in a few seconds without moving a finger, which is one reason I spend my time making sure that there's nobody close to the Einvald who wants to kill him. And an untrained fire mage can kill people without even trying, or knowing he is doing it. The Guild does its best to spot people with talent — not as young as the Doray do but before they are dangerous to themselves or other people. And once we spot them we not only see that

they get properly trained, we make sure they can't teach anyone outside the guild.

"In Esland, from what I hear, there is nobody to make sure that everyone with talent gets trained. And someone who has talent and wants to train can apprentice with any mage who will have him. I'm sure many of the mages do their best, but it's a recipe for a kingdom full of untrained or half trained mages. And not just Esland — the other successor kingdoms, Dalmia west of you and Brenland east, do it more or less the same way, or so I'm told.

"All a mage can teach is what he knows. All he knows is what he can do. What spells he can do depends on what talents he has. If the apprentice has different talents than the mage he'll never learn to use them properly. Even if he has the same talents — I'm sure Eslandi mages look for apprentices who do, as nearly as they can manage — he can only learn the spells that mage happens to know.

"The Guild library has every spell anyone in Forstmark has discovered for the past two hundred years. Once you apprentice to the Guild and join one of the Quarters — kenner in my case — your meistari tests your talents, figures out what magery suited to your Quarter you are capable of doing, and arranges for you to learn it. After you pass the tests that make you a full member you are entitled to charge your quarter's guild rates for your services.

"I know practically everything a kenner with my talents can use. If I had had the bad luck to be born fifty miles farther south I would only know whatever spells my master could teach me — if I had the good luck to have been trained at all..."

Their conversation was interrupted by the noise of someone knocking at the door to the apartment. Helgi stood up, motioned Eirick back, closed his eyes. In a moment he spoke. "It's all right. I'll get the door."

Eirick recognized the visitor at once. "Is something wrong? Is Grandfather all right?"

"The Jarl is fine. He's persuaded the Einvald to let you come visit with him. I have a spare horse; how long will it take you to get ready?"

The boy's face lit up. "Not long. I'll bring Jarl; he can run alongside. Grandfather will be amazed at how much bigger he is. Let me fetch my traveling clothes from the other room. Do I need court dress as well?"

"Doubt it, but one set might not hurt. I've a packhorse too."

Eirick turned to Helgi. "I don't know how long I'll be gone — probably a week or more."

The mage nodded. "That should give me time to practice up my game."

An hour later Eirick and Ingiald were on the road, past the guards at the entrance to the palace grounds then three miles downhill past fields and orchards to the wall that guarded the valley mouth. Twice Eirick tried to raise the question of plans for the trip — Jarl Henrik's holding, where they were presumably bound, was two days north and east of the palace — but each time Ingiald shook his head, remained silent. They were nearly two miles downhill from the gate, the fading sunlight throwing long shadows ahead of them, before he finally spoke.

"With all the mages the Einvald has in that place, a man never knows when someone he can't see is listening; I like to know who I'm talking to. But I doubt even his kenners can manage this far. Bit farther there's a place we can make camp for the night.

"We aren't going to Henrik's. We're meeting the Jarl at the north end of the pass into Esland. Some of our people are coming through and he thought they ought to have a chance to see you, and you to see them."

"Will Mother be there?"

"Far as I know, the Lady Kirstin is still at Henrik's in Torrevalle."

In a moment he spoke again, reluctantly. "Not cause she doesn't want to see you, boy. Not my place to... best talk to the Jarl."

He would say no more.

## Chapter 2

*[Jarl Eirick's camp north of Fire Mountain, Forstmark]*

The Jarl's camp, when they reached it late the next day, was an hour's ride into the pass that led south to Esland. Eirick's grandfather greeted him, brought him into his tent while some of his people made dinner. After exchanging assurances as to their mutual good health, Eirick put the question that was first in his mind.

"Will Mother be here?"

His grandfather shook his head. "I'm sorry. Kirstin went to the city with Berga, Henrik's lady, and some of her people — doing their city shopping early, before summer fever gets to be a problem."

"She knew I was coming?"

"She knew you were coming. She also knew I had promised the Einvald that I wouldn't let you see her — if I hadn't, he wouldn't have let you come."

Eirick looked puzzled. "Why doesn't the Einvald want...?"

The Jarl hesitated a moment before answering. "Best you know; you're young but not stupid and you have to learn to work with what we have now. Kirstin wants to go home, back over the pass. I don't know if she's gotten messages from her brother, but I'm sure he'd welcome her and I can't see why His Majesty would object — she doesn't have any claim to his throne."

"But I do?"

"Yes. No need to go through the rights and wrongs of it now, but you inherit your father's claim. Knowing how things turned out, it would be better if your father had accepted his father's losing out in the succession fight with the two other princes, but he didn't. The rising two years ago gave the king and the prince a scare — we had most of the Marches on our side and that plus a Forstmark army might have done it. It isn't as if anyone was expecting an invasion over the pass in midwinter.

"We lost. Looking back, not sure it would've been better if we won. Take the capital, crown your father king, with Forstish help could have done it. Doesn't give us the rest of the kingdom. The South, Duke Alessandro and his folk, friendly with the Doray, know the prince was worried about it. Duke's sister married to His Majesty, one reason to stay loyal. East came in two generations back when Owen, no sons, married his daughter to the king of Esland. Morgen could pull it back out again, probably get allies from the Bren if he needed help. Expect that's one reason the prince married Morgen's daughter, keep that end of the

kingdom a bit safer. If Iolen took the crown, killed the king and prince, those links break. Might end up with only half a kingdom, maybe less.

"Your father lost and Esland is still one kingdom, but East, South saw how close we came. Next time there's trouble with the crown they might think they could do better, maybe count on our help. Putting my daughter's husband on the throne his dad lost looked worth a try. But it wasn't worth breaking up the kingdom to do it.

"We lost. His Majesty pardoned everyone willing to swear to him except for me and Fredrik, let us go into exile, gave our holdings to sons of ours, picking ones he thought he could trust. His brother was the one on the spot — there courting Morgen's daughter, her father being in charge of the keep due to the king and prince trusting him more than us — and whatever else one might say about Prince Kieron, nobody ever thought he was stupid. He knew His Majesty would want him to heal wounds, not open them. Still people on the other side of the pass who want to try again, including one of your cousins. You should be meeting with some of them in another few days. Isn't going to happen, not unless something goes seriously wrong in Esland.

"Your mother wants to go back to her brother, take you with her, trust the king to let you alone. It might work, once it's clear you aren't after the throne. The king has no sons, so Prince Kieron is his heir. Kieron has a son about your age. His first wife died a few years back. Duke Morgen's daughter bore him a girl not long ago, may yet produce sons, likely enough, must be twenty years younger than he is. Might figure you for a long lost relative and no threat and treat you accordingly. Get you out of the Einvald's hands, make another rising a bit less likely. If they trust you.

"But they might not — no telling. You could end up in a dungeon or under arrest for the rest of your life — or dead. In their territory, with their mages around you, it would be easy enough to arrange something. Kirstin's always been a sweet girl and she wouldn't do anything she thought would hurt you, but she's maybe too willing to trust people.

"Einvald's afraid she might persuade you to go with her and, short of holding you prisoner, he won't be able to do anything about it. Once he starts treating you, or me, as enemies, we aren't a whole lot more use to him. He'd rather you keep up your father's claim. That's why he made me promise not to get you and your mother together in exchange for agreeing to let you come see me. I figured I had best tell you what I could."

"What use are we to him now?"

"I still have friends over the pass; that's worth something. And your claim gives him a convenient excuse if he wants to fight Esland again. Might help in diplomacy with the Doray and anyone else he's dealing with,

maybe the Dalmians, standing up for the rights of the true heir against the usurper.

"And there's always Forstmark politics. Henrik's important, so are some of my other friends and kin this side of the pass; he won't want to offend them. The king of Esland has to worry about losing his throne if something goes very wrong; the Einvald has to worry all the time. It isn't as if he inherited from his father or can leave the position to his son. If too many of the important people decide he's the wrong leader, next time Council meets he's back to being one more jarl if he's lucky, dead if he's not.

"Einvald Asmund put a lot into the invasion; when it failed it was even odds whether he stayed Einvald. Blamed it all on the Guild, of course, and since the Guild hadn't been strong for him before... Think one reason he agreed to the invasion was to build back up his ties to the mages; they'd been supporting someone else until their candidate broke his neck out hunting. He might have figured that if their plan worked he would get the credit and if it didn't he could give them the blame."

"And does the Guild try to blame him?"

Jarl Eirick smiled. "Hard to blame him for the damn mountain erupting. The Guild say they can't be blamed for it either, that there's no way their magery could have set it off. But since everyone who knows if that's true or not is in the Guild..."

"It sounds a tangle — more complicated than a chess game. What should I do?"

"If I were you? For the moment, go along with what the Einvald wants. Longer run, your choice is to go back home with your mother or do what I'm doing, build a new life this side of the mountains. Easier to do at your age than mine, but I'm trying."

As it grew dark, the Jarl's retainers gathered around the fire. Several of the men told stories, one sang a ballad, accompanying himself with strummed chords on a six-stringed lyre. When it came to Eirick's turn he recited a poem, a lament for a Marcher warrior who had died centuries earlier. That was followed by another ballad, more stories, with brief breaks to add wood when the fire got too low.

It was full daylight when he woke, on a bedroll in a tent with the sunlight shining through the canvas. In a minute his grandfather came in.

"Get much heavier, you'll have to put yourself to bed next time."

"I fell asleep by the fire?"

Jarl Eirick nodded. "What your mother used to do when she was your age. Another reason I wanted you to visit — make sure you don't turn too Forstish."

The boy shook his head. "Not likely. I can speak and understand it pretty well, but it still feels foreign. And I don't know any Forstish stories or poems. Do you think Olff would teach me to play his lyre?"

"You can ask. Nothing much to do today, just waiting to see if the people we are expecting show up. You could make a start."

"Who are we waiting for?"

"Friends. Maybe including your cousin Asgeir. People from the Marches who wish your father had won, think you should be king. They want to offer you their service; you should accept it. But be careful, don't encourage them to do anything that will get people killed. That's the reason we're here instead of back at Henrik's hold, so they can get here in a night and part of a day, not being obvious about it. I expect your uncle is willing to turn a blind eye to a good deal of that sort of thing but we don't want to make it too hard for him."

Eirick spent part of the day trying to learn to play the instrument — it was strummed from the front, blocked from the back, so that only the unblocked strings sounded — and part introducing Jarl to his grandfather's dogs, three of which had come with the party. A few hours before dinner time, he decided on a walk. He handed the lyre back to Olff.

"Heading up into the pass?"

"I want to see what it looks like. Besides, that way it will be downhill coming back. I'll have Jarl with me to keep me safe."

Olff turned to the Jarl, listening to the conversation, with a question on his face. Jarl Eirick nodded. "Let him go — boy wants to be alone for a while. Besides, the exercise will do him good."

Once out of sight of the camp, Eirick stopped for a conversation with Jarl.

"Grandfather understands. I asked one of the men; it's only about three miles more up the pass to where they think Father went over the edge. Miles more to the border, at the top of the pass, so it should be safe enough."

The dog expressed agreement by licking his master's face.

An hour and a half later, they stopped. There was nothing to show where Lord Iolen, riding at the rear of the army retreating out of the pass, had gone over the edge to his death. Even if someone had been near enough and paying sufficient attention to note the spot, an hour later any marker would have been under feet of molten lava. Eirick, following the path that had been rebuilt after the eruption, in places cut through the lava, for the most part over it, could only guess at the spot where his father had died.

At last he got up again, noticed that the sun was most of the way down the sky, shadows long. Time to go back down the mountain. He looked around for Jarl; the dog was out of sight. Called him.

After a few minutes searching he spotted Jarl in the path, several hundred feet uphill, called to him again. The dog did not move. As Eirick approached, he backed away; when the boy got close the dog turned and started up the path, ignoring his master's voice. Eirick followed, lava crunching under his feet.

An hour and several miles later he was not only puzzled but worried as well. Missing dinner was no great matter, but he had no desire to go back down the path in the dark. His first guess had been that Jarl was after something, that he had smelled a squirrel or perhaps another dog, but that became less and less likely as the pursuit continued. Something very odd was going on and he had no idea what. Or, despite his best efforts, what to do about it.

There was a sound ahead of something sliding, a torrent of yelps from the dog. When Eirick got up to him he found that Jarl had fallen into a shallow pit in the lava. Downhill, where the boy was standing, the drop was perhaps three feet. Uphill, where the dog was trying and failing to scramble out, it was easily twice that.

Eirick lowered himself into the pit. Jarl turned, back against the uphill end; as the boy came near, the dog bared his teeth, snarled. Eirick was too astonished to be frightened. Something was very odd indeed and with nobody else for miles around it was up to him to deal with it. Something Helgi had said. Perhaps...

Before he could change his mind, Eirick pulled the cord that held his protective amulet up and over his head. In a single quick motion he stepped forward, using both hands to keep the cord spread wide, dropped it over the dog's head, and stepped back.

Jarl stopped snarling, looked right and left with a puzzled expression on his face, turned to his master, whined. Eirick reached out his hand, palm down; the dog licked it. A moment later he was holding his dog tightly, while the dog licked his face.

Was the spell neutralized or only held in suspension? Eirick slowly lifted the amulet from Jarl's neck, watching the dog carefully, ready to let it drop back on if needed. The dog raised his massive head, licked his master's hand.

When Eirick looked up again, he realized that the sun had dropped below the mountain, leaving the path almost completely dark. Should he try to make it down or wait for morning? The pit the dog had fallen into provided them some shelter from the wind; with that, his cloak, and the warmth of his companion, spending the night there might be the best



policy. His grandfather would be worried, of course, but worse if he tried to come back in the dark and ended up falling off a cliff.

Having made that decision, he looked around to see if there was any better resting place that he could find before complete dark — and noticed, some distance uphill, a flickering light. His first thought was that it was the men his grandfather wanted him to meet; perhaps they had come this far and camped for the night.

Jarl pressed against his side. Somebody, Eslander or Forstish, had put a spell on his dog, a spell designed to draw him into the pass. It might be someone in the pay of the king, hoping he would break his neck in the dark, but that looked a very uncertain plan. Better, surely, to lure him into the pass and have someone waiting for him there.

As full dark came on, it became clear that what he was seeing uphill was reflected light from a fire. He thought he could hear faint voices in the distance. As quietly as he could, he helped his dog out of the pit at the low end, climbed out himself. A hand signal, repeated as a whispered command to silence — he wasn't sure how well Jarl could see in the dark — then boy and dog moved, as quietly as they could, up the path.

In a few minutes he could see the fire, two men sitting by it talking, a single small tent. If he got close enough he could, with luck, learn who they were, if they were the ones who had lured him here and for whom. If this was a plot by the king of Esland to get Eirick into his power, it was not likely that he would be greeted on arrival as a long lost relative.

How close could he get? The men were looking into the fire, so unlikely to be able to see him unless he came full into the firelight. So far as he could tell in the uncertain light of the fire, neither was wearing a sword. At worst, if they saw or heard him, he had a dagger and a dog; while he had no wish to fight two grown men, he would at least have a chance.

In a few minutes he was lying mostly behind a rock near the low wall at one side of the path, one hand supporting himself, the other on the dog's neck; Jarl responded to the pressure by lying down. Close enough — he could hear their words. The first sentence confirmed his guess.

"... and I still say the beast should be here by now, with or without the brat. Something must have gone wrong."

"Maybe that Hoskuld fellow isn't as good as he claimed; glad we haven't paid him yet. What do we do?"

"What can we do? It's too dark to go searching. If the plan worked, the kid should be following his pet into our arms. Let's build up the fire a bit. If he's out there somewhere, lost and cold, he'll see it and come. Just hope he hasn't managed to fall off the mountain and break his neck; no way we'll get any gold for that."

"The man in the city who wouldn't give us a name — how sure are you we can trust him? What if we bring him the boy and... "

"Worry about that when we have a boy to bring him. I expect we can work something out. We just have to be careful; he may want to cover his tracks, and dead men... What's that?"

"That" was Jarl. After several boring minutes lying down by his master he had risen to his feet to better see and smell the strangers, and, being a big dog, made a substantial amount of noise doing it.

The men stood up, looked into the night; one of them called out: "Hullo? Someone out there?"

Eirick stayed still, one hand on the dog's neck to make sure he did the same. After a moment of silence one of the men spoke to the other in a low voice, reached down, threw water on the fire. The fire went out in a cloud of steam; everything was dark.

The men were out there somewhere, either hunting him or hiding from imagined enemies. Too close — if they checked in the direction the sound had come from, they would find him. He stood up, backed away as quietly as he could, tripped over something and came down with a thump. Panicked.

The next few minutes were a confusion of running, voices, Jarl barking, intervals of silence, the smell of wood smoke. At last Eirick came up against something familiar — a wall. That meant he was at the edge of the road through the pass. Keep the wall on his right, head downhill, and he would be going the right direction. A mile or two — he was pretty sure he remembered the wall on that side lasting that long — and he would be reasonably safe. Find shelter from the wind, wrap both of them in his cloak, wait for morning, and hope that his pursuers would not come that far or his grandfather and his people would.

It seemed like hours before the wall on his right came to an end. By that time the sky had cleared enough to make starlight and moonlight — the moon was more than half full — at least a little help. At the left side of the path the ground dropped away into darkness; he could hear the sound of running water. He was thirsty and his water bottle, when he tried it, was almost empty, but trying to get down again and up in the dark would be risky. On the right there was a flat, a little hollow, then a steep rise.

Eirick spread out his cloak in the hollow, just the other side of the wall from the path, lay down on it, motioned Jarl to join him. With the dog lying beside him, he wrapped the cloak around both of them.

Dawn light woke him. He lay still, remembering the night's adventure, listened. He could hear a faint sound of running water, a bird, nothing else. Surely, now it was light, his grandfather would send people looking for him. But the farther down he got, the less far they would have to come.

Also, there were the two men at the top of the pass. He did not know how far into Forstmark they would risk coming, but the farther he got, the less likely they were to follow. He rose to his knees so that he could see over the low wall at the side of the pass. Nobody in sight. To his feet. Jarl came to his feet as well; once he was off the cloak, Eirick took it up, brushed off the dirt, put it on.

"What's wrong, puppy? Why are you licking your foot?"

Eirick lifted it up; the dog whined. Blood. One of the dog's front legs had been scraped raw a little above the pad, probably by sharp-edged lava in the confusion at the top of the pass, and was bleeding.

"Let me see. Poor puppy."

Eirick drew his knife, used it to cut a long strip from the lower hem of his wool undertunic, wrapped it tight around the injured leg. With luck it would stay on. Jarl took a few uneven steps, favoring the injured leg.

"We'll wait here for Grandfather. I expect one of his men can carry you."

Eirick sat down again, hidden behind the wall. Just in case.

It was most of an hour later that the sun came clear of the mountain, burning away the low mist. He looked down the slope, saw nobody. Something was wrong; it was hard to tell exactly what, but the path down did not fit his memories from coming up it. Then the sun had been low on his right. This time it was on his left.

It took a moment for him to realize that that was wrong. Coming up, the sun was setting in the west, he was going south, so the sun was on his right. Coming back down, the sun was rising in the east, he was going north, so it should again be on his right. But it wasn't.

Had he somehow gotten it wrong? Forget about last night. He was facing downhill, which was north. The sun rises in the east. So the sun should be to the right.

But the sun was on his left. That meant he was facing south. Downhill.

With a sudden shock he realized what must have happened. In the dark, at the top of the pass, panicked, he had gotten turned around. He had come not back north down the Forstmark side of the pass but south down the Esland side. The top of the pass was the border; he was now in Esland. In peril.

What to do? He had no food but he could hear water, with luck reach it. He was tired and hungry, but he could ignore that if he had to. He had come over the pass one way, he could go back the other. And had better, as fast he could manage it, before someone showed up from the keep that guarded the pass and the decision of his future got made for him.

But could he go back? The men he had fled from were presumably still camped between him and his grandfather. No doubt his grandfather had

sent men looking for him, perhaps come himself. With luck, when he got to the encampment at the top of the pass, there would be friendly faces there.

With luck. When the searchers got to the encampment the two men would surely tell them that they had not seen either a boy or a dog, that he had not gotten that far — and, of course, he would not have gotten that far had it not been for Jarl's odd behavior. His grandfather's people would believe them, start searching either side of the path for his body, alive or dead.

Jarl was whining again, licking at his leg. That was another problem. Eirick could probably make it back over the mountain, supposing he could somehow find a way of getting past the men at the top of the pass. But could his companion?

Staying where he was and starving to death was not a very attractive alternative. What about continuing down the mountain? If he walked into the keep at the bottom of the pass and told the garrison who he was he would get food and lodging. He would also shortly find himself in the hands of the king of Esland.

What if he didn't tell them who he was? So far as he knew, nobody in the keep or the farms near it had ever seen him — and nobody in all of Esland had seen him for the past two years, since he had left the kingdom in that final desperate flight to Forstmark with his parents.

If he was not Eirick son of Iolen, coming back into Esland through his own stupid mistake, who was he? And where was he coming from? He couldn't get away with claiming to be from the keep or one of the houses in the neighborhood, not for long. Where could he have come from that was far enough out of the way so nobody he met would expect to know someone from there, close enough to explain a thirteen-year-old boy with a dog getting here from there?

He closed his eyes, did his best to remember the maps he had studied. Coming north from the keep, the road forked. One branch led up to the pass. The other, the old route blocked by an eruption a century or more before the one that had killed his father, ended at the village of Efkić. Suppose he were from Efkić, had somehow gotten lost and ended up with a hurt dog most of the way to the Keep, too far from home to make it back.

Making plans was better than sitting still being scared. What did he do in Efkić, how had he gotten lost, why the dog? He had never been to Efkić but he had seen mountain villages in Forstmark. They all had sheep, sometimes goats as well, and boys with dogs herding them. He had been herding sheep with Jarl, had somehow gotten lost and ended up... Mist, mist in the mountains was supposed to be a danger. In the tale of the Oathbrothers that was how Tore and Tomas had met. Tore, on his

desperate mission of vengeance, had become lost in the mountain mists and arrived at Tomas's encampment just in time to help him fight off a treacherous attack by Ander and his people, the same Ander who Tore was hunting for vengeance for his brother's death. In the fight Tomas lost his brother as well and so the two had sworn to each other. "Bare is brotherless back" — it was his favorite line from the ballad.

Would whoever he met believe his story? He couldn't see why not — it was surely less improbable than what had actually happened. In any case, he had to tell them something and the truth was far too dangerous.

That settled, the next problem was getting the rest of the way down the mountain. He could manage, but what about Jarl? There was no way to carry him — the dog weighed more than he did.

He got up, looked uphill — no sign of anyone — turned, started downhill. Jarl followed, moving uncertainly.

## Chapter 3

*[Northpass, Esland]*

Coming down out of the pass, Eirick could see the keep in the distance, the road leading up from it lined with trees. Nearer, he thought he saw a little smoke, perhaps from a cottage. Jarl, who had been looking more exhausted than Eirick could remember, suddenly came alert, moved forward. Eirick followed.

A few minutes later he too smelled it. Someone, somewhere not very far away through the trees, was frying bacon. No telling who, but as good a chance as he was likely to get. He had to find a refuge somewhere for long enough for the dog's injury to heal and the men trying to capture him to get out of the pass — they surely did not plan to remain there all summer. He was from Efkic, had gotten lost in the mist yesterday while herding sheep with his dog, ended up here. Surely someone would be willing to let him stay for a few days, perhaps help out with chores and such in exchange for food and a place to sleep until it was safe to go back.

"Hullo. Would you like some breakfast? I'm sure we have plenty."

The speaker was about Eirick's age, a few inches shorter, with a friendly face, the tone shyer than the words. While Eirick was trying to decide what to say, the other boy turned, called out to someone behind him. "There's a boy and a dog here — can I invite them to breakfast?"

A woman's voice answered him. "Of course." Eirick heard her saying something to someone else about putting on more bacon.

"That's an enormous dog. Is it all right if I pet him?"

Eirick nodded. "Jarl's very gentle. Just move slowly."

The other boy reached out a hand for the dog to sniff and, that ceremony completed, stroked his head and back.

"Hullo Jarl. I'm Kir."

He turned back to Eirick. "What's wrong with his leg?"

"It got cut last night, coming across the lava uphill from here. I wrapped it, but I think the cloth may be coming loose."

He hesitated a moment, spoke again. "Hullo Kir. I'm Rick."

Fifteen minutes later Eirick was sitting on a low bench buttering a chunk of bread and feeling as if the past twenty-four hours had somehow vanished. The cluster of tents looked very much like the tents in the camp he had left the day before. There was the same campfire, the same tripod, the same hanging griddle. His grandfather's camp had been all men. This one included two women, one of them leaning over the fire dealing with the bacon frying on the griddle and one, the tall lady who had spoken earlier, who seemed to be in charge.

There were men as well — one was helping with the cooking. Two more eating; both were wearing swords. When they finished they got up, nodded to the tall lady, left the camp; a minute later two more came in and sat down.

Eirick ate slowly, buttered bread and bacon from a plateful that the cook, whose name seemed to be Carin, had put on the table between him and Kir. Eating fast was rude and gave you stomach aches, or so his mother had always told him. Eating slowly gave him time to try to figure out where he was, who these people were, and make sure he had his story ready when they got around to asking for it.

He had not noticed any game hanging up. More important, neither had Jarl. There were clearly no other dogs within range of sound or smell. So not a hunting camp. Possibly travelers heading over the pass, in which case he would have to try to think up a different story, one that would let him go with them. But nobody seemed to be making any motions towards breaking camp, although the morning was well along. So probably not travelers.

Jarl had decided to investigate the fire and what was cooking over it, retreated when one of the two cooks made threatening gestures with a wooden spoon. The tall lady, who had been standing looking up the pass as though expecting someone, noticed, said something softly to the dog, reached out a hand; he sniffed it, then came back to his master and lay down.

The lady came over, spoke to Eirick. "That's an impressive dog you have there; is he full grown or will he get even bigger?"

"I think he's as big as he is going to get. His sire was one of the Earl's wolfhounds, but his mother was our sheep dog and she's nothing like that size."

He hesitated a moment. Nobody had asked him where he was from, but they would expect something more than a name, might wonder if he didn't offer anything. Time to see if it would work.

"We're from Efkic, up that way. Yesterday evening, out with the sheep, we got farther than I'm used to going. Then the mist came down, a big cloud low, and I couldn't see five feet in front of me. It was cold, so I figured we had best keep moving, try to get back to the cottage, hope the sheep would find their way home. Somehow we must have gotten turned around in the mist and dark. When it got light again I was all the way to the fork where our path leaves the road over the pass. I would have come back but I saw that my dog had hurt his leg so figured I had best see if I could find somewhere that would put me up for a few days while it healed. Sometimes we stay out all night with the sheep, so Mother shouldn't get

too worried. If I see anyone heading Efkic way I could send a message, but I don't expect I will. I couldn't think of anything else to do."

The lady looked at him curiously, as if wondering if he was done. Eirick was tempted to elaborate the story but thought better of it; the more he said the more likely he was to say something that would signal that he was making it all up. The bit about staying out with the sheep was a good touch — he was pretty sure herders sometimes did that, at least in stories.

Finally the lady — he wondered if she was Kir's mother — spoke. "We have horses and no great need to go anywhere else today; I'm waiting for a friend to come back from exploring Fire Mountain. Do you think Jarl would be willing to be carried home on a horse?"

He saw the trap, avoided it. "That's very good of you, but I don't think he would. He doesn't mind horses when he and they are on a level, but the only time I tried carrying him on one he objected pretty violently. If I could stay here for a day or two, or if you can suggest somewhere else — I'd be happy to help out with chores and such."

"Do stay, at least for a day or two." That was Kir. "There's nobody here my age, or in the keep either. I don't suppose you play chess?"

Eirick turned, relieved at the interruption. "I would be happy to, and grateful for your hospitality. And yes."

"I have a board and pieces in the tent; Mari and I sometimes play. Would you like — "

The tall lady — Eirick wondered if she was Mari — interrupted. "If Rick walked here all the way from Efkic last night, challenging him to a game now would hardly be fair. Why don't you let him rest, have a nap if he can, first?"

"I'm sorry; you're perfectly right. I was just hoping..."

He turned back to Eirick. "You can use my bed; I'll show you. Then maybe later, when you've had a chance to rest."

At least a way to postpone further questions. Eirick followed Kir to one of the tents, lay down on the cot — the tent was warm enough to make his cloak unnecessary. Jarl followed him in, lay down beside the cot, went to sleep. For another minute Eirick's mind remained wide awake as his body settled into the comfort of the cot, cloth padding over a rope mesh. He wondered if there was any risk that his hosts would offer to send a rider with a message to his mother. A lot of trouble, but if they were willing to send a horse and man with him carrying Jarl... He would have to make sure the idea didn't come up, at least as long as possible. It would take a day or so for a rider to get to the village, discover that there was no missing boy named Rick, come back — by which time he had better be out of the camp and on his way home. Besides, it was hardly fair to his hosts to put them to that much useless trouble. He needed to think of something.



It was late afternoon when Eirick was woken by the sound of a baby crying. In a moment it stopped; he could hear a woman's voice, he thought the tall lady who he was pretty sure was Mari. Jarl was still sound asleep next to his cot; Kir was standing at the door of the tent looking in.

Their first chess game was still going, with Eirick, somewhat to his surprise, down a pawn, when Mari came to the door of the tent, the baby in her arms. She watched in silence for a minute.

"I don't think I'm going to play either of you. Dinner's ready."

Dinner, which had been simmering over the fire, was a pottage of mutton, root vegetables, and greens. Mari, having handed the baby off to Carin, found a spare bowl and spoon for Eirick; one of the men passed him a mug of beer. Watching, Eirick eventually worked out that there were six of them. Two ate; when they were done they left the table and two more came, only to be replaced by the final pair. To Eirick's relief, neither Kir nor Mari pressed him about his story, his situation, or what should be done.

Somewhat to his surprise, Jarl slept through the dinner; when the boys returned to the tent he was still lying by Kir's bed.

"He must have been even more exhausted than I was. When he wakes up he'll be hungry; what should I do for food?"

"I asked Bengt to save the scraps for him, the bits that didn't go into the pottage. I'll get them."

"And I'll rinse out my bowl and fill it with water for him; I saw where the barrel was."

The boys left the two bowls, food and water, at the back of the tent near where Jarl lay sleeping. Eirick bent over his dog a moment; so far as he could see nothing was wrong. At some point he had managed to get the wrapping off, but there seemed to be no fresh blood.

The game ended after another hour with a narrow win for Kir. It was growing dark, so while Eirick set the board up again Kir fetched a lamp. On the way back, he took a moment to speak to Mari, who was sitting by her tent with the baby. "What should we do about someplace for Rick to sleep? If he takes my cot, there's room for me on the floor next to it. But..."

"But you would want some more bedding, under you as well as over. Yes. I think instead I'll ask Karl to let Rick use his bed. He's taking the first watch, and when he comes in he can use the bed of one of the men who goes out."

Kir brought the lighted lamp back into the tent, put it down carefully on the table next to the chess board.

"Mari is going to ask Karl, the guard who shares my tent, to let you use his bed; he can trade off with one of the others who's on watch."

He continued more quietly, "So we'll have the tent to ourselves. As long as we are quiet enough so Mari can't hear us from her tent, we can talk as late as we want."

The game was still going an hour and a half later, this time with Eirick up a piece minus a pawn, when the lamp went out. Kir felt for it in the dark.

"No oil left; we'll have to wait until morning to finish it."

Eirick stood up, felt his way over to his borrowed bed, thought of something. "Bright battle reborn, with the sun's burning?"

"That's from Thorgrimr, isn't it? Do you know the whole ballad?"

"Most of it. I always get lost in the list of names at the end."

"Me too. Which are your favorites?"

Eirick thought a moment. "Oathbrothers. And Thorgill's tale."

"I know Oathbrothers. Is Thorgill the one where the two boys avenge their father?"

Eirick nodded, realized the other could not see him. "Yes. I know most of it."

"I'm not that sleepy. Do you think you could do it quietly enough so the others won't hear? I'll fill in any bits I can remember."

## Chapter 4

*[Mari's camp near Northpass Keep]*

Eirick, not surprisingly, woke late. His first thought was for his new friend; Kir appeared still sound asleep. His second was for his dog. Jarl's water bowl was empty, so at some point he must have woken up and drunk. The food bowl was not as full as it had been, but there was still some meat left in it. Not the dog's usual habit.

Jarl himself was lying as close to Eirick's bed as he could get; he must have shifted over from the other bed when he woke up and found his master no longer next to him. When Eirick bent over him he opened his eyes, moved his tail back and forth once, but remained lying down. A day and a night should surely have been long enough to recover from the trip over the pass; Eirick wondered if there was anyone in the camp who knew more than he did about dogs and what might be wrong with them.

"Is he all right?"

Eirick looked up; Kir was awake and watching.

"I don't know. He seems terribly slow this morning; normally he would be up and running around by now. And he didn't even finish his food. I'm afraid he might be sick. Or maybe his leg is getting worse instead of better — the way people's wounds sometimes do. Do you think anyone in the camp would be able to tell?"

"We can ask at breakfast — if there still is breakfast. It feels late. But I'm glad..."

Eirick nodded. "Me too. At home there's nobody I can do ballads with except Grandfather, and I don't see him very often."

He hesitated a moment; running two lives was harder than he had expected. He needed a reason, and no obvious one occurred to him. Surely a village boy would have plenty of opportunities to visit with his grandfather. What he wanted was a distraction. Fortunately, there was one readily available.

"Is that yours? Can you play it?"

"It" was a small lyre he had just noticed, hanging from a peg in the wooden pole that held up the far end of the tent's ridge.

Kir nodded. "I'm not very good. Mostly I accompany myself doing the ballads when there is nobody else around to object. Mari thinks I should find someone in the Keep or nearby willing to teach me; I don't think people in the City play the lyre, or at least I've never heard anyone doing it. A harp is a lot more complicated and harder to carry around."

"We should try one together — I can recite and you can play. That should make it easier; you won't have to pay attention to two things at once. Now that everybody's awake..."

"That would be fun. But first we should finish the game; I have to see if I can keep you from beating me. And I want breakfast — if there's anything left."

There was — sausage, bread, apples, butter and honey. Eirick discovered that, once the food appeared, he was indeed hungry. Mari came back into camp, carrying the baby — pretty clearly it was hers — and accompanied by one of the men. She passed the baby to Carin. Carin took the baby, kissed it, walked slowly over to the tents and back, singing softly. Mari watched her for a moment then sat down at the table, tore off a piece of bread.

"I had my breakfast while both of you were sleeping, but since I'm eating for two..."

Eirick looked up from his plate; Kir spoke.

"Rick's dog only ate half his food last night and barely woke up this morning. Do you know anything about dogs? Do you think one of the guards does?"

Mari shook her head. "You can ask them when they come in. I know what dogs eat, and that they need exercise, and that when something is wrong with them you ask someone who knows more about it than I do. When Ellen gets back we can have her take a look at him."

Breakfast done, the two boys returned to their chess game; half an hour later Kir accepted defeat.

"That's one each. Shall we try doing a ballad together — Oathbrothers, maybe? I know it pretty well."

Eirick nodded, hesitated. "Is Mari your mother? She acts like it, but you always use her name."

"She's my stepmother. Mother died when I was eight; Father married Mari year before last. But she's not like the stepmothers in the stories. I taught her to play chess and she tells me about things." He stopped, continued in a lower voice.

"Before Father asked her to marry him, he asked me if he should. I said yes. She's the nicest lady I know."

"So the baby..."

"Lanna is my sister — half-sister really. She's not bad for a baby, but she takes up too much of Mari's time. Father says she'll be more fun when she gets older. But I wanted a brother. I've always wanted a brother."

Kir fell silent; Eirick put a different question.

"Who is Ellen? Your stepmother seemed to think she might be able to help with Jarl."

"Ellen is one of the reasons we're camped here; she wanted to investigate Fire Mountain. That and one of the servants in the keep coming down with summer fever. I'm not sure why she wants to investigate it, but she's a mage, so it must have had something to do with that. She's Mari's best friend. Mari wanted to get Lanna out of the keep; she says summer fever is dangerous for babies and thought if we camped here Ellen could use our camp as a base.

"Ellen's mother is a healer. Ellen and her husband, who is a magister at the College, have a plot to get the College to make her the first magistra; Ellen told me all about it a few days ago, when we were staying in the keep. I think Ellen knows something about healing too — she seems to know about a lot of things — so she might be able to see what's wrong with Jarl, maybe even do something about it. I'm not sure how soon she's coming back."

Distractions over, the two boys settled to the serious business of combining Eirick's voice with Kir's music. Both had heard performances of the ballad, neither was entirely sure of the musical details. Eventually they settled on a simplified version, a series of chords that Kir could manage at speed, and started experimenting with ways of varying how it was played to fit the different feel of the different verses.

When they finally decided they needed a break — Kir's fingers were getting sore — they spent some time petting Jarl, then decided to go out for a walk. The dog showed no inclination to join them; Eirick refilled his water bowl and left it next to him.

"We can't go very far from camp, but as long as we stay close it's all right."

Eirick nodded, wondering if bandits were common on this side of the border or if there was some other reason for the precautions. His grandfather's encampment had been occupied by his armed retainers, but as far as he could remember there had been no organized system for setting guards during the day. Of course, there had been no women or babies there either.

Half an hour later, having gone as far as Kir thought safe through the pine forest surrounding the camp, investigated everything, and found nothing but one rabbit burrow — Eirick thought that was what it was — which might perhaps be of interest to Jarl when he was feeling better, the two boys returned to camp. As they headed towards their tent and another game of chess, there was a voice from behind them.

"Your Highness?"

Eirick spun around. The speaker was one of the guards. He was speaking, not to Eirick, but to Mari.

Eirick turned back to Kir, saw he was looking puzzled.

"I didn't realize there was anyone there." Keeping his voice steady was an effort.

He did not look back at Mari to see if she had noticed his reaction; that would only make it more obvious. He needed a chance to think, and not while trying to win the next game of chess.

"Let me see how Jarl is doing; do you think you could get more food for him from the cook?"

Kir nodded, went off; Eirick went back into the tent, sat down by the dog — again asleep.

If Mari was "Your Highness," it was hardly surprising that she camped with guards — surprising, if anything, that she was out camping at all. But forget about that puzzle. The real question was who was she. The king of Esland had no sons, that he knew, and he didn't think he had any daughters either; Eirick was pretty sure that Isabel, the queen, was said to be barren. By everything he could tell, Mari and Kir were Eslanders, so not visiting royalty. Who did that leave?

The answer, when it finally came to him, was obvious. Mari was married to Kir's father. There was only one prince in Esland — the king's brother, Prince Kieron. Eirick's grandfather had told him, not three days before, that the prince had a son by his first wife, that he had remarried, and that his new wife had born him a daughter.

It was common enough to give a son, especially a first son, his father or grandfather's name. Kir was the short form for Kieron just as Rick was for Eirick. Mari, Princess Mari, must be the wife of Prince Kieron, the king's closest advisor, the brother who had helped him defeat Eirick's grandfather in the struggle for the throne, the man chiefly responsible, as best Eirick could tell, for driving Eirick's father out of the kingdom.

It also meant that Kir was Eirick's cousin. His kinsman.

At which point Kir came back in, set up the chessboard, sat down at it.

Eirick lost the first chess game, forced his mind back to the board, won the second.

## Chapter 5

*[Mari's camp]*

They spent the next day playing chess, combining pieces of a ballad in an unsuccessful attempt to reconstruct all of it, and fussing over Jarl. That evening, when the boys went back to their tent after dinner, Eirick asked Kir if he could try the lyre. Despite his one lesson a few days before and Kir's help, he found it difficult to keep track of where the fingers of his left hand, blocking the strings that were to be kept silent, went. Eventually he handed the instrument back to Kir.

"I think it works better the other way."

"That's fine; my fingers are feeling better now."

They made it all the way through the ballad, this time without any serious mistakes, although at one point Eirick forgot a line and had to invent a replacement; Kir looked at him curiously but said nothing. When it was over both were silent for a little; somewhere very far away an owl was hooting. The door of the tent was open and the moon shone through it, but it was too dark for chess and neither boy suggested refilling the lamp. It was Kir who finally spoke.

"Do you have any brothers or sisters?"

Eirick shook his head. "No."

"I have one sister, now. And no brothers."

Again silence. Again it was Kir who broke it. "Would you like to be brothers? Like in the ballad?"

Eirick said nothing; in a moment Kir spoke again. "If you don't want to, it's all right. We'll still be friends."

For a moment Eirick hesitated, two paths clear in his head, then made his decision.

"It isn't that. There's something I have to tell you. After that, if you still want to be brothers..."

"Speak then and be not silent, as Uncle says when he's being formal."

For a moment there was silence, then Eirick spoke slowly.

"That whole story about being from Efkic and getting lost herding sheep was a lie, except for the getting lost part. Rick is my short name. My long name is Eirick. Eirick son of Iolen. I inherited my father's claim to the throne of Esland when he died, your uncle's throne, and the Einvald plans to put me on it some day."

For a moment both boys were silent; then Eirick spoke again. "Why are you smiling, Kir?"

"I have a secret too."

"What's your secret?"

"Mari is a truthteller."

For a moment Eirick looked puzzled, then his face cleared. "So you knew who I was?"

"I think she figured out the first day. Mari's not very good at chess but she's very clever about people. She told me this afternoon."

"And you want to be brothers anyway?"

Kir nodded. "Mari doesn't think the Einvald really plans to put you on the throne; she says he's using you as a bargaining chip, that he'll offer to stop supporting you, maybe to turn you over to Uncle, when he thinks he can get something he wants in exchange.

"But if she's wrong... If we're brothers, nobody can make us fight each other, not the Einvald, not Uncle, not anyone."

"Yes. Do you remember the words of the oath from the ballad? We can do that."

Kir nodded.

Two steps brought Eirick to his cousin's side. They were interrupted by a torrent of barks.

"It's all right, Jarl, we're not fighting. He's just hugging me."

\* \* \*

When Eirick woke the next morning, Kir's bed was empty. He checked on Jarl's food and water — he had eaten more than the day before — then went out to find his new brother. Kir was talking with Mari while Carin held the sleeping baby, rocking her gently in her arms. He looked up, saw Eirick, spoke.

"Mari thinks we should go for a walk before breakfast."

A few minutes took them to an open space in the woods out of easy earshot of the camp. It was Mari who spoke first.

"Kir told me about last night. The fewer people who know who you are, even in camp, the easier things will be, so you are still Rick from Efkic. But we need to talk about how you got here and what you want to do next."

"I got lost — that was the one part of the story that was true. But I don't think it was an accident. I was camped at the other end of the pass with my grandfather, Jarl Eirick. I went for a walk, and when I wanted to come back my dog Jarl — I named him for Grandfather — wouldn't come, kept going farther and farther into the pass with me following. Eventually he got stuck in a hole in the lava. He was behaving so oddly — snarling at me when I got close, which he never does — that I thought he must be under some sort of enchantment. I got my amulet around his neck — it was the only thing I could think of — and just like that he was back to normal.

"I was going to turn around and go back then, or maybe find someplace sheltered for the night and go back in the morning, but I noticed a fire a little farther along, a camp. I thought if I snuck up and listened —



it was dark by then — I might find out what was going on, that they might be part of what had happened with Jarl. They heard us, I ran, got turned around in the dark, and ended up coming down the wrong side of the pass.”

Mari said nothing; it was Kir, listening fascinated, who put the obvious question. “What did you hear? Were they waiting for you? Why?”

“They were waiting for me and Jarl — that was clear enough from what I heard. They said something about someone in the city who was supposed to pay them for bringing me back but not who, and it didn’t sound as though they knew.”

He stopped a moment, but the next step was obvious. “I thought it might be someone working for King Petrus. Mother wants to come back, home to my uncle, and bring me with her. Grandfather is afraid it might not be safe, that the king might think I was a threat and do something about it. The Einvald wants me to stay and won’t let me visit with mother; Grandfather thinks he’s afraid she might persuade me to come back to Esland with her. Part of the reason I wanted to hear what the men were saying...”

Mari nodded. “Part of the reason was to find out if they were working for Petrus, trying to get you into his hands. I suppose it’s possible, although I would think if something like that were going on I would have had at least a hint of it, and I’m not sure how someone working for him could have gotten at your dog — the Forstmark guild is pretty thorough about keeping foreign mages out. I can’t think of anyone else who would want to capture you. I suppose it’s just barely possible that it was a plot by the Einvald to persuade you that the king was after you so as to keep you from coming back to us. That would explain how they got to Jarl.”

She fell silent a moment, then put the next question. “What do you want to do? Go back north? We can provide food and bedding and such if you want to go back by yourself, and I could probably think of some excuse to send a messenger ahead of you, maybe a message from Earl Eskil to his father, to make sure the men who tried to get you aren’t still there. Or, better, send Ellen if she’s back by then.

“Anything more than that might risk word getting back to Kieron or Petrus, which could be a problem. The guards are from the Keep and have no reason to keep secrets from my husband, or the king, or my father for that matter — he’s there now.”

Eirick released the breath he hadn’t realized he was holding.

“But you would?”

“Kieron does what he thinks is right, I do what I think is right. Most of the time we agree. But he knows well enough that I will act on my judgment, not his. It would not surprise me if both he and Petrus were

happy to welcome you back, let you and your mother live in peace with Earl Eskil or back in the city if you preferred. But they might not, and it is not a choice I can make for you."

One thing, at least, he no longer had to fear — the choice would be his. Eirick considered his alternatives, liked none of them.

"If I can, I should at least stay here until Jarl is better; that will give the men in the pass more time to get out of it, too. After that I'll have to decide. I could try to cross north, get to Mother, and have both of us come back without telling the Einvald, but I don't know if I should. Or could. I'll have to decide. I wish Grandfather was here to help."

Mari nodded. "He isn't. You will have to decide for yourself what to do. But not today."

"What you can do today, now, is go take a bath, both of you — I don't know how long it is since Eirick washed but I know it is too long since Kir did. He can show Eirick where the creek is and lend him a spare tunic afterwards. Carin was planning to do laundry today."

When the two boys returned from the creek, clean and dripping, they found Mari talking with another woman, short, dark-haired, stocky, and looking as though she too was in need of a bath. Mari stood up to do the introductions.

"Ellen, this is Rick, the boy I was telling you about. He wandered in hungry with a hurt dog a couple of days ago and has been teaching Kir humility — Rick is a much better chess player than I am — ever since. Rick, this is my friend Ellen, who I hope can tell us something about what is wrong with Jarl."

Eirick shook his head. "Kir has been beating me at least as often as I beat him. Could you look at my dog? I'm worried — I can't see anything wrong with him, but mostly he just lies there as if he were worn out, when he hasn't been doing anything for days."

Ellen nodded. "I'm not properly trained as a healer, but I'll do what I can. Where is he?"

The boys led her to their tent. She kneeled down by the dog, again sleeping, closed her eyes, put one hand on the injured leg, held it there.

"The leg will be all right now; it was partly healed already. But I don't think that's the problem."

She closed her eyes again, her hand on the chest of the sleeping animal. It was a long ten minutes before she opened them. "It's magery. A web of magery woven through his body, feeding a center at his heart. It's amazingly bright; now that I know it's there I think I could find him from miles away. No wonder it's draining him."

"But... I thought I stopped the enchantment when I put my amulet on him. Should I put it back?"

She looked up at him curiously. "What enchantment?"

Eirick looked at Kir, then Mari; Mari nodded. "It's all right to tell Ellen."

Eirick gave a brief summary of the events that had brought him to their side of the pass; Ellen listened. When he was done, she shook her head.

"I don't think this has anything to do with that. I'll look again, but I didn't see any sort of compulsion on the dog; I think you may have broken it when you put the amulet on him. Can I look at the amulet?"

He hesitated for only a moment before he drew it out from under his tunic; she put out her hand, he leaned forward to let her touch it.

"It's good work, Guild craftsmanship. Guard it carefully. I don't know what was on your dog, but I can easily enough imagine spells that would have made him act the way he did and then been shattered by this.

"What he has now is different, not a compulsion at all, and I'm afraid the amulet won't help. It's woven right through him, using what's already there; I think it somehow pulls some of his life into fueling the spell. Not something I've ever seen before, or heard of. Or like. If someone did manage to take it off, unless he understood what he was doing much better than I do, I'm afraid it might kill the dog — take too much of him off along with the spell."

Eirick leaned over the dog, wrapped his arms around him, his face buried in Jarl's fur, breathed in the familiar smell. His voice was muffled. "So there's nothing anyone can do? He's just going to die?"

Ellen shook her head. "There's nothing I can do. Coelus might be able to figure it out, in time, but he couldn't undo it; he doesn't have the right talents. Someone else... Mother might be able to do something — she's a weaving mage and a much better healer than I am. It's possible that she could work out how the threads of the spell are tangled with the threads of his life and untangle them. I can't think of anyone else."

Eirick looked up, his arms still around the dog. "How do I get him to your mother?"

## Chapter 6

*[Guildhall, Forstmark]*

“You sent for me, Meistari?”

The Kenner looked up from his desk and the sheet of paper he had been writing on, his face framed by light from the open window behind him. A little greyer than he had been two years ago, the last time Helgi had seen him, at the ceremony that made Helgi a full member of the Guild. Perhaps a few more wrinkles. But the eyes were not yet the eyes of an old man.

“Yes. There is a task for you, if you want it. The Casters have asked us to lend them your services; I’ll be sending you over to their quarter to talk with Gunnar, the Gerningmeistari, shortly. But I wanted to talk to you first, both to tell you a little about what they want and to suggest something you could do for our quarter at the same time. Sit down.”

Helgi took a chair, waited.

“You know that the Eslandi boy, Iolen’s son, has vanished?”

Helgi nodded. “He went to visit his grandfather and disappeared from their camp. At least that’s Jarl Eirick’s account. I think the Einvald believes it, but I’m not sure.”

“It’s true enough; the Einvald asked me to have one of our people check it, so I did.

“The casters think they can find the boy and they want our help. He isn’t close enough for any of our people to spot him — that was the first thing I asked about, and they had already gotten one of ours to check for them. But you know how short the range of perception is for even the best of us.

“According to the Casters he went over the pass, south into Esland; they think someone working for the Eslandi king might have found some way of luring him and then taking him prisoner. They didn’t tell me how they know and I didn’t ask. But their plan is to send someone after him, get him free, bring him back. Losing him makes the Einvald look bad; bringing him back should make him grateful to the Guild, which would be a good thing. Our quarter is all right, but the quarters that ran the disaster two years ago, the Casters and Smiths, have not been in the best of favor at court ever since.”

“Not just at court, Meistari.”

“Not just at court. The Guild lost repute, and with it power, when the biggest project we ever tried blew up in our faces. Finding the boy and bringing him back when the Einvald lost him might make up for some of that. At least, the Casters think so.”

"And they want to send me, Meistari?"

The Kenner nodded.

"Why me?"

"Whoever they send after the boy has to find him, so that means a kenner. And, having found him, he has to persuade the boy to trust him and go with him. I'm told you know the boy, are a friend of his. Is it true?"

Helgi hesitated a moment, thinking the question over.

"Certainly I know him. My post was just outside the door to his apartments; we would talk, play chess, between my watches. For a kid he's surprisingly good. I suppose you could say we're friends."

"Which makes you better suited to the job than anyone else. They'll pay you standard guild rates, of course, and it doesn't hurt to have people in two of the other quarters feel in debt to you. On the other hand, it might be dangerous. If it really is the Eslandi king behind it and you are in his territory trying to interfere with his plot, you might not come back.

"That's one of the things I thought I ought to warn you about. The other is Gunnar, the Gerningmeistari. He has a devious mind — has had since we were lorisveinir together. Plots within plots, that kind of thing. I don't know what he is up to this time, but you shouldn't take it for granted that everything he tells you is true."

Helgi looked at the Kenner, trying to read what was behind the words. Finally he put the question. "Do you want me to take the job? Do you think I should?"

"Whether you should take it you will have to decide. But I do want you to — and for reasons that have nothing to do with the boy. I have been wanting to get one of our people looking around in Esland for some time now. I would have sent someone a year ago but the rest of the Guild was against it — policy is to keep our mages out of places where the Eslanders might get hold of them. This looks like a good opportunity to learn something, with the Casters paying for it and providing all the support they and the Smiths can think of, it being their project."

"What do you want me looking for, Meistari?"

"I want you looking for the real explanation of what happened two years ago."

Helgi looked puzzled. "I thought everyone knew that."

"Everyone knows that. But not everyone agrees. And they are all wrong.

"What everyone knows is that the Casters and Smiths, with a little help from us, spent more than a year on a massive project to channel fire from under the mountain and use it to melt the pass clear in midwinter, to make it possible for the Einvald to invade Esland when everyone knew it was impossible. The day the army moved into the pass the mountain, which

had been quiet for the past fifty years and more, erupted. Most of our people got out alive, but marching an army over molten rock works even worse than marching it over snow and ice, so the invasion was finished and a year's work and a lot of money wasted.

"The question is why the mountain erupted. The Casters have gone over and over their records of what they did, looked at what was left of their work in the mountain once things cooled enough so they could get at it, and they swear it wasn't anything they did. I believe them; tapping fire from the mountain, if it did anything at all, should have cooled things inside, not heated them up. The Einvald doesn't believe them, both because he wants someone else to blame — it was his project as much as the guild's — and because the timing of the eruption was so perfectly wrong. Certainly an odd coincidence that after fifty years the volcano decided to erupt just when it did."

Helgi's face was enough; he didn't have to put his question in words.

"What do I think happened? I think the Einvald is right that it wasn't chance, wrong about why it happened. If it was the Guild workings that set it off, the eruption could have happened any time in the previous year. If it was setting the spells going and pulling out fire, it should have happened most of a week earlier when they started melting clear our side of the pass, where the Eslanders wouldn't see it.

"The timing was perfectly wrong for us. It was perfectly right for the Eslanders — almost perfectly, at least. I suppose it would have been even better if they had waited another eight hours or so."

Helgi looked up, startled.

"You are saying that the Eslanders made the mountain erupt? That's impossible."

The Kenner made no reply, waited. From the courtyard outside, Helgi could hear the voice of a lorisvein reciting a verse in the True Speech — not a spell but a memorisation exercise. What he might have been doing, three years ago. The next verse ... he pulled his mind back to the conversation.

"Everyone knows that magery is weak; that's why they had to draw fire from the volcano instead of simply having casters with fire talent melt the pass free themselves. Setting off a volcano has to take a lot more fire than melting the pass clear. Thousands, millions of times more than any fire mage has.

"Besides, every caster I've talked with agrees that nobody in the Guild could do it or come close to doing it. And if we can't do it the Eslanders certainly can't; everyone knows their magery isn't up to our level."

"Everyone knows." The Caster's face mirrored his tone. "And since everyone knows it, everyone feels free to deny evidence to the contrary, even when the evidence is as obvious as a volcano erupting. On schedule.

"One of the things wrong with this guild, especially the other three quarters, is complacency. Everyone knows we are better at magery than the Eslanders, so if we cannot do something obviously they can't. And since everybody knows it, nobody is actually paying attention to what has been happening south of us."

"What do you mean, Meistari? Has something changed?"

"Yes — although most of the Guild has managed not to notice it."

"What was most wrong with their system was that it was based on individual mages taking apprentices. The apprentice hardly ever had exactly the same talents as the mage, so some of what the mage could do the apprentice couldn't learn and some of what the apprentice could learn the mage couldn't teach. They were losing old spells, I suppose, about as fast as they were gaining new ones, falling further and further behind us."

"They solved that problem fifty years ago."

"How?"

"Have you heard of the mage's college at Southdale? Of course you haven't. Sixty years ago, more or less, some of the Eslandi mages finally got the bright idea of pooling what they knew, sharing spells and teaching each others' apprentices. Currently the College, as best I can work it out, has about ten full time teachers — they call them magisters — and as many more who come in from time to time to teach things the magisters can't. They graduate about forty trained mages a year after a program of two or three years. That still means that a lot of the Eslandi mages are training under the old system, but it provides a solid core of ones who aren't, who have the opportunity to learn anything any magister can teach. And there's a library too — I don't suppose its spell collection is as good as ours, but it has to be enormously better than what any single mage has."

"So some of their mages have almost the same opportunity for training as all of ours. That might be a problem in the long term, especially if the College gets bigger. But how does that let them do something that all our best people say is impossible, Meistari?"

The Kenner gave him an approving look. "That's the right question. Unfortunately, there may be an answer."

"About the same time the College was getting started, an Eslandi mage named Olver came up with what he thought was a new approach to magery. I've had our people look at what he published and they don't think much of it — not a single complete spell and lots of confusing talk about multiple basis stars and such, and mathematical formulas that don't seem to mean anything. It isn't as if we didn't already know that not all talents fit into the old earth/air/fire/water pattern."

"But maybe they were wrong and there really is something to what he was doing. Or maybe his nonsense inspired someone later to do something



better. What we know is that the magisters at the College, at least some of them, take his work seriously. And there's evidence, quite a lot of evidence, that wherever they got it they know something we don't.

"One of the magisters is a mage named 'Coelus.' People at the College think very highly of him. According to our source, one of the most advanced students there described him as the best theorist of magery at the College, maybe in the kingdom. He's young..."

For some reason the Kenner smiled. Helgi gave him an enquiring look.

"Most of our recent information about the College is from a young galdrakona, a girl who was studying there. She thought she was reporting — for pay, but also, I suspect, for the fun of it — to some unnamed noble in the capital who wanted to keep track of what was happening. In one of her letters she said that Coelus was the only magister in the College young enough to be interesting — and she didn't mean for what he was teaching. But he was only interested in one of the other students, the advanced one.

"It isn't just what she reported about him; she didn't know very much. But there are three other very suggestive facts.

"The first is that there are multiple spells reported, by other people, to have been originated by Magister Coelus. A mage might, if he is lucky, discover a new spell, perhaps even two. Coelus, if what I have put together is right, has created at least fifteen or twenty. That very strongly suggests that he knows something about designing spells that we don't.

"The second is that there is some connection between Magister Coelus and Prince Kieron, the king's brother — who happens to be the royal official in charge of magery, the nearest thing they have to a kingdom Galdrameistari. The prince spent time at the College a few years ago, mostly dealing with Coelus. Our informant doesn't know exactly what was happening — there seem to have been multiple stories floating around — but something was.

"The third... When the volcano erupted, who do you think was in the Eslandi keep at their end of the pass, near the mountain, very possibly on top of the edge of the pool of lava that feeds it?"

"Magister Coelus?"

"Magister Coelus. And Prince Kieron and his mages. And the magister's star student, who ended up marrying him the next year. Put all of that together with the very convenient timing of the eruption and I am convinced that both the Casters and the Einvald are wrong. The eruption wasn't due to what the Guild did and it wasn't an accident.

"And that is why, since the Gerningmeistari is arranging to get you into Esland for his purposes, I want you to learn as much as you can while you are there about Eslandi magery, especially about Magister Coelus and the College. Rescuing missing princes isn't what you are trained for, after



all. Learning things is. You will be passing near the keep where the spell, if I am right in my guesses, was done; with luck there is something or someone you will come across, perhaps some residue of the spell itself, that will help us figure out how. You might end up in the capital, better yet at the College, although that isn't very likely. Wherever you are I want you to keep your eyes, and your mind, open. We know damn little about Eslandi magery and what we know mostly isn't from the Guild; the girl who was reporting on the College was recruited by someone working for one of the Jarls, one who had sense enough to want to know what was happening in Esland and figured that I would be grateful for copies of what he got. I was."

There was a long silence. They could hear voices from the courtyard outside, one of the masters teaching a class. It was Helgi who broke it. "That's fascinating, Meistari. And very disturbing. And of course I will do my best.

"But there was one more thing you mentioned that might matter. The magister's name."

"Coelus?"

"Coelus. That isn't an Eslandi name — at least, I've never heard of anyone else from Esland who had it, and I read a good deal from Esland when I was studying the language. It is, however..."

The Kenner nodded. "You're right. It's a Doray name, or at least a Doray word. That is very interesting indeed. Do you think ..."

"That it is Coelus who did the spell, or at least provided it to the prince and his people. But that he didn't get it from whatever theories of magery the Eslanders have come up with. Everybody knows the Eslanders are behind us in magery, but everybody also knows..."

"That the Doray are ahead of us. They were the first ones to master magery, they've been doing it for longer than anyone else, and there are reports of some amazing things they have done. Most of it perfectly useless, but still impressive. You think some Doray mage came up with a spell for setting off a volcano?"

Helgi nodded. "And having no volcanoes that needed setting off, he wrote it down somewhere and got back to his serious work designing firework displays for the Magistrate's birthday celebration. And young Magister Coelus — except he wasn't a magister then — came across it. Doray mages are bound, but either the Doray let him go off to Esland for some reason of their own or else something went wrong with the binding spell — mages make mistakes, even Doray ones — and he got free and fled the League before anyone noticed. And ended up in Esland, teaching at the College. With a handful of spells they didn't know, including that one.

Either they didn't notice he was gone or they thought making the Eslanders send him back would be more trouble than he was worth."

The Kenner was silent for a moment, thinking.

"The reason it's guild policy to keep our mages out of the kingdoms is that we have the Guild, they don't, so our mages know a lot more spells than theirs do. The worry is that if they captured a few of our mages ....

"The Doray should be even more worried — they have more spells than we do. If one of their mages got away, you would think they would send someone after to retrieve him, or kill him, or force the kingdom to give him back."

Helgi said, "So either I'm wrong about Coelus, or they never realized he was gone — maybe thought he had drowned..."

The Kenner nodded. "Or they are planning something to use against the kingdom to get him back — Doray plan in decades, not weeks."

"Or Coelus is working for the Doray. You noticed the college. Maybe they did too."

\* \* \*

"The Kenner told you what we want you for?"

Helgi looked curiously at the Gerningmeistari, the head of the Casters' quarter. Gunnar was a tall man, going bald, and his voice was surprisingly soft.

"Yes, Meistari. He said you want to send me across the pass to try to find Eirick Iolenson and bring him back."

"And what do you think of the project?"

"It sounds impossible, Meistari, but that must be because there is more that he didn't tell me."

"Impossible because?"

"To begin with, because I have to find him. I'm a kenner, but I can't spot someone, not even someone I know, if he's a mile away or anything close. Esland is a big place, so how do I find him?"

"That is the first problem; we believe we have solved it. Continue."

"Once I find him, he will be in the hands of whoever spirited him across the pass. I will be alone, with no resources but my wits and my magery — and my magery is for learning things not for doing things. They, if they are working for the king, will have whatever resources they need; the only limit is that they may be trying to keep everything quiet, in which case they won't want to call in the royal companies, but it's hard to see why they would need to."

"That is a harder problem but we think we can solve it as well. In addition to your wits and your magery you will have whatever the casters and the smiths can come up with to help. We are also planning to provide

you with a companion — not a mage, but someone familiar with Esland. Continue.”

“If I can find him and get him free and persuade him to come with me, we still have to get back through their territory and through the pass. Unless I manage to steal him away without anyone noticing, there will be people after us — people with more resources and more knowledge of the territory than we will have.”

“That too we have thought of. Are there any more?”

“Only that all of this assumes I can get to the boy before he arrives wherever they are taking him and gets locked up, or killed, or whatever the king of Esland wants him for.”

“Which is why we do not have a great deal of time. Arnulf here will take you to where we have the device that the smiths have prepared for you. He will explain it to you, and our plans for you in Esland. You do speak the language?”

“Yes, Meistari. Fluently — it’s part of my job for the Einvald. But I probably have enough of an accent to be noticed.”

“You will be in the Marches, where they think anyone from anywhere else in the kingdom has a funny accent. As long as you don’t commit yourself as to exactly where you are from you should be all right.

“Once you have your instructions, Arnulf will take you to where our people will provide the enchantments necessary to keep the Eslanders from spotting you as what you are. I am afraid that may leave you a little tired; we have a room and a bed for you. You leave in the morning for the pass.

“Any questions? Good.”

## Chapter 7

*[Mari's camp]*

"Melia, Ellen's mother, is in Southdale, where the College is. So the question is how to get Jarl to Southdale."

Ellen, Mari, and the two boys were seated at the camp table, having left Jarl to drowse in the tent; nobody else was near. Eirick looked up at Mari's words.

"I have to go with him. I'm sorry — I hope it doesn't make it harder — but I can't trust anyone else. And I'm not sure what he would do if I wasn't there."

Mari nodded. "Yes. So the question is how to get both of you there. It's a four-day ride back to the capital and more than another day to the College. What you said about the dog and riding — was any of it true? Would there be a problem with him on a horse?"

Eirick looked puzzled; in a moment his face cleared. "I forgot about that. I just made it up; I was afraid you would send us back to Efkic and find out I wasn't really from there. I've never tried to carry Jarl on a horse — he always ran along with us."

"Not this time, I'm afraid."

Kir broke into the conversation. "Would carrying him on a horse be safe?"

Mari thought a moment. "If he were healthy, probably, provided he didn't object, although it would be tricky rigging a saddle to hold both him and a rider and he's pretty heavy. As it is, I don't know. Perhaps not."

She turned to look at Ellen; Ellen nodded. "I've finished what I came here for."

Mari nodded. "And I can't go back into the keep with my parents even if I wanted to, because of the fever and Lanna. We left the coach we came up in in the keep..."

"So we can use it to take Rick and Jarl to Southdale, and Ellen's mother will cure Jarl and..." Kir's tone made it clear that he approved of the plan.

Eirick objected, "That's not fair — getting them to travel all that distance just to get Jarl to someone who might be able to help him. There must be another way. Maybe if you lent me a horse — I'm not that heavy and Jarl will do things if I tell him to."

Mari shook her head. "I'm not sending you and the dog off by yourselves to wander across the landscape. Besides, you are assuming I don't want to go to Southdale. As it happens, I do."

Eirick looked up at her uncertainly. "Really? You aren't saying that just so..."

"I hardly ever say things just so. And Ellen never does. You can ask her — we talked about the idea of my visiting Southdale before she went off exploring the mountain."

Ellen nodded. "Mari wants to learn healing. She has the right talents, at least to learn enough to be of some real use. When we were students there wasn't anyone at the College to teach her. One of my husband's colleagues had the clever idea of inviting Mother to come to Southdale not as a magistra but as a healer — in case someone at the College broke his leg or had a heart attack or something. Officially that's what she is there for, but there is nothing to stop anyone at the College, student or magister, who wants to learn from her doing it. If they get in the habit... And Coelus is in the capital, which makes the whole plan much more likely to work."

Eirick looked puzzled. "Coelus? You mentioned him before."

Ellen nodded. "Coelus is my husband and I love him dearly and have learned a great deal from him, but tact is not one of his talents. The other magisters are much more likely to decide they want to make Mother a tutor and whatever teaching she is doing official if they think it up for themselves than if he is there telling them that she should obviously be a magistra and nobody but an idiot would be against the idea."

"And so," Mari continued, "taking you and Jarl to Southdale isn't out of our way at all. The coach will be a little crowded with Eirick and the dog as well as Carin and the rest of us, at least until we get to the capital, where I assume we leave Ellen with her husband unless she wants to visit her mother too. But we can manage."

Kir looked up with a grin. "Eirick and I can go on the outside. That way there will be plenty of room for the rest of you inside."

"What a generous offer." Mari did not sound as though she meant it. "Don't you think you should ask Eirick first if he wants to ride on the outside?"

"Of course he does. Anyone would. Don't you?"

Eirick hesitated for only a moment. "Of course. Except that part of the time I will want to be inside with Jarl."

The essential plan settled, it was four more days before it could be put into practice — time to send one of the guards to the keep to arrange for Mari's coach, a coachman and a team of horses, time to decide what supplies were needed, time to fetch the rest of Kir's spare clothing and purchase cloth to make clothes for Eirick. It was just a week after Eirick had walked into Mari's encampment that the coach arrived there to be loaded up with possessions, food, three women, two boys, a baby and a dog.

Eirick, having made sure that Jarl was as comfortably settled as space would allow, got out of the carriage and joined Mari, who was wandering

around the camp making sure nothing had been left behind that they would want.

"What will happen to the tents and things?"

She stopped a moment to reply, "The guards will take care of them; you can see that Nat is striking one now. They and the packhorses will take what's left back to the keep."

"About the guards — I was wondering. We can't fit them into the carriage. Is it safe traveling without them? You were being very careful here — that's one of the things that started me wondering."

"About who we were? Yes. We won't really need guards; I'm not much of a mage but Ellen is a great deal more formidable than she looks. But we will take two along, on horseback, just to play safe and keep my father happy. And one more to send ahead to make arrangements. Not from these — they'll go back to the Keep."

She stopped a moment, glanced around; nobody was near. The only sounds were the wind through the branches and the faint noise of the creek.

"The guards here know too much about you — not who you are but how you showed up, probably parts of the story you told. We leave them, and what they know, behind. The ones who go with us will be leaving the keep before these six arrive, so all they will know will be what we tell them.

"If asked, we tell people that you are a friend of Kir's, which you are, and a kinsman of Earl Eskil — which you also are. The first rule, if there is any risk of truth-tellers about, is to tell the truth — selectively. The second is not to volunteer more than you need to. That was one of your mistakes. Answering questions nobody has asked makes people wonder.

"It will be obvious that you and Kir are friends — no need to say more than that unless someone asks. And if someone is too curious that may tell us something about him; whoever tried to grab you is still out there somewhere. It's not as if Kir's friends ought to be the business of anyone other than his father, me, and perhaps His Majesty."

"Besides saying too much, what else did I do wrong?"

"So you can tell better lies next time if you have to? Little things. You said Jarl's leg had been cut by the lava. Between here and Efkic the lava's at least a century old, worn down, mostly going back to soil. That doesn't make it impossible, but you wouldn't take it for granted that was what did it if you had really come from there, the way you did after coming over the pass.

"Also Jarl himself. Your idea for explaining what he looks like was brilliant. But there's still the problem of his name."

Eirick gave her a puzzled look. "I thought I took care of that. If his sire was one of Jarl Eirick's wolfhounds..."

Mari nodded. "Your grandfather hasn't been on this side of the mountains since before the dog was born. There are still some of the breed about — you aren't the only one he gave puppies to. But why would you connect the sire to Earl Eirick if it wasn't one of his pack? And Eskil doesn't hunt much and doesn't have a pack of his father's hounds, so you couldn't have been thinking of him.

"Aside from all that, Eirick wasn't and Eskil isn't a jarl, not this side of the mountains. That's the Forstish title, not ours."

Eirick hesitated for a moment before he replied. "Your Highness is entirely correct; that was stupid of me."

"You don't have to call me..."

"Shouldn't I get in the habit? If I were some second cousin of Earl Eskil brought up in the Marches and you carried me off to keep Kir company, isn't that what I would call you?"

This time it was Mari who was briefly silent.

"Yes. Probably not in the coach, after you had been with us for a few days. But in public, yes."

## Chapter 8

*[Northpass crest]*

“What’s that?”

Grimr brought his horse to a stop. “What?”

Helgi pointed. By one side of the road through the pass there were signs that someone had been there recently — a circle of rocks where there had been a fire. The mage dismounted, poked curiously through it.

“This might be where the men who stole Eirick were camped. Let me look around, see what I can learn.”

“Think I’ll poke around too. I’ve seen a lot of abandoned camps over the years.”

Half an hour later, Helgi turned to the older man. “There were men and horses and a tent but that’s all I can tell. No evidence that the boy was here — or wasn’t.”

“I can do a little better than that. They spent several days here. Left at least four or five days back; not likely to stumble over them coming down out of the pass.”

“You ought to have my job. How can you tell?”

“Magery’s not the only way to learn things. None of the droppings are fresh, some a good deal more dried out than others. Don’t suppose you can learn anything more from them?”

Helgi shook his head. “If there’s a spell for telling how long ago the manure left the horse I never learned it. But it fits what we know about the men we’re after. Eirick left the Jarl’s camp just over a week ago, so if they were waiting for him they would have been already camped here by then. And they would have headed back into Esland once they had him. Unless they stop at some point and sit around for a few days, I don’t see how we are going to catch them.”

“Arnulf said you would have a way of following the boy.”

“I’m supposed to. Once we get over the top of the pass I may be able to use it.”

Three hours later, with the road clearly heading down, the tree line not far ahead and the distant fields hidden in mist, they stopped to breathe the horses. Grimr was the first to speak.

“From here on we may meet locals. I’ve done this sort of thing before; gather you haven’t. Best we run over our story.”

Helgi nodded agreement, thought a moment. “We’re brothers, born in Esland — don’t say where — hair color matches close enough. Our parents left the Marches when we were kids, moved to Forstmark. That was back



when the princes were fighting over the throne and their Jarl had picked the wrong side.

"But after the latest trouble, things got a little uncomfortable in Lundt for us, what with everyone knowing where we came from. And there isn't much work for us there anyway; we thought it might be better back south. My master gave me leave to try to find another apprenticeship somewhere where chances were better. The capital looks like the best chance for a jeweler so that's where we're headed."

"If we meet someone from Esland, how much of that do you tell him?"

Helgi looked puzzled. "All of it?" Grimr shook his head.

"As little as you can. When's the last time a stranger told you his life story? What would you think of one who did? You need to know the whole thing, case something comes up where it matters. Don't need to tell it to the world. With luck, anyone we meet in Esland will assume we're Eslanders. The story is in case they don't.

"What are our names?"

"Helgi and Grimr?"

Grimr nodded. "Folk think it's clever to pick some new name. Someone uses it, they don't react, he gets suspicious. Nobody in Esland knows our names, might as well use 'em."

Helgi nodded, paused, spoke. "I think it's time to see if this has any chance of working."

He reached into the wallet at his side, found the talisman — to touch and sight an oddly-shaped rod of dark polished wood, more than a foot long and heavy for its size — gripped it, closed his eyes, looked south.

It was a long minute before he pointed, opened his eyes. "It works. He's in that direction."

He was pointing south, down the road, into Esland.

"You're sure?"

"I'm sure that's the direction of what I'm seeing. Assuming that the smiths got it right, that should be where Eirick is."

A few hours more brought them below the mist, the valley spreading out below them. They stopped again, again Helgi searched.

"Yes. That way. Towards the Keep — I assume that's what it is — but a bit this side of it, as best I can tell."

"You can judge distance too?"

Helgi shook his head. "I can judge direction. From here, that's south and down. By how much down it is, I can get some idea of how far out he is, assuming he isn't floating in the air, which doesn't seem likely, or buried underground. If I had used this thing more I might get some idea of distance by how bright what I'm seeing looks, but I haven't. And I have no idea how it works."

He paused; better not to discuss Guild matters with an outsider, even one in the Guild's employ. Obviously the talisman had been attuned to Eirick, which probably meant that it had been made before he disappeared, perhaps at the Einvald's request, as a precaution in case he somehow lost track of his guest. But how was it able to detect the boy from miles away — a far greater distance than the simulacrum, a larger and more elaborate piece of smith work, could manage?

Fortunately, he did not have to know how it worked, only how to use it.

At which point he noticed that Grimr was still looking at him with a puzzled expression.

"Something wrong?"

"You are sure of the direction?"

Helgi nodded. "I'm surprised he isn't farther off, but it's good news for us."

"It isn't that. Arnulf had a guess about where we would find him — place a few miles west of the keep, just off the road to the capital. Don't know how he knew and didn't want to ask — I don't meddle in mage's affairs more than I have to. But it looks like he was wrong."

A few hours later, Helgi again brought his horse to a halt.

"We should be getting close soon; we'd better be careful."

"Can you...?"

He nodded, slid his hand into the wallet, felt for the talisman. "I'll check."

He stood looking down in the direction of the keep, closed his eyes. Opened them. "They've moved him."

"Where?"

Helgi closed his eyes again, stretched out his hand pointing, opened them. "They've moved him west — not very far. Near the road. Maybe Arnulf was right after all."

An hour later they were out of the pass, approaching the crossroads and the keep that guarded it. Helgi again stopped, dismounted. "Hold the horses. I don't want to be too obvious; we're getting to places where someone might be watching."

He moved off the road into the shelter of one of the evergreen trees that bordered it, in a few minutes returned. "He's on or near the road to the capital somewhere west of here. Maybe the place Arnulf told you. Any idea how far it is?"

Grimr nodded. "Maybe three miles from here; I think I know the turnoff. If we camp near there tonight..."

"I can go in and see if Eirick's there. If they aren't mages, it should be pretty safe. If they are, they'll be Eslandi mages and not watching for me,

might even be asleep, so I should be able to spot Eirick and then get back out of their range."

\* \* \*

It was past midnight when Helgi got back to the camp. The fire was long out, nothing left of it but a faint smell of charred wood. His companion was stretched out in the small tent, eyes closed but awake. Helgi crawled in, rolled himself up in bedding and cloak before he spoke.

"A small house with two men in it. I spent most of two hours listening. Eirick isn't there."

"Was it the right place? Could you figure out what they did with him?"

Helgi shook his head, then realized that the other could not see him. "The right place but they never had him. The two men are brothers; the house is theirs. They planned to capture him in the pass all right but it didn't work; instead of coming to their fire as they figured a lost kid would, he ran away from them back down the mountain. They searched a couple of miles into Forstmark then gave up and came back down their side of the pass. At this point they are sitting home waiting for the man they were supposed to deliver Eirick to, worried about what happens when they tell him what happened."

Grimr's voice was puzzled. "You say the kid ran back down our side of the mountain. But that trick stick you have says he's on this side, somewhere west of here. How...?"

"The talisman is pointing at something on this side of the mountain, but we have only the word of the smiths that it's pointing at Eirick. Maybe it's pointing at something he was carrying or wearing — his amulet, say. His cloak. His shoe. Something he dropped in the confusion in the dark. Something that ended up in the possession of some random traveler coming across the pass and heading west for the capital."

"And the boy?"

"Either got home alive, maybe lost for a while in the mountains so we missed him, or decided he wanted to be somewhere other than the Einvald's palace and went there, or..."

"Or fell off a cliff and is lying dead somewhere out of sight of the road through the pass. And we've been wasting our time. If any of those is right we should turn around and head home."

Helgi hesitated a moment before responding. "You should go home. My quarter asked me to look into some other things this side of the mountains."

Grimr shook his head; Helgi suspected that the action was automatic, wondered if it had occurred to the other man that only one of them was blinded by the dark. "My orders are to keep you safe, make sure the

Eslanders don't get their hands on whatever guild secrets are in your head. If the boy isn't here, I go back home and you come with me."

Helgi considered replying in the same tone, chose a simpler solution: "It's late to argue and I'm tired. In the morning we can work through how much we know, how sure we are, what we should do. Right now I'm having a hard time keeping my eyes open."

The mage closed his eyes, lay still, considered the morning. His companion seemed surprisingly confident of his ability to prevail, just as he had earlier seemed surprisingly confident of his ability to retrieve Eirick from his captors and get him back to Forstmark. A puzzle. One place to look for an answer might be the wallet that Grimr always wore slung over his shoulder, the wallet that lay not three feet away on the other side of the sleeping man.

Half an hour later, with Grimr sound asleep and snoring, Helgi quietly rolled up his bedding, shoved the bundle out of the tent, followed it, shivering a little in the evening cool. He wondered if the other had realized how little protection a secret pocket, however well concealed, provided against a curious kenner. The protective spells that concealed his talents blurred perception a little, but not enough to matter at a range of three feet, and recognizing the nature of scrolls was one of the things he had been trained to do. Four of the twelve were marked with a letter E, three more with an H.

Was Grimr counting on being able to trick the intended victim into reading the scroll? Or had the smiths come up with a way of crafting a scroll that a user without talent could use to enspell its intended target? If so, they had neglected to tell the rest of the Guild of their accomplishment, which was interesting.

Of course, there was one more possibility. A disturbing one.

The magery he was trained in would be of little use if it came down to a physical conflict, whether with a servant of the Eslandi king or of the Caster. On the other hand, he did not see how the casters, or the smiths, or both together could have provided Grimr with a way of keeping track of Helgi that did not require the skills of a kenner to use. Once a few miles away and well off the road, he would be free to get on about the business of his quarter without worrying about attempts, magical or otherwise, to drag him back over the pass.

The question was which way to go. Coming down out of the pass he had seen no sign of the spell residues that the Kenner had asked him to look for. It was possible that a longer search would find something — also that it would attract the attention of someone in the keep that guarded the pass. And there was a further risk — an encounter with Grimr, on his way home angry.

The other direction, west and south, a route Grmr had no reason to take, would bring him to the capital and past that the College. There should be lots of students there familiar with Eslandi magic and, if his own experience as a student was any guide, happy to show off their new knowledge.

That settled, it remained only to separate his cloak from the bundle of bedding, put it on, saddle and load his horse. Quietly.

## Chapter 9

*[Road west of Northpass Keep]*

“Isn’t this fun?”

Eirick nodded loyally. The two boys were on the outside bench of the coach, above and behind the seat where the coachman sat, holding onto the side railings. They had been going for more than an hour, their usual conversation made more difficult by the noise of the coach’s wheels and the hooves of the horses.

Eirick leaned over to get his mouth closer to his cousin’s ear. “We need a chessboard.”

“The pieces would be all over the road. Wouldn’t even work inside the coach.”

Eirick shook his head. “Pegs. Holes in the board.”

Kir nodded his agreement. The two were silent for a while before he spoke.

“We need to make friends with Ingvar. The coachman.”

Eirick looked at him curiously, said nothing.

“So he will let us take turns driving it.”

Eirick again nodded, turned to look around him. Both of the mounted guards were in sight, one ahead of the coach, one behind. It seemed barely more than token protection for the wife and son of the heir to the throne, traveling through territory that less than three years before had been in rebellion. Any of the holds they passed could, if its lord desired, raise a force more than adequate to deal with two guards, or six for that matter. Mari’s confidence suggested that his grandfather was right, that the end of the rising had left the Marches safely under royal control.

Of course, there was also her odd comment about her friend Ellen. Obviously she, like Mari, was a witch — a galdrakona, a mage woman, as Helgi would put it. But from all he had heard, the talents of witches lay in healing, weaving, and the like. A healer could, he supposed, pervert her talent into a weapon against her enemies, but surely not a very potent one. And even a trained war mage could hardly hold off an army. Not even a very small army.

It occurred to him that he should be hoping that Mari was wrong, that she was not as safe as she supposed. He was, after all, his father’s son; in strict logic she was his enemy.

But then, in strict logic, so was Kir. Which showed how much strict logic was worth.

An hour later the coach slowed, rumbled off the road, came to a stop. The coachman turned to the boys behind him. "Horses need a rest. People too I expect."

The boys climbed down. Eirick was the first to speak. "It feels so quiet."

Kir nodded agreement. "It's always like that. Worse inside the coach. Mari and Carin will be getting out food for the noon meal; we should have time to explore a little."

Exploration took them to a creek shaded by willows where the coachman, having unhitched the horses, was watering them. A little upstream was a pool with a convenient rock by it for the boys to sit on, shoes off, bare feet dangling in the stream.

"The water is cold and I'm thirsty."

Eirick nodded agreement, reached into the wallet at his side.

"And I have a cup."

He dipped the horn cup into the water, passed it over to his cousin. Kir took a cautious sip.

"I can taste mud in it."

"Let me see."

Kir passed the cup back. Eirick took it in both hands, looked down at it carefully. "If I hold it still for a bit, maybe I can get the mud to settle out."

He held it while Kir poked around on the bottom of the stream, looking for gemstones. A few minutes later, Kir returned with a handful of pebbles.

"Pretty, but ..."

Eirick nodded agreement, bent over the cup, took a sip. "Try it now — just from the very top."

Kir sipped, this time still more cautiously. Again.

"No mud. It worked. Fill it up again to give some to Jarl. Fresh water might make him feel a little better." He passed the cup back.

The two boys fell silent while Eirick refilled the cup, held it still, watched it carefully as the mud settled out. Kir was the first to speak.

"You told me one of your cousins wanted to start another rising, get you to lead it. Is that going to be a problem?"

"I don't think so. My uncle is against it. If they get to Grandfather he'll tell them that he's against it — and he was the one leading it last time. I'm against it — I don't want to be king. I'll tell them so."

"What if — "

They were interrupted by Ellen's voice. "Ingvar says the horses will be ready in another half hour or so; Mari sent me to bring you back to have something to eat first."

When they got back to the coach, Eirick poured the water into a bowl, put it on the floor of the coach next to where Jarl was lying. The dog lifted his head to look at his master, sniffed at the water, drank it, went back to sleep.

While they were sitting on the grass eating, Kir described to Mari his cousin's idea for a traveling chess board.

"I expect we can get one made for you when we get back home."

Ellen looked up from her plate. "Do you need a board?"

Kir looked at her curiously. "To play chess we do."

She shook her head. "Kir tells Eirick his move, Eirick tells Kir his, both of them remember where all the pieces are. It's harder — you have to really pay attention — but at least you won't be bored."

Eirick extracted the one essential fact from the interesting but implausible suggestion.

"You play chess?"

Ellen nodded. "With my husband. And before that at home."

"Would you like to play one of us? When we stop for the night?"

"If you want. If there's time and you can get at your board and pieces."

It was late afternoon when Rauf, the harbinger they had sent ahead to make arrangements for the night, came back, accompanied by two other riders. Ingvar let the coach slow to a stop. One of the two spoke.

"My master, Lord Marten, invites Her Highness and her companions to spend the night at his hold. To escort them there, he has sent his son." He nodded to his companion.

The coach door opened; Mari leaned out. "Lord Marten's invitation is accepted with gratitude. And I am grateful as well for the loan of his son."

The words were formal but it sounded to Eirick as though Mari was having difficulty keeping the tone serious. The reason became clear a moment later, when Ellen stuck her head out of the door as well. "Anders. What a pleasant surprise. It is your father's hold we are going to?"

Anders bowed from the saddle, first to Mari, then to Ellen. "It is indeed. Welcome, Your Highness. Welcome, most learned lady. Another three miles or so and I can properly welcome you into my father's hold."

He looked up at the boys on the roof of the coach, looked again. His grin vanished.

An hour later the coach rolled through the gates of a small hold, came to rest in the courtyard. The group who met them was headed by a couple in what Mari suspected was their best clothing; Anders made the introductions.

"Princess Mariel, my father Lord Marten, my mother Lady Ingri. Father, this is Her Highness Princess Mariel and her friend the Learned Lady Elinor."



Marten bowed, his lady curtsied. "Your Highness and your companions are welcome here. We have prepared a suitable room for you; my lady will show you to it. Will you want your child and her nursemaid to be with you?"

"I thank you, my lord. I will want my daughter and my friend with me if that can be arranged. If you can lodge Carin somewhere close that would be convenient but hardly necessary."

"About your son..."

Anders interrupted his father. "I can speak with the boys about where they would like to stay — my room if they want it."

Mari turned to him. "I expect Kir and Rick will be happy enough to share sleeping space with your father's retainers in barracks or great hall, but you can ask them. Anywhere with room to set up a chess board should do. Better still if any of your guards play — or know some of the old ballads."

Kir, having gotten down from the coach roof, broke in. "Ellen said she would play us."

Mari gave him an amused look. "I'm sure she will. But not, I think, until after dinner. Both of you should get your things, chess set included, go with Anders, and work out with him where you want to sleep."

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Half an hour later Mari was unpacking clean clothing while Ellen entertained Lanna; the baby was lying, legs kicking the air, on the ornate four poster that was the room's most striking feature. There was a knock on the door. Ellen looked up, spoke softly. "Anders."

Mari nodded. "Come in."

Anders, still in traveling clothes, came in, closed the door. Mari was the first to speak. "You look worried. Can we help?"

He hesitated for a moment before speaking. "Rick. Kir's friend. What..."

Mari, the situation suddenly clear, nodded her answer to the unspoken question.

"Yes, I know who he is. So do Kir and Ellen. And no, he is not under any compulsion; I don't know if Ellen could cast such a thing but she wouldn't. Rick got here by a combination of intent — we don't yet know whose — and accident. I offered to send him back; he chose to come with us instead. He is under no peril from me — I cannot speak for my husband or his brother, but hopefully none from them either — and Kir is at no peril from him. Very much the contrary."

There was a moment's silence before Anders, looking somewhat more his usual self, spoke again. "I was the one, when they came through three

years ago, who kept him entertained while his father... I don't think anyone else has recognized him. I assume..."

"That it would be better not to tell anyone else? Yes."

The two were interrupted by an unhappy sound from the baby. Mari unbuttoned her robe at the neck, picked up her daughter; it took Lanna only a moment to find what she wanted. Anders turned to Ellen. "Half an hour or so until dinner, perhaps a little longer. The boys asked me to remind you about chess."

Mari looked up from the baby she was nursing. "This is your parents' room?"

Anders nodded. "I was born in that bed. So was father."

Ellen gave him a puzzled look. "If this is their room, where will they be sleeping?"

"In my room. I will be in the hall with father's retainers and the two boys. We aren't set up for guests in the castle itself, but it would hardly do to send you out to the village. It isn't like the College here, with guestrooms and all."

Later that evening, the dinner — more nearly an impromptu feast — over, Ellen and Mari returned to their room, Mari carrying the baby. Once inside, Ellen walked a wide circle around the room, eyes closed, muttering words in the True Speech, before joining Mari and Lanna on the bed.

"You should be safe enough. I will see if the boys are still awake; I owe them a chess game or two."

Mari nodded. "I doubt there is any danger — if there is, Anders does not know of it, and I believe he is the only mage in the hold. The lord and lady seem friendly enough. After she stopped feeling nervous, Ingrid offered me a good deal of practical advice on babies and nursing, which I don't think she would have been up to if they were planning to murder me in my sleep.

"I would like to watch — the boys, not the game — but I think I had better get undressed and to sleep instead. Good luck — but I do not suppose you are the one who will need it."

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"Maybe if we keep trying?"

Kir, seated with his cousin on top of the moving coach, shook his head.

"We could play a hundred games each and not beat her. Not even close."

There was brief silence before the alternative occurred to Eirick.

"Do you think she would teach us?"

Kir thought a moment. "Probably. Mari told me about her, back when they were both students at the mage's college. At lunch time Ellen would

explain things to the other students; Mari says she was much better at it than the magisters. They called it Ellen's seminar. At least we could ask."

The two boys fell silent, considering the matter. Something else occurred to Kir.

"Grownups can be odd — did you notice what the men were talking about last night, when we were falling asleep, after Sigurd had finished the ballad and put his lyre away?"

Eirick nodded. "They were talking about Mari nursing Lanna herself — they sounded surprised. I never figured out why and then it was morning."

"I think they expected her to use a wet nurse — that that was what Carin was with us for. I've heard of ladies in the capital doing that and I expect they have too. It sounded as though they didn't approve of wet nurses."

Eirick thought a moment before answering.

"Do you remember the bit about Thorgill and his brother — why Thorgill was the greater hero?"

Kir shook his head. "I don't know it that well — why?"

"Because when they were babies their mother let Thorgrimr nurse once with a servant girl, when she didn't have time. The baseborn milk made him just a little base — still a hero, but not as good a one as his brother."

There was a pause in the conversation; Kir broke it.

"Did you manage to get leftovers from the feast for Jarl? You said you were going to try."

Eirick nodded. "Carin got them for me. Bones with meat on them — Jarl likes to chew bones."

Kir responded to tone not words. "But?"

"But he didn't. I'm worried."

The coach went over a bad bump; both boys caught hold of the railings, fell briefly silent.

## Chapter 10

*[Prince Kieron's townhouse, the capital]*

Mari looked around the familiar room, considered and rejected the possibility of sitting down, waited. In a few minutes the door opened and her husband came in. She was the first to speak. "You look unhappy."

He nodded. "I'm glad both of you are home safe, but... Surely your father could have lent you more than three men for an escort. It's been less than three years since..."

"It's been less than three years since the Marches were in arms against us. I'm sure Father would have lent me more if I had asked him for them — fifty or a hundred men, which is what it would have taken to make any real difference. And if you were a Marcher lord and you observed that the wife of the heir did not feel safe in the Marches without a small army to protect her, what lesson would you draw?"

Kieron considered the matter for a moment. "That we didn't trust the Marcher lords. That he might be wise not to commit too strongly to Earl Eskil and the other loyalists, that they might not have the support of their own people. I can see all that. I am not saying that you should have come back home with an escort a hundred strong — only that you shouldn't have come back by yourself. You could have waited until part of the royal contingent was due to rotate out and gone back with them, the way you came. Just as safe and a lot less obvious. I don't want to insult our supporters in the Marches, weaken our position there. But I also do not want to lose two of the three people I love most in the world — and with no escort to speak of, any minor lord with a grudge could have ..."

"I could have waited. I had reasons not to — summer fever at the keep and our daughter not a year old yet. Other reasons to come back as well. But look at the other side. What does it tell the Marcher lords when your wife and son travel through their lands with nothing to even hint that we are afraid of them, when we stay in every little castle along the way as if we were traveling through Father's lands in the East?"

"We need these people's loyalty. You need it, Petrus needs it, Kir will need it. He isn't some shadowy manikin to them anymore, some stuck up kid from the capital who probably dresses in cloth of gold and has three servants to pick up after him. He's that charming kid — young man — polite as you could ask for, happy to sleep on a straw mattress in the great hall with the retainers, got one of them into a chess game and beat him too. The Marchers are old fashioned, not that different from Father's people. They want to follow lords they know, lords they can trust, not someone

who thinks he is owed the earth because of something his great grandfather did.

"And not only Kir. The people around Northkeep know me — the family has spent time there since I was a child and Mother can make friends with anyone. The rest of the Marches don't. The first hold we came to belonged to the father of a boy I knew at the College, the one who was herald for the Earls when they summoned Northkeep to siege. I know which side they were on then.

"The lord and the lady turned over their bedroom to me, it being a small castle with no guestroom, took their son's room; he slept in the hall with Kir and his friend Rick. Lady Ingri was a little stiff at first. She had the idea that ladies in the capital spent all their time walking in gardens or listening to music and had their babies brought up by servants, with wet nurses the way the Doray nobles do it and the southern lords who follow the Doray fashion. The way I expect Isabel would have if she had ever had children. Ingri thawed when she realized that I was nursing my own daughter — and changing her too for that matter. We spent the second half of the feast talking about babies. One of hers died young but she brought up four others and had lots of helpful advice on how to deal with them, Lanna being my first."

There was a long silence, the prince looking at his wife while he tried to untangle his mixed emotions. At last he spoke.

"I concede, love, that I could not have found an abler ally; I am sure the Marches are safer now than they were a week ago. But it still turns me cold to think of the risk you were taking. No escort worth speaking of, most of a week in the Marches, no way to know in advance who could be trusted and who couldn't."

Mari smiled. "I take risks when I have to. I also cheat. Just how much about our trip did Ingvar tell you?"

He stopped, thought a moment.

"You traveled in our coach with Ingvar as driver, two outriders, a third rider to serve as harbinger, Carin, a friend Kir picked up somewhere, and a lady friend of yours. Also a very large and apparently sick dog, I gather belonging to Kir's friend. Did he leave anything out?"

"Only names."

He waited.

"Ellen."

It took Kieron a moment to understand. "The Learned Elinor? Magister Coelus' wife was the friend who was with you?"

Mari nodded, still smiling, said nothing.

"I apologize; remind me not to underestimate your tactics again, beloved. A charming mix of innocence and wisdom, as you told me long

ago. It would never occur to anyone who did not know her that she was anything more than a friend keeping you company. Didn't to Ingvar. And one of the most formidable mages I have ever encountered. Even the most formidable mage can be killed when he is asleep, but since nobody knew she was a mage ... I do not think she would be as much protection as an escort of a hundred men, but it might be a close call."

"A great deal less obvious than an escort of a hundred men. I told you I cheated."

Kieron nodded, wrapped his arms around his wife, held her tightly, her cheek against his shoulder. In a few minutes he released her, drew a long breath, gave her a quick kiss. "Let me have my people fetch something for us to eat. I haven't had dinner — I got back to the house after you arrived — and I do not suppose you have either."

He went to the door, spoke to someone, came back; the two seated themselves at the small table. Mari was the first to speak. "Your turn to tell me what you have been doing and what has been happening while I was gone."

"North and south, Forstish and Doray. Which do you want to hear about first?"

"North. They are closer."

"You know that the Einvald has Iolen's son at his court, supports his claim to the throne?"

Mari nodded.

"Something is happening; I am not sure what. People say that someone tried to kill the boy. Einvald Asmund of course is blaming us, the boy hasn't been seen since, and the rumor is that Asmund has tucked him away somewhere, nobody knows where, to keep him safe."

"Is it true?"

The prince shook his head. "I don't make war on children. Neither does my brother. I cannot swear nobody in Esland is responsible but it is hard to see who would try such a thing. It would practically have to be magery, which would be hard for anyone but the Forstish Guild; they do a pretty good job of keeping out foreign mages. Harder for anyone trying to do it without my help, harder still if they had to keep it out of my sight.

"Besides, we don't want the boy dead, we want him here and alive. His mother would like to come back home; she's exchanged messages with her brother. Earl Eskil put it to me; I told him his sister was free to come back if she wanted. We didn't exile her, and nobody with any sense thinks she had much to do what her husband was up to. Iolen wasn't one to tell his right hand what his left hand was doing, let alone confiding treason to his wife.

"I told Eskil that the boy was welcome to come back too, as long as he didn't bring a Forstish army or a claim to the throne. One less excuse to fight us the Einvald has the next time he needs one. I've been wondering if maybe Asmund was afraid the two of them would decide to come south, leaving him with one fewer pawn on the board. A fake assassination attempt would make a fine excuse for locking the boy up for his own safety somewhere his mother could not get at him.

"I do not know where the boy is or what he has been doing, but I wish him well. What are you smiling at? You don't have word about the boy, do you?"

"You could put it that way. Where Eirick Iolensson is at the moment is upstairs; I think he and Kir are working out how to fit him and a very large dog into Kir's suite. For tonight and, if they have their way, quite a lot longer.

"Kir has wanted a brother as long as I have known him. They swore to each other two weeks ago."

"You are telling me that while you were guesting with your father in Northpass Keep you took the opportunity to steal Iolen's son and heir out from under the Einvald's nose, make friends with him, introduce him to my son, and bring him home with you? I know your friend Ellen is talented — one of Iolen's people I talked with two years ago swore she could make herself invisible — but I do not see how..."

Mari shook her head. "Eirick showed up when we had left the keep — I told you one of the servants had come down with summer fever — and were camped out at the base of the pass. Someone had used a spell on his dog, one of his grandfather's wolfhounds, to lure the boy into the pass as part of a plan to grab him. He suspected something, got by them, got turned around in the dark, came down the wrong side of the pass, and walked into our camp with a tall tale about being a shepherd from Efkik who had gotten lost in the mist — a credible effort considering the boy's age. It took Kir about five minutes to recognize a fellow spirit; Eirick not only plays chess at about your son's level, he knows most of the same ballads. Two days later Kir proposed that they swear to each other and Rick, who is a considerable improvement on his father, insisted on telling Kir who he was first.

"Ellen's only contributions were working out what was wrong with Rick's dog and, later, teaching both boys a lesson. They thought they could beat her at chess as easily as Kir beats me. According to her there is some sort of enchantment draining the dog. She intends to bring her husband over tomorrow, see if between them they can work out what it is and what to do about it.

"If they can't, and none of his friends here can, she plans to take the dog, which means also Rick, which means also Kir, to Southdale to consult with Ellen's mother, who I gather is a very accomplished healer."

Kieron gave his wife a curious look. "I don't suppose the mother's name is Melia?"

"Yes. You've heard of her?"

"Enterprising as well as accomplished. She has been giving lectures, personal instruction as well, on healing, and not just for women. In Southdale, not in the College, which of course does not have women as magisters — magistras, I suppose one would say. Three quarters of the mages in the kingdom think she must be a fraud. The other quarter want to go to Southdale and attend her lectures, there never being enough healers around. That includes three or four of my people. I did not know she was Ellen's mother but I cannot say I'm surprised."

Mari smiled. "Four or five of your people if you count me. There was no one at the College teaching healing when I was there. Ellen thinks I can learn, and it would be a useful skill to have. If something happens to Lanna, or Kir, or you, and there does not happen to be a healer around ... I plan to go with the boys if they go, attend at least enough of the lectures to see if I can learn what Melia is teaching."

"But you will at least be here tomorrow? There's a ball at the palace. I plan to go, and..."

"And would like my company? Of course."

The door opened, revealing a servant carrying a tray with bread, cold meats, part of a wheel of hard cheese. Another followed with goblets and a pitcher. Mari stopped speaking while the servants put out plates and goblets. There was silence for a few minutes while the two ate. Finally Mari broke it. "Now tell me the other half of your story. What have the Doray been doing?"

"Not the Doray. A Doray. So far at least."

"Almost two weeks ago one of my people down south, in Bonia, heard there was someone in the marketplace acting oddly and went down to see. What he saw was a tall man, stripped to the waist, who would walk one direction, more and more slowly as if he was fighting something, like a man waist deep in water moving against the waves. Finally he would come to a stop then start walking backwards, the other way, looking as if something was dragging him. Eventually he ran into the wall of a building, stopped, started going forward again. The whole pattern kept repeating."

"Most of the people standing around watching thought he was crazy, though it had not gotten to the point of small boys throwing stones yet, but some of them were talking about magic. That close to the Doray — Bonia is almost on the border — people are inclined to think in those terms. They



have stories of mages using compulsion spells to pull girls south into Doray territory, although so far as I can tell none of them are true.

"Eduard is a clever boy. It occurred to him that even if the Doray were not up to stealing women south they did have strong views on Doray mages coming north, and north was the direction the man he was watching was trying to go. And the man was indeed a mage, a pretty strong one by our standards though maybe not by theirs.

"There happened to be an apothecary shop to hand, so Eduard went in, bought a strong sleeping draught, borrowed a cup of water to put it in, and handed it to the mage next time he came to a stop; the man drank it without looking, must have been pretty thirsty. Once the drug took effect, Eduard rented a wagon and team with the owner to handle it, loaded in the sleeping mage and headed for the capital. By the time he woke up they were far enough from whatever the source of the spell was so that the man could talk coherently, which would have been more useful if he had known Eslandi or Eduard more than five words of Doray. But he seemed to approve of the direction they were going.

"They got here three days ago and I have spent most of that time with the Doray mage — he was a Doray mage, of course — and your friend's husband, who does speak Doray, much better than I do. It turns out that Magister Coelus was born in Doray territory. I asked if he knew Bonia and he said he and his parents went through it when he was eight on their way into Esland, but he had not seen it since. It was good luck for me that he is currently in the capital working with the Learned Olver, who I gather he finds still worth talking with despite his age; the College's loss is our gain.

"I do not understand how Marcus — that is his name, as it turns out — managed to get free of the geas the Doray put on their mages to bind their loyalty, but Magister Coelus seems to have at least a guess. And I am still waiting for the other shoe to drop when the Doray figure out where their missing mage is and want him back, which I expect they will."

"Will you give him back?"

The prince shook his head. "Not if I can help it. He is in our territory, where our law applies, and that includes the ban on compulsion spells. Besides, it is a chance to learn more about Doray magery, which could be very useful indeed. From all I can tell they are forty years behind us in theory but I expect they are still well ahead of us in practice. And I might be able to learn other things about the Doray from him as well. I have spent the past sixteen years combing the kingdom for the Magistrate's agents; he might know about some of the ones I've missed.

"They may not like our keeping him but I cannot see much they can do about it, aside from looking down their noses at us and making comments in their own tongue about mannerless barbarians."

Kieron fell silent, turned back to food and drink. In a few minutes Mari spoke again. "That's north and south. What about east and west?"

"Nothing new in the west. In theory Dalmia still claims a town and some land of ours on the left bank of the Tam, but they lost it most of a century ago and Willem's not making war on anyone until he loses his taste for fancy architecture and lavish entertainments — by what I hear he is up to his ears in debt already. Or dies — I gather his sons don't share his tastes.

"Brenland will be a problem if the barons ever stop fighting each other — counting heads, they're as big as us and Dalmia put together. Henrik, who knows the Bren better than anyone else I have, thinks it is the Doray, that every time it looks as though things are going to quiet down they stir the pot a little. Paying one of their lords to pick a fight with another has to be a lot cheaper than maintaining an army big enough to deal with Brenland, supposing they were ever all moving in the same direction and that direction was south.

"But something is happening, although I'm not yet sure what. I got a message from your father yesterday; the post rider must have left after you did, but of course with relays of horses he made much better time than your coach. According to Morgen, his people report more trouble on the border than usual along with rumors that two of the barons are putting together an army.

"It might not be for us — but then again... So he is on his way back east and I plan to send a good deal of the garrison here to help; it isn't as if anyone is about to attack the capital. The royal companies will make camp at the ford of Aron. Close in case Morgen decides he needs help. And if... some of the Bren get past him, they can block the ford; no other place an army can cross for a long ways north or south of there.

"I am also sending messages to Duke Alessandro in the south and the two earls in the north, warning them that there is a risk of a Bren invasion, asking them to be ready to call out troops and march them north and south, respectively, if it happens." He fell silent.

"We will hope it doesn't." Mari took the last piece of cheese from her plate, ate it, looked back up at her husband, smiled. He smiled back, took her arm as she rose.

## **Book II. Southdale**



## Chapter 11

*[Royal palace, capital]*

Isabel took a last long look at her reflection. The high collar, rigid and bright as burnished gold, framed her face — still beautiful, even if no longer the face of the seventeen-year-old beauty that Petrus had wooed and wed. Farther down the cloth of gold softened almost to a second skin to show the perfection of a figure that had not changed in twenty years. That, at least, was one blessing that followed from her great misfortune. She spoke without turning. “It’s perfect, Dame Alyson. Perfect. And you promise...”

“I promise Your Majesty that I have made nothing for anyone else for tomorrow’s celebration. I cannot promise that there is no other mage who has thought of turning her skills to such a purpose, but certainly I have never heard of any. The magisters who trained me, being men, could think of no use for my talent save tempering sword blades and carriage springs and such.”

“And after the ball tomorrow?”

“After tomorrow, if you have friends you wish to recommend me to, I will be happy to ornament their beauty as well. But I will remain at Your Majesty’s service whenever you require me.”

“Can you help me out of it? It’s so beautiful... I wouldn’t want to damage it. And tomorrow...”

Alys spoke a single word in a language the queen did not know, ran her hand down the back of the garment; it opened, and she helped Isabel slide herself out of it.

“I will come tomorrow before the ball. You could get into it with the help of your servants, but if I am here I can make sure the fit is perfect, the way it is now.”

There was silence for a few minutes while Alys carefully arranged the dress on its hanger, put the hanger in its place in the largest of the wardrobes in the queen’s dressing room, helped the queen into a loose robe. It was Isabel who broke it. “What you did with the dress. Can you do it with other things?”

Alys nodded. “My talent is in tempering, Majesty. I can make a rod of soft steel hard or of hard steel soft. I have most skill with cloth, having spent the past two years applying my talent to my art, but I was trained with a variety of other materials.”

“Would it work with flesh? I don’t mean... that isn’t... I only wondered if you could reshape my face as easily as you reshape my dress? My body...”

"Your Majesty's body does not show your age; your face, in time, will. As will mine. I could change that, I think, but I will not; I do not know enough to do it safely. Skin and flesh are not fabric, like cloth, they are part of a living creature. Not being trained as a healer, I have no clear idea what would happen if I shaped a face as I shape a dress and I think it very likely that I would do more damage than good."

She hesitated a moment, continued. "I put that same question to the magister who trained me, and he gave me the answer I have given you."

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"It was wonderful. It might have been ten years ago; all the young men... The dress really is magic."

"If Your Majesty will hold still..." With a word, Alys undid the binding that held the dress closed, with both hands carefully peeled it off the queen's body. "The dress holds its form by magic, but the magic that made all the men in the hall fall in love with you was your own. That is something I neither can nor will do."

"You saw?"

Alys nodded. "I was watching from the gallery. I exaggerate a little, but there was no question who was the center of attention."

"Not Her Highness?"

"The Learned Lady Mariel danced three dances with her husband. Other than that, every time I saw her she was by the wall, talking with one person or another. I do not think she takes Your Majesty's delight in dancing."

"Learned Lady? Of course — Mari is a mage, like Kieron. Like you. Could she do something like this for herself, if she wanted?" Isabel gestured to the garment that Alys had carefully hung up.

Alys shook her head. "Mariel's talent is not in tempering. And even if it were, the magery is only a part of what I do."

The queen looked up, struck by a sudden thought. "Mari went to the College at Southdale. You went there too. Did you know her?"

Alys nodded. "We were the same year. There were only six girls, and both of us were part of the group around Mari's friend Elinor. Ellen's mother is a mage and Ellen knew more about magery than any of us, more I think than most of the magisters except for Magister Coelus, who she was studying with. The only magister young enough and good looking enough to be interesting; she married him last year.

"She used to explain things to the rest of us. I pretended not to understand so as to get her to explain more. I expect Mari saw, but Ellen... is very straightforward. Later..."

Alys fell silent. Better, perhaps, not to mention that some of the spells she used for dressmaking were of Ellen's invention. Alys knew, Isabel might know, that Ellen remained close to Mari, Mari who was princess by virtue of her marriage to the king's brother, her husband heir to the throne due to the queen's barrenness. To what degree Isabel's feelings for the wife of her husband's brother reflected that twist in their connection, to what degree the rivalry of one beautiful woman for another at least equally beautiful and more than a decade younger, Alys could not judge; she doubted that Isabel herself knew.

Alys helped the queen into a loose robe, stepped back, looked at the effect. "If I may, Your Majesty?"

The queen nodded, stood still while Alys passed her hands over the robe. Satisfied, the mage stepped back.

"Better. I expect His Majesty will be less concerned with the robe than what is under it, but still... With men, it is always prudent to be sure."

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"Your Majesty."

Isabel looked up from the remains of her breakfast. "Yes, Cristina?"

"The coach His Grace sent awaits your pleasure."

"It can await it a little longer; I'm not dressed to pay visits, even to my brother. See that the coachman is offered something to eat and drink, then come back and help me change."

The queen spent a few more minutes on memories of the previous night — reassuring as well as pleasurable to have proved the continued power of her charms on the one man who mattered — before turning her mind to the more immediate question of what to wear.

It was nearly two hours later that a servant ushered her into the room where Alessandro was waiting. He stood up to greet her.

"It has been too long since we talked. I am told that you made a great effect at the ball last night, that all of the young men of the court now adore you. I hope you are taking care..."

"I may not be a politician, brother, but I am not a fool. I am where I want to be and intend to stay there. The young men are more than welcome to adore me, but there is only one man who shares my bed. That is what you were asking, was it not?"

"You are become very direct, Bella."

"Necessary, considering how you choose to be, Sandro. Was that all you wished to say to me?"

He shook his head. "Only the beginning. Let us sit; this may take a while."

Isabel sat down in one of the chairs at the long table, looked up at her brother, still standing, waited.

"My first concern is that, as you say, you retain your present position. As their wives grow older, kings have been known to... as you know."

She met his gaze. "Who better? Petrus is not Thoma, the God be thanked, and I am not Elinor. She had lost too much of her looks by then; it is not a mistake I intend to make. And if Petrus were inclined to imitate his father, I think I would know. Certainly Elinor did. Or do you know something that I do not?"

Alessandro shook his head. "So far as my knowledge goes, your husband has taken no mistress and shows no sign of wanting one. Is that plain spoken enough for you?"

Isabel nodded. "Yes. So what is it that made you send for me?"

"The future." He sat down across the table from her, spoke slowly. "Even you will get older, and even Petrus... It would be prudent to bind him to you by something more than desire for your person, lovely though that may now be."

"You mean children. Doubtless it would be a fine thing if I could bear my husband a son but I cannot, and since he has already an heir that he is pleased with he has no need to put me aside for a wife better suited as royal brood mare."

For a moment that silenced Alessandro, but only a moment. "You were not worried about Morgen's daughter, then?"

"Perhaps a little, but that has now settled itself. Petrus would never do anything to hurt his brother, and Mari... has her own royal marriage. I do not think she is in that much of a hurry."

Alessandro nodded. "That is the other half. Petrus is five years older than I am, fifteen years older than you, and a throne is not such a safe seat. Rumor has it that Iolen was plotting the king's death before he was discovered and fled the kingdom, and there may be others. How will it be, sister mine, when it is Mariel and not you on the throne?"

"I will pray that that is not the story the God is telling; I do not see what more I can do. My husband assures me that the north is now safe. The east is Morgen's and he is a patient man. They say that nothing happens in the south that you do not have a hand in, and since you will not have a hand in anything against your sister's husband, he may well live out a long life."

The duke looked at his sister in surprise; there was an edge to her voice he did not remember having heard before. He hesitated a moment before continuing. "Even so, it would be better for you, better for us, that your position not depend wholly on your husband. You take it as certain that you cannot bear a child. What if that could be changed? If you had a son..."



"If I had a son, and if I outlived Petrus, I would be the mother of a king. But since I cannot have a son..."

"You would be the mother of a king, I would be the uncle of a king, and our family would have a kinsman on the throne, the proper reward for the support we gave your husband against his brother twenty years ago, at considerable risk to ourselves. The reward we expected. You take it as certain that you cannot bear children. I do not."

"Three different healers have given the same answer to that question. As have twenty years of marriage. I can assure you that Petrus..."

"Has done his part. Yes. It is not Petrus I am concerned with, but the healers. How do you think your husband found them?"

There was a long silence. Finally he continued. "You know the answer as well as I do. They were provided by the royal master of mages — the king's brother and, so long as you do not have a son, his heir. The man Petrus trusts most in the world. And the one man in the world I am least inclined to trust in this particular matter."

"And the testimony of my own body?"

"Every witch in the south claims she can prevent conception, and no doubt many of them are telling the truth."

"Indeed. And having concluded that my barrenness is a plot by Kieron, which I admit possible although I find it less likely than you, what do you propose to do about it? Surely you have a plan. You always have a plan."

"My plan is simple enough — to have you examined, and if possible cured, by a competent healer not selected by His Highness nor under his influence or authority. Better still, a healer abler than those that have examined you. Even if my suspicions are mistaken, still some healers are more skilled, or differently skilled, than others, and what one cannot cure another can."

"And where in all of Esland do you think to find this paragon of healers who has somehow escaped the notice of the royal master of mages?"

She looked up at her brother, her expression a fair imitation of idle curiosity.

"The ablest of Eslandi healers I would expect to be known to, and very likely under the influence of, His Highness. The ablest healers in Esland, perhaps not."

The queen gave her brother a puzzled glance, said nothing. In a moment he continued.

"You do not see the answer to my riddle? Tell me then. Where in all the world are the most skillful mages found? Is it here?"

“You are proposing that I cross the border into League territory, take ship perhaps for Doray island, and have myself examined by a Doray mage? They are not precisely our enemies, but to put the queen of Esland in their hands might be considered by some imprudent.”

He shook his head. “I said in Esland. Antonius, the Doray legate here, has with him a staff. It includes a healer, I am told an able one. I think we may safely assume that she is not in the service of Prince Kieron. I have not yet made the arrangements; I wished first to speak with you. But I do not think the legate would be unwilling to do us the favor. It is always useful to have friends — even for the Doray.”

## Chapter 12

*[Alyson's workshop, the capital]*

Gregor looked around the workshop curiously, closed his eyes for a full minute, opened them. "I see no threats, Your Majesty." His companion said nothing.

"In that case, perhaps you gentlemen could guard me from outside the door? I do not think that Dame Alyson and I require your assistance in choosing fabrics for next month's ball." Gregor hesitated a moment, bowed his assent; mage and guard moved to the door, through it.

The queen turned back to Alys. "Now that we can speak in private, there were..."

Alys held up her hand. "One moment, Your Majesty. Let me get some things out first." She went to one of the cabinets at the side of the workshop, took out several folded pieces of fabric; with them over her arm, she used the other hand to slide open a drawer, remove what appeared to be two large books, carried everything over to the middle of the room and put the things down on the table. That done, she brought over two chairs, gestured Isabel to one of them. "We can look at the fabric samples here."

The queen sat down. "Actually, what I wanted..."

"One moment more, Majesty." Alys joined the queen by the table, but remained standing, stretching out one hand, finger pointing at the floor; Isabel noticed that table and chairs were set within a circle of black stone inlaid in the grey stone of the floor. As she watched, Alys turned in a full circle, speaking softly words in a language the queen did not know. Where sunlight coming through the open window reflected off the black stone, Isabel could see that there were symbols carved in it. Finally the younger woman sat down, spoke in a softer voice.

"Now, Your Majesty, we may speak in private. If Gregor's perception were not good enough to both see and hear us from outside my front door, he would not have been able to assure himself a moment ago that there were no assassins upstairs hiding under my bed. The static part of the spell shielding us is older than I am, but I find it useful. The protection extends the full height of the building and can block sound, sight or both, as I desire. As long as we remain within the circle, Gregor can see but not hear us and will no doubt be wondering whether his perception is failing or if it is possible that two women can refrain from talking for whole minutes at a time. Now, if you will, tell me what other than showing you fabric samples I can do for Your Majesty."

There was a brief silence before Isabel responded. "You can give me advice — as a mage, not a dressmaker. As the whole world knows, I am

barren. Several healers have examined me; it is their opinion that the condition cannot be cured."

The queen bent for a moment over the fabrics on the table, opened one of the books of samples curiously before she continued. "I have a brother who finds that conclusion unsatisfactory and has an unfortunate habit of disbelieving facts he does not like. He points out that the healers who examined me were selected by His Highness, and His Highness..."

Alys nodded. "His Highness might have his own reasons..."

"Yes. Myself, I do not think it likely; Kieron and Petrus are very close, and I do not think Kieron would lie about such a thing to his brother. It is true, however, as Alessandro also points out, that different healers have different talents, so it is at least possible that what one could not cure another could.

"My brother, like many in the south, admires the Dorayans and has contacts in the League, commercial dealings across the border; his private secretary is Dorayan. By his account, their legate here has in his service a very accomplished healer. Alessandro wishes me to be examined, perhaps treated, by that healer, both because she is skilled and because she has no ties to His Highness.

"I trust the Doray less than he does and Kieron more, and yet... at least part of his argument is good. As you have just demonstrated, there is a great deal about magery that I do not know. I need advice from a mage I can trust, one with ties to neither Kieron nor the Doray. That, not planning a gown for next month, is why I wanted to speak with you."

"I am flattered, Your Majesty, and hope I can deserve your trust. Healing is one use of magery which the College does not teach, there being no men who can teach it, although that may be changing. As a mage, however, I can give you at least one warning. A Dorayan mage might use his skills upon you for his purposes as well as yours, perhaps to make you more inclined to urge His Majesty in their favor. If you act on Duke Alessandro's advice, do it in a place you control and with at least one skilled mage you have reason to trust observing what is done."

"My thanks. I had considered such risks but did not know how best to guard against them. Do you have other suggestions?"

Alys thought a moment, smiled. "It occurs to me that I do, Majesty. There is a healer, a lady by the name of Melia, who last year was invited to Southdale by the College. I understand that a few years earlier one of the older magisters came close to dying for lack of a skilled healer nearby and they did not wish it to happen again with a worse outcome.

"Last year she gave a series of public lectures in the inn at Southdale on the use of magery to heal, lectures directed at male as well as female mages. The first were attended by only one or two magisters and a handful

of curious students, the later by more; I am told that she offered individual instruction as well. I gather that a number of the magisters were very much impressed. This year's lectures are expected to draw a considerable number of mages, not only from the College but from the capital and elsewhere; I know two or three here who plan to attend. If she does it long enough she may eventually drag the magisters of the College into including healing in what they teach, although they will doubtless wait until one of the men she has trained is available to teach it.

"Melia is accomplished, she is Eslandi not Doray, and I very much doubt that she owes any service to His Highness. I know that her daughter, who was a student with me — Ellen, I mentioned her once before to your Majesty — does not. There was a clash of some sort between Ellen and Magister Coelus on the one hand and His Highness on the other sometime during my second year, although I never managed to get Ellen to tell me what it was about. I cannot think of any healer in the kingdom who better meets Your Majesty's requirements — and she is in Southdale, an easy two days from here."

Alys stood up, lifted her hand. "Now, if your Majesty would like to discuss fabrics for the dress for next month's ball, I can..." Isabel interrupted her.

"One more question — for my curiosity only, if you permit it. You said your bedroom was on the floor above this. Where is your bed?"

Alys smiled. "Immediately above us, Your Majesty." With a gesture and a word, she dismissed the guarding spell.

## Chapter 13

*[The Archon's palace, Malar Island, Dorayan League]*

"Your Excellency sent for me?"

The Archon looked up from his desk, said nothing, waited.

Justin went to his knees, from his knees to a full prostration, ignoring the stranger — a mage — who stood at the other end of the office.

"You may rise. Have the barbarians agreed to return my stolen property?"

"They have not, Your Excellency. I am informed by your man with the legation that Prince Kieron has again rejected your re... your demand."

"Barbarian insolence. If they will not give him back, we must take him. I instructed you to find a way of reclaiming Marcus without their consent. Have you done so?"

Justin shook his head. "Not yet, Excellency. As Your Excellency knows," he probably didn't, but it was not for one of his servants to say so, "we lost our last agent in the palace and have not yet been able to insert, or gain control over, anyone else close to the prince."

It was also not his place to point out that it had been the Archon's response to that loss, ordering him to discipline Marcus as the subordinate responsible for dealing with Esland, that had apparently set off not the day or two of sulking for a lost concubine that Justin expected but the mage's defection.

Which, since he was, like Justin, bound, should have been impossible.

"All we have left is servants' gossip from the prince's townhouse. Unless the Magistrate has someone..." Justin carefully avoided looking at the stranger. A powerful mage he did not know standing silent in the Archon's office almost had to belong to the Magistrate, but until his master mentioned him it was not for Justin to do so.

The problem resolved itself when the stranger spoke. "We do not. The Eslanders learned enough from us to make them competent in the simpler forms of magery, which unfortunately include truth telling and the identification of bindings, and they seem to have come up with some crude tricks of their own since.

"The nobles are not under the prince's authority and do not entirely trust him, so we still have ears in most of the great houses and more than ears in some. And a few in the royal service take our gold. But the royalty themselves are entirely out of our control and largely out of our observation. A most unsatisfactory situation and one the Magistrate has decided is to be dealt with. Barbarians on our border are one thing, but

barbarians on our border who are entirely out of civilized influence are another."

He turned from the Archon to face Justin directly. "I am Arius. I have been instructed to deal with the situation; your master has been instructed to provide me any assistance I require. I believe that your plan may play a part in mine. What is its current status?"

Which meant that someone in Justin's team was reporting to the Magistrate as well as to his immediate superior. Also that the stranger was deliberately revealing the fact; he could easily enough have waited until Justin mentioned at least the existence of his plan to his master. Which meant that the Magistrate wanted the Archon to know, which might also mean... If the Archon had any plans to improve his status he had not shared them with Justin, but then, of course, he wouldn't, until the last moment.

Justin pulled his thoughts away from the possibility that his master had just been warned away from a planned coup, in which case Justin's next task might be to identify the Magistrate's spy and have him dealt with, to the more immediate topic of his plan to recover the missing mage. "Since we cannot take Marcus back from the Eslanders, we must make them give him back. According to our source, the prince's wife and son should have left the capital by now for a town two days' travel away. The wife, who is a witch, apparently planned to go there to study with a particularly accomplished healer — with no escort. It should be possible to take advantage of such carelessness.

"The wife is young and reputed beautiful, there is only one son, so I have no doubt that Prince Kieron would be more than willing to return our runaway mage in exchange for the two of them. That is my plan. I had thought of executing it myself, with the Archon's permission, but if the Magistrate could provide someone more qualified that would be better still." He fell silent, waiting for his master's response.

The Archon thought a moment, then turned to the other mage. "I realize that it is League policy to avoid any confrontation that would reveal our activities in the barbarian kingdoms. But considering the situation in Esland, I wonder if this might be a case where it would be proper to make an exception. It is clear that Prince Kieron, at least, knows whom he is fighting, so Justin's plan would tell him nothing new and might warn him of the risks of opposing us so energetically. And leaving Marcus in their hands..."

"Yes. Just how much does Marcus know and how well is his knowledge protected?"

The Archon turned to Justin. "He was working under you."

Justin nodded. "Marcus was the one responsible for our dealings with Esland; that was why, when things kept going badly there ... He read

many of the reports that reached my office, knows what noble families we have agents with, in some cases knows or can guess the names and positions of our people. All of that, of course, was protected by the usual bindings, linked to his life. But Marcus must have somehow broken free of both loyalty and the bindings that held him here — he should be dead by now and, so far as we know, isn't — and with the assistance of Eslandi mages he may be able to do more. I would expect it to take time, of course."

"But we do not know how much time." Arius was speaking not to Justin but to the Archon. "My plan relies on some of your people in Esland as well as some of ours, and yours may be betrayed soon, may already have been. The prince will not be free to simply seize someone in the household of one of the most powerful nobles, which gives us a little more time. But still, it would be well to move quickly." He turned back to Justin.

"My plan is more ambitious than yours, but yours will fit in very nicely as part of it. I intend to obtain possession of the wife and son myself; I should be able to deal with any defenses they have that you may not have been informed of. You or one of your people, someone fluent in the barbarian language and familiar with their customs, will accompany me. While I am here the Archon will provide me with an office; bring all relevant information to me there. We will have to make arrangements for me to notify our people when I have the wife and son and for them to notify me when the runaway has been returned. And I will want to know as much as I can about what information he has betrayed to the Eslanders.

"Also," he turned back to the Archon, "the Magistrate will want to know everything you can learn about how Marcus was able to break free of the bindings of loyalty. We are particularly interested in the witch who wove them, since one failure raises concerns about every mage she bound. You will obtain all relevant facts, including the identity of the witch in question and whatever you can learn of her activities, and entrust them — and her — to a messenger I will provide. It could be that she was merely careless, but ..."

The Archon stood up, bowed. "I hear and obey."

It occurred to Justin that, although he had heard those words many times, it was the first time he had heard them spoken by his master instead of to him.



## Chapter 14

*[Southdale]*

Helgi turned over, feeling for a more comfortable position in the stacked hay. Enough moonlight came through the open window at one end of the loft to let him see, barely, the low roof above him.

The first question was whether or not he was a mage. So far on his journey he had gone shielded; talent might draw attention, attention he did not want. In Southdale, where students and magisters made the possession of talent unremarkable, that would no longer be a problem. The innkeeper had taken it for granted that he was a mage when politely explaining that all of his beds were already occupied by other mages and offering Helgi the alternative of sleeping space above the horses. The stalls were full as well; Helgi could hear occasional sounds from below as the horses shifted. His own horse had ended up left to graze in the field of a farmer most of a mile out of town.

Just now the inn was packed with mages come to learn healing, making the absence of talent itself remarkable, especially for those attending the lectures in the inn. He had rejected as too dangerous the idea of trying to enroll in the College. But the lectures in the inn, given by a *galdrakona* in a kingdom that had long insisted that what women did was not magery, were not under the authority of the College and were, so far as he could determine, open to all. The best way not to arouse curiosity would be to drop his shielding and present himself, if asked, as a mage from the kingdom's northern Marches.

The lectures provided an explanation for his presence in Southdale as well as an opportunity to learn more about *Eslandi* magery, but there was one problem. The *Magistra* would expect her students to learn what she taught, to use magery to heal. That Helgi would not, could not, do. He was limited, by both oaths and binding, to the magic of his own quarter.

That problem could be dealt with. When it became clear that the next lecture would require active participation by the students he could choose to return to the capital or back to *Forstmark*. If the requirement arose without warning, he could always try and fail to follow the instructions. Surely the *Magistra* had encountered poor students before.

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The inn's main room was crowded, noisy with conversation, alive with excitement and interest; except for the servants, everyone present was a mage. Perhaps a dozen he guessed, by their ages, to be students; three more wore, over vest and breeches, the robes that identified them as magisters

of the College. Most of the mages were men but there was a handful of women as well, including one who was tall, strikingly good looking and very well dressed; two of the magisters were talking with her. Obviously someone important.

"Excuse us, learned gentles, excuse us." Two of the servants were carrying a table through the crowd to the far end of the room. The table in place, they went out, returned with a chair, placed it on top of the table. Helgi noticed other servants bringing in more chairs and stools, arranging them in front of the table. Judged by a quick count, not nearly as many as the number of mages in the room.

"There she is." A small elderly woman, alert face framed by grey hair, was coming into the room from the inn's entrance hall. She moved through the crowd, men and women making way for her, took one step onto one of the chairs next to the table, from that to the table top, raised one hand. The room gradually fell silent.

"Learned gentles, seat yourselves if you can, if you can't don't; the inn appears to have no more chairs." She waited while those mages who could found chairs, others, Helgi among them, standing behind. A tall man in a magister's robes said something to her; she leaned down to listen, reply. When all were settled she resumed. "The learned Magister Henryk is worried that I will talk longer than you can stand, so has offered to speak to Master Alayn about constructing some benches by tomorrow, or perhaps the next day, or however soon Hal can get him to do it, until which some of you will have to put up with standing; I am afraid I will be talking for much of the morning. Today I will explain what you have to learn to be able to heal and why most of you can learn it; the afternoon will be for individual instruction of those who attended last year and for the rest of you to practice what I have described. We will continue in that way for the next two weeks, more or less, then see where matters stand, how many of you are left, and what you want to learn next. Once I start talking I am hard to stop, or so my daughter tells me, so if any of you have questions it might be wise to ask them now."

Nobody spoke; after a brief pause she continued. "There are three things you must learn to be a healer; I cannot teach you any of them. What I can do, what I am mostly here to do, is explain how you are to teach yourself the first two. I will spend an hour or two each morning for the next few weeks doing so, leaving the rest of the day for you to do the hard part.

"The first and most difficult lesson is learning to perceive, understand, make sense of, the structure of a living creature. You learn it by doing it. Two things that help are, *primus*, that by good fortune each of you has a living creature conveniently available to examine, *secundus* that, as long

as you remember to look but not to act, you can do no harm, particularly fortunate since the living creature you will be examining is yourself, which is good practice for future occasions when it won't be. As you will soon discover, your own body is far more complicated and confusing than the most elaborate mechanism, magical or otherwise, that humans have constructed, supposing that anything is wholly without magic, which I doubt.

"Once you have learned to examine your own body and make a little sense of what you perceive — you can spend years making more sense of it, and understanding all is past the knowledge of any mage and probably always will be — once you have learned a little about how a living creature is put together and how it works, you will be ready for the next part, learning to see what is wrong with a creature that is sick or injured. That, fortunately, is much easier. A man or horse or dog with a broken leg has a million things right with him and only one thing fundamentally wrong. If you know what the leg is supposed to be like you can see what is wrong, which is the first step to fixing it. If you do not know enough about the leg of a horse, or a dog, or a man — luckily they are all very much the same, and by the time we are done you will know a great deal about your own legs — to see what is wrong with it and make it right, the patient usually has other legs that are not broken and you can look at those.

"Once you have learned to see what is right with a living creature and what is wrong, it remains only to learn to do something about it. That part of the healer's art, and only that part, depends on the particular talents of the healer. Any trained mage has perception. Almost all have sufficient range and resolution to make sense of a living creature when they are standing next to it, so the first two parts, what you will be working on over the next few weeks, I expect that any of you can learn. But different mages have different talents and even after Olver, who I think is the cleverest man I know, worked out how different sets of talents could be used to do the same spell, it remains true that most mages are very good at some things and very bad at others.

"If any of you happens to be a weaving mage, which is what I am, I could teach you to use that talent to close a wound or knit a broken bone, but even for the other points of the craftsman's star you would require a different teacher; I have only a very general idea of how tempering, refining, or shaping could be used to heal, still less for earth, air, fire, or water. It is likely that any talent can be used to heal something, although some are more useful than others, but to learn to do it with your talent you must find a healer with that talent to instruct you, or, if you cannot find one, work it out for yourself and try not to kill anyone, yourself included, while doing so. You can deal with the limits of your principal talent by

using secondaries and reagents and thinking hard before you do anything — easier for those who have studied under Coelus at the College, or before that under Olver, or under their students.

“But none of that will be taught in lecture, since it is different for each mage. Before I start teaching you how to learn to look at your own hand and see what is in front of your face, are there any questions?”

She paused briefly. Before she could start again, one of the younger men in the audience — one of the ones Helgi guessed was a student at the College — raised his hand. Melia nodded to him to speak.

“What if a dog has a broken tail?”

She smiled. “You don't have a tail yourself, or not much of one, and the dog has only one, and that broken, so how do you discover what an unbroken tail would be like, assuming there is no other dog ready to hand? By great good fortune, a dog's tail, unlike his leg or yours, is made up of a series of almost identical parts, getting smaller as you get nearer the tip. The broken one is different from the others and should not be. A good question, and one that illustrates a point we will discuss in a week or two, that there are many different ways of figuring out what needs to be fixed and you only have to find one. But it does have to be one that gives you the right answer, otherwise you may do harm rather than good. Any more questions?”

“If not, it is time for the first lesson. Examine your right hand. All of it.”

Helgi closed his eyes, raised his hand, looked at it. Into it. A confusing, vaguely disquieting tangle. It occurred to him that he could have used perception to examine his own insides at any time in the past four years — and hadn't — and that there was a reason.

“Complicated? Try a single finger.”

A finger was easier. He could make out what had to be the finger bones, three of them, jointed. Cordlike bits running along them top and bottom, tiny tubes that he supposed were veins carrying blood, other structures that made no immediate sense to him.

“Does anyone think he understands what he saw?”

There was a brief silence. One of the younger men, the same one who had asked about a broken tail, shook his head.

“Good; you didn't. A living body, even a single finger, is a tangle of interconnected structures. Some of it nobody I know of understands. But much of it, perhaps most, makes sense if you take it one part at a time.

“The bones are among the simplest parts of the body and the easiest to make sense of. Start with a single finger; try to teach yourself to see the bones and ignore the rest, figure out how they work, the form of the joints, which way they are supposed to bend. Since it is your finger, you control

it; bend the finger" — she illustrated with her own, hand raised " — and see what the bones do, how the joints move.

"Once you understand one finger you mostly understand the other three, so try the thumb next, work out how it is different. Then the whole hand, just the bones. When you think you understand that, look at a foot." Melia was still standing on the table in the front of the room, next to the chair that the servants had put on top of it. She turned to face it, lifted one foot, put it on the chair's seat, holding onto the back to keep herself steady, closed her eyes, bent over it. "See how it is the same as the hand, how different. Compare the big toe to the thumb. When you have done all that, try it again, this time with your eyes open so you can see how the structure of the bones relates to the physical hand and foot you thought you understood. Then do the same thing with the forearm and the shin, the upper arm and the thigh bone.

"When you come back tomorrow I want you to have looked at every bone in your body, seen how they fit together, which parts are the same, which parts almost the same, which different. As much as possible, why." She put her foot back down on the table top.

"Questions?"

There were none. As the room emptied, Helgi stepped back against the wall, stood considering what he had learned. The magistra's lecture might almost have been designed for kenner, dealing as it did entirely with knowledge, albeit knowledge to be used for healing.

He was not in Esland for his own training but to learn more about magery in Esland, magery at the College. Something the Magistra had said about talents... Olver must be the mage who was supposed to have discovered something new about talents; it sounded as if she had actually known him, perhaps studied under him. Coelus was the other one, the Dorayan who knew, perhaps, how to set off volcanoes.

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Half an hour later Helgi was sitting in the shade of a tree in a field a little way outside the village, trying to make sense of his hand and ignore his stomach. Both the inn and the nearby cookshop had been too crowded to find a seat, so he had decided to spend some time on the exercises described by the Magistra, return when the rest of the crowd from her lecture had eaten.

Looking at the hand, he kept getting lost in the tangle. A finger then. Just finger bones. By focusing down very sharply, he could make the rest almost vanish, see the bones alone. He bent the finger, watched the bones move. That explained, or partly explained, the shape of their ends — they were designed to continue to fit together as the finger itself flexed.

Something must be holding them there; he resisted the temptation to try to see what. Better to follow the instructions. The Magistra's conversation might be a trifle erratic but the morning's lecture had left him in no doubt that she knew her work.

He had successfully progressed from finger to hand to forearm, done the same for foot and shin, and was working through the structure of the shoulder joint, raising and lowering his arm to see how it moved, when he noticed, behind him, more bones, at least a partial skeleton, shins that were not his. Startled he opened his eyes, turned.

"The Lady Melia has at least one devoted student; I was beginning to wonder if you would ever notice that I was standing here. If you are getting tired of your own bones, you are welcome to inspect mine for contrast."

She held up a hand. Just for a moment Helgi held focus, perceived her hand as a collection of linked bones, thinner, more graceful than his own. He blinked, perception dropped away.

"I apologize, my lady." He hesitated, corrected himself — she was obviously a mage — "learned lady. I am afraid I was so deep..."

"Into your own skeleton that you didn't notice mine? I forgive you. Where are you from; I don't think I have seen you before?"

"Actually, it was your skeleton..." He stopped. She was not only a lady and a mage but young — at a guess near his own age — and pretty. Telling her that what he had first noticed were her shin bones was perhaps not the best way of pursuing the conversation.

"I am from up north." By her accent she was from the capital or somewhere near it, so probably would not know one Marcher holding from another, but there was no need to take chances. "I heard of the Magistra's lectures and came to see if I could in truth learn what she was teaching." He hesitated a moment. "My name is Helgi."

"And mine is Alyson, but you can call me Alys; all my friends do. Did you study at the College?"

Helgi shook his head. "This is the first time I have been here. I had heard of it, of course, but no more than that. They say that one can learn more there than from any one master, but it is a long way and I don't think I know anyone who has actually been a student."

She gave him a mischievous smile. "Yes you do. Now."

It took him a moment to understand. "You are a student here?"

"I finished two years ago, came back with a friend who wanted to consult the Learned Lady Melia; I don't really know her, aside from today's lecture, but her daughter was a student with me. Not enough free time to learn healing and I am not sure my talents would be suited to it if I did, but I thought I would attend a lecture or two while I was here and see if it was something I could understand. Perhaps next year..."

She turned, looked down the slope, away from the direction of the village. "Have you tried to look at the College?"

He shook his head. "Not yet. Is it on the other side of that cloud of mist downhill from here?"

"You think..." She broke off, gave him another smile. "Let's go look."

He followed her down the slope. Coming nearer he realized that the mist, if it was mist, had a surprisingly regular shape, a vast hemisphere, its flat side against the ground. As he came closer it towered above him like a wall, up and on either side curving away.

"What is it?"

"Close your eyes and see."

There was a long silence before he spoke. "My dream."

Alys gave him a curious look, said nothing.

"Last night. A sphere of woven fire. In the dream I knew it was big, but... name of the gods." He stepped back, opened his eyes, woven fire fading back into mist, turned to the comforting sight of the lady beside him. "Who made that thing? Is it some ancient Dorayan masterwork, still burning after two hundred years?"

Alys shook her head. "They say it was created by Durilil in the early days of the College, forty or fifty years ago. It is the containment sphere; we are told that its purpose is to protect the College from the world and the world from the College.

"Any more questions you must put to Magister Coelus. He was studying it back when I was a student, trying to understand how it had been made and why it was still burning. Or you could ask Ellen; I expect she knows more about it than anyone else. You are coming back to the capital, are you not, after you are done with the lectures? There are lots of things to do in the capital; it's a much more interesting place than Southdale. I could probably find one or the other of them for you there."

"You are saying that the College is inside that thing?"

Alys nodded.

Helgi drew a deep breath. "I had no idea that Eslandi... that any mage could craft a magical construct on that scale. It blocks perception; does it block other things as well?"

"Air comes through, and light, and rain; we have weather inside as out. But a stone will bounce off. The only place you can get through it is at the entrance, around that way, and the Magister Gatekeeper has to open it for you."

"It's amazing; I think I need to sit down somewhere far from it and recover from the shock. The cookshop was full after the lecture but I expect there will be room now; would you like to come? We could sit down and



you could tell me about being a student at the College. It would be a pleasant break before I go back to studying my bones."

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That evening in the hay loft, eyes closed, Helgi considered the day's lessons. From the Magistra, a kenner's approach to learning to heal, an exercise that had consumed most of the afternoon and evening. His conversation with Alys had provided a pleasant interlude but also something more. It was clear from an hour spent with her over food and wine that the Kenner was right about the College; while it might not be quite the equivalent of the Guild, it came a great deal closer than most of the Forstmark mages realized. And it had one thing the Guild lacked — a theory of the underlying nature of magery.

His first reaction to Alys' attempt to explain it, like the Kenner's first reaction describing the theory to him, was that it sounded like nonsense. There were two reasons to reject that. The first was Alys herself. She was obviously not a fool or credulous; by her own account she only partly understood the theory. But she had no doubt that the more advanced students and magisters were using it not only to understand existing spells but to create new ones. One part of that was somehow calculating one spell from another, how to create the same effects with a different combination of talents, something that, so far as Helgi knew, nobody in Forstmark could do.

The second, the overwhelming reason to abandon his belief in the superiority of Forstish to Eslandi magic, was the containment sphere. The Guild's project to melt clear the pass for Lord Iolen's invasion might represent magery on the same scale, but it was a work of brute force in comparison to a precise structure of woven fire hundreds of feet across, holding its form for decades. The Guild's project had depended on the combined efforts of hundreds of mages over a period of more than a year; the sphere, if Alys' account was correct, was the work of a single mage. Even if he had been assisted by a few of the magisters — that early in the College's history there could not have been very many — there was no way he could have had the use of a tenth of the talent that had gone into the Guild's project. Quite clearly Durilil, if that was who it was, knew things about magery that the Guild did not.

Which meant that it was not entirely impossible that some other mage or group of mages, knowing those things, really had been able to nudge Fire Mountain into erupting, as the Kenner had put it, on schedule. The longer Helgi talked with Alys the less likely his earlier guess, that the new spells had been stolen from the Dorayans, seemed.



Which might mean that it was time to start home to report what he had learned; he had made one slip already in his conversation with Alys, although she did not seem to have noticed it, and the next one might bring unwanted attention from the Eslandi authorities. On the other hand... There was no hint in what Alys had said that the underlying theory was a secret. She seemed perfectly willing to try to explain what she knew of it, and there might be others here, students, graduates, or magisters, who knew more — most obviously the Magistra. That was a strong argument for staying, at least for a while.

It occurred to him that he had come south with two missions, not one. Before making any final decision... His saddlebags, with clothing, travel food, odds and ends, were lying next to him. Unlikely, but easy enough to check. He unbuckled the flap, reached in, felt around until he found the talisman.

## Chapter 15

*[The College, Southdale]*

Isabel, seated in a comfortable armchair in the sitting room of the suite that the College had hastily cleared for her use, looked up as Alys entered. "I think I am recovered from the exertions of the journey and the conversation of my brother and his secretary; what have you learned, running about town?"

"Quite a lot, Your Majesty. I spent part of the morning attending the Magistra's lecture — that's what everyone is calling the Learned Lady Melia. I expect a few of the older magisters are horrified, or will be if they hear about it. It was very interesting and I think if I could afford to take a few months off from my craft I might actually learn enough healing to be useful, but not this year.

"After the lecture I arranged for Your Majesty's visit. She lectures in the morning in the inn and gives individual instruction during the afternoon. After Master Dur, the village jeweler, made the jewels for Her Highness' wedding, he got a lot of new customers in the capital and moved there, so the Magistra, who is an old friend of his, rented his shop here and uses it to teach in. She has a commitment tomorrow evening, she didn't say what, so suggested that we come by after the evening meal the next day. If you like, I can spend tomorrow showing you around and introducing you to some of the magisters.

"But you will never guess who else, or what else, I met and talked with today."

"Since I will never guess, why don't you sit down and tell me? You must have been on your feet all day and I expect they could use a rest even if you don't need one. And by the way, you don't have to "Majesty" me in private; my friends call me Isabel."

"And my friends call me Alys. I spent part of the afternoon talking with a new one."

"Who was male, young, and falling in love with you?"

Alys returned the queen's smile. "Young and male, at least. Also a mage. A Forstish mage."

"That I would not have guessed; I do not think I have ever met a mage from Forstmark. How did you know? Did he tell you where he was from?"

Alys shook her head. "He said he was from the north, leaving me to assume he meant the Marches without actually saying so; he may have been afraid I might be a truth teller. The accent was one clue; I happen to know a young man in the capital who came from there. But there was more.

"The first time he saw me he addressed me as a mage. Mages from Esland, unless they've studied at the College and he said he hadn't, mostly don't think of women as mages. Then I showed him the containment sphere around the College and it shocked him; he had obviously never seen or heard of it before. We mostly take it for granted after living inside it for two or three years, but it is pretty amazing. Even if an Eslandi mage hadn't seen it he would have heard about it. And the final clue was in his reaction to it. He started to say that he hadn't realized Eslandi mages could do such a thing, then changed it to just mages.

"So he isn't from Esland and doesn't want me to know he isn't from Esland. That probably means either Forstmark or the League, and a Dorayan wouldn't think of a woman as a mage — they're worse that way than Eslanders. Bren or Dalmian wouldn't either. Someone from Forstmark, especially a mage from Forstmark, would."

"That was all very clever and I expect you are right. Did he fall in love with you?"

Alys shook her head. "I don't think so, at least not yet. He was friendly enough, but I had the feeling he was more interested in talking with me to find out things than... for other purposes. But he's attending the Magistra's lectures and I plan to go back tomorrow morning for the second one."

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"Your Grace has accomplished your half of the agreement with your sister; Her Majesty is here, free to consult with the witch recommended to her by her dressmaker without having to make any embarrassing explanations to her husband. How long before she will be done, so that we can bring her to someone who might actually be able to deal with the problem?"

Alessandro looked up from the unpadded wooden armchair. "Patience, Gaius. Whoever may have recommended her to Isabel, the witch is well enough thought of as a healer to have filled the inn with mages here to attend her lectures. Perhaps the trip will not turn out to be an entire waste of time after all.

"And speaking of which, once you discovered that the inn had no space for us, why did you not arrange something for us at the College? It would surely have been more comfortable, and you could have complained to Isabel instead of to me about how long she was taking."

Gaius felt a moment's concern, dismissed it; his employer's tone signaled irritation, not suspicion. "As I explained to Your Grace, enough of the mages who are here for the lectures are graduates with a claim on hospitality to put a strain on the resources of the College. Add to that not one but two royal parties, Her Majesty with her dressmaker and Her

Highness with her stepson, and while they might have found a bed for Your Grace in an attic they could hardly have provided accommodations for you and yours befitting your station. This house was the best I could manage on short notice; the owner assured me that it would be suitable for our purposes."

Alessandro looked around the room; his expression did not suggest that he found either the accommodations or the explanation entirely satisfactory. "I may not be royalty, but I am a prospective employer; that should have been worth something. What arrangements have you made for me to speak with one of the magisters and interview the students he recommends?"

Gaius looked surprised. "Your Grace actually intends to go through with that? I thought it was only an excuse to come here with your sister."

"His Highness is a patron of the College as well as a graduate and I expect will receive a report from someone in some form on our visit. Even if I do not end up hiring anyone here, I have to go through the motions to make my reason for visiting, which is to say my sister's reason for visiting, believable."

"I can assure you that the League..."

"Trains better mages than the College. No doubt it does. But even if you are correct that the Archon would be willing to agree to bind a mage to my service... How young did you say your mages are bound?"

"As soon as talent is detected. Usually about ten or eleven, sometimes younger."

"So if a mage was bound to me tomorrow, it would be a decade or so before he had the power and training to be of any use. If I find a suitable candidate here, he can be in my service by the beginning of summer. If he happens to be a student taking a third year and willing to abandon it for a position, I need not wait at all; he could come back to the capital with us and then on to wherever I decide to send him."

One problem that, for all his careful planning, had not occurred to Gaius. He shook his head. "If Your Grace is willing to be satisfied with inferior training, less talent, and uncertain loyalty, perhaps. As I suggested earlier..."

Alessandro shook his head. "As you suggested earlier, the Archon might be willing to instruct one or two of his mages to serve me for a time, thus eliminating the wait. And can you imagine what Prince Kieron's reaction would be if he heard that I had in my service a mage bound to the Archon, loyal to me only subject to the Archon's orders? Your people have been good and helpful neighbors and I am willing enough to trust them, but His Highness has a somewhat different view of matters."

"His Highness... I know of at least two of our merchants ordered out of the kingdom on suspicion of some unnamed wickedness and have heard rumors of worse. One might almost think that His Highness was using fear of us for some purpose of his own."

"Perhaps. Whatever his reasons, he regards any Dorayan in Esland as at best a potential spy. He has not yet tried to persuade me to dismiss you from my service, at least not in so many words. If he heard that I had not merely a Dorayan secretary in my household but a Dorayan mage... It is not a risk I am willing to take."

Gaius kept his face as nearly expressionless as he could manage.

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"Your Majesty, the Learned Lady Melia. Learned Lady, Her Majesty Isabel."

"Come in, Majesty, come in both of you, through to the back room where there is a fire. Sit down and tell me in what way I can be of assistance to you."

The room they entered was plainly furnished, a long counter along much of one side, a fireplace at the end. Melia led them through to an inner room, at one end the jeweler's work table and furnace, at the other end a fireplace, against the wall between a loom with a partly woven fabric. She motioned them to chairs in front of the fire. The Queen sat down.

Alys turned to their host. "I can come back for Her Majesty when you are done. How long is it likely to be?"

"To answer questions within my ability, not long. To deal with problems, perhaps longer. Come back in an hour."

Alys left. Melia sat down, facing the Queen, waited. There was a long silence. Isabel finally broke it.

"I am barren. I wish to know if the condition can be cured."

"Stand up, let me look at you."

Isabel stood. Melia came over, placed one hand against the queen's belly, the other on her lower back, closed her eyes. It was most of ten minutes before she opened them, stepped back, gestured the other to a chair.

"You are barren. Do you know why?"

"Yes."

Melia waited for more, finally spoke.

"The woman who did this told you she could undo it?"

"Yes."

"She lied. She could not, I can not. No other harm was done to you, but you will never bear a child. Do you know her name?"

Isabel was silent a moment, thinking. "It was twenty years ago. Zaneta. I think it was Zaneta."

"Where?"

"In the capital."

"How old was she?"

"Older than I was, but not old. Thirty perhaps?"

"Very likely still doing it, then. Something will have to be done. No need for your name to be mentioned — there will be other victims. Do you want to tell me more?"

Isabel looked up at the other lady, back to the fire, spoke slowly.

"I was young but not a fool — the affair was not by my choice. Not at all my choice. Preventing consequences was. A friend told me that she knew a healer with the requisite skill, a lady from our part of the kingdom practicing in the Capital. Later, after I married, I asked her to undo what she had done; she told me that she had. As the years passed ..."

Melia nodded. "As the years passed, it became clear to you that she had not. Does your husband know?"

"It was Petrus who rescued me. Told me that my seduction had been magery, which I should have suspected.

"From him I have no secrets."

## Chapter 16

*[Southdale]*

Night time, a light breeze blowing down the deserted street. Over the shut door, wood reinforced with iron bands, the jeweler's sign. The same house he had scouted out two days before.

"So you found the kid after all."

Helgi spun around, startled. "Grimr? I thought you would be back home by now. Weeks ago."

Grimr shook his head. "I told you. My orders were to bring you back, make sure none of the guild secrets in your head got to the Eslandi mages. After you walked out on me I figured, between what you'd been saying and a few hints earlier from our employer, that you were likely to head for here. Didn't expect the kid would be here too. Been following him with that trick stick of yours?"

Helgi shook his head. "What makes you think I found Eirick?"

"Going to tell me you didn't? Only other reason I can think of for you being out here this time of night is an affair with a galdrakona three times your age. That it?"

"How did you know this was the Magistra's house? I only found out this morning."

"And before that?" Grimr gave the younger man a skeptical look. "If you didn't know whose house it was and your magic stick wasn't pointing at it, what were you doing out here night before last?"

Helgi looked around. Nobody else in sight in the dim moonlight. Neither the other's tone nor what Helgi could read of his mood was entirely friendly. Odd that he had been able to spy on a kenner without being spotted, but it was at least evidence of useful skills; if Eirick was being held prisoner, Grimr would have a better idea of how to get him free and back to Forstmark than Helgi did. Helgi did not trust the larger man, but there was no obvious reason to keep his knowledge, such as it was, secret.

"Two days ago I tried the talisman and found something close; it turned out to be the shop of the local jeweler. I wondered if perhaps the beacon was an amulet or something of the sort, lost by Eirick, found by someone; the jeweler at Southdale would be an obvious customer for mage work, though I would have thought the capital more likely. So I tried to ask around without being obvious about it to find out what I could about the local jeweler, see if anyone knew if he had guests. Then yesterday, the talisman stopped working."

"Should have left asking questions to someone with more practice; magic isn't the only way of learning things. Master Dur has been out of

town for months, visiting the capital. He's rented the place to the galdrakona who's been giving talks at the inn — to you and half the mages in Esland.

"And she has guests. Including a kid and a very big dog. Now don't you wish you hadn't run out on me?"

Helgi shook his head. "So you could have dragged me back over the pass, leaving Eirick in the hands of the Eslandi king and his people?"

"It was your idea that the kid... we can have that argument some other time. Right now our job is getting him away from whoever has him and safe home. He knows you, so you go in, talk him into coming out, and we head for home with what we came for. I stay out here. If I hear sounds of trouble, I come in. Guldagraethar can be dangerous, but this one is a healer and an old woman at that, so she shouldn't be a problem. If she is, I'll deal with it."

Helgi nodded. "I'll go in, but first..." He closed his eyes, probed through the door of the shop. The front room was empty. Behind it a second room, dimly lit by moonlight through the windows; Helgi recognized a furnace, now out, a workbench, an anvil, familiar tools. The jeweler's workshop. At one end a cot, someone sleeping in it. The amulet hung on the bedpost was one he knew. A second familiar form, half under the cot. He had come to the right place. It only remained to get in. Grimr probably knew more than he did about breaking into houses.

Unnecessary — a gentle push and the door opened, unbarred. He felt around the front room for less obvious defenses, found nothing, entered.

The door to the back room was half open; Helgi came through, stopped, considered what to do next. A staircase, presumably to living quarters on the upper floor, at least one person up there sleeping. No guards awake that he could perceive and no physical bonds on Eirick. Without moving from the doorway, Helgi explored the sleeping boy. No magical bonds either unless the Eslandi mages had spells more subtle than he had experience of, which seemed unlikely. Perhaps his captors relied on the difficulties the boy would face if he chose to leave them, alone save for Jarl in a hostile kingdom. No magical bonds, but something about him...

Helgi had no wish to wake whoever was upstairs, most probably the lady Melia; he was more inclined than Grimr to take seriously her ability to deal with a kenner and an untalented, however competent the latter might be at violence. Touching the boy would almost certainly rouse the dog to his defense. Fortunately Jarl knew him.

He drew a long breath, spoke softly. "Jarl." The dog raised his head but remained silent, sniffing the air. Helgi let out the breath he had not realized he was holding.

"Eirick." The boy came awake, opened his eyes.



"It's Helgi."

"Helgi? What are you doing here?"

Helgi moved into the room, stretching his hand out, palm down, for Jarl to sniff. "Looking for you. When you vanished, the Guild sent me across the pass to find you, get you free of whoever had captured you, bring you back."

Eirick rolled out of bed, stood up, shook his head. "Nobody captured me. Some men tried, but I got past them, got turned around, came down this side of the pass. Found..." He hesitated a moment. "A friend. I don't want to go back to Forstmark, back to the Einvald's palace to sit around waiting for him to try to make me a king. I don't want to be a king. I want to stay here in my country with my kin. I'm sorry you have spent all this time searching for me to bring me back north, but I'm not going."

There was a moment of silence before Helgi spoke again. "You are sure?"

The boy nodded.

"It's up to you. As best I can tell, you aren't scared of anyone or under any compulsion. I expect I'll be staying around for a while; there are things I can learn here, from the Magistra and from other people. It might be better if they don't know where I'm from."

Eirick thought a moment. "I won't tell. But Mari's a truth teller and clever; I'll have to be careful."

"I don't think that will be necessary."

Helgi spun around; the voice from behind him was Grmr's.

"I am in charge of this expedition, not the kenner. My orders are to bring both of you back to Forstmark. Once there, you can discuss with the Einvald your future plans. Since you do not wish to come..."

He broke open the scroll he was holding, spoke a sentence. There was a choked sound from Eirick, then silence. Helgi turned back to him; the boy was standing perfectly still.

"And as for you," Grmr continued, "I can deal with you similarly if I must. It will be easier, for me now and for you later, if that is not necessary." Grmr held up a second scroll. "As you can see, the spell is effective." He stepped up to the motionless boy, slapped him lightly across the face. Eirick remained frozen.

From under the bed Jarl leaped to the defense of his master. Grmr threw up his left arm to guard his throat; the dog caught it in his teeth, bit down. Grmr dropped the scroll from his right hand, drew his dagger.

Three steps brought Helgi behind him. Pulling the talisman from his wallet he raised it high, struck down with all his strength.

Grmr fell. Jarl let go of his wrist, dropped to the ground whining.

The first to speak was Eirick. "What happened? Why is he lying there? Jarl, are you all right, puppy?"

Helgi bent over the dog. Jarl was lying in a pool of blood, more pouring out of the stab wound in his belly. Time stopped as the mage leaned over, closed his eyes, put his hand on the wound. Melia had been right; the structure of blood vessels was a close parallel to what he had studied in his own belly two days before.

"Can you...?"

Helgi answered without looking up at the boy, his hand pressing down on the wound. "I'm sorry. I'm not a life mage. I can see the wound, hold closed the artery, slow the bleeding. But I can't heal it, can't save him. I'm sorry. I don't know how."

A voice — a voice he knew — from above and behind him. "Just keep the pressure on; I'm halfway down."

He looked up; a familiar face framed by a tangle of grey hair. A moment later Melia was leaning over the wounded animal. Eyes again closed, he watched fascinated as the ends of the blood vessel touched, fused, cut flesh joined, the wound closing, disappearing. The healer sat back on her heels, absentmindedly stroked the head of the unconscious dog. She looked up curiously at Helgi kneeling beside her, Grimr lying on the floor.

"And now that that is dealt with, who are you, who is he, what are both of you doing in my house in the middle of the night and which of you tried to kill poor Jarl, as if what he has been through already wasn't enough?"

Before Helgi could figure out what to say and how, Eirick spoke. "The one who tried to help is Helgi; he's a friend of mine from Forstmark."

"And the other one?"

Eirick shook his head. "I don't know who he is. He came in behind Helgi, wanted to carry me off back to Forstmark to the Einvald. Then everything went blank, and the next I knew he was lying there and Jarl was on the floor bleeding. Will he be all right?"

Melia turned back to the dog, passed her hands over his body. "I've undone what the knife did. I can't put blood back and he lost too much of it, but rest, all the water he wants and food should take care of that in a few days. I'll stay by him for a while, just to be safe." She turned to look at Helgi. "Haven't you been at the inn?"

He nodded. "Attending your lectures, lady, trying to learn what I can within the limits of my quarter."

"I didn't know I had students from quite that far away; which quarter of the galdraguild do you belong to? Obviously not healers. Is your friend from Forstmark too? I don't think I've seen him before. And which quarter

is he from, and why did he stab poor Jarl, if he did, and why did you knock him senseless if it was you, and which of you has been doing what to Eirick, and why?" She paused for breath, giving Helgi his chance.

"We both came from Forstmark, lady, to try to find Prince Eirick and rescue him from whoever carried him off over the pass."

Eirick cut in. "I told Helgi I didn't want to go back and he said that was all right and asked me not to tell people he was from Forstmark. Then that man came in and said he was going to make me go back. Then I don't know what happened."

Melia looked back at Helgi, waited.

"Grimr has been carrying scrolls with compulsion spells on them; that's one of the reasons I left him three weeks ago up north. I was supposed to be following Eirick, since I'm a kenner, and Grimr was sent along to help. At least that's what they told me. But he said part of his job was making sure I got back to Forstmark, whether I liked it or not. That was after we discovered that the plot to grab Eirick had failed and thought he hadn't ended up coming south after all.

"Grimr wanted us to go home, I wanted to come south and learn more about Esland and Eslandi magery and the College. So I did. But he somehow followed me. When the talisman told me Eirick was here and then that he wasn't, Grimr must have seen some of it and figured out that I was still looking for Eirick. He used a spell from a scroll — I don't know how he was able to cast it, without talent of his own — to control Eirick. Then Jarl attacked him, and I hit him over the head with the talisman." Helgi raised his hand, still holding the wooden rod. "And then you came in, lady. And I think my knocking Grimr out, or maybe Jarl attacking him, somehow broke the spell on Eirick, though I don't see how if it was the scroll that cast the spell."

Melia got up, walked over to where Grimr lay, put her hand on his forehead; the other two fell silent watching. Finally she looked up at Helgi. "You say he has been following you, but you didn't know it?"

He nodded.

"You're a kenner. Shouldn't you have perceived him — earlier tonight if not before?"

Helgi thought a moment before replying. "I should have. And he shouldn't have surprised me tonight, although I was distracted talking to Eirick and trying to make sure I didn't start Jarl barking. Even a mage has a hard time hiding from a kenner, and for an ordinary person... Unless the Guild gave him something — I don't know if the Smiths could do that."

Melia shook her head. "No. That's not it."

It took Helgi a moment to understand. "You are saying that Grimr is a mage? That did occur to me, when I discovered he was carrying the

scrolls. But why would he be pretending not to be? And the Guild would have to know, so why didn't they tell me?"

Melia was looking, not at him, but up the stairs. Turning, Helgi saw why; someone else at the top of them beginning to come down. A woman, young, wrapped in a sleeping robe.

"Is everything all right? I heard Jarl growling."

"Welcome to the confusion, love. Not all right — the belly isn't a good place to be stabbed, not that I can think of anywhere that is — but I got to him in time. The visitor on his feet is one of Rick's Forstish friends, come to rescue him from us; he helped keep Rick's puppy from bleeding to death after the other one stabbed him. That one is Forstish too but not so friendly, fire, I think, so you may want to let him see you. I can't keep him asleep forever, and besides, there are questions Rick and his friend may want to put to him. Speaking of which, we'll want your friend Mari first."

Helgi responded to the only part of the torrent of words he could make sense of. "You are saying that Grimr is a fire mage?"

Melia turned back to him. "He's all wrapped up in a tangle of shielding spells and I wouldn't think the Galdraguild rules against kenner learning to actually do things — even sillier than the College not teaching healing — would apply to just looking. Come over and see if you can see the spells, maybe what's under them. Start with the top layer and follow the threads down."

A moment later Helgi, feeling as if he were again an apprentice in training, was bending over Grimr. After a few minutes he shook his head. "I can see that he's shielded, but I can't make any sense of the pattern."

"I don't suppose you ever got taught any weaving or unweaving? Never too late to learn, assuming you don't plan to go back home just now, not the sort of thing they would teach a kenner, worried as they are about stepping on some other quarter's toes or poaching their clients. Linen threads aren't the only things that can be woven — or un. Watch."

Eyes closed, perception focused on the shielding spells, Helgi waited. A cloud of mist, a tangle of threads, a single thread in the tangle outlined in light; as best he could he followed it into the pattern, in a moment was lost in confusion. Out again; the one thread was still clear. It shifted, blurred, vanished. Now another was outlined, then gone. Another.

"Try again; it should be easier."

To his perception the cloud/tangle had shrunk, become less of a chaos, more of a pattern. This time he could follow the one bright thread further, until at last the pattern again dissolved. Back out. "I'm sorry, I can't."

"Never too late to learn. Watch."

More threads pulled clear of the tangle, dissolved into mist, were gone. Still more. Finally Melia spoke again. "Now look."

He looked. The remnant of shielding spells was a woven knot, its pattern simple enough to follow, the barrier weak enough for him to force perception through. What it guarded was flame, weak but unmistakable. She was right. Whatever else he might be, Grimr was a mage. A fire mage.

Helgi looked up at Melia. "So that's how he could use the scrolls. Enough perception to help him stalk me, though his shielding spells must have made it harder to use it, but he still needed the talisman and me if he wanted to find Eirick from miles away. And someone to put the beacon on Eirick, whatever it was, for the talisman to follow. That part makes sense, but the rest doesn't."

"Try the talisman now." That was the stranger, the girl watching from part way down the stairs.

He lifted the wooden rod, closed his eyes. Faint, perhaps far away, but there was indeed something. He opened his eyes, followed the line of the talisman.

It was pointing at the dog.

Melia broke the silence. "You were right, love, that is how they did it. Somewhere in the Guild is a mage I would... though I don't expect he would want to be met, twisted creature that he is, here I'd try to have him banned, but I don't suppose the Guild... at least it will help us finish undoing his work." She saw Helgi's expression, turned back to the younger woman. "Tell him — I haven't the stomach. Not his fault; he didn't know what he was following."

Ellen came the rest of the way down the stairs, turned to Helgi. "Jarl was the beacon; the spells on him drained his life to power it. Mother finished getting most of them off him yesterday; if she hadn't he would have died. Your talisman is close enough now to pick up what's left; if you get next to him we should be able to use it to figure out where and what they are and remove them too. In Esland, a mage who did something like that would very likely be charged with abuse of magery and banned from future use under penalty of death. I don't know how they deal with such things up north."

Helgi thought a moment. "Life magic, so for the graetharmeistara, the head of the quarter, to judge."

Ellen looked curiously at him. "So anything she approves of is permitted?"

Helgi nodded. "The guild council could meet and overrule her but I've never heard of it happening."

Ellen shook her head, said nothing.

The floor was hard, head and wrist hurt. Eyes closed, body still limp, Grimr reached back through memory: Where was he and why?

He had invoked the cloaking spell and followed the kenner into the house. The kid was there, of course, but instead of finding some way of persuading him to come out where he could be dealt with, the idiot kenner had told the kid that of course he could stay, then announced that he himself intended to stay too, in a town full of Eslandi mages, any one of whom might uncover Helgi's secret and turn him over to whatever local authority had a use for a captured Guild mage. Idiot.

The problem was one Grimr had considered weeks ago. He had, and used, what he needed to deal with it. With the kid under his control, the kenner would be no problem; the limits of his defiance had been demonstrated three weeks ago when instead of openly opposing Grimr he waited until the other slept and then sneaked out of camp.

What had happened to Grimr after he took control of the kid and made the situation clear to Helgi? His final memory was of a monstrous beast going for his throat, savaging the wrist he put up to guard it. When Helgi told him the talisman had stopped working, Grimr assumed that the beacon on the kid's dog had finally gone out, that the dog was dead, burned out, having lasted rather longer than expected. On the evidence, not.

Neither the kid nor the kenner had the guts, not to mention the physical ability, to have knocked Grimr out, even with his attention on the dog. Who else?

The answer was obvious. He was in the house of a galdrakona, a healer and, old woman or not, she must have done it. Not by hitting him over the head, which was what it felt like, but by some healer spell run backwards; he had heard of such. Where she had been, why he had not perceived her, were puzzles — but he had been occupied at the time. For all he knew, the Eslanders might be able to block perception with a primitive version of the Guild cloaking spell, might even have stolen the real thing from some Guild mage with as little sense and responsibility as the kenner. Or perhaps, not being bound by Guild rules, she had used her talent to set up some sort of trap, a static spell, that he had fallen foul of.

Whatever the explanation, he had been left lying unconscious. Time to learn more.

Eyes still closed, Grimr opened his perception, cautiously reached out. At least his injury, whatever it was, had not weakened his talents; if anything the opposite. His surroundings were, as always, colorless, but the image sharper than usual.

On a chair partway across the room, watching him, the kenner. For a moment Grimr played with the idea of finishing matters here and now;

Helgi was well within his range. But that would mean abandoning the mission, trashing months of work by himself and allies in three of the four quarters. Without Helgi, the only witnesses would be Eirick and Grimr himself. The kid knew too little, Grimr too much, and any questioning would surely be done with a truthteller and without the shielding spells that currently guarded him. If Grimr came back without Helgi, Gunnar would not be pleased. And pleasing the Caster was, all things considered, Grimr's chief job.

Sitting next to the kenner... another mage.

A fire mage. Grimr pulled his perception back. A fire mage a great deal more powerful than he was, defensive barrier already up. Invoking fire to settle matters and get himself free... might not be such a good idea.

The wooden floor was not the most comfortable bed he had known and there seemed little point to continuing to lie there. He opened his eyes; to judge by what he could see through the open shutters it was not yet dawn. The fire mage was a woman, a young woman. Surprising but still dangerous. For the moment he would ignore her, concentrate on the kenner.

"Figured out which side you're on yet?"

Helgi shook his head. "I haven't even figured out how many sides there are. I'm on four at least — Forstmark, the Guild, my quarter, and Eirick's. I'm beginning to think there's at least one more, and you're on it. I don't suppose you would like to tell me just who told you that, if I didn't come back with you, you should use a compulsion spell to make me come? It wasn't the Kenner."

"My orders were from Gunnar, the Gerningmeistari. It's Guild policy not to let our mages wander around Esland on their lone, as you and your boss know. If he thought he could get around policy by sending you with me and then having you set off on your own at the first opportunity, that's his problem, not mine."

"Was Gunnar also the one who just happened to know who was supposed to capture Eirick and just where to look for him?"

Gimr shrugged. "He told me where to look; I didn't ask how he knew. I told you — I don't meddle in mage business when I can help it."

"And of course you had never seen those two men before, didn't know anything yourself about who they were or what they were doing?"

Gimr was silent a moment. Not a question he had expected, certainly not one he wanted. If this were a Guild inquiry, all defenses stripped in advance, the mission would be over. That was only supposed to happen after they returned, with Grimr safely far away and only Helgi there to answer.



He spoke slowly. "I've spent a lot of time south of the mountains, met a lot of people, so for all I know I might have met those two — you never did tell me what they looked like."

"You never asked. But you knew where to find them, knew they were supposed to have Eirick. The only two times you were surprised were when we came over the pass and the talisman wasn't pointing where you expected and when I came back to camp and told you Eirick wasn't there. Did you know about the whole plot — before it happened? Were you the man from the city who was going to pay them to turn Eirick over to him or maybe the mage from Forstmark they arranged it with?"

Grimr shook his head. "Now you're just being crazy. My job was getting Eirick back and making sure you came back. If I was behind the whole plot I could have saved myself a lot of work by not having him grabbed in the first place."

"Maybe. But you haven't answered my question. Did you know in advance? Did you help to set it up?"

Questions and answers fitted a familiar pattern of query and evasion. It occurred to Grimr, with a sudden surge of panic, that Helgi's quarter included truthtellers. Could Helgi himself...? Surely, if so, he would have been told. Could he have an invisible ally, a second kenner sent south as part of some elaborate counterplot to learn the truth and reveal it, or threaten to reveal it, to the Guild as a whole, perhaps even to the Einvald himself? Gunnar was good, very good, but not all his rivals in the Guild were fools. Perhaps this time he had been too clever.

But no. Even if Helgi was a truthteller or had a truthteller as ally, it did not matter. Before he left the guild house the protective spells guarding Grimr had been reinforced, additional layers added. As he was now, no truthteller, not the strongest of kenners, could pierce them to recognize a lie. No need to search for responses that only seemed to answer the other's questions. Against all his training, the simple solution was the best. With luck Helgi had not noticed his hesitation or, if he had, not guessed its reason.

"I did not know in advance. I did not try to set it up. Gunnar told me where he thought I should look; I assumed one of his people south of the mountains had picked up some hint of what was happening too late to stop it."

There was a long silence; finally the female mage broke it. "Do you deny using a compulsion spell, in this room last night, on Eirick Iolensson, in order to force him to return with you to Forstmark against his will?"

Grimr gave her a puzzled look. "I know why Helgi is concerned with what happens to Prince Eirick. Who are you and what concern is it of yours?"



"I am a mage of Esland and so obliged to obey and defend the bounds of magery. The use of a compulsion spell on one unwilling is a violation of those bounds. I do not know how it is in Forstmark, but with us violation of the bounds is punished by a ban from the use of magery, violation of the ban with death. Did you use a compulsion spell on Eirick Iolensson?"

"And if I did? Do you propose to murder me here and now?"

She shook her head. "I propose to have you taken to the Royal Master of Mages in the capital with a report as to the circumstances. The Einvald has representatives there; it will be up to His Highness whether to turn you over to them or try and sentence you himself. Whatever happens, you would be wise not to make any further attempts against Eirick."

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His eyes heavy with missed sleep, Helgi looked around the front room of the jeweler's shop, lit by the early light of dawn. Eirick was there, sitting by a shorter boy of about the same age. Jarl was lying on the other side of Eirick, the Magistra kneeling on the floor beside him, one hand on the dog's back. The door opened, letting in the younger mage, whose name seemed to be Ellen. She was accompanied by a second lady, taller, better dressed, also a mage. The lady he had noticed at the first lecture.

Ellen walked three slow circles around the room, muttering words in the True Speech. Parts of the spell Helgi had heard before, the purpose clear enough by the effect. With eyes closed his perception was bounded by the ring she had cast; the barrier was no doubt equally effective in the other direction. When she was done she spoke to the Magistra. "Gervase wasn't happy to miss two of your lectures, but I promised one of us would fill him in when he got back. He and his friend should be on their way to the capital by now, along with our visitor."

She turned to Helgi. "Mari is a truth teller — she was listening from in here."

For a moment there was silence.

"How much of what Grimr told me was true? Could you tell?"

The tall lady nodded. "At the beginning he was being careful. Either he perceived me or he suspected there might be someone observing from the next room or he was just doing it out of habit. At the end, when you put questions in a form he couldn't evade, he lied." She looked down at her tablets, open. "He did know in advance. He did try to set it up. He did not assume that whoever gave him the information had picked up a hint too late to stop it. And you weren't being crazy. Is that what you needed to know?"

"I should have asked more questions — I still don't know why he did it, or why Gunnar did — he has to be the one behind it. But at least it is clear enough what they did."

Eirick looked up from the sleeping dog. "People in the Guild hired those men to catch me, put a spell on Jarl to lure me up to them, put another spell on him that would have killed him, then sent you and Grimr to find me and bring me back?"

Helgi thought a moment. Eirick was entitled to the truth, or at least the best guess he could manage of it, but exposing Guild politics to servants of the Eslandi king was another matter.

"Part of it has to have been the work of someone in the Guild, but just who did what and why I don't know." He, unlike Grimr, still had protective spells shielding him; it was unlikely that a truthteller could penetrate them. If she could... He had formed a guess as to what was happening, what would have happened if Eirick had not escaped the trap set for him, but that was not quite the same thing as knowing. With luck he would have a chance later to talk with Eirick alone.

Or perhaps not. Grimr had been disposed of, but nothing had been said of what was to happen to Helgi. Best to know.

"Are you sending me off to the prince as well?"

Ellen shook her head. "Why should we? You haven't been using compulsion spells on anyone, have you? There's no law I know of against foreign mages wandering around the kingdom. If you tried to enroll at the College they might object — at least, I've never heard of a Forsting training there. But Mother's lectures are open to anyone who wants to come.

Which answered two questions; the younger galdrakona was daughter to the older. But still left one. "Are you, all three of you, in service to the prince then? Or just friends of Eirick?"

Ellen looked amused. "I don't think Kieron regards Coelus and me as servants of his. Sometimes allies. And not entirely reliable ones at that."

It took a moment for the name to register. "Coelus?"

"Magister Coelus. My husband. He and I have had disagreements with His Highness in the past. I think he has given up trying to make us act on his judgment rather than ours. So far as Rick is concerned, he is Kir's friend" — she nodded at the boy sitting next to Eirick — "Mari is Kir's stepmother, I am a friend of Mari's, Melia is my mother. Does that make enough of the connections clear? If not, I expect Rick will be glad to explain the rest of it."

The tall lady, the truthteller, Mari, smiled at that but said nothing.

Which left a lot of questions unanswered. He would need at least a few hours of sleep before trying to deal with them.

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Helgi had almost worked out to his own satisfaction the mechanics of his digestive system, how the food got from one end to the other and what happened to it along the way, when he realized that someone was watching him. Someone he knew. He stood up, turning. Eirick, accompanied by the other boy — Kir, if Helgi had the name right — and Ellen. Daughter of the magistra, wife of the magister at the center of the puzzle the Kenner had sent him to solve.

Eirick was the first to speak. "I'm sorry. You looked as though you were doing something very hard, although I couldn't tell what."

Helgi shook his head. "Not a problem; I could use a break from studying my guts. Anyway, I had been thinking we ought to talk sometime."

Ellen spoke to Kir. "Neither of us has had lunch yet, and I expect the cookshop will be emptying by now."

"I'm not that hungry."

"I am. And Rick will want a chance to talk with his friend. We'll come back for him after lunch."

Helgi sat down again, back against a tree, facing town and cookshop. Sunlight through the leaves dappled the grass around him. He motioned Eirick to join him, waited until the other two reached the town's one main street, turned down it.

"I'm not going to try to persuade you to go back north. Not entirely sure I want to go back myself, though I probably should. I do want to tell you what I know, and guess, about what's been going on. It's Forstmark matters, Guild matters, and your friends are Eslanders, so..."

"I'm an Eslander too."

"They're working with the prince, even if they aren't in his service. If he knew the things I want to tell you he might be able to use them against us. You have a right to know, being in the middle of it, and I trust you not to tell anyone if you promise not to. I don't know them, don't know how much to trust them, don't know just how independent they are of the prince."

He paused a moment. "That's odd — you think something is funny."

"You can tell that because you're a kenner? Or wasn't I keeping my face under control?"

"I'm a kenner and feelings are what I'm mostly trained to see. What was the joke?"

"'Kir' is short for 'Kieron;' he's named after his father."

It took Helgi a moment to understand. "The prince. And Mari is his stepmother, so she's married to Prince Kieron? That explains a lot. Good thing I didn't say more this morning."

Eirick shook his head. "When you were listing sides you said you were on my side. Mari is too. After she found out who I was she didn't tell him, didn't tell anyone but Ellen and Kir, until she made sure that the prince wouldn't do anything to me when he found out.

"But I won't tell her what you tell me if you don't want me to." He hesitated a moment. "I won't even tell Kir. He'll understand if I tell him it's a promise. Not unless it's something that might put him in danger; I can't promise that."

"That's fair. Give me a moment; I've been thinking about this for most of the past month, but I'm not sure I know how to put it into words." He pulled out a stalk of grass, chewed on the end, was silent. Eirick said nothing, waited. Above them there was a rustling in the tree. Helgi looked up, saw a squirrel.

Finally he spoke. "It goes back to the invasion two years ago, even further back, to when the old Einvald died and Asmund ended up winning out to succeed him. The Guild mostly backed Jarl Eyvind until he managed to break his neck — I think it was an accident but some people don't. The invasion was supposed to patch things up, Guild and Einvald working together. When it went bad, the Einvald blamed the Guild.

"The Gerningmeistari, the Caster, is named Gunnar; the head of my quarter warned me that he was devious. His plan was to set up a make-believe plot to grab you and turn you over to the Eslandi king. Grimr and I would rescue you, which would be easy because Grimr, having arranged the whole thing — he works for the Caster but mostly in Esland, so knows people there — would know where you were and how to get you back. That would make the Einvald look bad, since you were under his protection and he didn't protect you, and the Guild look good, since they had rescued you. The Einvald would end up in debt to the Guild and having to pretend to be grateful, which I expect Gunnar looked forward to."

"Why did they send you? Wouldn't it have been easier to send just Grimr, or send someone with him who was in on the plot too?"

Helgi smiled. "The reason they said they were sending me was to track you, using the talisman, the wooden stick I knocked Grimr out with last night. They didn't really need me, since they knew — thought they knew — where you would be. Though I suppose they figured my being able to track you would be useful if something went wrong with their plan, as of course it did.

"The real reason to have me along was that I wasn't in the plot. If everything had gone according to plan, if you had walked into the arms of the two men at the top of the pass the way you were supposed to, I would have ended up bringing you back to the Einvald. I would have been questioned by the Einvald's truthteller and I would have told what I thought was the truth, how you had been grabbed and we had rescued you. You would have told the same story. Grimr would have been off on another errand into Esland, so they couldn't question him."

The two were silent for a few minutes; finally Eirick spoke. "What happens now? Does the Guild send someone else to bring me back?"

Helgi shook his head. "I think that plot is finished. Grimr knows that I at least suspect the truth and that you heard enough to suspect it too. Without us to support their story the whole thing collapses. The Caster might try to have me killed to keep the story from getting out; if I go home, I'm going straight to my own quarter and not leaving it until matters are settled. I don't know what he would do if you came home. If you stay here and some version of your story does make it north, he would just claim it was an Eslandi invention.

"The question for me is what I should do now. There are a lot of things I would like to tell the Kenner, starting with what I just told you. But I'm learning things here in Southdale I couldn't learn at home and I want to learn more of them."

Eirick looked puzzled. "I thought Guild magery was more advanced than..."

"In some ways I expect it is. But there are things they know that we don't — the containment sphere around the College, for instance, is the most amazing piece of magery I've ever heard of. And I think they really have some sort of insight into how magery works that we don't.

"That's what I want to learn for the Kenner. What I want to learn for myself is what the Magistra is teaching. It's kenning — how to find out what's wrong with someone — but I've never heard of that sort of thing being taught to kenner at home. I expect the life mages would object if it were. And if I stay here..."

Helgi stopped. "Your friends are back." Eirick, turning, saw Kir and Ellen coming through the field towards them.

"And I should go back to trying to understand this morning's lecture."

## Chapter 17

*[A farmhouse near Southdale]*

Arius looked around the deserted farmhouse. "The owners?"

"Owner — a widower without children. But with a lawsuit in the capital concerning his rights to a valuable inheritance — or so he now believes. The village inn is full to overflowing with mages come to attend some public lectures, so when I explained that I was looking for a place to stay and offered to rent his house for a few weeks... The money I paid him will cover his expenses in the capital for as long as it takes him to persuade himself that his claim and case have somehow vanished due to error or corruption, and since it is two days' travel each way we should be well gone by then." Justin fell silent, waited for the senior mage to speak.

"It is a farm — when the livestock get hungry and start making a racket, won't someone notice? We want as little attention from the locals as possible."

"Matters of concern, learned one, but I believe I have dealt with them adequately. The big animals — a mule and a yoke of oxen — are with a neighbor half a mile off, the chickens fend for themselves, the horse he took with him. His hired man was told to take the week off. We are most of four miles from the village and well off the main road, so visiting mages are unlikely to come by. Or other travelers.

"Is there anything more I have missed?" Justin fell silent, waiting for the senior mage to respond.

Arius shook his head. "I do not think so. Once they find the princess and her son are missing the place will be buzzing like a hornet's nest. I do not know how far out they will search, but we should spend the rest of today making this place hard to find; I will show you how to do your parts of it.

"Tomorrow you and I go into the village, leaving Melchius here to guard the place. We can scout around, find out where they are staying — very likely with the healer she is here to study with. With luck we move tomorrow night. The next morning you set out for the capital, find the Archon's man with the legation, have him speak with the prince. If the prince accepts our terms, you arrange to have Marcus returned to his master, come back here to me, and we head for home, leaving the royal witch and her boy behind; you will leave a letter with the legate to be passed on to His Highness once we are gone, telling him where to find them.

"I believe that covers everything."

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The moon, more than half full, gave enough light to see street and house, not that either mage needed it. The senior spoke. "My barriers should ward off any drunks coming home from the inn; I do not expect anyone else will be out this late. But just in case, you remain by the door to deal with any trouble."

Justin nodded his assent. "Are the right two in there?"

Arius' expression was answer enough. "One boy, one witch on the ground floor. Both asleep, which will make it easier. And earlier, when that Forstish mage was visiting and only those two were in, I heard him say "Highness" twice. Mostly their jabber was too fast for me to follow, but that word was clear enough. The old healer is up above; you will cast the barrier to keep her from seeing or hearing what we are doing while I deal with the two below."

"What do you think a mage from Forstmark is doing here, learned one?"

"That part of the God's tale I do not know, but I expect our masters will find the fact of interest; Forstmark is not on our border, but we still try to keep an eye on them. I recognized the accent, and the bindings on him are Forstish work; I have seen such before." Arius waited a moment to see if his junior had any more questions, turned, spoke a few words softly, gestured with one hand — the other was in the wallet by his side — entered the house. Justin watched a moment, then turned to face the empty street.

Eirick opened his eyes. It was still night, but enough moonlight came in through the windows of the workshop to show Ellen's cot where she had put it two nights before when she brought it down from the upper room, Ellen in it. Someone was circling her cot, trailing a faint haze, a grey glow. Eirick tried to shout a warning. Nothing. He tried to roll out of bed onto his feet. His body lay still. The amulet, where it rested against his chest, felt warm, almost hot. He could not move a hand to touch it; only his eyes and eyelids were his own.

He watched, frozen, as the grey mist closed, layer after layer, around the sleeping mage. When she was entirely enveloped, when he could no longer make out her form through the cocoon woven about her, the stranger stopped his circling, bent over Ellen for a moment, reached down, then walked over to Eirick's cot. No face he recognized. A hand reached into the breast of his sleeping robe, drew out his amulet, lifted amulet and cord off. A voice spoke, a brief phrase in a language he did not know. Darkness closed down.

Eirick was cold. He was walking. In front of him another figure, still faintly wrapped in grey mist. Ahead of her a third. Too tall to be the lady Melia; with luck she was still sleeping in her own bed. He thought he heard footsteps behind him as well. The moon was ahead of him, low, setting.

They walked for a long time, how long Eirick could not judge. From time to time he stumbled over something, once fell, but whatever spell bound him held; he got up, continued walking. The moon set. At last there was the loom of something darker still in front of them. The man in front opened a door; Ellen and Eirick went through, came to a halt. Behind him Eirick heard someone close the door.

Familiar noises; someone, out of Eirick's sight, was putting logs together, breaking sticks of wood for kindling. No sound of steel on flint, but firelight, reflected from the walls, the smell of wood smoke. A voice, this time speaking Eslandi with an accent, an accent he thought he recognized.

"Sit down in the chairs at the table and do not move."

For a moment his body was his own. He turned around. They were in what looked to be the kitchen of a farmhouse, stone walled; a fire was catching hold in the fireplace. In front of him a table and chairs; he was walking towards it. Sat down. A moment later Ellen sat down beside him.

"You have had a cold walk; here is some hot wine. Drink it." The wine was in glass cups, an odd luxury for a farmhouse. It was hot, sweet, spiced. Something about the wine Ellen was drinking, sparkles in it. Eirick drank, heard Ellen beside him swallowing.

"Through there is a room for you to sleep in." The speaker pointed at a door in the wall Eirick was facing. "There are protections on the windows and the door, and my servant will be awake and on watch; it would not be wise to try to leave it. In the morning you will be fed and I will speak with you."

Again darkness.

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The cookshop was not quite as crowded as it had been the first day but Helgi, looking in through the door, had almost made up his mind to come back later when he noticed a familiar face. Alys looked up from the table, gestured him in. "We have space if you want to join us."

"Gladly, learned lady, if your friend does not mind."

The lady sitting beside Alys — some years older, well dressed and strikingly attractive, smiled up at him, turned to Alys. "This must be the handsome young man you were telling me of a few days ago. By all means let him join us." She turned back to Helgi. "I understand you are from Forstmark? I have never been there."

Helgi's first response was panic; either he had been less clever than he had thought or Alys cleverer. His second was relief. From the tone, neither of them saw a Forstish mage wandering around Esland as anything more



than a pleasing novelty – which, it occurred to him, was rather like the reaction of the Magistra and her friends. He started breathing again.

Alys glanced at the other lady, hesitated a moment, spoke. “Isabel, this is my friend Helgi. Helgi, this is Isabel, who I have been showing around Southdale and the College.” She looked back at her friend, who was still smiling, motioned Helgi to the empty chair across from her.

He accepted the invitation, took the chair, turned to Isabel, searched for a topic. No sign of talent – either not a mage or very strongly shielded. And new to Southdale, so more likely not. It occurred to him that looking at her and not speaking might be misinterpreted; Alys was pretty, but Isabel...

At which point Isabel solved the problem for him. “Is magery very different in the north? Do they have a College as well?”

Helgi shook his head. “Different in some ways. Mages, all mages, are members of the Guild, and the Guild trains us. An apprentice here, unless he is at the College, learns only what his master can teach him. A lorisvein at home can learn anything anyone in the Guild knows, at least anyone in his quarter.”

“So your mages are much better trained than ours?” Oddly enough it was an honest question; not one he would have expected. He thought a moment, feeling for an equally honest answer.

“Most of the Guild would say so, and a month or two ago I would have agreed. I am not so certain now. Alys showed me the containment sphere around the College and I could barely believe my eyes; I do not think anyone in the Guild could create anything like it. I do not understand her description of the theory courses here very well, but it does not sound like anything I was taught. I do not see how mages trained outside the College could be as well trained as our Guild mages, but College-trained mages might be. And they might learn some things we don't teach because we do not know them.”

Alys broke in. “You should talk to Ellen; she understands the theory. She even used it to invent some spells for me. And she is married to Magister Coelus, who invented a good deal of it, or so they say. I am sure she could do a much better job of explaining than I could.”

He hesitated a moment, but it was the question that needed to be asked, and it was hardly likely that a casual conversation in the cookshop would get back to anyone important. “And she would? Forstmark and Esland have been fighting each other, off and on, forever. Wouldn't she think something like that ought to be kept secret?”

“That is exactly the mistake we made for two hundred years, just on a bigger scale.”

The speaker was an older man sitting at the next table. Helgi turned to look at him as Alys spoke. "Magister Henryk. I didn't realize you were listening. This is my friend Helgi, from Forstmark, as I think you heard. And you met," she hesitated a moment, "Isabel two days ago, when we came to the College."

Henryk looked amused at something but didn't say what. "I apologize for listening in on your conversation, but it sounded interesting. I have never been to Forstmark — the Guild objects to foreign mages wandering around, which is probably why your friend is surprised that we don't. But I've heard a good deal about it."

He turned to Helgi. "You were right about what was wrong with the way magery used to be handled in Esland, when each mage kept his spells secret and only taught them to his apprentice; the College changed that. But doesn't Forstmark do something similar, except that it's each quarter of the Guild instead of each mage? And wouldn't it be the same mistake if each kingdom tried to do the same thing, to discover important things about how magery works but then keep them secret?"

"It might be better if nobody kept secrets," Helgi responded. "But what if you don't and your neighbors do?" Before Henryk could answer, a server showed up with bread, plates, mugs, a tray of apples and cheese, another with a pitcher of beer, a platter with sausage and part of a meat pie. While the others took food, Alys put a question to Helgi. "You mentioned quarters of the Guild, and Hal did, and I don't know what they are."

"It's how the Guild is organized. I'm a kenner, so what I do is use magery to learn things. Smiths use it to make things, amulets, or tempered sword blades, or scrolls. Casters use magic to do things. Life mages use it to heal, or to put on or remove bindings, or anything that has to do with living creatures and depends on their being alive."

"But you are here attending the Magistra's lectures. Will you have to switch quarters when you go home so you can use what you learned? Can you be part of two quarters at once?"

Helgi shook his head. "You can't be in more than one quarter. And I've never heard of anyone switching quarters — how could he unlearn everything he knew from his old quarter before he switched? What the Magistra has taught so far is all kenning, learning things about our bodies and how they work. If she gave us an exercise where we actually had to heal something I couldn't do it."

"You mean you wouldn't be allowed to? Under the rules of your Guild?"

"That as well — I'm sworn to my quarter. But I'm bound, too. So couldn't."

"If you broke your arm you could see the break but you couldn't use magery to fit the two pieces back together again and do whatever else to heal it your talents let you? You would just have to sit there with a broken arm and hope someone from the right quarter came by?"

Helgi was trying to find an answer when there was another interruption.

"Alys. Have you seen Ellen?"

The speaker was Mari, coming in through the door and looking less calm and collected than usual. She nodded to Isabel. "Excuse me; this may be urgent. Ellen and Rick, a friend of Kir's, disappeared from her mother's house last night or early this morning, and Melia is worried. Have you seen her?"

Alys shook her head. "I saw her in the library talking with Jon two or three days ago, but not since then."

"If you do, tell her that her mother is looking for her." Mari turned to go.

Helgi took a couple of apples from the platter, dropped them into the wallet at his side, tore off a piece from the loaf of bread, stood up. "Excuse my leaving; I hope I'll have another chance to talk with both of you later. Eirick is my friend too; I should help look. It's one of the things I'm trained to do." He pulled a coin out of his purse, dropped it on his empty plate. "My share."

Once out of the cookshop, Mari turned to Helgi.

"Melia says some sort of magery had been done in the house — there were remnants on Ellen's bed and on Jarl. She thinks Doray by the feel of it. If they walked out under compulsion, do you have any way of tracing where?"

He shook his head. "The Talisman only worked because of the spell on the dog. I could spot Eirick if he were close enough." He closed his eyes, paused a moment. "But he isn't."

Mari thought a moment. "The Doray are supposed to be very strong and very skilled. Finding Ellen and Rick is the first problem, but ..."

"And my skills are for learning things, not fighting people. We need help."

Mari nodded. "The College. Dag is a fire mage. One of my husband's mages is guesting there, attending the Learned Melia's lectures. I'll go into the college for Dag and Rorik, have Rorik fetch Osbert from the inn and Gervase if he is back from the capital. We can all meet at Melia's house and start the search from there."

When Eirick woke, he was lying on something rough, less comfortable than the cot in the jeweler's workshop. He opened his eyes. He was in a small room he had never seen before, one wall stone, the others wood; it had not been a dream. What he had been sleeping on was a coarse blanket over a pile of straw; beside him Ellen was still asleep.

At least his body was now his own; he could move his fingers, his hand, his arm, his leg. His mind was his own as well. What could it tell him?

Someone had taken him and Ellen captive. He had no idea why and only the accent of their captor, the same accent as Master Valerius, to suggest something of who. The Doray were said to be very good at magery, which explained how it had been done. Ellen was a mage, from what Mari had said a very able mage. Perhaps, when she awoke, she could find some way to get them free. As he lay waiting, he ran through his memory of the past hours, how they had gotten to where they were. Somewhere in them, he thought after he had gone to sleep, there was a dream, a frightening dream. It had something to do with Jarl, and someone else, someone he knew, but as he tried to remember what it was the memory fell apart, vanished like mist.

The door opened; the same mage who had spoken to him the night before was standing in it. He walked over to where Ellen was lying, spoke to her in a loud voice. "It is morning, Your Highness. Time to get up."

She opened her eyes, gave him a sleepy look. "Highness?"

"Yes. I know who you are."

She still looked puzzled; her voice, when she spoke, was hesitant, quite unlike its usual tone. "Who am I?"

"You are the wife of Prince Kieron, and you," he turned to Eirick, "are his son. The prince is in possession of something that does not belong to him and refuses to return it to its owner. My junior left this morning for the capital, bringing with him your amulets as proof that we now possess two things of his.

"We are offering to trade. When the prince accepts the offer and Justin returns, you will be free to go. Until that time you will remain here. You will be fed — we are not barbarians. Get up now and come with me."

Ellen looked up at him, still with a puzzled expression, and spoke, still in the same odd tone. "I am Princess Mari?" He nodded.

"I had forgotten."

A few minutes later they were seated across from each other at the table, a loaf of bread and a chunk of cheese in front of them along with a pitcher of water and two glasses, brought by the silent servant. As they ate Eirick again tried to remember his dream, again failed. He looked up at their captor. "My dog. He isn't here. What did you do to him?"

"I left him asleep; dogs are easier than people. I told you we aren't barbarians; we don't kill things unless there is a reason to. I expect he is awake by now."

Eirick took another bite of the bread, ate slowly, thinking. Part of the riddle was answered. However it had happened, the Dorayan mage — that was surely what he was — had mistaken Eirick and Ellen for Kir and Mari. If Kir had known someone was trying to capture him he would have told Eirick. If he did not know, Mari did not know. Ellen was a much better mage than Mari, yet the other had taken her prisoner without difficulty. If he found out his mistake... Helgi had said that the Dorayan mages were powerful and very skilled; this one might be a truth teller as well as everything else.

Eirick looked up from his plate. "If my father gives you back what you want, you will release us?" A question, not a statement. A question could not be a lie.

Arius nodded. "As soon as I get word. Meanwhile, you remain safely my guests. The food and accommodations may not be what royalty is used to, but they should suffice for a few days.

"Your mother looks pale. Give her this." He poured from a smaller pitcher into another glass, handed the wine to Eirick. "To toast a near end to your visit." Eirick looked down at the glass. Sparkles, he was sure he was seeing them. He passed it to Ellen; she took it clumsily, spilling a few drops onto the table. The Dorayan spoke sharply. "Drink it."

They spent the day in the same small room where they had slept; twice the servant came in to carry off the chamber pot and empty it. Several times Eirick tried to start a conversation; each time it tapered off as Ellen lost the thread. He wondered if it was the aftereffects of the spell or some drug in the wine their captor had insisted on her drinking. Twice — once the previous night, once in the morning. If he insisted again that was the answer.

Two possibilities. Try to escape. Remain, pretend that he was Kir and she was Mari, say nothing that would give away the truth, hope the prince would figure out what had happened, somehow arrange for them to be found and rescued before the Dorayan mage discovered his mistake. There was no way the prince could know, from the amulets, who the captives were, but he would know who they were not. Whatever it was the prince had of the Dorayan's, it must be something important. When he refused to give it back...

The prince would send to make sure Mari and Kir were safe, perhaps come himself. What then? Eirick had no doubt what Kir would want, would try to insist on, but how much power did he have over his father? Eirick was quite sure that if he had ever told his father to do something his

father did not want to do, it would not have happened. Then Kir might try to search by himself, might find them, might be caught.

Eirick had to escape. The question was how.

The noon meal was again bread and cheese and water, this time a smoked sausage as well. Looking around the kitchen, Eirick noticed two pairs of shoes by the door, one of them his. He did not remember putting them on, or taking them off after he had arrived, but he must have worn them for the walk, otherwise his feet would be in much worse condition than they were.

The afternoon dragged on, again in the room, Eirick running through ballads in his head, reciting one to Ellen; when he started it the servant came in, watched them for a moment, went out again. Ellen listened for a little, then fell asleep. The window looked big enough to climb out of; beyond it he could see tree branches only a little distance off. If he did try to escape it should be at night. Almost certainly the window was protected by magery, most likely blocked, at the least spelled to alert the mage if he went through. He needed something better.

He lay very still as it came to him. It depended on his guess being right, and it probably wouldn't work. And on his being able to repeat something he had done once, weeks before.

It was full night when the door opened again. Eirick woke Ellen, the two came out to the table, the light of the kitchen fire and a single candle. Again bread and water, but this time part of a ham. With no knife and little chance of being given one, Eirick used hands and teeth to eat it. Ellen took only a few bites. The Dorayan mage watched unsmiling.

Again the glass of wine, handed to Eirick to be passed to Ellen at the other side of the table. Eirick put it down, his hands still holding it, looked up. "How long did you say it would be before we could go home?"

The other thought a moment. "A day and a half ride to the capital, the same back, that should be three days. Another day for your father to make up his mind to return our property and arrange to do it. So four days, maybe more if he tries to bargain, or if he has to send for it. My junior left this morning, so that means three more days at least until he comes back with word."

Eirick's eyes were closed, all his attention on what he held. Sparkles of light. Slowly, too slowly, sinking towards the bottom of the glass. Like the mud in the water in his horn cup. A thin layer of wine with no sparkles. The Dorayan had finished answering; time for another question.

"The property you are trading us for — it must be very valuable. What is it?"

"It is a mage named Marcus, bound to the service of his archon. Somehow Marcus evaded his binding and came north, or perhaps one of

your father's people snuck south across the border and captured him — that is one of the things we will want to learn when we have him back. However it happened, he ended up in your father's possession. The Archon asked for his return, your father refused. Such behavior cannot be tolerated so I took steps," Arius nodded towards Eirick and Ellen, "to deal with it. When you are back with your father, you might suggest that he be more prudent in the future with regard to us."

The sparkles were almost all at the bottom of the glass now, the wine above them clear. It might be enough, but... "So you are from the Dorayan League?"

He nodded. "Very good; you are a clever boy. I am indeed a mage in service to the Magistrate, my junior in service to one of the archons. You have seen what two mages of the Doray can do, what you, or your father, or his brother the king, cannot prevent them from doing. We bear no ill will towards our neighbors, but we expect civilized treatment from them. It will be worth remembering when you are on the throne. Now give your mother the wine before it gets cold, it will help her sleep."

Eirick passed the glass to Ellen. "Is it still warm, mother?"

She gave him a puzzled look, touched it with her finger, nodded, put it to her lips. When she put it down, Eirick could see that she had drunk almost half of it.

"Does it make you sleepy?"

She nodded.

"Have just a little more, then we can both go to bed." She obediently sipped, rose.

It was hard to fall asleep. If he had guessed right, if the sparkles were not his own imagination, if what he had done had worked, if Ellen had not drunk too much... It would surely take hours for the drug to wear off; if Ellen were not better by morning he would have to find some way of repeating the trick without making the Dorayan mage suspicious. How?

He woke, startled, at the feel of a hand on his wrist. The whisper was Ellen.

"Are you awake?"

He caught her hand in his, squeezed it. "Yes. Are you all right?"

"I think so. How long have we been here?"

"Just one day. This is the second night. I think he drugged you with something."

"Do you know where we are, what is happening?"

"A farmhouse, somewhere less than a night's walk from your... from the Magistra's house. The men who took us are Dorayan mages. They want to make" — he hesitated for a moment — "my father" — he tightened his grip on her hand, then loosened it — "do something." The mage was



probably asleep, probably could not hear them. If he was awake and could hear them he would know that the drug had worn off, so Eirick's plan would not work. In which case, better that he not discover his mistake. "So they took us prisoner, thinking he would be willing to exchange his wife and son for a Dorayan mage who had escaped to Esland. The mage who is guarding us was giving you drugged wine, morning and evening, and last night I managed to keep it from working."

For a moment Ellen said nothing, then her hand tightened on his. "Thank you. Now lie still, look as if you are asleep, while I try to see what can be done."

She let go of his hand, settled back into the straw.

It felt like hours but probably wasn't when she again touched his hand. "I think I have dealt with the servant. Also the protections on the window. We will go through it and then as far away from here as we can before the mage wakes." She started to sit up; he caught her hand.

"Let me go first. If something goes wrong he'll think I was trying to escape by myself and assume you are still safely under the drug."

She hesitated only for a moment. "Yes."

The window was indeed big enough for Eirick to climb through, using the room's one chair. Once outside he stood still, waiting to see if his escape had been detected, shivering a little in the evening chill. A moment later, something came through the window, fell at his feet. He reached down to pick it up — a blanket. A moment later another, followed by Ellen. She picked up the second blanket, wrapped it about herself.

"It's cold out at night and we're dressed for sleeping. I'll go first; I don't need light to see. You follow; be careful what you step on. Our shoes are in the other room and I don't want to risk going after them. Tell me if I'm going too fast."

Ellen led, Eirick followed, along a path through the woods, feet cold, ears alert for any sound of pursuit. A few uncomfortable pebbles, but for the most part grass and dirt. It seemed forever until the path emerged on a narrow road. Ellen stopped, turned back to him. "Just a minute; I see something that will burn."

She bent down, came up with a handful of dry grass, spread it carefully, some twigs on top. A moment later a tiny fire. She reached into it, drew out a thread of flame. "Stand still a moment." Her flickering fingers wove a mesh of fire around him, shrinking to a second skin, vanishing. Again, this time around herself; Eirick watched, fascinated. One question answered and Mari's confidence in part explained. Eirick had never heard of a woman who was a fire mage before.

Finished, she turned back to him. "It's protection. When he wakes up he will use perception to try to find us. If he was very good and standing



next to us he might still be able to do it, but he probably isn't that good and he certainly isn't that close. He will have to use his eyes instead." She paused, looked down the road. "I don't know what direction we are from town, so either way is a guess."

Eirick shook his head; the night seemed to have gotten darker somehow, but he could still just make her out by the light of the little fire and no doubt she could see him — with or without her eyes. "Coming, I was awake part of the time. The moon was setting ahead of us."

"So we want to go east." Both looked up; the sky was clear, stars sprinkled against black in familiar patterns, a faint breeze blowing. The small fire went out suddenly. Ellen turned left, started walking again; Eirick followed.

## Chapter 18

*[The College]*

Three adults, two boys, and a dog were enough to crowd the office of Coelus's suite. Eirick and Kir were on the floor next to each other with Jarl between them, Mari and Melia in the two chairs, Ellen sitting on a corner of the desk, speaking. The window was open on the kitchen garden; they could hear the sound of bees, faintly smell mint.

"I asked Eirick to tell our story; he was awake for more of it than I was. Are there any questions that we can answer?"

Melia was the first to speak. "The drug."

Ellen shook her head. "All I can tell you is the effect. It drained power from me. Not only what I needed for magery but more, which left me half witted, which is some evidence for your theories."

Melia nodded agreement. "As is what was done to poor Jarl. If I could find the mage who did it and refrain from strangling him until after he had told me what he knew, we might learn something."

Ellen turned to Mari. "Mother thinks the power mages use is part of how life works. Everyone, even animals," she reached down to pet Jarl, lying by Eirick's side, "has it, mages just have more and more ways of controlling it."

She turned back to the boys. "When I woke up after Eirick got me free of the drug, I had enough back to think clearly again and to do little things, like putting the servant to sleep and unweaving the spells on the window. I didn't have enough to stand a chance against the Dorayan. I'm in better shape now but still not fully recovered, which is one reason we are inside the College's containment sphere instead of back in Mother's house. I don't know if he will try again, nor how strong he is.

"Mari and Kir will have to be careful too. We can't be certain the Dorayan mage was telling the truth about why he took us and who he thought we were, but it is the most likely guess. If so, he may discover his mistake and try again, this time for the right people.

"If his whole story is true, then sometime today Kieron will be getting two amulets that are supposed to be yours and aren't. He may or may not figure out whose they are; if Coelus is there he will recognize mine." She turned to Mari. "What will Kieron do?"

"If he thinks Kir and I are in danger? Come himself as fast as he can, probably with one or two of his people and more following by coach. If he recognizes the amulets he will at least send Coelus and some of his people, very likely come himself, unless the business with the Doray runaway

requires his presence. On the other hand, he might think the whole thing is a bluff. He might even think the purpose is to get him out of the capital."

Ellen turned to her mother. "And if he tells Coelus..."

Melia nodded. "We may have other friends coming to help." She did not look displeased at the thought. "I, however, have a lecture to give and had better go give it. When I come back we can continue deciding what to do next. You and Rick can use the time making up for lost sleep."

Mari got up. "And I will accompany the lady Melia, since as one of her students I do not want to miss the lecture; I'm not sure how many more I can stay for. I expect that if she cannot keep me safe from one Dorayan mage, an inn full of Eslandi mages can."

The two left. Kir looked up at Ellen. "How sure are you that he was telling the truth?"

"The Dorayan? About what?"

"About why he took you and Rick prisoner. That he thought you were Mari and me. It's a pretty stupid mistake for a mage to have made, to come all this way and then get the wrong people."

Ellen nodded. "People do make stupid mistakes sometimes."

"It wasn't the first time someone has come after Rick. They weren't mistaking him for me the other times. The mage didn't have to tell you and Rick all that stuff about what he was doing. Maybe, while everyone is guarding me and Mari..."

"Maybe. That's one reason why all three of us are going to spend the night in Coelus' rooms here — Mari should be safe enough in her room but I assume you will want to be with your brother. I've asked one of the college servants to bring a couple of pallets. One advantage of being married to a magister is that even when the College is full to bursting, which at the moment, between visiting mages and visiting royalty, it is, there is still someplace for me to sleep. One advantage of the College is that it's inside the containment sphere — and all the mages in the League are outside of it. Which means I can sleep safely.

"But now, since I spent a good deal of the last two nights walking, I am going to bed. If you brought your chess board, you and Rick..."

Eirick, sitting on the floor with his back against the wall, was fast asleep.

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The Magistra was later than usual. Waiting, Helgi took the opportunity to look over the other members of the audience. Perhaps two-thirds as many as on the first day. The audience then had included a noticeable sprinkle of curiosity seekers, including two or three whose reaction when the Magistra first appeared had felt to Helgi like hostility or

contempt. No such remained. Scanning for emotions, those remaining felt serious, engaged.

Melia appeared at the back of the room; a lane opened before her as mages drew back out of the way, some taking their seats on chairs or benches. Mari came in as well. Helgi caught her eye, spoke in a whisper.

"Your Highness? I returned to the learned lady's house this morning but nobody was there."

"They're back. Safe. Rick can tell you about it tomorrow."

She moved off, remained standing just inside the room. A minute later Alys came in, nodded to Mari, found a seat on one of the benches. The Magistra, as usual using a table to get high enough to be seen, looked around the room; the audience fell silent.

"Apologies for being late; there were some things I had to deal with — I will want to speak with any magisters present after I'm done here — but now," she glanced down at her tablets, open in her left hand, "we can start on today's topic. You have now examined, and taken the first steps to understanding, five of the systems that make your body and everyone else's body and everything else's body, if you don't count bees and crabs and such that don't have bones, work. You started with your skeleton, which is the easiest. Then the tendons that pull your bones around, and sometimes get hurt doing it. Then the muscles that pull the tendons — too complicated to examine anything like all of them, but at least you have the general pattern. After that you looked at the system of veins and arteries and the heart that pumps the blood through them to get it to everything else in your body to do whatever blood does — worse than the muscles, since if you look closely there are tiny blood vessels all through you, but at least you have looked at the big ones and at the little ones in a bit of one finger as far down in size as your perception would get you. Finally, you worked your way through the tube that starts at your mouth and comes out at the other end and turns the food you eat into whatever it is that your body does with it. Then you spent two more days trying to see how it all went together.

"This is only a beginning. You don't yet understand all of what you have studied — neither do I — and you can and should work out more whenever you can. One nice thing about being a healer is that you never need to be bored, since if you have nothing else to do you can always spend your time trying to make sense of one bit or another of your body. And the five systems we have looked at aren't nearly all of it, since I left out the lungs, and the parts of us we use to make babies — one of the few ways in which we aren't all pretty much the same, although we're more nearly the same than you might think — and various other things that I more or less understand, as well as lots more that I don't. And I've said nothing at all

about the role that magic plays in living things, which is a puzzle that one of you might work out some day — if you do, remember to tell me about it if I'm still here.

"I'm only getting you started; most of what you have to learn you will have to teach yourselves. So today, instead of making you try to cram another system into your heads I am giving you a new problem. Look at your own body, very carefully, and find everything that's wrong with it.

"I, for instance, broke my left arm when I was five. There was no healer, so it had to heal itself, which in time it did. But if I look at the bone," she raised her forearm as if examining it, closed her eyes; the table creaked as her weight shifted, "I can still see where the break was, where the two halves of the bone grew together just a little offset from each other. If you have the bad luck to be flawless, get someone else to let you search his body.

"Many of you broke an arm, or a finger, or a collarbone — children are more breakable and less careful than parents might wish — when you were growing up. Others cut themselves yesterday, or last week, or two years ago badly enough to leave a scar, or have sprains that still bother you — just look, don't try to fix it because you don't know how yet — or sore muscles, or burns, or bruises, problems with your teeth, or are deaf in one ear, or...

"Don't start by seeing what hurts or remembering where you once had a cut or burn or what once broke — although it may come to that if nothing else works. Start by looking through your own body just as if it was the body of a patient you couldn't talk with because he was unconscious, or spoke the wrong language, or was an infant or a horse. Use the tricks I have taught you to find something that doesn't fit, that shouldn't be the way it is. After you find it, then you can use your memory, or your eyes, or your feeling of what hurts, to figure out why.

"When you are done, trade with someone else — he searches your body, you search his. See if you find the same things.

"Questions?"

It occurred to Helgi that perhaps he could, after all, make use of what the magistra was teaching. Partner with a life mage skilled in healing, use his talents to find the problem, let her solve it. Failing that — if one quarter or the other disapproved — partner with an ordinary surgeon for the same purpose.

## Chapter 19

*[The Magistrate's Palace, Doray Island]*

The room was round, walled with polished marble; mosaics caught the sunlight through the high windows, reflected it back in red, blue, gold. A smell of incense. At the center, throned, the Magistrate. Three mages spaced evenly about the circle. Arius, the senior of the three, spoke a phrase in the True Speech, calling up the barrier to shield his exchange with his master, stepped forward, prostrated himself.

"Rise. Report."

"Harkening and obedience." He paused a moment, assembling his account; the Magistrate liked matters clear. "I succeeded in taking prisoner the wife and son of the barbarian prince, held them for a day and parts of two nights, but they then escaped; I do not know how. I thought it prudent to return directly to your Excellency, stopping in Bonia only long enough to send a message north to the Legate."

Silence for a moment, before the Magistrate spoke again. "And did you accomplish what I commanded?"

"I did, Excellency. The son, the wife being a witch. A very strong witch, one of the strongest I have ever encountered, too strong for me to bind. I do not know if that will create difficulties."

The Magistrate shook his head. "The stronger she is, the better. The wife and son of the heir are the most likely center for power to reform around, but not if she is believed responsible for what will happen. Nothing is certain; we do not know what story the God is telling. But it should work."

He thought a moment, then continued. "Your part in my plan is for the moment complete; I have not yet received a report from Gaius on his. Negotiations with Esland's neighbors are proceeding well. There is, however, another matter I would like you to look into, one at least as serious as our difficulties with the barbarians. While you were gone, a report from Archon Aulus on Marcus arrived. Not accompanied by the witch responsible for the defective binding."

"She had escaped? Died?"

"Worse. There was a fire eight or nine years ago in the provincial record house on Malar. Among the records that were lost were the binding registers for the province."

Arius thought a moment. "Each mage has a diploma; it names the witch that bound him."

"That would be very useful if we knew who bound Marcus. He was carrying his diploma when he turned rogue. Useful if she was merely incompetent. More useful if ..."

Another moment's silence before Arius spoke again. "The Archon. How long... "

"Twelve years."

"It was his own mage that turned. That did him no good. Injured him."

"Accidents happen. It was a very convenient fire. I want you to look into the matter — Marcus, the fire, the witch if you can figure out who she is, the Archon. Have someone question the girl Aulus took away from Marcus — she might know something. And start by arranging for someone really competent to check the bindings on all of my people here."

"Starting with myself, Excellency?"

"Yes."

"And while you are doing that, send one of your people to Malar Island to reconstruct the binding registers from the diplomas of the mages — what Aulus should have done after the fire. 0Then if another one goes rogue we will know who bound him."

## Chapter 20

*[Southdale]*

"You might have told me."

"Told you what?" Alys's face across the table was all innocence.

Helgi shook his head. "You know what. Told me who your friend Isabel was."

"I wish I could have seen your face when you found out whose wife you had been making eyes at. Besides, it was good for her. She was still glowing an hour later."

"Because a man found her attractive? That can hardly..."

"Because a man who didn't know she was the queen of Esland found her so attractive he could barely tear his eyes off her. I was sitting next to her and might as well have been a hundred miles away. I should feel insulted."

"I didn't... And you didn't. You were enjoying watching me make a fool of myself."

"Perhaps. A little. But that isn't why I did it."

"Think, Helgi. You are a mage. When you are forty you will be just as powerful as you are now and growing year by year more skilled. When Isabel is forty I expect men will still look at her the way you did yesterday, but year by year she will be less certain if they are looking at a beautiful woman or only a queen. She is a clever and tough-minded lady, even if she does not always let it show, but she has only one real talent and it cannot last. It does not hurt to show her that she has not yet lost it."

There was a long silence; Helgi broke it. "You care for her."

Alys nodded. "I've become very fond of Isabel. I know it sounds silly; she's a much more important person than I am. But it all rests on one man. His father was blatantly unfaithful to the old queen — some even say..." She paused a moment, continued. "The son hasn't followed his father's example, so far as anyone knows — and we probably would, such things are hard to hide. And he has a reputation for honest dealing."

"But men like young women better than old. Even honest men."

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"Come in — it's not barred."

Ellen looked up from the desk as Mari entered the room, spoke softly. "How are the boys?"



Mari took the other chair, sat down. "The boys have moved the table to one side of the room. Kir is sitting at it staring at a wine glass full of muddy water."

Ellen nodded understanding. "So Rick finally figured out what he is?"

Mari shook her head. "Rick thinks anyone can make mud settle out of water — or a drug out of the wine it's dissolved in — if he stares at it long enough. Kir is holding the glass. Rick is banished to the other side of the room waiting for it to clear. I expect it will be a long wait."

Ellen smiled. "Unless Rick's range is longer than the width of the room, which I doubt; he's just beginning to come into talent. What happens next? He's young for the College — younger than I was, or even Coelus."

"Speaking of whom, keep your voice down. He's on the other side of that door" — she nodded to the bedroom — "asleep. At least I hope so. He arrived about an hour ago; I told him I was safe and uninjured, gave him a short account of what happened, and put him to bed. I gather he left the capital around noon yesterday, rode hard until dark, rolled himself up in a blanket under a tree, and started again at dawn."

"He brought a letter for you from Kieron; I have it here. Also one for Rick from Earl Eskil, enclosing a note from Rick's mother. Apparently, with Rick out of his hands, the Einvald decided to let her go back south to her brother."

Mari was silent a moment, thinking. "We — mostly Kir, but his father and I as well — had been assuming Rick would stay with us. The boys won't want to be apart if they can help it. For the short term ... I'll be heading back to the capital in a week or so and we can send Rick north from there to see his mother, which he will surely want to do, and make it clear he's welcome with us whenever he wants to come. After that..."

"After that it will be up to Rick; I can't see Eskil refusing to let him come back to the capital, at least once he knows that Rick will be welcome there. And it will be easier to start Rick's training in the capital, too. Some of Kieron's people trained at the College — and of course Kieron did too, although I doubt he'll have much time for giving lessons. And Coelus and I can help; Rick's a bright boy and, from what I've seen, eager to learn. I like him. And I can't see Kir being jealous of his cousin's accomplishments."

Mari shook her head. "Brother. That's how both of them see it. And no. There isn't a jealous bone in Kir's body; he's prouder of Rick's talent than if it were his own. Where's the letter from Kieron?"

She spent a few minutes reading the letter, looked up again. "If Rick wants to start training in the Marches, there's Anders."

Ellen gave her a puzzled look.

"He never told you how he spent the year he took off?"

Ellen shook her head. Mari smiled.

"Some of it at least. The Marchers are fond of drinking matches, two men drinking until one of them falls over. Anders' talent is the same as Rick's. By the end of his first year he had learned enough, maybe from one of the older students, to use it. On beer. I gather he got quite a reputation."

"Filtering?"

Mari nodded. "They start with a pitcher between them, fill cups in turn. A little time to talk, trade boasts, insults, first. By the time they poured, the top half of the pitcher was a lot weaker than the bottom half, or the other way around, depending on which was pouring first. The same trick Rick used with the wine. So if Anders is around — his father holds from Eskil and their hold isn't that far from his — he can help teach Rick."

## Chapter 21

*[The Magistrate's Palace]*

In the center of the small audience room the Magistrate enthroned; on the high table in front of him a golden chessboard, jeweled pieces, a single lamp burning with a clear flame and a faint, pleasant scent. He looked up as Arius entered. "Yesterday I received a final report from Archon Aulus on his part of the plan for dealing with the problem of Esland; it appears to be well in hand. I require, before you depart for the north, a summary of yours."

Arius thought a moment, arranging matters in his mind. Each part his master already knew, but the whole pattern... "Primus," he glanced across at the chessboard, "removal from the board of the two chief pieces, leaving as heir a child supported by his mother and her father. They will be suspected of guilt for the killings, the more so as the mother is a strong witch. The queen's brother will also be suspected, giving him cause to put the blame on them. For the Earls of the north, suspicious of both, the collapse of royal authority offers a promise of future power once their own heir has come south. Instructions have been sent to Valerius to arrange that end of it. Esland will, at least for a while, be broken into pieces."

The magistrate nodded. "Have you ever watched a diamond being split?"

Arius shook his head.

"It looks like magery but I am told that it is by the nature of the stone. Hard though it is, harder than any other stone, a few taps by one skilled in the art and it falls apart."

Arius nodded his agreement. "Even so. With three armies contending, Esland will be reduced to the shattered state of its eastern neighbor, no longer a threat to our peace. By the time one of the three succeeds in reestablishing royal power, if one does, we will have undone the prince's work of the past decade, put back in place our people, ensured a measure of control over the troublesome barbarians on our borders. And, with any luck, the new ruler or rulers will think it prudent to be more friendly to us than the old."

The Magistrate looked up from the golden board. "If all goes as you have planned it. We cannot know what story the God tells."

Arius nodded. "For which reason we have provided for the risk that one half or the other of my plan may fail, leaving one or both alive. Archon Aulus and his allies are the second string to our bow. The chaos that they create should give us a second, if less elegant, chance at our enemies."

There was a brief pause before the Magistrate spoke.

“Tomorrow you come onto the board. I am told that in the form of the game in favor in the southern islands, a pawn is transformed into a queen when it reaches the final rank.” He leaned down, spoke to a chess piece; it moved forward.

Arius nodded; the piece that had moved, carved ivory crowned with gold, was the white queen. “Whereas in our game... Some might find it hardly fair that we play our opponents' pieces as well as our own.”

## Chapter 22

*[Troutvale, Northern Marches]*

Kirsten bent over the cloth stretched on its wooden hoop, completed a final stitch, tied it off, snipped the scarlet silk. An axe, red on white, her father's badge and now her brother's. Six of them along the edge of the cloth, twenty-four around the bottom hem of the tunic once she had assembled all four pieces of wool.

Six months and more since she had seen her son and at that age boys grew; assembling it would have to wait. She was good at waiting. Only weeks since the message from Eskil — odd to think of her younger brother as Earl Eskil — passed to her through their father. News that her boy was alive, south of the mountains, at peace with his father's kin. She had started the tunic then.

A week later word had come from the Einvald, permission to leave Forstmark, return to her brother's hold. Jarl Eirick had made clear to her the condition — silence from both of them, so long as they remained in the Einvald's territory, as to what had become of his guest. If he wished to pretend that Iolen's son was still in Forstmark under his protection, that was no concern of theirs.

And now she was home again, in the chamber she had left for Iolen's house and bed, the pattern of the painted walls only a little more faded than she remembered, the familiar sound of horses shifting about in the stable on the other side of the wall. Lord Iolen. Prince Iolen the Einvald had called him, for the short weeks before her husband marched south in search of a throne — to his death. Prince Eirick was what the Einvald called their son. That was over now, and to Kirsten's mind well over.

How much longer she would have to wait she did not know; perhaps she should add more ornament to the tunic's sleeve. Or embroider something for her brother. More than half the skein of silk, brought by merchants from League territory far to the south, remained.

"Kirsten. Are you within?"

Her brother's voice, with a tone in it that brought her to her feet. Eskil never could keep good news to himself; it was one of his more endearing traits. She opened the door.

Earl Eskil, as broad as his father and nearly as tall, filled it for a moment before he stepped aside to reveal the slighter form behind him. Three steps brought Eirick into his mother's arms. The earl watched his sister and nephew for only a moment before he stepped backwards, closing the door softly behind him.

It was full dark and Eirick put to sleep with a final kiss from his mother before Kirsten had a chance to speak with her brother, again in her chamber. It was Eskil who opened the conversation. "How much did the boy tell you?"

"What mattered. I can see that he's well and happy and an inch or two taller than when last I saw him. There was a problem with his dog, but he got a healer down south to solve it; Jarl is easily twice the size I remember, but still acts more like a puppy than a grown dog. And Rick is at peace with his southern kin, which was what Father was worried about. Considerably more than at peace with his cousin, I gather."

The earl nodded. "Yes. That boy will be king some day. And his closest friend will be your husband's heir. And mine."

She looked up, startled, but said nothing.

"If I ever find a woman who suits and get a son of my own that might change, but at the moment Rick's my closest kin, not counting Sven and his boys. The ban covers them as well as him; that was one of the terms of the treaty."

"If he is your heir will you want him here with you? It sounded as though he was planning to go back to the capital with his cousin."

Eskil shook his head. "As my heir, he needs to spend part of his time here, get to know people, let them get to know him. Time with you too. As Kir's brother he needs to spend part of his time in the capital. I expect I can work it out with His Highness." He gave his sister a final smile, left the room.

## **Book III. Chaos**





## Chapter 23

*[The capital]*

Carlo looked up from the counter where he was measuring out, by the light of an oil lamp, a few final doses for the next morning's customers. The knock came again. He put down the flask carefully, went to the door, opened it. Stepped back. The prince's man came into the shop.

"It is tonight. Are you ready?"

Carlo nodded.

"Wait until full dark. The relieving forces have been informed; they will come in the gate when you get it open then force the traitors to open the main gate. You will have earned the gratitude of His Highness — and every citizen of the capital."

He gave Carlo a last long look, made an odd gesture with his hand, went out, closing the door behind him.

Carlo felt oddly calm, as if he were watching himself from a distance; it occurred to him that it was rather like the effect of one or two of the drugs he dispensed. This, finally, was the night he had been waiting for since the prince's man first appeared, explained who he was, why he was there, what the danger, what Carlo's role was to be in saving the city. Carefully, as if it was merely one more part of his usual evening routine, he took a pitcher down from the shelf, set it on the counter. The key to the cupboard was on a fine chain around his neck; he unlocked it, drew out the flask. Its contents were thicker than water, faintly yellow. He unstopped it, measured three drams into the bottom of the pitcher, taking care not to breathe the fumes. Restopped the flask with his accustomed care, replaced it, locked the cabinet.

He filled the pitcher a third of the way up from the small wine barrel at the back of the shop, swirled the liquid around to mix in the drug, added more wine. Sat down; the sun had set but it was not yet full dark, the quarter moon pale in the sky. Stood up again.

Half an hour later he was out the door, the pitcher of wine held carefully. Down to the end of the small street, right on the road that led to the west gate of the city. Whether the royal regulars holding the gate were traitors in the pay of the Dalmians or dupes of traitors at a higher level he did not know. Whatever the reason, they were keeping out the relieving forces from the south, desperately needed to reinforce the militia and what remained in the city of the royal companies. Soon, very soon, the invading army would arrive, trapping Duke Alessandro's forces on the wrong side of the city wall with the gate closed against them. The prince's man had made all of that very clear, along with the necessity for Carlo to say nothing

that might reveal his knowledge of the situation to Dalmian agents in the capital. Ahead of him loomed the wall, barely visible, the main gate. As usual, he turned left before it, followed the walkway to the opening that led to the small gate where he and his comrades had their post.

Jeffrey, looking up from his dice, was the first to spot the new arrival. "What do you have for us there?"

"Something to keep the cold out — to make up for my being a little late."

The others gathered around him, bringing out drinking bowls; Carlo poured. Colin sipped, gave Carlo a curious glance, sipped again. "Tastes a little odd — sure it isn't from a barrel that went bad?"

Carlo shook his head, poured a very little of the wine into his bowl, touched his tongue to it.

"Don't think so."

The moment passed, the men emptied their cups, returned to their dice game. Carlo noticed that the hand holding his wine bowl was shaking, put the bowl down.

"Back in a minute; stomach bothering me." The privy was empty. Perhaps he should have told them, persuaded them to open the gate. But one of them might be... the prince's man had warned him. Better this way. There was a mage stationed at the main gate, very likely a truth teller; that was why the prince's man had picked him instead of someone stationed there. How long before someone wondered if he was all right? How long before...

When he finally returned to the others, all was quiet save for the sound of breathing, Colin slumped against a pillar, the others stretched out on the stone pavement. He waited a moment to be sure, wondered if they would be angry when they woke up and found out what he had done. Surely once he explained...

The bar was heavy; it usually took two of them to open the gate at dawn, although once or twice Karl, a blacksmith and strong, had done it by himself. If he had told them... Too late now; it was up to him.

Carlo squatted down until his chin was just above the end of the bar, as he had seen Karl do, both hands under it, strained upwards with all the strength of arms and legs. For a moment nothing, then it moved. Up, clear of the bracket. He leaned back, pulling it away from the door, overbalanced; the end of the bar, swinging free, struck him as he fell. Up again, pushing the other end free of its bracket, rolling the bar away to clear the door.

The door itself swung open easily when he pulled it. Outside a cloaked man, behind him a column of troops, the rescuers from the south. It was done.

The cloaked man said something to the troops that Carlo could not follow; it almost sounded like Dalmian. Two of them came through the gate, knives out, bent over the sleeping guards. Didn't they understand? Carlo stepped forward. Behind him the cloaked man spoke a single phrase in a language Carlo did not know. Carlo froze, unable to move. Blood. Another phrase. Darkness.

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"Your Highness"

Kieron looked up from the papers on the table — Alayn's tone was urgent.

"What is it?"

"Enemy troops are in the city. All over the western half, to judge by two of the watch who had the good sense to run from them. And the fires — you can see them from the tower."

"Have you ..."

"Torgeir is assembling his company and Sylof's in front of the citadel. I've sent men to where the other two are lodged, Wadard and some of his people are rousting out the mages in the building, telling them to assemble in the hall by the front door. I assumed you would want your armor; Hako is bringing it."

"Do we know who they are, how they got in?"

Alayn shook his head. "One of the watchmen said he thought they were yelling in Dalmian but he wasn't sure. No idea how they got past the wall — treachery, maybe."

"Or magery. If it's Dalms, we should have better mages than they do. Are they across the bridge yet?"

"I don't know, Highness. With luck not."

By the time Kieron made it to the front hall of the citadel, trailed by the servant still fastening the buckles of his armor, almost a dozen mages were already there. Kieron spoke above the clamor of voices.

"There are enemy troops in the city, probably Dalm but we don't know for sure. We have two companies plus us — the other two may or may not join us in time to matter. Nobody in his right mind would try to invade the capital with fewer than a thousand men, more likely more, so there's no way we can defeat them in open battle even if our magery is better than theirs, which it probably is. What we can do is try to block the bridge, keep their main force west of the river, deal with whatever has gotten across if it isn't too many, give the city militia on this side time to assemble. Failing that, we fall back on the citadel."

He turned to one of the men coming in.

"Rorik. Marcus is at my townhouse. I want you to go there, get him out of the city, take him to the College — someone there may have better luck than we have had with his bindings. Tell Her Highness to get out through the east gate with the children."

He turned back to the other mages.

"This is war. Those of you with experience form up behind the shield men, along with the archers. I'll want Francisco by me. Healers and anyone else with nothing for combat farther back — they may have war mages too and will certainly have archers. If we manage to capture any of the enemy, Martin will be useful. Also anyone who speaks Dalmian."

He led the mages out the front door of the citadel, to where two companies were forming up in the faint moonlight; a few of the men held lighted torches.

"Captain Torgeir."

"Your Highness. What do you want us to do?"

"Block the bridge, keep the main force of the enemy west of the river while we call out the militia on this side, hope there are few enough across for us to deal with. Your company moving north on River Road, Sylof's spread across the four roads east of that to make sure nobody gets behind us. I'm sending word for Ásgeirr and Ben to assemble in the market square, move west from there up Bridge Street. If we encounter substantial enemy forces — they probably have a lot more men than we do — we fall back on the citadel, hope the other two companies manage it as well.

Once the companies were formed up, Torgeir lead his through the park that surrounded the citadel to where the end of River Road met the dock area, then north along the road. On the far bank across the river they could see several houses burning. On the near bank, ahead of them on the road, torches, men in foreign armor moving towards them.

The company halted, reformed, a line of five shield men stretching from the river bank to the houses that lined the road, behind them axes, farther back more shields covering the crossbow men, Kieron, Francisco, two other mages, Torgeir, others.

The captain whispered something to the signal man beside him. A horn call. The company moved forward at a trot, struck the front of the enemy force.

The first few of the Dalmians, taken by surprise, fell. Behind them more men formed up, a solid line the width of the road; the attack slowed, stopped, shields locked against shields, axe men behind trying to work over their own shield wall.

Torgeir glanced at Kieron. The Prince closed his eyes, reached out with his mind to a point a little behind the front of the enemy force and left of the cobblestoned street, spoke three words, turned to Francisco.

"Take out the center two, but keep enough back for defense; they may have fire too and I can't afford to lose you."

He turned back, saw his men surge forward in the center of the line, tried to guess, by faint moonlight and enemy torches, the size of the force he was facing. Two more blocks to the bridge.

A gasp beside him. Francisco, unmoving, hands in front of his face as if to shield himself from something.

Eyes closed, Kieron could see it, a lance of pale flame eating through the barrier between the mage's hands.

A strained whisper. "Too strong."

Earth could do nothing against fire or the mage who wielded it, but ... the source of the attack was just behind the front ranks of the enemy, between the street and the river bank. On dirt. The prince spoke two words, counted to three in his head, two more.

The fire lance vanished, but Francisco was slowly crumpling to the ground. A faint smell of burned flesh. Too late.

Kieron turned the other way, spoke in a loud voice to get Torgeir's attention.

"A fire mage. And too many men. Sound the withdraw, loud enough to reach the other company."

It might be only seconds until the enemy fire mage was free from the earth, liquid then again solid, that bound him; if he had power left, any mage within his range would be a target. No defense but distance, but he owed his men at least a chance to pull free of the fight.

Kieron poured all the strength he had left into the soil just in front of the enemy line, spun around, ran for his life.

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"Report."

Torgeir caught his breath, thought for a moment.

"Company all made it, minus two we lost in the clash on the road, wounded are with the healers, everyone else manning the curtain wall. Enemy fell back when they saw the fortifications, expect waiting for more of their people, maybe engines. Sylof is back too, nothing much before he heard the recall. Brought some friends with him." The captain gestured at a small cluster of men around a wheelbarrow. It was loaded with a wooden chest, some smaller boxes, several sacks; one of the men was gripping the handles.

Kieron spoke to the youngest of the group. "Welcome, Magister. Who are your companions?"

Coelus gestured to one of the others. "This is the learned Olver; I told Your Highness I had been studying with him. We brought some other

magies. I am air and Ver shapes, so neither of us is much use in combat, but Dur is fire.” He gestured to the man at the wheelbarrow.

The fire mage was stocky, middle aged, plainly dressed — a little surprising that there was a fire mage in the city that the prince had never met. Kieron closed his eyes, reached out. Not quite as strong as Francisco, doubtless less well trained for war, but a great deal better than nothing. He turned back to Coelus.

“Air can give our archers more range, which might matter. Other talents are useful too. Do you know what’s happened to your lady wife?”

“Ellen was in the townhouse with Her Highness.”

A fire mage strong enough to avenge Francisco would have been very useful for their defense. But it was still good news. With Ellen as escort, Mari and the children could, with any luck, get out of the city and safe.

Better odds than he had.

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Arius took one more look around the empty shop that was his temporary headquarters, sniffed the air. A faint tinge of smoke. Discipline was not to be expected of barbarian troops; hopefully Prince Walic’s men had not gotten too badly out of hand. Damage to the Eslandi capital was not a matter of much importance, one way or the other, but widespread fire would lead to chaos which might make his job harder. With luck, someone was dealing with it; he could not be everywhere.

Just at the moment he had a report to write — the legate, heading home with his staff, could carry it back to their master. He checked that the quill was sharp, unsealed the bottle of ink that he had brought with him, spoke the Words over it. Good for a quarter hour, perhaps a few minutes more; it should be enough. He dipped the quill.

*To His Supreme Excellency his loyal servant, Arius, sends greetings and word.*

*The first steps of the invasion were accomplished without difficulty. The Dalmians, with our assistance, seized the border post, killing or capturing all within it. Their cavalry outran the refugees from the army’s advance, our people guarding the bridge west of the capital dealt with the handful who evaded them.*

*The army reached the capital a little after sunset of the fourth day. The western gate once taken, our allies had no difficulty dealing with the garrisons along the western arc of the wall and seizing the bridge that links the two halves of the city. By ill fortune the alarm was given before the seizure of the city was complete, some barbarian fool having fired a building for the fun of it. What was left of the enemy regular forces attempted to impede advances east of the river, then retreated into the citadel.*

*We now hold all of the city gates; only the citadel remains in enemy hands, although I am told that there is still sporadic fighting elsewhere. We have not yet confirmed the deaths of the prince and king. Our people made an attempt on the citadel this morning, but the garrison appears to be supported by surprisingly strong magery; the Dalmians now have the building under siege. I expect that Marcus is being held there; the Dalmians have his description and orders to watch for him.*

Arius hesitated a moment, holding the quill where there was no risk of ink drops on the paper. His master was not fond of bad news; better to leave a more detailed account of the failed attack and its casualties for a later and longer report. He thought a moment more, dipped the pen again, continued.

*The palace complex is under our control and its staff being interrogated; once that is done I plan to release some of them to spread word of the deaths of the king and his heir.*

He paused again. Very likely their enemies, if miscarriage of his plans had left one or both still alive when the attack began, had died in the night's confused fighting; barbarian rulers, by all he had heard, were bloodthirsty types, as careless of their own lives as those of their followers. If either had survived, he was presumably holed up in the citadel, to be killed or taken — and then killed — when that fell.

There was a third, if unlikely, possibility; his prey might be still alive somewhere in the chaos of the city. The prince was a mage, an earth mage and by barbarian standards a strong one. Which was why each of the forces guarding a city gate included one of Arius' people. Weak mages and witches could be ignored; strong mages, most especially strong earth mages, on the other hand... The king he had no sure way of identifying, but it was his brother who was the festering thorn in the League's side.

None of which need go into the current report. Enough to make it clear that the city was taken and its rulers, if not already dead, would be before the report reached his master.

Arius signed the report at the bottom, pricked the ball of his thumb with his stylus, let the drop of blood form, put his thumbprint across the signature. Spoke a word; the page went blank. He folded it in thirds, bound it properly with gold cord. A wave of his hand set a candle alight. He carefully dripped a drop of melted sealing wax on the cord and pressed his thumb down again, sealing cord and letter. As a protection the second seal was wholly useless in the modern world — but custom was custom.

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Something was happening, something serious, to judge by alarmed voices, the scent of smoke in the air, distant noises. The taller of the two

witches, the one married to the Eslandi prince, had called in two of the servants and appeared to be giving them instructions, of what sort Marcus could only guess; not for the first time he regretted his ignorance of the spoken form of his hosts' tongue. A pounding at the door; the other witch went to open it.

The man who came through it Marcus recognized as one of the prince's mages, smudges of soot on his face, clothes torn, one injured arm bound to his side. Something, certainly, was happening. The prince himself knew at least a little of the high speech; perhaps his servant did as well. He was speaking now to the witch who had let him in. If Marcus had correctly untangled matters, she was the wife of the mage he had spent the last two days talking with; if only the husband were here ...

She turned to Marcus, spoke slowly:

"Foemen the city in. Some of the Magistrate. Thou must go. With Rorik." She gestured at the other mage. The diction was archaic but the meaning clear. One obvious question.

"Where?"

The witch hesitated, searching for words.

"House of the learned. Southron valley. Two days. Safe."

She paused again, continued:

"One in unweaving learned there. You to aid."

Again a pause; she held up her hand to signal that she was not done.

"Protection. Will weave. Foeman's search to foil."

He gave her a puzzled look. She thought a moment, took the wax tablets that hung at her belt, opened them, reached in her wallet for a stylus. Wrote a line in the high speech.

"I wil a bareeyar weave thee, that men of the magistrat see thee ..." she scratched out the final word, continued to write "thy talent not."

He thought a moment, nodded assent.

The witch motioned him to a chair. The small table beside it held a candlestick and candle. She gestured it alight, drew out from it a thread of fire. Startled, Marcus closed his eyes, focused his perception on her. A barrier, one of the tightest he had ever attempted — too tight for him to check through it for talent. If she was indeed a fire witch she was the first he had ever encountered outside of a story. And if the barrier shielding her was her own work, the one she was weaving for him might indeed veil him against even the Magistrate's mages. Supposing, as seemed very likely, that they were in the city hunting him.

At which point it occurred to him that hunting him might be the reason they were in the city. In which case the sooner he got out of it the better.



At least he only had himself to protect. The first time since Mada had been taken from him that he was glad of her absence.

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Once Marcus and Rorik were safely out of the door, Mari turned back to Ellen.

"Now we need to get out too, before it occurs to anyone to come after us. Most of the servants have kin in the city or near it; the four of us had best try for the east gate. From there it's only a few miles to Carin's parents' farm. It's a little place and well off the main road, so with luck, even if the invaders keep going farther east they'll miss it. Get anything you think we'll need; I'm going to go up and fetch the children."

Minutes later she was back, the baby in her arms, Kir following her. Ellen handed out leather water bottles, fetched from the kitchen. Turned to Mari.

"Are we riding or walking?"

"I'm leaving the horses behind; the Dalmians may be watching out for people who look important. On foot, we're just part of the mob trying to get out before the troops start a general massacre or burn down the whole city. One reason I changed to the plainest clothes I own."

In the faint moonlight, the street in front of the townhouse was for the moment empty. Mari turned left, away from the river. Down one of the cross streets they could see a house burning; a breeze for a moment brought choking smoke. As the smoke cleared, they could see half a dozen men, soldiers, moving in their direction. One of them shouted something in Dalmian, pointed.

Mari broke into a run, holding tightly to the baby in her arms. A glance backward — the soldiers, running, were strung out behind them, the nearest almost within arm's reach of Kir, lagging a little behind the two women. Ahead of them burning houses on both sides of the narrow street, smoke and flame between blocking the way.

"Go through; I'll ward." Ellen cried out something more, this time in what Mari recognized as the True Speech. She slowed just long enough to let Kir come up with her, grabbed his right hand in her left, with her right held Lanna, the baby's face against her mother's throat, ran into the flame, through it, eyes blinded for a moment by the glare.

The Dalmians were almost on Ellen when she cried out again. From the burning houses a torrent of flame poured past her on left and right, converged on her pursuers. She turned, ran, in a moment had caught up with the others. The street behind her, between the burning houses, was a solid wall of flame.

Past the market square they turned right to get to the main road that ran from the bridge to the east gate. When they reached it they found it crowded with people, many carrying bundles, a few with loaded animals or pushing carts that rattled on the cobblestones. At the gate soldiers in armor, two carrying torches. Mari spoke softly to Kir.

"Can you take Lanna?"

He nodded, gave her a puzzled look. She handed the baby, wrapped in a blanket, to him, spoke again.

"They may be looking for us; we don't want to fit what they're looking for. I'm going through the gate first by myself. Let three or four people come between us, then you go, carrying your sister. Ellen comes last. That leaves her hands free in case something goes wrong." Kir nodded.

Sextus, bored, scanned the figures approaching the gate — another dozen of the local barbarians fleeing the conquest of their city by the barbarians west of them. A figure caught his eye. Tall, almost his own height, face smudged, but certainly... He gestured to one of the Dalmians guarding the gate, pointed.

The guard stepped out in front of the approaching woman, signaled her to stop. Said something Sextus could not follow — hardly surprising, considering that it was one barbarian trying to talk the speech of another. Pointed at where a dozen women had already been sorted out from those fleeing the city, watched over by three Dalmian guards. When she didn't move, the man seized her arm, pulled her roughly towards the others, grouped near the gate just inside the city wall.

A boring job but it had its rewards; it would be hours, perhaps more, before anyone with authority over Sextus showed up, meaning that for the moment he could have his pick. He gave a glance at the next batch of refugees approaching — one woman reasonably young but not a keeper — then walked over to the captives to get a better look at his prize.

Mari ended her quick examination of the other captives. None was tall, none had a baby with her. The reason she had been stopped had nothing to do with who she was. Telling them, if they believed her, might solve the immediate problem, but...

At which point the approaching mage stopped, clapped his hands to his face, screamed. The guards, who had been conducting a conversation in their own speech while eyeing the captive women, spun around startled. Mari turned back to the others.

"This is our chance. Run."

Without waiting to see what the women did, Mari ran for the open gate that led through the city wall. Two more Dalmians were inside it, one at each side; beyond them she saw Ellen standing, eyes closed. One of the

two, seeing her coming, moved forward, stumbled, fell — Mari dodged him, was through the gate, running.

She stopped when she came up with Kir, waiting where the road left the cleared strip to enter the surrounding forest; he was standing, his back against a tree and the baby in his arms, looking back at her. A moment later Ellen joined them. Mari looked back in the direction of the gate; the moon almost down, no obvious pursuers. She turned to Ellen.

“What did you do to him?”

“Something I once threatened to do to someone else; this one deserved it.” Her face was pale. “We’d best keep going. I think the Dorayan was in charge but there’s probably a Dalmian officer, and once he gets things sorted out he might send people after you.”

Mari shook her head. “They didn’t know who I was. No need for them to go chasing across the countryside when there will be a hundred more women coming through the gate in the next hour. Nothing we can do about it now; you can’t take on the whole Dalmian army by yourself. I need to fetch help, which means Father, which means getting east to him as fast as I can.

“The first step is to get Kir and Lanna to somewhere safe; I can’t ride post across half the width of the kingdom carrying a baby.”

She stopped, struck by something Ellen had said.

“The mage was Dorayan?”

Ellen nodded. “Not the same one who took me and Rick prisoner, but the bindings on him had the same feel.”

Mari thought a moment. “Kieron thought we didn’t have to worry about the Dalmians because Willem was too badly in debt to afford a war. But if the Doray are behind it... money wouldn’t be a problem. Half what he owes is probably owed to the Doray, maybe more.

“If it is the Doray who are in charge, the army in the capital isn’t all we have to worry about. Kieron’s been trying to get rid of their people here for years but I doubt he got all of them. Mostly he was looking for Doray mages pretending not to be or people bound to their service; ones just taking their gold are a harder problem. We were hoping to find out more about that from Marcus once we got the rest of the bindings off him.

“Which means the capital isn’t the only place where I’m safer...”

Ellen finished the sentence. “Safer as one more anonymous refugee than as the wife of the heir.” She nodded, turned to Kir.

“You too.”

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“Are you the station keeper?”

Renard looked up from the bridle he was mending. A woman, tall. Clothes scorched and smudged with smoke; another fleeing whatever chaos was happening in the city. He was glad his post was at least a few miles east and out of sight from the road. This one, however, had found him.

"Yes, miss, I am. Renard. In charge of this station."

"I am here for a horse." She stretched out her hand, palm up.

If he was fleeing from a city that had just been taken by invaders he would want a horse too, if anything surprising that she was the first to think of finding one here. She had washed her face sometime after escaping the city fires; he wondered if money was all she planned to offer him. Tempting — more tempting at a second look — but he was a cautious man. Five years as post rider, another four assisting at a station farther out, a good job now and not one he felt inclined to risk.

"I'm sorry, miss, but the horses here are for post riders. To sell you one, even to lend it, as much as my job is worth." He looked down to see how much she was offering him. Not coins. A familiar disk of bronze, inlaid with a running horse in silver. He looked back up.

"That token is for a post rider carrying messages. How did you get it?"

She spoke after a moment's pause, her voice sharp.

"I have a message that needs carrying east. You are sworn to provide a mount to anyone with a token. Which I have."

"It doesn't work that way, miss. The oath is just words; I have my job to do, and..."

Bert, standing listening by the stable door, was trying to get his attention; when he saw that Renard had noticed him he made an odd gesture, using his forefinger to sketch a circle over his head. Did the groom mean that the lady was crazy and should be ignored...? Renard turned back to her. She might be crazy, but just ignoring her didn't seem likely to do much good. He was trying to figure out what would work better when Bert spoke from behind him.

"Your Highness wants to ride east, carry word of the attack to His Grace your father?"

Renard spun around, had his mouth open to tell Bert to stop trying to do his superior's job and get back to his own. Stopped. Turned back to take another look at the woman Bert was talking to. No jewelry, clothing plain, but she stood, and spoke, like someone more used to giving orders than taking them.

"One moment, miss." He hesitated a moment. "Madam. I have to check something in the stable."

Bert followed him in, started speaking as soon as they were through the door.

"She's Princess Mariel, Prince Kieron's wife."

"You're sure?"

The groom nodded. "I used to help my brother out in the palace stables; I've seen her lots of times."

"So I have to give her a horse. And it has to be one safe to ride. And... fetch the brown mare."

He went out, doing his best to erase the frown from his face.

"I've sent my groom to get a mare for Your Highness; a pretty beast, and well mannered."

"I don't care about her looks or her manners; is she fast?"

"No slow horses in the post, Highness."

"Is she the fastest horse you have?"

Refusing the orders of the wife of the prince who was, among other things, in charge of the post riders might end his job, but getting her thrown and maybe killed would end it faster and worse. Talking around the matter seemed unlikely to work with this particular lady. Better to simply lie.

"Fastest horse in the stable just now."

She shook her head.

"I think not."

Bert was leading the mare out of the stable; she turned to him.

"Show me the horses you have."

Seeing no alternative, Renard nodded his assent, hoped the groom had sense enough to find her something suitable.

The first stall held a gelding, a tall grey. Mari turned to Bert. "Is he the fastest?"

He thought a moment. Lying to her felt wrong, but Renard was the man he had to work with day in and day out. Better to temporize.

"He's pretty fast, Highness."

"Is he the fastest horse you have?"

The real answer was three stalls down and, not having been exercised yet today, likely in a foul mood.

"Might be, Your Highness. Hard to tell, but he's fast."

She shook her head.

"Show me the others."

A few minutes later she was putting the same question, this time in front of the stall where the roan was making his usual fuss.

"Not if you want to get where you're going, Highness. He can move along, but it might not be in the direction you want."

She gave him a long look. "If you were choosing a horse for an experienced post rider and wanted the fastest, would you choose him?"

He shook his head, tried to look as if he meant it. Five minutes later he was saddling the horse — carefully, having no wish to be kicked or bitten — and wondering how he could best explain matters to Renard.

The horse saddled, bridled, and led out into the stable yard, the next question was how to get the princess onto it. To his surprise and relief, Mari took charge of that matter herself, taking the bridle, spending a few minutes talking to the horse and, eventually, stroking his nose, then mounting. She was walking the roan around the yard — having dealt with his usual experiments on a new rider with no apparent difficulty — when Renard came out of the stable leading the grey. He looked angry but spoke calmly.

“I’m not sending Her Highness out alone; this one is for you.”

It occurred to Bert that since the princess was a lighter rider on a faster horse and in a hurry, he was not going to keep up with her for long — a fact that had probably occurred to her, to judge by the lack of protests.

If it had not yet occurred to Renard, this might not be the time to point it out.

## Chapter 24

*[The capital]*

Pompi looked up at Justin with a puzzled expression.

"Are you sure? I thought our orders were not to let any of their mages escape the city."

"Not any of the Eslandi mages — and especially not any earth mages. This fellow is from Forstmark, not Esland — the next barbarian kingdom north. And his talent, such as it is, is fire, not earth, so no risk he's really the missing Eslandi prince in disguise. Apparently the prince found him wandering around his kingdom without permission, locked him up in a cell in the palace complex. Arius figured it wouldn't hurt to have someone to carry a message across the border north; seems the Magistrate has someone at that court too. Don't know what he did to his wrist, but I gather he can still ride.

"Also, he's sending these two," the mage pointed at Cristina and Hrolf, mounted, a few steps behind Grmr, "with messages to one of the Eslandi lords up north. Part of the Magistrate's plans; if I knew I couldn't tell you but as it happens I don't. Barbarian kingdoms aren't the safest place to travel, especially when there's a war going on. Arius figured they were more likely to get where they were going with the escort of a mage, even a barbarian mage and a pretty feeble one at that; I won't say he's wrong.

"Which is why I'm here with one slightly damaged barbarian mage from outside the kingdom," he nodded at Grmr, "one of the king's guards whom the king won't be needing any more, being dead, and one of the queen's ladies whom the queen won't be needing any more, having fled south to her brother after killing the king. At least I gather that's the story. Also a horse for each of them and an extra for supplies, in case you were wondering. Armies can always use more horses, but I figure the Magistrate's plans are a bit more important than the convenience of our barbarian friends. All clear?"

Pompi nodded. "Harkening and obedience."

Curious, he closed his eyes, reached out with his mind. Relief in all three, as might be expected. A mix of other emotions, as in most people. In the mage an underlying anger, banked fire but no present target.

He turned to one of the guards at the gate. "You can let them go now." Both guards stepped back. Grmr led the other two through the gate and out.

Late on the third day, Cristina brought her horse up even with Hrolf's. "What are you watching so carefully for? Bandits?"

He turned to answer, shook his head. "Not many in the Marches — don't come here if they have any sense. If they do, don't last long. Suppose some desperate folk fleeing the capital might want our horses, but that isn't it. Three of us, me and the Forstish armed, doubt we look like safe folk t' steal horses from.

"I'm looking for the turnoff to Sven's place. Haven't been since before the troubles but ought t' be able to spot it. Path off to our left, just after we ford a brook. Pretty sure it wasn't the one we crossed a mile back — hope not."

"Sven. You and Grimr mentioned him a few days ago. Is he a friend of yours? Someone important?"

"Kinsman. Sven's grandmother, my great gran, sisters. Same as Earl Eskil — Sven's his brother. Got the old place, family farm, when Earl Eirick went north and Eskil inherited; Eskil has the new hold that their grandad built. Better for defense — head of Troutvale, stone walls. Not so good grazing, though."

"So Sven is the younger brother?"

Hrolf shook his head. "Older. Would've been earl some day."

Cristina gave him a puzzled look. "Would have been? I don't understand."

"The troubles. Eskil's loyal, same as I was. Sven backed Iolen, same as his dad did. Mebbe even helped convince his dad. After the rising was over, prince offered the rebels generous terms — the two earls into exile, everyone else willing to swear let off. But, just to play safe, the succession had t' go to sons the king and prince trusted. So the old earl is up in Forstmark now and Eskil's in his place stead of Sven.

"Petrus didn't want folk scared, angry, mebbe south, east, north not trusting each other. Too much of that already. Didn't want talk of royal kin trying t' seize the throne, either. Everything settled fast, Marches back in allegiance, this time with Earls he could trust. Settlement was Kieron's, he being the brother on the spot, but Petrus backed it. Figure even the rebels knew prince's word was as good as the king's, them being close as they always have been. Damned if I know what we're going t' do without 'em."

A few minutes later they came to a small brook crossing the road and waded their horses through it. Hrolf called out to Grimr, "This is it — that path to the left goes up to Sven's place."

The three turned off the road, following a path through the trees that lined the creek, Hrolf moving up ahead of Grimr. After a few minutes the path veered right out of the trees into sunlight. Ahead of them was a wide meadow, a few horses grazing, a stone wall, on the other side sheep.



Beyond was the farm house surrounded by its outbuildings, beyond that the mountains, their peaks in cloud.

A little distance from the house Hrolf stopped, waiting. A minute later a large man accompanied by a very large dog came out the front door onto the stone porch, looked towards them. Cristina noticed that he had an axe hanging from his belt. Hrolf called out, "Greetings, cousin."

The man nodded, raised his empty right hand in greeting. Hrolf rode forward, dismounted. Sven, nearly a head taller, embraced him, lifting him off his feet.

"Welcome home — hope those city folk haven't turned you soft. And who are your fellow travelers?"

A few minutes later the three of them were seated in the farmhouse kitchen, their horses having been taken to the barn by a man introduced to them as Kari and a boy. The dog came over and sniffed curiously at Hrolf's extended hand. Next to Sven the animal had looked large, next to Hrolf, enormous. Sven came back into the room.

"Three of you look hungry; Tonna'll fetch you something. While we wait, what news? Rumors, but the first folk from the City I've had a chance t' talk with."

For a moment all three were silent, looking at each other, then Hrolf spoke.

"Dalms took the capital — surprise attack, caught the garrison napping. Killed Prince Kieron, not t' mention a lot of other folk. Half the city burning when we left."

"Killed the prince? Hell of a way t' go. You're sure?"

"Saw the body. Took three or four with 'im, but..."

Sven's expression was grim, but he put the obvious next question.

"King made it out?"

Hrolf shook his head.

"Dalms got 'em both?"

Hrolf shook his head again, looked at Cristina; after a moment she spoke.

"The queen stabbed him. I didn't see it, but that has to be what happened. Justin thought so too."

"Justin? Foreign soundin' name."

"Justin is a Doray mage. The Doray were in the palace. I suppose they must have come with the Dalmians; I don't know why. The king was naked in his bed, stabbed through the heart, and the queen was nowhere to be found in the palace. They showed me the body. Justin thought that perhaps someone had put some kind of spell on the queen to make her do it. Or maybe that it was a plot by her brother, but I don't believe it; Sandro wouldn't ... Duke Alessandro wouldn't do such a thing. I expect that's

probably where she went — who else would protect her if she killed her husband?”

An hour later, all three fed, Grimir off checking on the horses, Cristina bedded down on a pallet in the farm’s guesthouse — otherwise a storage barn but mostly empty until the harvest came in — Sven and Hrolf finally got a chance to talk.

“Tell me the rest of it. What the Forstish is doing with you, how sure you are the lady is telling the truth, how the three of you got out after the Dalms seized the city. Doubt they left the gates unguarded — and the lady’s not one soldiers’d be likely to let go.”

Hrolf hesitated a moment, organizing his thoughts.

“Grimr is a mage, Forstish. Gather His Highness’s people spotted him in Southdale doing things a mage ought not to, brought him back t’ the city. Expect they’d have sent him back t’ the Einvald, eventually — mebbe waiting t’ see how much the Einvald wanted him back, how grateful he might be. Was locked up in the palace when the Dalms took the city. Pack of Doray mages with ‘em, seemed to be more or less in charge of things — wouldn’t be surprised if it was the mages got them into the city, Doray craft mebbe. Mages took over the palace, found Grimir, let him out. No reason to hold him, guess they decided to send him back north where he came from. Maybe wanted news to reach Einvald, one reason or another, figured he’d bring it.

“Told me they had a message fer Earl Eskil, wanted me to take it, knew I was kin to him, sending along the mage, two safer’n one. Don’t know why they decided t’ send Cristina with us; didn’t feel like asking. Could just be she’s from the south, folk friendly to the Doray, speaks their talk, figured as well be nice to her. Not kin to Queen and Duke Alessandro, far as I ever heard, but in her service. Folk down south don’t care about such things the way we do.”

The two remained silent for a while, thinking, until Sven put the next question.

“Kieron’s boy. Know what happened to him?”

Hrolf shook his head. “Figure they probably got him along with his dad, but didn’t see the body, so he might’ve gotten out. You’re thinking...”

Sven nodded. “If the boy is dead, Eirick Iolensson is the heir, fair and square, no argument — least, I don’t know of any closer kin. He’s a good kid, would make a good king. Eskil’ll back him — don’t know if you heard, but my brother made Eirick his heir. So will I, and the rest of us that wanted things different than they turned out. That puts both sides of the Marches behind him, ends the split. Don’t have anything against the prince’s kid — nice boy from all I’ve heard, told him and Eirick swore brotherhood, good sense in both of ‘em if so, that way no one could set one ‘gainst t’other. But

if the boy is dead, it makes things a lot easier up here. Raise an army, push the Dalms out of the capital with any help the rest of the kingdom can give us, crown the boy. Can't see anyone with a stronger claim — dukes don't have an heir of their own to push. Not unless the princess is bearing, and got clear, and it turns out a boy — could be, but odds against. Don't suppose..."

Hrolf hesitated only briefly. "If Princess Mariel was pregnant she hadn't told the palace and wasn't showing — I saw her a week or so back. What happened to her I don't know. Expect getting a woman with her looks out of the city wouldn't be easy, once the Dalms had the gates. Or the Doray, if it was really them running things. Heard stories about the Doray."

Sven thought a moment. "First thing is get word t' the hold up in Troutvale. My brother was there last I heard, probably still is. You're going that way tomorrow, otherwise I'd send my boy. Lend you fresh horses if you think you need 'em. Any idea what message you're carrying for him from the Doray?"

Hrolf shook his head. "No idea. Sealed, and what with mages and all, figured opening it might not be a good idea. Just told me to give it to Eskil."

"Might be they want to divide up Esland, Marches for us, west for Dalms, south for Doray — would explain what Doray and Dalms are doing in one boat. Don't suppose Eskil'd go for that."

This time it was Sven who shook his head. "Not my little brother. King he swore to is dead, still do his duty to the kingdom. Even if it kills him."

Hrolf caught the note of pride in the bigger man's voice, smiled.

Sven paused, continued. "Take a message from me, too. No need to write it — words will do between kin. Tell him if he wants to march west, drive the Dalms back to Dalmia, I'll come, bring everyone I can, help put his heir on the throne the boy's grandad lost."

Hrolf nodded. "Yes. But remember, it's the Doray too. Expect we can manage the Dalms all right, specially if there's help from the royal companies and maybe the dukes. But we'll be fighting magery as well as spears."

Sven smiled. "I can cast a shaft further than any mage I've heard of can cast a spell. Mages die just like the rest of us. Getting tired of farming anyway."

The kitchen door opened. The man entering, mouth open to speak, was younger than Sven but almost as large. Sven spoke first.

"Hrolf, mebbe remember my son Asgeir, bit smaller when you last saw him. Asgeir, your cousin Hrolf Ivertson."

Asgeir nodded, spoke.

"Is it true, what the Forster says? Dalms took the city, killed the royal family, Prince Eirick the only one left, safe with uncle? Are we going to..."

Sven held up his hand to stop the torrent.

"Want an answer, got to let a man speak." He stopped, nodded to Hrolf.

"It's true that the Dalms took the city — how they got in I don't know, maybe magery, help from the Doray. The prince is dead; I saw the body. I didn't see Petrus's body, but Lady Cristina did. By her account it wasn't the Dalms that killed him. She thinks it was the queen, maybe enspelled t' do it by the Doray or someone else."

"So that makes Eirick the heir."

Hrolf shook his head. "Not quite; don't know what happened t' Kir, prince's boy. Might've been killed with his dad, but I didn't see the body. Maybe the Dalms took him prisoner, plan to hold him for ransom. Might even have gotten out of the city somehow, with help from the prince's people."

"A kid, city boy, rich, used to folk doing everything for him? If the Dalms held the city, were burning and killing the way the Forster says, doubt he could get out if the prince couldn't."

He stopped a moment, as if struck by an idea.

"If the Dalms took him, could be why you didn't see a body. Could be for ransom, but... You say the Doray are in on it. Mages, best mages in the world. Bet they could make the boy do what they want, maybe convince him they were his friends. Get some of the loyalists on their side, stead of helping us kick them back to Dalmia."

Sven shook his head. "Don't think they'll persuade him of much if he saw them kill his dad."

Asgeir gave him a stubborn look. "They're mages, pa. Can make him forget if they want. Tell him the Dalms did it, pretend the Doray are on his side."

Sven didn't look convinced. Hrolf broke in.

"What your boy says — could be; we'll want the best mages we can get when we march west. Should probably send someone down to Southdale, get help from the College."

Sven nodded agreement. "Until we know the boy is dead, we don't proclaim Eirick as king — no point starting quarrels till we have to, which isn't until we have the city back. After that, we'll see. Morning you head for Troutvale, I start sending word around, see how many I can raise. Expect once he hears from you, Eskil'll send word to Duke Morgen out east, any of the royal companies he knows where to find, maybe the southern duke too, maybe the College. And I'll send a couple of my people back west to watch for the Dalms, case they're moving this way. May have

to fight them here first. Don't suppose you know what they were planning next?"

Hrolf shook his head. "When we left, didn't see any sign they were massing to go anywhere, but might be they planned to finish looting the city first, then head this way. Or south. Or east. Or more than one way, if they had the troops — didn't have any way of getting count, but there seemed t' be a lot of 'em. Never did find out why they attacked — not as if we had any quarrel with 'em. Had t' guess, it was the Doray behind it. King and prince been worried about 'em for quite a while, rooting out their people places they shouldn't've been. Some flap 'bout a runaway Doray mage, gather Kieron thought he might have things to tell if'n they could get through spells kept him dumb. Maybe the Doray were coming t' take him back."

## Chapter 25

*(The Marches)*

While the three were saddling and bridling their horses the next morning, they were joined by a fourth, Sven's son Asgeir. He nodded familiarly to Grimr, spoke to Hrolf.

"Expect you can find Troutvale without me but thought I'd come along, see what Uncle plans, come back t' let Pa know. Friends will want to hear the news, make plans. Talk to Prince Eirick, too, let him know we'll all back him, even if Pa and Uncle want t' take things slow."

He went into the barn, brought out a fourth horse.

It was a little after noon when Asgeir, riding in front with Grimr, turned off the main road on a well-worn path running up a valley towards the tree-covered mountains north of them. The stream it ran beside was wider than the stream by Sven's hold. Hrolf turned to Cristina.

"Reason they call it Troutvale — caught a big one in a pool a little farther on, back when I was younger than Asgeir here. Mebbe try my luck again, once we get settled in, supposing Eskil doesn't have work for me — but likely he will."

"What do you expect to happen, once we arrive? Your cousin this morning sounded as though he thought the Earl would be raising an army to take back the capital."

"Very likely. If the royal family are all dead, makes young Eirick, Eskil's sister's son, the heir through his father. Half the Marches would've backed him against them alive, if'n they thought they could win — more'n half backed his dad, two years back. With the loyalists like me and Eskil backing him too, that gives him the whole Marches.

"Comes to blows, we're the strongest part of the kingdom, why Iolen thought he could take the throne, having surprise on his side and the Forstish helping. Eskil'll be sending word east to Earl Finn and Duke Morgen. Trying to get the royal companies too — some of 'em were stationed east and a bit south of here, Aron Ford, His Majesty being worried about problems from that direction. Been wondering if that was Doray trickery — get us watching our eastern border, talk the Dalms into attacking from the west. There's your duke down south, too, don't know if he can get troops together, come up the river, in time to help, expect Eskil will want him to. Might even send me south — expect Alessandro would recognize me, having been in the palace a time or two when I was serving. Doray trickery around, much to be said for messengers with faces folk know."

Talking, they came out of the trees into sight of the hold, a square stone-walled keep with a single tall tower. Horses were grazing in a field to its right, other animals beyond them. In one field, men with scythes were cutting hay. The gate to the keep was open, guarded by men in armor.

When they approached the gate, one of the guards came forward. Hrolf started to speak, but was interrupted by Asgeir.

"They're from the capital, news the royals are all dead, Prince Eirick's the only one left."

The guard turned back to Hrolf, a question on his face.

"I'm Hrolf Ivertson, in His Majesty's service in the capital, or was. Kin to the Earl, and have a message for him. Also news."

"Is what the boy says true?"

"Maybe, maybe not; true enough that the Dalms took the capital. Can you take me to Eskil, find someone to take care of our horses?"

One of the other guards — they were all listening — stepped forward and took Hrolf's reins. Hrolf dismounted, looked up at the others.

"Expect Earl Eskil'll want to talk to Cristina too, but I might as well deliver my message first."

Asgeir was already leading his horse towards a barn a little way outside the wall. Another guard took Cristina's horse, spoke to her.

"I'll take care of this one, leave it over there." He gestured at the barn. "You go in with them. The Earl'll want any news from the capital he can get. Heard some wild stories from there, expect you can tell him more."

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Eirick and Helgi came into the Earl's chamber, Jarl as always at his master's side. Eskil was waiting with a worried expression on his face.

"You sent for me, Uncle?"

He nodded. "Yes. There has been some very disturbing news — if it is true, and I am afraid it probably is. I have just spoken with travelers from the capital. They say the Dalmians took the city a few nights ago by a surprise attack, that the prince and the king are dead. One of them is a cousin of mine and was one of the king's guards. Another is one of the queen's ladies, says she saw the king's body, that the queen went mad and stabbed him. I do not have a truth teller here to check; there is one at Olaf's and I can send for him, probably will. But I trust Hrolf, and..."

"The king is dead?"

Eskil nodded. "So he says. It may not..."

"Where is my father?"

Eskil gave him a puzzled look. Eirick's face was set and grim; he was speaking in a strained tone, one hand resting on the hilt of his dagger. Helgi

stepped forward, spoke slowly, one word at a time. "Your father is dead, Eirick."

Eirick gave him a puzzled look. "Dead? But I have to..." He glanced down, put his left hand on Jarl's head. "Jarl. He hurt Jarl."

Helgi turned to the Earl. "I understand the Learned Elinor arrived this morning as well; could you send someone for her?" Eskil walked to the doorway, said something to one of the guards; Helgi turned back to Eirick, spoke again, still like someone talking to a child. "Your father, Lord Iolen, died two and a half years ago when Fire Mountain erupted. More than a year before Jarl was born."

"You are sure?" Helgi nodded. Eirick's face relaxed back to something more like its normal expression. His tone was puzzled. "But I saw him... doing things to Jarl."

Both men were silent, Eskil waiting, Helgi with eyes closed and an expression of concentrated effort. The door opened; Ellen came in. Helgi was the first to speak. "Can you detect compulsion spells?"

"Usually, if I look carefully. But not what they do."

"Examine Eirick. Then yourself. Then tell us what you find."

Ten minutes later she opened her eyes, spoke. "I think there was a compulsion on Eirick, but it is mostly faded. That means it was put on some time ago; they do not last that long, especially on a mage."

"Might it also mean that it has been triggered?"

Ellen gave him a surprised look. "I suppose that is possible. But it would have to be very recently to leave even as much residue as I saw."

Helgi nodded. "Very recently. Less than half an hour ago. What did you find on yourself?"

"Nothing. Why?"

"I wanted to be sure. Eirick's father is safely dead but your husband, so far as I know, is not."

She gave him a puzzled look, waited.

"When I am home I work for the Einvald, watching for anyone in the palace with ill intent — meaning assassins. That's my talent and my training. I am not a truthteller" — he glanced at Eskil, back to Ellen — "and I cannot read minds, but I see emotions."

"In the months I've known Eirick, I don't think I have ever seen him really angry. Less than half an hour ago, Jarl Eskil told us that he had received word that your king had been killed, that his wife went crazy and stabbed him. As soon as he heard that, Eirick changed. He wanted to kill someone; if he had been in the palace I would have called the guards. His face changed too. And the first thing he did was to ask where his father was."

"His father? But..."



"Yes. Lord Iolen died more than two years ago and Eirick knows it. But he did not know it then. He wanted to know where his father was and he wanted to kill him."

Ellen looked at Eirick a moment, turned back to Helgi. "A compulsion spell. And the news about the king triggered it." He nodded agreement.

"But who put it on? And why? What was the point of compelling him to kill a father who's been dead for two years... Oh."

Ellen turned to Eskil, listening with a puzzled expression. "A month or so ago, two Dorayan mages took me and Eirick captive in Southdale, held us for a day and a night until we managed to escape, mostly thanks to Rick."

The earl nodded comprehension. "And the Doray are in the capital now, with the Dalmians. That is who. But why?"

"They thought we were Kir and Mari. They were planning to trade us to Prince Kieron for a Dorayan mage who had escaped to Esland."

Eirick interrupted. "My dreams."

"Yes." Helgi again. "Tell us about your dreams."

"I think they started when we were prisoners. They were about Jarl. Father was doing... things to him. Horrible things."

Helgi's glance met Ellen's in mutual understanding; there was a moment's pause before Helgi spoke. "The mage thought Eirick was Kir, put a compulsion spell on him to make him kill his father as soon as he heard the king was dead. The dreams were Eirick's mind creating reasons for what the spell was going to make him do.

"The mage also thought Ellen was Mari."

Ellen nodded. "I see; that is why you asked... I see."

Eskil still looked puzzled; Ellen explained.

"Helgi thinks that if the Doray were trying to spell Kir to kill his father and thought I was Mari, they might have tried the same thing with me to make me kill my husband — two strings to their bow. Compulsions do not last long on a mage of any strength, probably not even if the Doray cast them, but Rick is just coming into his talents. Coelus showed up at the College a day or two later, and I felt no inclination at all to kill him. I won't say I have never felt so inclined" — she smiled, as at a memory — "but not recently. Once they got a good look at me, they may not even have..."

The earl raised a hand to interrupt her.

"Can you fetch the friend you came with?"

Ellen looked puzzled, nodded, went out. When she returned, followed by Kir, Eskil was the only one in the room. He looked at Ellen's companion, spoke slowly.

"Kir, I am afraid I have some very bad news."

Kir looked up at him, waited. There was a long silence before the earl continued.

"Some people arrived this morning from the capital. They say the Dalmians took the city four days ago by a surprise attack and your father and uncle are both dead."

He paused a moment.

"One of them says he saw your father's body."

Kir stood perfectly still, took two long breaths. Ellen reached out a hand, drew it back. For a moment nobody said anything, then she spoke.

"How sure are you it was true — you said you did not have a truthteller here."

"The man who told me is named Hrolf. A cousin of mine and one of the king's guards. A careful, steady sort, always was even when he was young. I cannot see how he could get it wrong, no reason he would lie." He turned to Kir. "I am sorry, but I think it's true."

There was another silence; again Ellen broke it.

"How did Hrolf get out of the city? I would have thought the guards..."

Eskil shook his head. "I gather the king was dead by then. Hrolf must have been captured or surrendered; he did not say. However the attackers got hold of him, one of them, a Doray mage who for some reason was with the Dalmians, gave him a message and told him to take it to me — I gather they somehow knew we were kin. Gave him a horse and companions and horses for them too — one of the queen's ladies, she's the one who told me she saw the king's body. And a Forstish mage who happened to be in the capital and wanted to go home. The Doray thought a bigger party would be more likely to get here."

"The lady. What does she look like?"

Eskil looked puzzled. "Look like? What you would expect of one of the queen's ladies. Southerner, at a guess, only a few years older than you are. Good looking woman. Why...?"

"When we escaped the city, the Dalmians had guards at the gate stopping women, attractive women; they tried to take Mari but I"—she hesitated a moment—"managed a diversion. If they went to the trouble of sending one of the queen's ladies out instead of... there was a reason. I need to talk to her — the other two as well. I probably won't be able to see anything, but... If the Doray are involved, things may not be what they seem."

She turned back to Kir. "I do not want to get your hopes up, but your father may still be alive. I do not suppose any of the three said whether the citadel had been taken?"

The last was obviously to Eskil; he shook his head.

"They didn't say. Expect you can find them easily enough — try the great hall. Since you arrived this morning, have you seen anyone who recognized Kir, told anyone who he was?"

Ellen thought a moment, shook her head. "No. I do not think so."

"Don't. If His Majesty and his brother are both dead, Kir is the heir presumptive; better that his enemies not know where to find him. Not until we have an army."

Finally Kir spoke.

"Where is my brother?"

After Kir left the room, Eskil remained silent a few minutes, thinking, then turned to Ellen.

"Didn't want to get the boy's hopes up but... do you really think his father might not be dead?"

She nodded. "The story about the queen stabbing the king might be true — what the Doray tried to do with Kir and his father, but that time it worked. On the other hand... the Doray let two people out of the city, provided them with horses and an escort, and they just happened to be witnesses to the fact that the king and his heir were dead and how. I don't believe it.

"Mari thinks — I expect Kieron thought — that the kingdom had been at risk for a long time of falling apart. Not just the rising here. In the south it's the queen's family, Duke Alessandro and his kin, that people look to, and they look south of them to the Doray. The East, where Mari comes from, only came into the kingdom a couple of generations ago. If Morgen ever had a reason to pull them back out again I expect he could.

"Petrus married Isabel, Duke Alessandro's sister. Kieron married Duke Morgen's daughter. Mari didn't say the reason Kieron married her was to help tie the East in, and I'm sure that wasn't all of it, but I expect it was part. Iolen and his father both married into the Marches. One way the royals could tie the kingdom together.

"Suppose someone wanted to untie it. If Morgen thinks Alessandro got his sister to kill Petrus because he's trying to grab the crown, will he trust him against the Dalm? Will you?

"If everyone believes the king and prince are dead, that there is nobody but Kir with a claim to the crown, one of his relatives might decide that someone older would make a better king even if his claim isn't quite as strong. There are the royal cousins, Renald and Radolf, with holdings close to the Dalmian border. They might be friends with the Dalmians. And even if they aren't, other people might think they are."

"You think the Doray and the Dalm are trying to get everyone in the kingdom distrusting everyone else, making it harder to kick the Dalmians out, maybe breaking things up for good?"

She nodded. "And that's why they sent Hrolf and Cristina out to spread their story. It might be true, it might not. I couldn't make your kinsman see a corpse that wasn't there or the wrong face on one that was, but I wouldn't swear the Doray can't. The king and prince might be both dead. One or both of them might be alive. We need to know."

She fell silent for a moment, spoke again. "The reason to send Hrolf to you was supposed to be a message. What was in it?"

Eskil hesitated a moment before answering. "Part of it was about a Doray mage who somehow got away from them, someone named Marcus. They want him back, would be very grateful to get him. Maybe grateful enough to recognize Eirick as heir, give us back the capital to crown him in."

"That's the message they sent you. What do you think they are sending to Alessandro? To Morgen? To the cousins?"

Eskil nodded. "I take your point. What should I do to keep it from working?"

"What you should do is make sure everyone in the Marches knows Eirick doesn't want to be king, you don't want him to be king. What I should do is find out whether the Doray are telling the truth about Kir's father and uncle. Kieron was in the citadel just before the attack — I don't know where Petrus was, probably the palace. Can you lend me a horse?"

## Chapter 26

*[Troutvale]*

Eirick's bed was crowded — both boys sitting on it, Jarl lying between them, his head in Eirick's lap. Kir was speaking.

"Your uncle sounded pretty sure. Ellen thought it might be some Doray trick and I hope she is right, but... At least I still have you. And Mari; she got away with us." His face was smudged where he had wiped off the tears; keeping his voice steady was an effort. For a moment both boys were silent. Eirick, watching his cousin, was trying, and failing, to think of something to say. He remembered, pain dulled by time, the night he got the news that his father was dead.

There was a knock on the door, Eskil's voice.

"Are both of you there?"

Eirick answered, "Yes."

"May I come in?"

Eirick looked at Kir, Kir nodded. Eirick got up, opened the door for his uncle.

"Kir told you?"

"He told me. I hope it isn't true."

"So do I." Eskil's voice was calm. "Kir's father was a good man; if he's dead the kingdom will be worse off without him. Expect even here most see that.

"The Learned Ellen couldn't find any sign that the two who told me the king and prince were dead had been deceived by magery. She wasn't sure that if they had been she would be able to tell, but I think we have to make our plans on the assumption that their account is true.

"Kieron was Petrus' heir; Kir is his. We need to clear the Dalmians out of the kingdom and we are not going to do it if we are fighting each other over the succession. I expect Morgen will support Kir, and I will, and I think I can persuade Finn, that's Frederik's son who's earl in his place now, to go along." He paused, looking at Eirick. Eirick said nothing.

His uncle continued, "That leaves the south, which means Duke Alessandro, and the royal companies. I expect some of them got killed when the Dalmians took the capital, but most weren't there, which is one reason the capital fell so easily."

"I think the companies will back Kir if Morgen and the Marches do. I'm not so sure about Alessandro. He's on the Doray border and both Hrolf and the Learned Ellen think the Doray are allied with the Dalmians, so Alessandro may be involved somehow, may even have known the attack was happening and not warned His Majesty. His sister never had any

children, so they don't have a claim to the throne that the rest of the kingdom will take seriously, but they might not think they need one if they have Doray and Dalmian backing — maybe claim for the queen.

"The first thing to do is make sure everyone else is on one side, which means yours." He was looking at Kir. "I plan to head off to Finn's tomorrow morning. I think Rick should come with me."

Kir looked puzzled. Eirick spoke first to Eskil. "Yes. I'll come." He turned to his cousin.

"Some of the people in the Marches who backed my father still feel the same way; Grandfather told me about them when I was still in Forstmark. Uncle is afraid that Finn might take their part if it looks as though there is a good chance to succeed and," he hesitated a moment, "they might think that now there is. They can't make me king if I don't want to be king, and the best way to convince them is if I'm there saying so. It would help if Grandfather was here to tell them too."

Kir said nothing, nodded.

Eskil shook his head. "If Father comes back he's an outlaw, anyone can kill him. Would help to have him, knows more about running an army than I do. But he can't."

A brief pause, Kir with a thoughtful expression, before Eskil resumed.

"My brother Sven was one of the people who supported Iolen. He gave me his word not to plot against the treaty back when I became earl and I trust him. I have sent word for him to raise what forces he can; we'll pick them up when we move west. And I have sent out word to the rest of my people to assemble here. One messenger to Morgen, one to the keep east of here, one to the encampment of the royal companies at Aron Ford. Assuming the Dalmians aren't coming this way — Sven sent word by his son that he's sending scouts west to make sure if they are we know about it — we will move west in a week or two, with luck join with the companies a little this side of the capital. Morgen is farther away; I don't know how soon he can join us."

Kir looked up.

"Mari was going to take the news of what happened to her father; she said she had a token for the courier system. She's very fast; father says..." He fell abruptly silent, looked back down.

Eskil thought a moment. "The three of you got out the morning after they took the capital?"

Kir nodded. "Lanna too. Mari left her with friends near the capital. Couldn't ride post carrying a baby."

"If she makes as good time as the post riders, she should have reached the company's encampment at the ford by now — it's on her way. She may tell them to wait for Morgen, make sure they don't try to retake the capital

by themselves and get smashed. Another two or three days to reach her father, depending where he is. He was dealing with troubles on the eastern border, so I expect he already has troops assembled. If he can pull free... maybe two weeks from now, more likely three, we could have Morgen's people and the companies getting to the capital. Assuming no trouble with Finn, and I don't think there should be, we can be there about the same time... So the only loose end is Alessandro. And maybe the Doray – gods know what they can do."

After Eskil left, Eirick lifted Jarl's head from his lap, got up, walked over to the other end of the bed where Kir was sitting. He hesitated for a moment before wrapping his arms around his cousin, pulling his head against his own chest. He spoke softly.

"You still have me."

A moment later there was another knock on the door. Eirick stepped back, went over to open it. It was Helgi. He came in, looked at the two boys, spoke to Eirick.

"A problem. Grimr is here."

Eirick looked at him curiously, said nothing. In a moment Helgi spoke again.

"Someone told me that a Forstish mage had come with two people from the capital. As best I know, Grimr and I are the only Forstish mages in Esland. I took a look in through the door to the great hall; he was there, with two others who I suppose are the two he traveled with. I don't think he saw me."

Kir, for a moment distracted from his own misery, put the question in a puzzled tone.

"Why is he a problem? We're in Esland, not Forstmark. Besides, if you're both Forstish..."

Helgi hesitated a moment. It was Eirick who replied.

"Grimr will want me to go back with him – tried to force me to, back in Southdale. We're a lot closer to the border here. And I expect he's still mad at Helgi for not helping him."

It occurred to Helgi that if that was not all of the problem, it would do for the moment.

"Grimr had scrolls with compulsion spells, used one on Eirick back in Southdale. I don't know if he managed to get his wallet back when the Doray turned him loose but I wouldn't be surprised. I am not sure he has the gall to try to use them to steal Eirick out of his uncle's hold, but I'm not sure he doesn't – he might figure on rewards from the Caster and the Einvald both if he managed it. As it is, his boss isn't going to be very happy with him when he gets back.

"It's a problem for me as well. He won't want me to get back to Forstmark to tell the Einvald and my people in the Guild what I know about what he and his boss were up to. Grimr is a fire mage. If he gets close to me, problem solved."

The two boys were silent for a minute, thinking. It was Eirick who spoke first.

"Do you know about the High Pass?"

Helgi shook his head. "Only pass I know about is by Fire Mountain, the way I came south with Grimr. Is there another one?"

Eirick answered him. "Fire Mountain is the only pass good enough to get an army through. That is why there is a royal keep blocking it — what Father told me. But there is another pass that starts uphill from here, comes out above Gruneval, where the Einvald's palace is. I've never been through it, but it's supposed to be passable, at least in good weather."

Helgi thought a moment. "Grimr might know about it. He's spent a lot of time this side of the mountains. If he takes it, or if he sees I'm taking it..."

Eirick broke in. "I'll ask Uncle to offer Grimr supplies to get him back to Forstmark in exchange for his taking a message to Grandfather telling him that Mother and I are safe here. Make sure he's going by the Fire Mountain pass. If you leave while Grimr is talking with Uncle he won't see you, know you were here or how you are getting back. I can give you a message for Grandfather too — not sure I trust Grimr to deliver one. Let him know what's happening."

Helgi looked at both boys, smiled. "Many thanks. The sooner I leave, the less chance for Grimr to learn I am here and try to do something about it. Where does the pass start?"

Eirick stood up. "I can show you where the path through the pass starts, a little ways uphill from here. I'll go look for Uncle now, ask him to find some excuse to keep Grimr long enough to give you time to get your horse and whatever else you need. You can stay here with Kir until I come back. As soon as Grimr is in with Uncle, I'll tell you. While you get your things, I'll fetch travel food for you up from the buttery."



## Chapter 27

[The College]

*Through a red mist the hated face of her seducer. At last revenge. In a motion practiced in dreams she slid out the hidden dagger, drove the narrow blade into the king. Behind her a familiar voice, louder than she had ever heard it, was shouting words in a language she did not know.*

*The mist vanished, the face changed. "You're Petrus." The voice was hers. In her own ears, it sounded like an accusation. "You're not Thoma, you're Petrus."*

*His voice was gentle. "I am Petrus and you are Isabel. My father has been dead for twenty years; it's a little late to stab him. Besides, I don't think a lead knife would have been very effective on him either."*

*She looked down. The narrow blade was bent almost in two.*

*"I don't understand. You were Thoma. And the knife..."*

*He took it from her without speaking, looked at it curiously, bending the blade a little with his fingers.*

*"It's not lead. I think it's iron, but I've never seen iron that soft. What happened to your friend?"*

*She turned. The body unconscious on the floor was Alys, the new ball dress crumpled under her.*

The queen opened her eyes; through the window of the bedroom of their suite, she could just see the first light of dawn. Somewhere a cricket was chirping. Beside her the comforting shape of her husband. The man who had carried her off from his father very much against his father's will, married her. The man who had accepted without question the quite unbelievable account of why she had tried to kill him. The man who had carried her off again, this time to the College, to learn what had been done to her and why. She closed her eyes, let sleep wash back over her.

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"Your Majesty?"

Nathan, one of the two guards they had brought with them to the College, was standing in the bedroom door.

"It's one of the magisters, Majesty. He says it's urgent."

"Let him in; I'll be out in a moment."

Petrus rolled out of bed, taking care not to disturb his sleeping wife, pulled on a robe, went through to the main room of the suite. Nat was letting in three men, in the lead a magister the king had been introduced to earlier. One of the other men looked familiar, but not from the College; Petrus tried to remember his name, failed. His right arm was wrapped in bandages. The magister — Henryk — gestured to the injured man.

"Rorik just arrived. He said it was urgent that he speak with you."

The king turned to him. "You are one of my brother's mages, are you not?"

Rorik nodded. "Yes, Your Majesty."

"Why are you here? And what happened to your arm?"

"His Highness thought it would be the safest place for Marcus, after the capital was taken."

"The capital was taken? By whom?"

"The news hasn't gotten here yet? Three nights ago a Dalmian army attacked. I don't know how they got in or how they made it that far without our having some warning, but they took the western city before there was any serious fighting. His Highness was planning to try to hold the bridge, fall back to the citadel if he couldn't. He sent me to fetch Marcus from his townhouse. By the time I got there the enemy were across in force. We managed to make it out through the east gate but we didn't have mounts and it took us till now to get here on foot."

Petrus turned to the third man. "Do I know you?"

It was Rorik who replied. "Marcus doesn't speak our tongue. He's the mage who escaped the League and came here — didn't His Highness tell you about him?"

"I did not remember his name; tell him he is welcome here. Kieron said he was hoping to learn more about what the League was up to in Esland, with luck the names of some of their agents. Did he?"

Rorik shook his head. "His Highness had Magister Coelus and some of his friends trying to undo the bindings that kept Marcus from telling us things. But then the Dalm invaded."

"Perhaps one of the magisters here can do it. Our problem at the moment is Dalmia not the League, but it would still be useful to know who we can't trust. Have you had a healer look at that arm?"

Rorik shook his head. "There wasn't time in the citadel — His Highness wanted me to get Marcus out of the city before all the gates were blocked. He told me Your Majesty was here, so I thought I should report to you as soon as I could. I got it splinted and wrapped and since I didn't have a horse I didn't need two hands. Do you know if the College has a healer?"

Petrus nodded. "The Learned Lady Melia. She was out of town when we got here but is supposed to be getting back today. I am told she is very good."

He turned back to Henryk. "You heard what Rorik said about the attack on the capital. Can you send someone to the garrison to ask Captain Geffron to come here so I can speak with him?"

"Will Your Majesty want someone from the College as well?"

Petrus nodded. "Yes, of course. Magister Bertram and yourself. And if there is someone else you think we need — but not a crowd or nothing will get done."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

Petrus went back into the bedroom; Isabel was awake and sitting up. He walked over to his wife, looked down at her. His right hand caressed her cheek; she turned her head to kiss it. He was the first to speak. "You heard?"

She nodded, said nothing.

"There has to be a connection."

"Between the attack on the capital and..."

"And the plot to kill me; they wanted me dead before they attacked. How could a Dalmian mage have gotten at you to cast the spell? That's what has to have happened. With luck the Lady Melia will be able to tell us more. It's pure luck that you and I weren't in the city.

"It sounds as though Kieron is in the citadel, but it can't hold out forever. I need to do something."

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Henryk's voice. "Your Majesty. Captain Geffron is here."

"Bring him in."

The door opened. Henryk entered, accompanied by Geffron and Bertram, the magister who seemed to be in charge of the College insofar as anyone was. Graying — Petrus wondered at what age magisters retired — well dressed under his robe in the style of ten or twenty years back.

Henryk was the first to speak.

"I thought we would want chairs. By Your Majesty's leave?" Petrus nodded. Three of the College servants entered, each carrying a chair, put them down and went out. In a few moments the visitors were seated; Petrus remained standing.

"Magisters. Captain. This morning, as Magister Henryk may have told you, one of my brother's people arrived from the capital bearing some very bad news. There was a surprise attack by a Dalmian army three days ago. Most of the royal companies were elsewhere and there cannot have been time to mobilize the militia. The attackers somehow got through one of the gates and took the city."

Bertram was the first to respond.

"That's impossible. Our last war with Dalmia was before I was born."

"And for the past decade or two Willem has spent his money on buildings, not armies. That is a puzzle we will want to consider. But however unlikely, the attack happened and we must deal with it."

Petrus turned to Captain Geffron.

"I want a dozen reliable men, riders, from your garrison. Send them to me here for letters to carry and instructions on where to go."

He turned back to the magisters.

"We do not know where the Dalmians will attack next but it could be the College. By now most of the servants know I am here which means half the village does, and word may spread. Keeping things secret is hard.

"Even if they don't find out where I am and come after me, between magisters and students you have more than a hundred mages, the largest group anywhere outside the capital. They may decide to come after them. If the whole college goes east with Geffron's troops as escort, how fast can you move? How many days' food do you have on hand and how can you transport it?"

Bertram gave him a shocked look. "Abandon the College? The library? Everything?"

"If we have to. I can have Geffron station scouts a day west of here, set up a beacon fire somewhere we can see it. Have everything ready. If they spot a Dalmian advance we pull out. If the Dalmians don't come, we stay."

Geffron shook his head. "If the Dalm are chasing they'll use cavalry, and we can't mount the whole college — not enough horses, even if we grab the ones in the livery stable. We could get Your Majesty away, maybe the magisters. If Your Majesty thinks the Dalm are going to attack here in force, the College should be moving out tomorrow."

Henryk interrupted him. "Your Majesty. Captain. You are both forgetting the containment sphere."

The king looked puzzled. "I thought it was only a protection against magery. Can it stop arrows? An army?"

"Yes. If Captain Geffron can lend us one of his men with a crossbow I will be happy to demonstrate."

"Will it hold against a Dalmian army? They will have their own mages with them."

"There is no known way to break it using either force or magery. And I doubt the Dalmians know anything about magery that we don't."

The king was silent for a moment, thinking. When he spoke again, it was in a changed tone.

"How much do the Dalmians know about the sphere?"

Henryk thought a moment.

"Some of them must know it exists — it isn't a secret — but they wouldn't know how strong it is."

"So if they discover I am here without much of an army, it will not occur to them that I do not need one, that the sphere will protect me?"

Henryk nodded.

The king smiled. "Good. But it is not proof against a siege; we will still need supplies."

He thought a moment.

"Suppose we are under siege. We cannot open the door because there is a Dalmian army on the other side of it. If Eskil and Morgen and Alessandro combine their forces and defeat the Dalm, how will we know? Do we just stay here until we run out of food, then open up and hope it is safe?"

Bertram looked puzzled, said nothing. In a moment Henryk responded.

"Sylof, the Magister Gatekeeper, can make the opening as large or small as he wants. If we need to see outside he can open a small hole. If it looks safe he opens it wide enough to let one of us out, then closes up again."

Henryk turned to the captain. "Is Len still with you?" Geffron nodded. Henryk turned back to the king. "The Learned Leonard is a war mage with the Companies. Also a graduate of ours. He can teach the students some of what they will be needing."

Petrus turned back to Geffron.

"How many men do you have?"

The captain thought a moment. "We're a half company, fifty men. Just at the moment we have three empty slots and one man sick, so forty-six. If you are using twelve of them for messengers, that gets us down to thirty-four. Should I move them into the College?"

Petrus shook his head. "If Henryk is right about the sphere, they shouldn't be needed — just extra mouths to feed in a siege. If he's wrong..."

"If we come, we bring our own supplies — inside the College or out, my men have to eat. And wrong could mean a lot of different things, for some of which we might be useful. We can't take on an army in the open. But if they somehow manage a breach in the magical defenses we might be able to hold them until the mages repair it."

The king nodded. "I will want opinions from whichever of the magisters know most about the sphere. Also from the Learned Leonard, when he arrives.

"One more thing — the villagers. You need to warn them that the attackers may come here. Best if they move out now."

Captain Geffron shook his head. "Most of the folk around here are farmers and the ones who aren't lend a hand at harvest. It isn't all in yet, let alone threshed. A few could leave, but if they all leave they starve."

"How soon will the harvest be done?"

"A week, two at most. But they still have to dry, thresh, and winnow."

Petrus turned back to Bertram. "How many days' food does the College have in storage?"

"I don't know. Arthur, the cellarer, would be in charge of that."

"Can you have him fetched?"

Henryk looked at Bertram. Bertram nodded. Henryk said, "I'll send for him." He left the room, said something to someone in the hallway, returned.

The king looked at Bertram. "Suppose you bought part of the harvest as soon as it was cut. Do you have space to dry it? Could people here thresh and winnow it? That would give the College grain to last out a siege, save the villagers some of the work and give them money to buy food if they have to run."

Bertram said nothing; it was Henryk who answered.

"We could dry some in the open spaces in the College, the rest in the field outside the sphere, assuming the captain's men could give us warning in time to bring it in. Most of the servants are from farm families, some of them off helping with harvest now; two of the students are from farms as well. Also Jon, the assistant librarian. I expect they could show the rest of us what to do. We'll have to borrow flails and fans from the villagers. I don't know how long threshing and winnowing takes, but if the College is under siege we'll have lots of time and lots of free hands. We would still have to grind it to get flour; I suppose we could borrow a few querns as well. Too heavy to carry and I expect the villagers would rather have their equipment safe with us than out where the Dalmians can loot it."

The king shook his head. "You don't have to grind it, you can just cook it up as porridge. That's what the Companies do when they are on the move, having to live off what wheat they can buy."

Geffron nodded. "Or steal. Bread in garrison, porridge on the march."

The door opened. A man entered, well dressed but not wearing a magister's robe. He turned to Bertram.

"You wanted me, sir?"

"Yes. His Majesty had some questions for you."

The cellarer turned to the king, waited.

"If the College was under siege, with the containment sphere closed, how long could we survive on the supplies you currently have?"

The man thought a moment, opened the wax tablets at his belt, did some quick calculations, looked back up at the king.

"We'll run out of fresh meat in two or three days if we can't buy pigs or cattle from the village. But we have a fair stock of beans, flour for bread. Not enough butter, but oil. If people are willing to live on that, I could feed the College for a week, probably two."

"Suppose we add in wheat — threshed and winnowed but not ground. How much would it take to add another week to that?"

The cellarer looked back at his tablets, thought for a minute.

"Thirty-five or forty bushels should do it."

"We want at least eighty bushels if we can get that much — less if we can buy beans, flour, other foodstuffs that keep. Enough so you can feed the College for at least a month with that plus what you have. We'll be buying it from harvest. How many bushels harvested does it take to give a bushel threshed and winnowed?"

The cellarer shook his head. "I don't know — never been a farmer. Someone around here will. I'll ask around."

Henryk said, "Jon will know."

The captain added, "And see what else you can bring in. Get tired of nothing but porridge pretty fast."

Petrus turned back to Henryk. "You said one of the librarians had been a farmer?"

Henryk nodded. "Jon. Dag recruited him off a farm. Graduated a couple of years back. He'd been helping Jerik in the library as a student, agreed to stay on."

"Can you send him to me? There is too much I don't know."

"Of course."

"Other questions?"

Petrus waited a moment; none of them spoke. "If not, you can go; you all have things to do."

## Chapter 28

*[The College]*

"The Magis...the learned Lady Melia will be with Your Majesties shortly."

Henryk went out, closed the door behind him. Petrus looked curiously around the room, stone walls hung with faded tapestries, a carpet, southern work by the look of it, on the floor, noticed his wife's expression.

"By your face, love, there is a joke I am missing."

She nodded. "Magister Hal. Henryk. The one you said Kieron spoke so highly of. He started to call her the Magistra then remembered where he was. Practically everyone calls her that and some of his colleagues don't like it. My friend Alys told me all about it when I was here before."

The king looked puzzled. "When I told Kieron what had happened he said that she was the one to take you to; I told him I would go, asked him to cover for me, keep my leaving quiet. When I got here and asked to see her, Magister Henryk made the arrangements, told me he had sent someone to ask her to come speak with you as soon as she got back from a farm where two people had been hurt. I gather her skills are thought highly of. But no one explained just who she is or what her connection is with the College."

Isabel thought a moment. "Officially, her connection is that the magisters arranged for her to move to Southdale so that there would be an able healer available if they needed one; I think they pay her a retainer. That says something about what they think of her skills. She's also a good enough teacher so that after she had been giving lectures on healing in the inn for a while half the College, magisters and students, were coming to listen. Quite a lot of other mages too. Alys saw Mari there the first time we came here. She and Alys were in the same class at the College as Melia's daughter Ellen and they were all friends."

"The Learned Elinor? Married to Magister Coelus? Kieron speaks... highly of her."

"So does Alys. She says some of the spells she uses in her work Ellen invented for her."

Isabel hesitated a moment before putting it into words. "I think, if the mages had their own royalty, Melia and Ellen would be part of it. I had that feeling on my first visit. When Melia told me that there was nothing she, or anyone, could do to undo... to cure my barrenness, that I wasn't ever going to have children, I believed her. The College doesn't have women as magisters, so she started giving lectures in the inn. I suppose it's



hard to say 'no' to someone who can turn you into a toad, or whatever the best mages can do to ordinary ones."

The door opened; Petrus examined curiously the lady who came through it. Short, grey haired, plainly dressed. She turned first to Isabel. "Hal tells me that Your Majesty wishes to consult with me again?"

The queen nodded. "About something that occurred after my previous visit here. I..."

Melia held up her hand. "Does it matter if others can hear what you are about to tell me?"

Before Isabel could answer, her husband spoke. "Very much, learned lady."

"Then give me a moment." She walked a slow circle about the room, her lips moving; Isabel could hear no words. Returned to her starting point, she made a quick gesture with her hands, stepped forward. "You can speak now. Is it the same...?"

Isabel shook her head. "No. Five days ago I tried to kill my husband."

Melia said nothing, waited.

"Coming into our room, what I saw was not Petrus but... someone I had good reason to hate. He was dead, dead years ago, but that did not occur to me. There was a dagger in my hand. I stabbed him with it."

"Where did the dagger come from?"

The queen fell silent, her face puzzled. "I should have thought of that. It wasn't anything I had seen before, but it must have been hidden somewhere on me." A moment's pause before she continued. "I think I remember — it feels almost like a dream — my corset."

"For someone who was stabbed by his wife five days ago, His Majesty looks surprisingly well."

"She only tried to stab me. The blade bent."

Isabel explained, "My friend Alys — the Learned Alyson, I think your daughter knows her — was with me. She did something. I don't know what; can a mage turn steel into lead? Whatever it was left her unconscious on the floor and me standing there with a dagger that wouldn't go through my husband's shirt, not to mention his rib cage."

"Or at least not through the mail shirt your husband has quilted into his cloth one if he was wearing it then too, as I suppose he was."

Isabel looked surprised; after a moment the king nodded. "Yes. She didn't know."

"Show me the knife."

Petrus hesitated for only a moment before reaching into the pouch at his belt. Melia looked at the knife curiously, straightened the blade, closed her eyes. Opened them.

"Alyson is a tempering mage. She used all the power she could draw on to turn the blade into the softest iron I've ever seen. Drew more than she should have, which is why she passed out, but it was the right choice. If this started as tempered steel, and I assume it did, I don't think mail as fine as what His Majesty is wearing at the moment would have stopped it.

"Alys has a good brain and goes to some trouble to hide it; not sure my daughter ever noticed. Delighted to hear that she has been using it for something other than chasing boys — getting boys to chase her, I suppose I should say." That got a smile from the Queen. "Now tell me the rest of the story."

"That's it. Once I stabbed him, or tried to, whatever spell was on me came off; I was looking at my husband and trying to make sense of what had happened to his... to the man I thought I had stabbed. It was a spell, wasn't it?"

"A compulsion spell, set to trigger when you saw your husband. Let me see if there is enough residue left to tell us anything."

Melia walked over to where Isabel was sitting, put her hands on the younger woman's head, closed her eyes. Petrus watched, said nothing. After a few minutes, Isabel spoke. "Can you..."

"Sit still, love. I'm not done."

It was almost half an hour before she opened her eyes, stepped back.

"That's what it was. It's done what it was designed for and no, there aren't any other compulsions on you, so you should be able to sleep better tonight than last. Not enough left to be sure, but my guess from the feel of it is League work, or at least a League-trained mage — might be some south. We don't teach compulsion spells here, or not much, what with their being mostly in violation of the Bounds. It doesn't feel like the style of a Guild spell. I don't suppose you've been in Dorayan territory lately?"

Isabel shook her head. "I came home from here by the direct route to the capital in my brother's coach, along with Alys."

"Your brother is from the south, if I have who he is straight. Does he have any Dorayan mages, or Dorayan-trained mages, in his service?"

Isabel thought a moment. "Gaius, his private secretary, is Dorayan, but he isn't a mage; he tried to get Sandro to persuade me to let one of the Legate's mages examine me. There was a mage with the party, but he is from Alessandro's own lands and was trained at the College, spent most of his time here with friends. One of the reasons my brother came, aside from escorting me, was to try to hire one or two more. Also to talk with some of his people who are students here to see if he might want to hire them after they graduate."

"Did he hire any?"

"Nobody extra came back with us and he did not mention hiring anyone. I think Gaius said something about there not being any students interested."

Petrus gave her a puzzled look. "There were three when I was here. And one of them was a southerner."

Melia put another question. "Alys was with you and your brother?"

"She traveled with us both ways, coming and going. We dropped her off at her home in the capital the night we arrived."

"And you at the palace the same evening?"

"It was late and I did not want to make a fuss; we tried to arrange the trip as quietly as possible. So I spent the night at Sandro's townhouse, was brought home in the morning. It was another two weeks before Petrus got back from his visit to the College — he must have arrived a week or two after I left — and I tried to kill him."

Melia was silent a moment before putting her next question. "Where is Alys now?"

It was Petrus who replied. "She's here. I did not want any wild stories spreading. We had enough trouble between the threat of a Bren invasion in the East and my brother at daggers drawn with the Doray over their runaway mage. Alyson was the only witness, so we brought her along. Just to be sure."

"I can't see the girl gossiping over anything that mattered and this does, but it's lucky you brought her along. The spell wasn't on Isabel when I examined her two weeks ago; not what I was looking for but I would have seen it. It was on her when she got back to the palace and tried to kill you. So it was put on her between those times. Alys may have noticed something." Melia went to the door, turned back to the other two. "I'll go look for her. One of my students has a lesson scheduled for this afternoon, so if I don't find Alys and come back in the next half hour or so I won't be back until this evening or tomorrow morning before my lecture. While I am gone, Isabel should see if she can remember anything else — dreams, or things that happened to her on the trip."

She was turning to leave when Petrus spoke again. "Before you go, there is one more thing I wanted to ask about. Three weeks ago a Dorayan mage named Marcus somehow broke the bonds that kept him in League territory and came north to us. Kieron's hope was that he could tell us more about Doray activities in Esland, might even be able to name some of their agents. Unfortunately, breaking the bonds that held him in the League doesn't seem to have broken the ones that kept him from telling us things his master didn't want told. Kieron was trying to free him from those with help from some other mages, including Magister Coelus, but then, as you may have heard, Dalmians attacked the capital."

"Yes. Hal told me."

"After the attack, Kieron told Rorik to get Marcus out of the city, if possible to me here. Both of them are here at the moment, Rorik with an injured arm — you should look at it. It occurred to me that if none of my brother's mages could break the bindings on Marcus, perhaps you could suggest someone here who could."

"Have Rorik bring him to my house — I can look at both of them." She shook her head. "I'm being stupid; he's safer inside the sphere. Me too. I have a key to Coelus' rooms. Have Rorik and Marcus meet me there two hours from now. Katarina's lesson should be done by then."

She went out, shutting the door behind her. For a long minute king and queen sat silent, each looking at the other. It was Petrus who finally spoke.

"Duke Alessandro. Your brother. Kieron has been worried about him, thinks he gets along too well with the Dorayans."

She smiled. "Everybody in the South gets along with the League; they're half our trade."

"The Dorayan lords — that isn't what they call them but it's what they are — are all rich and handsome, their ladies are beautifully dressed. And beautiful. And their mages do amazing things. If you talk with them in Dorayan, which anyone with any pretense to education in our part of the kingdom speaks, they politely hint that with a little help we might be brought up to their level. They don't quite say that all the people north of us are barbarians wearing the skins of wild beasts, but..."

"A lot of the commons are scared of their mages; I've heard all sorts of stories. But for people like us... I know your brother thinks the Doray are a threat and for all I know he may be right, but in the South we're more concerned with what they can do for us than anything they might do to us."

"Which is one reason my brother considers them a threat. You said your brother brought you here to get examined by the learned Melia. Tell me more."

Isabel thought a moment before answering.

"Alessandro was concerned that I had not, would not, have children. I told him that I had been examined by able witches — healing mages — and there was nothing to be done. But of course the witches were provided by Prince Kieron, and my brother..."

"Thought that my brother was keeping you barren so that he could inherit? I don't believe it."

"Neither did I — but Sandro did. He wanted me to go to a Dorayan healer, a woman in the capital in the service of the Legate. I trust the Dorayans less than he does and I know how you and Kieron feel about

them. So when Alys mentioned that there was a healer at the College who was said to be one of the best in the kingdom, I suggested to my brother that he take me to her instead. To get an opinion from a healer not selected by Prince Kieron. Once I convinced him that I wouldn't go along with his plan, he agreed. I... didn't want people talking, so I told my ladies that I was going on a visit to the College, that my brother wanted to hire another mage or two from their students and I was coming along. And now that the College trains women..."

"You might hire one too. Not a bad idea. The same reason I came here a couple of weeks later.

"So Alessandro tried to persuade you to see a Dorayan mage, to examine you. Perhaps..." The king fell silent a moment before continuing.

"You know and I know that your father sent you to court in the hopes of making a royal marriage, putting a grandson of his on the throne. The first part happened, although not quite the way he planned." He smiled at his wife, reached out, lifted her hand to his lips. "But the second didn't and won't. That's not a problem for me; if I die first, my brother will make a good king. When we're both gone... Little Kir is everything I would want in a son of my own, and I expect there will be more; Mari's young. But your brother..."

She nodded. "Wants a nephew on the throne. If he can't have one it must be someone's fault and Kieron is the obvious candidate. That explains why he wanted to believe that I could be cured.

"But it isn't a reason for him to have a compulsion put on me to kill you. There are quite a lot of things he might do, probably including treason if he thought he could gain by it. But whatever else he is, Sandro isn't stupid, and having me kill you, by magery or any other way, would be a stupid thing to do. It puts Kieron on the throne and it gets us — him — blamed.

"The spell might have been put on while I was with him — obviously that's what the Magistra thinks — but if so it wasn't his idea. Either it was done without his knowledge or whoever did it told him they were doing something else, most likely another try to cure my barrenness."

Her face lit up. "That's it. Whoever gave him the idea of going to the Legate's healer, most likely Gaius, planned for her to put the spell on me. When that didn't work he arranged to have it done while I was traveling with them. That last night, when I was under Sandro's roof and Alys wasn't there to notice anything.

"You said we were having troubles with the League. I expect they would rather kill Kieron than you, but killing you and getting me blamed for it and maybe starting a civil war between Kieron and Alessandro might look to them like a step in the right direction.

"We have to warn Alessandro; if they've tricked him this far, they aren't likely to stop. He needs to know that Gaius can't be trusted and why and who is pulling the strings."

There was a pause, both silent, before Petrus spoke.

"I know where Alessandro should be; I asked him to make preparations to assemble the South at Mersey-on-From in case it turned out we needed them to deal with the Bren. I planned to send one of Geffron's men to him — he can carry a message from you as well."

Isabel shook her head. "If Gaius is working for the Doray, if he's planted people loyal to him in the household, the message will never get to Sandro. It only takes one mage loyal to the wrong side to arrange for the messenger to drop dead on his way to my brother. Easier still, Gaius can take the message, tell the messenger he will deliver it, and then burn it instead."

She stood up.

"There is one messenger Gaius can't stop. I'll leave in the morning. Can you provide me with a couple of men from Geffron's company and a mage, perhaps someone from the College?"

Petrus rose, the armchair creaking as his weight left it, took two steps to his wife, embraced her.

"You are a very brave lady, my love, but no. We can't risk it. I can't. I'll see if the College can provide me someone to get a message to Alessandro, assuming he and whatever forces he has assembled are where they are supposed to be. A mage should have better odds of getting through than an ordinary messenger. But you, beloved, are going to stay with me. Where I can be sure nobody is putting any more spells on you."

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His dinner over and the dishes cleared away, Petrus was considering the forces available to retake the capital, how long it would take and how long the citadel could be expected to hold out, when there was a knock on the door.

"Come in." It opened to show Melia.

"By Your Majesty's leave."

She circled the room, speaking words under her breath, then turned to the king.

"Never know who might be watching. Or listening. You never know anywhere else either, but odds are a lot higher when half the folk are mages.

"Has Her Majesty remembered anything more?"

Petrus shook his head. "My wife is out with her friend Alys. They should be back soon. Did you have any luck finding someone who could free Marcus?"

Melia nodded. "Myself. It took a couple of hours to unweave his bindings, then I spent another hour talking with him. A little slow — I'm more used to reading Dorayan than speaking it. But he told me why the attack happened. I thought you might want to know."

"Very much."

"The Doray were losing control, what with your brother finding most of their people here. They decided to do something about it. The plan was to persuade Willem to attack, with Doray gold to pay for it and a whole lot of Doray mages to help. I expect they were the ones who got his troops into the city, one way or another."

"My thanks, lady — that answers one question. If the Dalmians are supported by Dorayan mages that will make the mages here even more important."

Melia nodded her agreement. "What do you plan to do with the mages who are in town for my lectures? There must be fifteen or twenty of them — more than the inn had chairs, anyway."

"Send them off to find lords raising troops — armies always need mages. It's our good luck that so many were out of the capital. And theirs."

"Three or four of the ones who attended my lectures last year and came back know enough by now to be of some real use as healers — you should send them to wherever you think the biggest forces will be assembling. There are half a dozen more who are pretty far along but need more training. They should stay here where I can work with them, along with the most promising of the College students. How long do I have before Your Majesty will have an army assembled and need healers for it?"

The king thought a moment. "The biggest force will be what Eskil can raise in the Marches. Morgen already has an army assembled, but my messenger will have to get to him and then he has to get back west, assuming the Bren are no longer a threat. Alessandro should be at Mersey-on-From with the core of an army. And then there are the royal Companies, ten of them at Aron, the rest scattered."

"By the time we assemble everyone it will be at least three weeks, probably four or five. Too long — I doubt my brother in the citadel can hold out that long. I need to find some way... Figure you have at least a month."

Melia nodded. "No more lectures, since most of my audience will be gone. That gives me more time to work with the students. I'll need it."

There was a brief silence before the king spoke again.

“Did you find out if Marcus knows anything about Dorayan agents here? If the Doray are behind the attack...”

Melia shook her head. “He was tired and it’s not my language. In the morning I will see if I can find someone from the south who speaks Doray better than I do. Then I can get on with what I ought to be doing, which is teaching, while he — or she — pumps Marcus.”

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Petrus looked out the window again — full dark. Not a good time for Isabel to be wandering around the village, even if the friend who kept her company was a mage. He went over to the bed, sat down. Something rustled. Curious, he folded back sheet and blanket. Under them was a single folded piece of paper. He opened it.

*I am going to do what I told you I should do.  
I love you.  
I.*



## Chapter 29

*(Mersey-on-From, Southern Esland)*

"My sister did what?"

"Her Majesty stabbed His Majesty to death. Four days ago." Gaius spoke calmly.

"I don't believe it."

"I have spoken to a traveler from the capital who says he saw the body; we can arrange to have him questioned by Edwin if you wish. But I also have word from my contact in the legation. He thought I — you — would want to know as soon as possible."

"I still don't believe it. I can imagine Isabel stabbing someone, if she had good reason. And if she did I expect she would do a good job of it. But not His Majesty. She was fond of her husband. More important, her position depended on him. Even if he took a mistress — and as far as I know he hasn't — and she found out about it... No."

Gaius hesitated for a moment. "Perhaps it was not precisely her choice. Your Grace knows of compulsion spells?"

Alessandro gave him a look of mixed interest and puzzlement. "I know they exist. But they aren't permitted in Esland and I've never known of anyone using one."

"A prohibition enforced by His Highness. Or not. I am told that Her Highness is a very powerful witch; no doubt she has seen a good deal of Her Majesty. And His Highness has in his service the most powerful mages in Esland."

The room was silent save for the crackling of the fire on the hearth. At last Alessandro spoke. "You are suggesting that Their Highnesses put a compulsion spell on Isabel to make her kill His Majesty, thus ascending the throne over their bodies." He paused a moment. "Very likely mine as well; she is my sister after all. Did either of your sources know where she is now?"

Gaius shook his head. "Not now. But His Highness was at court, and he was the second most powerful man in the kingdom and the heir, so I expect..."

"I am still not sure I believe it. If it is true... I must consider what steps to take. For both of us."

Alessandro considered the matter, eyes closed, finally spoke slowly.

"We are encamped four days from the capital with the nucleus of what could become a substantial army, raised at His Majesty's request for the defense of the kingdom against a possible Brennish invasion. What do we know about the location of the royal companies?"

"Scattered, many sent to the eastern border to support Duke Morgen against the Bren. Besides, if we spread word of what has actually occurred..."

"Morgen? Her Highness's father?"

"In the east, watching the border — two weeks from the capital, or near that. And, I am told by a source I trust, with orders to stay east until sent word that the threat is done."

"So if it comes to open warfare... His Highness may not have an army, but he has a lot of mages in his service, more under his authority."

"The Magistrate has more and better. I have no doubt that he would be willing to lend as many as necessary to Your Grace. His Highness is no friend to the League."

Again silence while Alessandro considered the matter. Risks, certainly. Very grave risks, whatever he did. But also opportunity. Finally he spoke.

"I am not the only lord who can raise troops. You think His Highness is attempting to usurp the throne — but he is, at least, the heir. If I try to rescue my sister and seize power, with no claim at all... The next heir is Kieron's son; I can hardly claim for him, not while either of their Highnesses is alive. There are the king's cousins, Renald and Radulf, but I don't see that putting one of them in would do anything for me and they don't have many troops behind them. There's Iolen's boy in Forstmark at the Einvald's court. The Marches supported Iolen, and the Marcher earls can raise a lot of men if they want to. They and I together ... You have a different plan?"

Gaius nodded. "Your Grace brought your sister to a famous healer in Southdale in the hope that her barrenness could be cured. Suppose you had succeeded."

Only a moment before Alessandro nodded his understanding. Gaius continued, "Her Majesty returned to her husband's bed several weeks ago, rose from it finally with child. A healer, perhaps the same that cured her, found that she was carrying a son. A son who was heir to the kingdom. A very vulnerable heir.

"And, knowing all those things, as soon as the rest of our levies get here I come north in force, take possession of my sister for her and her son's safety, deny the rumors that blame her for the king's death or admit them and blame it on enchantment, and claim power as regent — temporary regent — for my unborn nephew. Nine months later..."

Their eyes met; Gaius finished the sentence. "Nine months later a boy is born; boy children are not that hard to find, and Her Majesty would of course have been kept in seclusion by her loving brother for her own safety."

Alessandro closed his eyes, turning over the idea in his head.

"It is an improbable, impossible, reckless plan. But it might work."

He opened his eyes, glanced down at the desk.

"The top drawer has the lists. For my own people, polite orders to raise as many men as can get here within two weeks of today. For everyone else, His Majesty has commanded me to assemble a force to defend the kingdom against a threatened invasion. I pray them to bring what forces they can, to assemble at Mersey-on-From two weeks from today. Don't include Petronio or his brother, they would be more of a nuisance than a help. Francisco ... I'll write a special letter to Francisco, now that we're kin he'll expect it and he knows my hand. He should be able to raise a hundred of his own, easy, twice that from his followers — one reason I married his sister.

"And a message to Bianca, telling her that we are raising a host here, will need supplies. There will be people in the hold who know what an army needs, and Laurentius should have a fair idea what we have or can buy. Better to have her attention on that than on trying to figure out which of the hold ladies have shared my bed, or might — I had to send Cristina north last year. Credit where credit is due; at least my wife is competent.

"A lot of letters to write; get Francis to help you."

## Chapter 30

*[Mersey on From]*

"Learned."

The mage looked up from his desk. A guard, by his voice a worried one.

"Yes?"

"Two ladies at the front gate. Say they want to speak with His Grace."

Guido waited; there was more to this than that.

"One of them says she is his sister. The queen."

That brought Guido out of his chair, mind racing, face deliberately calm.

"Was there anyone else there when you spoke to them?"

The guard shook his head. "Just me on duty, sir. Didn't like to leave it, but I'll be back in a minute, and I thought you..."

"Yes. Bring the ladies here now; don't let them speak to anyone on the way. Mention this to no one; when your watch ends come back here."

Good fortune, very good fortune, the God's favor, that the guard on duty was one of his people. How to assure his silence for the longer term could be considered when the immediate problem had been dealt with, passed on to Gaius — who, further fortune, was in the building, upstairs with the duke or near him. Gaius had made it very clear that messages or messengers for the duke went through him.

In a minute the guard was back, shepherding two ladies, one obviously a female servitor of some sort. Guido had never seen the queen, but the lady in the lead, by dress and looks, fit. Her presence should mean all going according to plan, the king dead, the queen fled to her brother. Best to delay until he could get word up to Gaius.

"I am the Learned Guido. What can I do for you?"

"I am Isabel. I am here to see my brother. Take me to him." The tone of one who expected to be obeyed.

To accept her identity or not? Best remain ambiguous.

"I will send someone to tell His Grace's secretary."

Isabel shook her head. "I am not here to speak with Gaius. Take me to Alessandro. Now."

"It is not that easy, madam. You may be... as you say. But it is not my part to decide who speaks to His Grace and when. I have my orders."

"I am the Queen of Esland and you will take me to my brother."

"I will not, madam. You will remain here while I send word to..."

Isabel interrupted him. "You will take me to Alessandro now. If you do not I will scream; I have a very loud voice. You may then explain to your master how you have treated his sister and why."

Guido hesitated a moment. Neither a public scene nor obedience to the queen's command was an option, which left only one alternative. It would make assuring the guard's future silence still more essential, but that could be dealt with, one way or the other. The words were ready in his mind; he raised both hands, began to speak them.

From behind the queen her servant spoke a single word in the same language. Not a servant then. He closed his eyes, reached out with his mind. Not a servant.

Then the pain hit him. He clutched at his chest, spell forgotten. His knees gave way.

Isabel watched in astonishment as the mage fell to the floor; the guard bent over him. She turned back to Alys, a question in her face. Hardly the occasion to ask for an explanation. The queen considered her options, took one, screamed.

In a moment the room filled, guards, clerks, a dozen men. Isabel pointed dramatically at the body.

"The mage. He just collapsed. Someone send for a physician."

She recognized one of the faces. "You. Eduardo. Take me to my brother."

Astonished recognition; he bowed. "Yes, Majesty."

...

The door to the duke's office opened; he looked up in surprise, recognized the intruders.

"Isabel. You should not have come. Now I will be blamed."

"Blamed for what, brother?"

"Your killing the king. They will say I put you up to it."

"Who told you, brother, that I had killed Petrus?"

"Everyone is saying it."

"And who told you that?"

He paused a moment to think. "Gaius told me. But he had spoken to someone who had seen the body."

"A considerable achievement. When I last spoke with my husband, three days gone by, he was alive and well."

There was silence for a moment before she spoke again.

"Gaius told you that I had killed my husband. Stabbed him perhaps?"

Alessandro nodded.

"Oddly enough I attempted just that, not by my own will, but by good fortune failed. It seems the spell was put on me while I traveled in your company. In the judgment of the Learned Lady Melia, by a Dorayan mage.

"I assured my husband that you had no reason to seek his life, less by my hand. The League, however, loves neither Petrus nor Kieron, and the Magistrate's servants may see no need to ask permission for what they do — even in other people's houses. Odd that your secretary, your Dorayan secretary, knew what should have happened."

Again silence; this time it was the duke who broke it.

"Gaius is Doray, but the only mage traveling with us was Alexio, whom I hired last year from the College. Do you suspect him of working for the Doray?"

Isabel shook her head. "This year too, you intended to hire from the College. Did you?"

An odd change of subject; he gave her a puzzled look. "No. There were no third years in search of positions."

"So you told me. And yet, when my husband came on the same errand a week later, there were three."

"Gaius asked at the College, and..." He fell silent.

Isabel looked over at Alys.

"I spoke to the gatekeeper — at Her Majesty's suggestion. Gaius never entered the College."

The queen turned back to her brother, waited.

"You are saying that Gaius is a mage? And in service to the Magistrate."

She nodded. "And could not enter among so many Eslandi mages without risking discovery. Precisely so."

The duke thought for a moment. "I will call him in and question him; his office is nearby."

"It might be prudent, brother, to have a truthteller present. One not hired by Gaius or under his influence."

Alessandro nodded. "I know the very man." He stepped to the door, spoke briefly with one of the pair of guards outside it, came back to the queen. "You remember my friend Lord Ricard? From Southbank, almost on the Dalmian border? As far from Dorayan influence as one can get and still be in the province. And he has advised me several times over not to trust the Doray. He arrived yesterday with his levy; I've been assembling troops here while waiting for word from the capital."

"He has a truthteller with him?"

The duke smiled. "His brother."

In a few minutes there were voices at the door. Alessandro went to it, came back with a small man, neatly dressed. "Learned Robert, my sister, Her Majesty Isabel." The mage bowed. "I am about to question my secretary; I wish to know if he speaks the truth."

A moment later Gaius entered, looked around him curiously. His master spoke first.

"Gaius. Her Majesty believes that you are a mage and in service to the Magistrate. Is it true?"

The secretary gave him a puzzled look. "Why would she believe such a thing?"

"We may come to that presently. Is it true?"

Gaius turned his head to scan the room, pausing to look carefully at the smaller mage. "And who is this, your Grace?"

"Someone I trust to tell me if you speak the truth. Now answer my question."

"I hold the Magistrate in great respect, but I am your Grace's loyal servant."

"That was half of my question." He waited a moment, then turned to the truth teller, a question in his face.

"I am sorry, your Grace. I cannot tell if he speaks truth or not; he is shielded."

"Shielded?"

"Protected by magery, both against my art and any attempt to read his talents."

Alessandro turned back to Gaius. "And how does that happen, if you are neither in service to the League nor yourself a mage?"

For a moment the other was silent. Then, with a sudden motion, he stepped to the door and turned, putting all four of the other occupants of the room in front of him. Raised his hand.

Alys stepped between Gaius and the queen. He spoke three words, made a gesture with his right hand too quick to follow, a moment later a second with his left. She froze, her own hand half raised.

"So much for Your Majesty's dressmaker. As for Your Grace..."

"Guards!" At Alessandro's shout, Gaius turned to the opening door, two guards beyond it, made a second gesture that froze them in place, started to turn back.

Two steps had brought the duke behind the Dorayan mage. His face frozen in astonishment, Gaius went to his knees, collapsed slowly, face forward, to the floor. Alessandro leaned down, wiped his dagger on his secretary's robe, sheathed it again, turned to the queen.

"It appears, sister mine, that you were correct.

"Do you happen to know," he gestured at Alys and the two guards, "how long these spells are likely to last or how they can be removed?"

Isabel shook her head. "I do not. My advisor on matters of magery," she nodded towards Alys, "is at the moment silenced."

Alessandro turned to Robert; he too shook his head. "I have no knowledge of such spells or how to deal with them, Your Grace."

Slowly, with an effort, Alys lowered her hand, spoke, the words slurred. "The magery." She stopped a moment, continued, "linked to the mage. Few minutes more for them." She fell silent, took a tentative step forward, another. A third; Isabel reached out to steady her. The duke smiled at her, spoke again.

"Robert. Fetch your brother and a few men of his that you are sure you can trust. Say nothing to anyone else. It is not likely that Gaius was working alone."

In a few minutes the truth teller returned, accompanied by his brother and two others. Duke Alessandro was the first to speak.

"It appears, Ric, that I ought to have taken your council sooner. The matter has, however, been dealt with." He gestured at the body of his secretary. "Help me drag this behind the desk out of sight. Also the rug. I am about to question everyone in the building with the help of your brother, to find out which ones were working for me and which for him. There is no need to give them advance notice of where things stand."

...

Duke Alessandro looked up from the list of names on his desk, spoke to Ricard. "I believe we are done, so far as staff, guards, and mages stationed in this building are concerned." He looked down again, up. "Three guards under restraint, one dead. One more apparently fled — unless he was away from his station and out of the building for some other reason. Also one mage found dead on the floor of his office. Some hours ago, I am told. Poison, perhaps?"

It was Isabel who replied. "Guido, you mean? He tried to keep me from reaching you."

"And you killed him? I did not realize you had become so lethal."

Isabel shook her head. "He died."

Alys abandoned her quiet conversation with the other mage, turned to the duke. "Her Majesty did not kill him. I did. He was trying to use magery against her."

"I knew that the College taught a range of useful skills, but not so wide a range."

"Not the College, Your Grace. I attended some of the Magistra's lectures. Having learned how the body works, it is a short step to how it can be made to stop working."

She turned to the queen. "There are valves in the human heart that bend to let the blood flow in and out. You know that my talent is for making hard things soft. And soft things hard."



The silence was broken by Ricard. "Your Grace. Did Willem's news reach you? It occurs to me that, under the circumstances, it might not have."

"I have heard nothing of any Willem, saving the king of Dalmia. One of your people?"

"A neighbor. He farms on the border and both he and his sons visit well beyond it. I told him where I thought you could be found and lent him a fast horse. Having no friends of my own at Court, I thought it best that the news go through you."

"What news? Told you what?"

"A Dalmian army, a large one, assembling in Karso two weeks ago. He did not know for certain where it was going, but that's less than two days their side of the border. By now it could be well into Esland. According to his younger son, who saw it, the army was accompanied by a considerable baggage train, including what looked like disassembled siege engines. Even with their speed held to that of the wagons, if they were heading for the capital they may well have reached it by now. If His Majesty does not yet have warning — "

Isabel interrupted him.

"The Dalmians took the capital a week ago; I'm surprised you didn't have word from people fleeing in this direction. His Majesty is in Southdale." She glanced at Gaius's body.

Alessandro nodded. "I expect he blocked accounts by anyone who made it here from the capital and from Ricard's friend Willem as well. Killing them might have been noticed, but he could always say he would pass a message to me and then send the messenger off."

Isabel smiled. "Yes. That's why I came myself."

Her brother looked at her with surprise for a moment, then nodded again. "One messenger they could not block. Although I gather Guido tried. I hope your husband appreciates what he has."

"All I have here so far are some of my own people and Orlando's company; they had been making a damned nuisance of themselves in and around Piso, as mercenaries will in peacetime. I thought they might provide a useful body of cavalry if there turned out to be need. The rest of what I can raise fast should be here in another ten days; I sent messengers out three days ago. After what Gaius told me had happened, I thought they might be needed."

"And now they are."

"We will need more boats. The *Lucrece* is anchored here now — you can have what used to be father's stateroom if you like — but she doesn't have space for an army. He turned to Alys. "You are welcome on board as

well, of course." For a moment their eyes met, before he turned back to his sister.

"I've already sent word for Rafael. He's sure to be on the river somewhere, this time of year, and the merchants will just have to do with what winds fortune sends them for a while. With Rafael and enough boats we can move our troops north faster than horse or foot could travel. Supply by water too — feeding an army by land is a pain, as I discovered five years ago dealing with troubles on our eastern border.

"More messages to write. Francis has a good clear hand; I'll have him fill in until I find someone permanent. This time not from the League."

## Chapter 31

*[A fishing village near the capital]*

“I can get you in, but it’ll cost. If the Dalm spot it...”

“How are they to know I’m not just one more of your crew, helping to deal with the fish as you pull them in? Surely your people don’t stay on board all the time. Once it’s dark...”

“Once it’s dark, odds are the Dalm won’t see ye leave. But it isn’t just Dalm. There’s a Doray stationed at the docks. Don’t expect he needs daylight t’ see things. Don’t expect they think much of spies sneaking into the city, either. Risking my boat, maybe my life. Can ye pay enough t’ make it worth my while?”

“Can’t you dock a ways down from where the mage is? I can’t be the only one coming back in — you said things quieted down after the first day or two. The city isn’t much use to them without people. I can manage twenty silver.”

Rog shook his head. “Forty at least. Should be more.”

Half an hour and thirty silver pieces later Ellen was on board the fishing boat headed downstream, wondering about healer tricks to keep her stomach quiet. Not something her mother had had reason to teach her.

“Past the chain now, almost there, best go in the hold, stay there while Sim and I unload. I’ll give a knock when it’s full dark, none of the Dalm too close.”

The hold was stuffy and smelled, not surprisingly, of fish. In a few minutes she felt the boat slow, heard the sound of voices. Something scraped across the deck. Eyes closed, she reached out with her mind. The dock, a man on it. Rog threw him a rope. A minute later the boat was at rest against the wharf. Both men got out. Sim checked the rope tethering the boat, gave a friendly nod to the man who had caught it, sat down on the flat top of the bollard. Rog walked down the quay, between the river and the line of buildings.

Two more fishing boats, half a dozen men. Further along a cluster of more. In armor. Rog said something to the soldiers, went in the door they were standing outside of, into a room with...

A mage. Surely Dorayan. Waiting for dark did not look like such a good idea.

The first thing to do was to get out of the hold. She stood up, put her hands against the hatch cover above her, pushed. It didn’t move. Looked up, eyes closed. Something was resting across it — a wooden box half filled with fish and water. She pushed harder. Nothing. Too heavy.

The hatch cover was boards nailed to cross pieces — nothing for a weaver to get hold of. The box... was boards glued together. She reached into the join with her mind, unwove the glue. Once the fish and water were out of it...

She felt the boat move under her. A moment later footsteps on deck, several men, the boat rocking from their weight. Too late.

Rog's voice. "Other side of it, Sim. Lift. Damn it, thing's falling apart." A plank, one side of the open box, hit the deck, noise of water, fish flopping. The boat rocked again. A loud splash — one of the soldiers, backing away from the flood of fish, had gone over the side. Voices, laughter.

Someone, one of the Dalmian soldiers, opened the hatch, looked down, pointed at Ellen, said something. When she didn't respond he spoke again.

"Come out." Heavily accented but this time understandable. He reached down, helped her up out of the hold. She looked around curiously. Four soldiers and both fishermen on the boat, two more soldiers on the quay, one of them dripping. Just beyond, taller, blue robed, the mage, watching with a bored expression.

Rog met her gaze defiantly.

"Thirty from you, fifty from them. A good trip." Ellen said nothing.

The soldier who had helped her out spoke again. "With me. Come." She followed him over the plank linking boat to quay, stepping carefully. The mage spoke to the soldier, turned to her. One finger under her chin he inspected her slowly, spoke. A different accent.

"Who sent you here?"

"Nobody, sir. I'm looking for my husband. He was in the city when you took it. I just hope..."

With luck not a truth teller. Or, if he was, not about to ask questions to which she could not give a truthful answer. Also not skilled enough to spot the woven barrier that masked her talents. If he did...

His hand dropped into the neck of her tunic, lifted up her amulet.

"What is this?"

"A protective amulet, sir. The mage in our village made it for me. To keep insects off."

Among other things. She did her best to look scared — not hard, under the circumstances — and humble.

He thought a moment, turned to the soldier, said something in Dalmian, turned back to Ellen.

"Go with Cunrad. Do what he tells you. In the morning he will take you to be examined. Then, if you are telling the truth, you can look for your husband. If not..."

"Yes, sir."

The soldier, Cunrad, gestured for her to follow him, set off along the quay. After a few minutes he turned down a street, led her to a house, through the open door. Inside, the main room was occupied by three other soldiers, two on chairs against a table playing at dice by the light of an oil lamp. The third, watching them while he drank, looked up. A bed had been dragged into the room, two bedrolls on it, two more along the wall. In one corner a desk, its drawers emptied, an untidy heap of papers. Another corner was a tiled fireplace, fire burning in it. Cunrad said something to the others, pointed at her. At the bed. Turned back to Ellen.

"In the morning, Doray. Now, nice to us."

She backed off a step. Spoke with an uncertain tone.

"Where is the privy? I need..."

He gestured to a door, she went through it, closed it behind her. A window, but too small. And the wall looked solid. Through the window she could see it was full dark.

Cunrad looked after her a moment, turned back to his companions.

"I brought her, so I go first. You can roll for second."

They nodded.

"What the — "

Werner was pointing at the desk, where the stack of papers was burning.

"Spark from the fire?" He turned to look at it, reached for a blanket. The logs went up in a sudden, blinding blaze, then went out. So did the lamp and the papers. Smoke filled the darkened room.

Out the door, down the street, heading away from the Quay. Right on the first cross street. An intersection with a larger street, a sentry and a hanging lantern. Ellen stopped, pulled shadows around her for a cloak, crossed through the pool of light, careful to make no noise.

A block farther brought her to the shuttered marketplace, a familiar corner. She considered turning right, back towards the river to the prince's house, decided against; the place might well be watched. Better Olver's house to see if any of the inhabitants were still there, if not, what she could learn of them. That Coelus or her father or Olver himself would have remained, perhaps hidden in the basement laboratory, was unlikely but not impossible. The house was not likely to be watched. The Doray knew the prince for their enemy. If they knew their real enemies there had been no sign of it.

Olver's house, when she reached it, was unharmed, although two of its neighbors showed signs of fire damage and one across the street was a burnt-out shell. She stood watching for a few minutes from the narrow front yard of the ruin. Olver's door was half open but she could perceive

no sign of life. At last she crossed the street, went in the familiar doorway. Closed her eyes. Nothing.

Which might or might not mean nobody — she was not the only mage who could weave barriers. The trap door was closed, fitting invisibly into the pattern of the parquet floor. No sign of life in the building or the street outside. She spoke a word, reached down, felt for the hidden catch, lifted.

The basement was empty, the racks of elemental reagents undisturbed save for a piece of paper tucked between two flasks. Unfolded, a note:

*We are trying for the citadel.*

C

In daylight she would be able to see whose banners were flying over the citadel, but better sooner than later. Unlikely to have fallen to magery if Olver and his friends were there, but the invaders might have brought siege engines. Best to go and see.

She transferred three flasks from the rack to her wallet, wrapping them in her scarf. Air, water and earth, along with her fire, could support, at least in theory, any possible spell. A spell based mostly on reagents would be weak, but even a weak spell might prove useful. Time to go.

A block short of the park that surrounded the citadel, the street was blocked by a wall of piled cobblestones, the opening guarded by two Dalmian soldiers. Beyond she could see several campfires, soldiers moving around them, smell their smoke. A block farther east, a smaller street, a single sentry sitting on a chair no doubt dragged out from one of the nearby houses. She wove shadow around his head, moved silently past him. Half a block farther down she took shelter in a burned-out house.

A lot of Dalmian soldiers. At night, hidden by woven shadow, she could with luck avoid them on her way to the postern gate of the citadel. The greater hazard would be mages, Dalmian or, more likely, Dorayan, traps of Dorayan mage craft as well. The only Dorayan mage she had seen so far was the one on the quay but there had to be more, many more, in the besieging force.

She cast her mind to the limit of its range, searching through the last few houses, all occupied by soldiers, and into the park. No mages. Twenty or thirty feet beyond the houses at the edge of the park a wall of earth sheltered still more soldiers. On the besiegers' side benches, an occasional looted table. A few soldiers stood on one or the other to watch over the wall. The nearest bench had a man sleeping on it.

Past the last house on her left, then turning to cross its front. The door opened — she stepped back, out of the way of the man coming out. Something broke under her foot. The man turned, she froze. A puzzled look in the direction of the sound, a brief pause, then he continued out of the door, along the earthen wall to where an officer was sitting at a desk

with a pile of papers. The officer looked up, spoke to the soldier, marked something on the sheet of paper in front of him. Ellen drew a long breath.

What had broken under her foot was a dead branch from a tree at the far corner of the house. She moved past the door, found a position sheltered between the tree and the house.

The dirt wall was unlikely to bear her weight. She reached out to it, wove together rootlets, blades of grass. Not enough. Nobody between her and the sleeping soldier — she moved in his direction, in one hand a flask, unstoppered. Five feet short of the wall she poured out its contents, spoke the words in her mind, with her mind's eye watched the dust soak into the ground, spread towards the wall, fill it. Backed away.

Too many soldiers, too quiet. Fire... but if something took flame for no reason... Dangerous to assume they were all fools.

She carefully edged towards the officer, lifted a second flask out of her wallet, unstoppered it. The papers on his desk moved gently in the breeze. A whispered word. The wind lifted the papers, scattered them. He looked up, noticed, put his hand out to hold down the last few, called out something. A sudden rush of soldiers from the wall after the blowing papers.

Ellen put one foot on a bench, grabbed the top of the wall, over it, the noise of her landing drowned in the sounds of voices and movement.

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Kieron was thinking, not for the first time, about the route from the townhouse to the east gate, what obstacles there might have been, in the chaos of the attack, that his very able wife, aided by one of the most formidable mages he knew of, could not have dealt with. They had surely made it. Once out of the city ...

"Your Highness"

Kieron looked up, gave Alayn a questioning look.

"The guard at the outer postern gate says someone is there. A woman. Asking for you."

"Someone from the Dalm?" He shook his head. "Not at night, and not to the postern — if they wanted to bargain for a surrender, ... Who the hell else?"

"Fetch Martin — whatever she says, we will want to know if it's true. And Otto, just to be safe. I know one woman who is fire and I suppose there could be another."

Twenty minutes later the Prince, accompanied by Alayn and the two mages, reached the courtyard by the postern gate. Otto was the first to speak.

"Fire. Be careful, Highness. I'll shield."

Kieron closed his eyes, opened them again.

"That will not be necessary. Let her in."

Alayn helped the guard unbar the gate, opened it. Ellen came in, nodded to Kieron. The gate swung shut.



## Chapter 32

*[The capital]*

Seated around the table in what had been the king's council chamber were half a dozen officers, at the head Prince Walic. He looked up as Justin entered.

"Your Highness sent word you wished to consult with me."

"Yes. Now that our siege engines have finally arrived we are prepared to deal with the citadel and any royalty that is hiding in it. We will want whatever help you can offer."

Justin nodded, spoke.

"The citadel has underground chambers forward of the wall; one of our people scouted two of them out three years ago. A fire mage hidden in one can use perception to locate attackers, fire to kill them. An earth mage can turn earth to mud under advancing men or engines. Mages of other sorts can hinder or kill attackers in other ways. All, of course, within the limit of their range. We believe that there is a third chamber constructed more recently, farther out from the wall than the two on our map. Several of our mages were in range of it before we discovered our mistake.

"Your siege engines outrange their mages. With the guidance of our map and the assistance of our magery you can use them to collapse the chambers, killing their occupants. No need to take the risk of putting your people or engines where their mages can reach them."

One of the officers at the far end of the table, robed as a mage, spoke.

"How do we deal with the chamber not on your map?"

Justin smiled.

"We plotted the locations at which our mages were killed by enemy fire. Around each we drew a circle whose radius was the range of our most powerful fire mage, surely longer than the range of any of theirs. Neither of the chambers we have mapped is inside those circles, so the attack could not have come from either of them. The third must be in the intersection of those circles, probably near its center. That gave us a good enough estimate to calculate where the tunnel connecting the chamber to the citadel must run, since whoever constructed the defenses would have made the tunnel as short as possible; we have now added it to our map. Drop enough boulders on the tunnel to collapse it and the chamber is useless."

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Kieron turned back from the window, telescope in hand, spoke to Alayn.

"Their engines are moving into position; it is not going to be long now. Fetch Captain Torgeir."

When Alayn came back with the captain, the prince gestured him over to the window.

"I cannot see what is behind their earthwork but I count four of the big stone throwers showing over it. Is everything ready?"

"I think so, Highness. All four of the springalds we brought up from the armory are emplaced on the curtain wall ramparts, as near to the attackers as we can get 'em and crewed. They've been ranged in using ordinary shafts. There are ten of the special shafts you and the Learned Olver prepared for each. Twelve men with siege bows, braced and ready. When the wall goes down in front of one engine they target the crew for as long as they have targets, then shift to the next.

"Ordinary crossbows don't have a hope of reaching them at that range but Einar and his boys are up top the ramparts. Their longbows don't have the punch of siege bows but they shoot a hell of a lot faster. Should do some real damage to the crews — if they can reach them. As long as our mages can keep the wind blowing the right way Einar thinks that plus the height should do it."

Kieron thought a moment.

"Coelus and Ben aren't trained for war. Have you made it clear to them that we don't care about the breeze at ground level — what matters is up high where the arrows are spending most of their flight?"

"Yes, Highness. Went over it again with them just yesterday. They think they can manage, provided nature's wind isn't blowing the other way and the enemy air mages aren't paying attention."

"I hope so. The Dalm can replace the men on the ropes but I doubt they have many spare engineers.

"Get back to the wall and your boys now. Send up Wilham and the Learned Olver."

He turned back to Alayn.

"With enough time the Dalm can breach our curtain wall, shift the engines forward in range of the keep, breach that, storm — they have to have easily ten times our numbers. But from what the Learned Elinor reported, Eskil should be here in another week or two. Even if he can't take the city they'll have to pull in the company that's outside the city wall blocking our back gate.

"With luck, what we have planned will buy us a day. Dur and Otto working from the two underground chambers in front of the wall might buy us another when they get closer — it doesn't take much to weaken a trebuchet sling enough so it breaks when they use it. I have the mages in place now, just in case the Dalm decide to attack without waiting for the

trebuchets to break our wall, maybe use a ram against the gate instead. Fire is good against men as well as against siege engines but no fire mage can make much of a dent in an army, not even if we had the real Durilil instead of one of his namesakes from Olver's people. If we can stall them for enough days and if the Marchers don't take too long to get here..."

"I understand, Highness. And if we don't make it, every Dalm we kill is one fewer for Eskil to deal with when he does get here."

Kieron nodded.

"And every day they spend fighting us is one day longer before they leave the city to conquer more territory, kill more people, hunt down my brother, start trying to persuade some of our lords to switch sides."

Wilham came up the stairway, followed a moment later by Olver. The older man stopped to catch his breath. The younger spoke. "Your Highness sent for us?"

"Yes. The attack is coming shortly. The Learned Olver has already provided one useful spell to our defense; his talent may find use later if some of our engines need repair. But what I want him for now is not doing magery but understanding it.

"We know what the Dalmian mages can do — a little less than what we can, thanks to the work of Magister Coelus and the Learned. But the Doray will have spells we do not know. I want you," he looked at Olver, "here with me, where we have a good view of our curtain wall, the enemy earthworks, the attacking engines. If something happens that we do not understand, you are more likely to figure out what it is and how to counter it than any of the rest of us. I want you," he turned to Wilham, "down at the wall, where a good deal of what is happening will be in range of your perception. Watch for magery or anything else that we are not expecting. We plan a few surprises for the enemy, starting very soon, but they may have some for us."

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Imre looked over the nearest of the four engines, the one under his direct command. The crew on the ropes had the end of the throwing arm almost down to ground level, the counterweight most of the way up. Kolos, the strongest of the team, was by the pile of boulders that had been brought in that morning, using a balance and weights to weigh them, marking each with chalk — all else being equal, the heavier a rock, the shorter the distance the trebuchet would throw it. A copy of the Dorayan map of the citadel was pinned to Imre's plotting table. By standing on a chair he had been able to look over the earthworks to orient the map, using the citadel gate for a mark. The first shot would be an ordinary boulder. Once he had the range, he would start delivering the Dorays' presents.

Looking along the line of the earthworks that protected them he could see the other engines getting ready as well, each with an engineer busy plotting range and angle. They would release in sequence, starting with his, to avoid any confusion about which shot belonged to which engine. The prince had promised a prize to whichever engine took out the first of the hidden targets shown on the map. Imre planned to win it.

Kolos carried over one of the boulders, put it in the sling. Imre read the weight chalked on it, did a quick mental calculation, checked it against a graph on the paper sitting on the plotting table next to the map, adjusted the mechanism that controlled the angle at which the sling would release, turned to look down the wall. Two of the three engines were showing ready flags.

The third flag went up. Imre took a last careful look to make certain his engine was oriented parallel to the line he had marked on the ground, signaled Kolos to pull the release. The counterweight came slowly down, the throwing arm up faster, faster still. The sling pulled the boulder off the ground, swung out, released as the arm came vertical; eighty pounds of rock down range. The counterweight, past its low point and rising, slowed, swung back. Kolos caught the rope attached to the arm; three of the others helped him pull it back down for the next shot.

"Angle perfect, range long — you hit the wall." That was Mihal, the best spotter in the crew, standing on a chair to look over the earthwork. He was the one man at risk — a lucky shot from one of the enemy siege bows and Imre would need a new spotter.

"How high?"

"About halfway up the wall."

According to the notes on the map, the curtain wall was fifteen feet high. To hit the chamber, he had to shift the point of impact back to...

"Hey!"

That was Mihal again — had he been hit? He was pointing at a shaft tipped with an iron point sticking out of the near side of the siege wall. No siege bow should be able to get through two feet of dirt, not at this range. The head was too big. Around the shaft the dirt was melting away, the wall above sagging. Another shaft. A third. Eight feet of wall collapsed. Mihal clutched his chest, went to his knees, down.

For a moment Imre was frozen, watching the earthwork that had shielded his crew and him melting into the ground. An arrow over what was left of it barely missed him. Of the cluster of men around Kolos, hauling on the rope, one was down. Imre yelled, "Move — we don't have cover!"

By the time they were all safely past the gap in the earthworks, a third man was down. Imre looked around, spotted an officer coming out of one of the houses.

"They've torn a hole in the earthworks; three of mine wounded. Get some shields out here."

The officer turned around, went back into the house, yelled something. In a minute two soldiers came out, unarmored but with shields. Imre pointed at where his wounded were lying. The soldiers, shields up, grabbed one man by his arms, dragged him to shelter. Another. No more arrows seemed to be coming. A third.

"Send someone for a healer."

He turned to see what was happening to the other three engines. The nearest had its arm vertical, bodies strewn around it, a gap in the earthworks in front of it. The third was just throwing, the fourth had its arm down to reload.

He hesitated for only a moment. Yelled. "Cease throwing. Abandon engines."

As he spoke, the fourth trebuchet released. A moment later the earthworks in front of the third trebuchet started to collapse.

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"It worked. I don't know how many of them we got, but nobody is going to be manning those engines until they rebuild the wall."

Olver lowered his telescope, nodded. "We got a few but most of them made it into cover. See for yourself."

Kieron took the telescope, rested it on the window sill, looked through it, handed it back to Olver. "I don't suppose you could figure out how to make this work for perception as well as eyesight?"

Olver smiled, shook his head, passed the telescope to Alayn.

Wilham came up the stairway. "Problem, Highness. You had best come see."

Kieron and Alayn followed him down the stairway, into the courtyard, up the stairs to the rampart that topped the curtain wall of the citadel. Wilham pointed.

"One of the rocks from the first barrage hit the wall a bit behind the chamber on the left, I'm guessing they somehow knew it was there and were aiming for it. Two others fell short in the center, no idea what they were aiming at. I didn't see the fourth one. Look at where one from the second barrage hit."

The depression was twenty feet in front of the wall, ten feet deep, stonework exposed at the bottom of it. Wilham spoke again. "That's the

roof of Dur's chamber — one more rock in the right place and we're short a fire mage."

The prince's tone was puzzled. "How the hell did they do that? None of the other rocks did. I've never seen... Oh."

Wilham gave him a puzzled look, said nothing.

"They have the same thing we do, only better. We put a static spell on the shafts, they put it on the rock. It hit, the dirt turned to mud, it splashed. And they know about the chambers, were targeting them. Go down and tell Dur and Otto to get the hell out of the chambers — once the engines get back into action, they're death traps."

He turned to Alayn. "Fetch Olver. Coelus and the learned lady too. Tell them to meet me in the guard room by the keep entrance."

Ten minutes later, four mages were gathered around a small table lit by light from narrow windows high above. Kieron was the first to speak.

"Our trick with the Learned Olver's static earth spell worked, collapsed the earth wall in front of the enemy engines. We probably killed a few of the men serving them. By now they will have figured out how we did it, will know they have to patch the wall with something that isn't dirt. With luck that might buy us a day.

"I was hoping that the fire mages in the two chambers forward of the wall would buy us another, but that isn't going to work. Just before the engines stopped throwing, one of them dropped a boulder practically on top of the chamber that the Learned Dur was in. With ten feet of dirt plus another foot of stone that shouldn't have been a problem — the mage chambers were designed to stand up under bombardment. But when the rock hit, the dirt splashed — we could see the stone roof of the chamber from the rampart. If they hadn't stopped throwing, I expect one of the next few boulders would have hit it. When they start throwing again that's going to be their target, and after that the other chamber."

Olver looked up. "You are saying that they have the same spell."

Kieron nodded. "Only a stronger version. It took three or four of our shafts to collapse a section of dirt wall. One of their rocks made a crater ten feet deep, most of twenty feet across."

The older mage shook his head. "It's the same spell. The heavier the object it is embedded in, the more power it will hold. That is why you couldn't just do the same spell three times on one shaft and have that shaft take out ten feet of earthwork by itself.

"Once they finish with the chambers I expect they will try to use treated boulders to melt the dirt under the curtain wall. I'm not an engineer, but I wouldn't be surprised if they could bring down the wall that way. We need..."

He stopped, pulled out his tablet, started scratching notes. Coelus spoke.

"Air to neutralize earth?"

Olver nodded. Coelus turned back to Kieron. "If Your Highness will excuse us, I think what Olver and I should be doing is working out a schema to keep the wall from collapsing, protect the second mage chamber. When we have it, we'll want your help testing it."

In a moment only Ellen and Kieron were left in the room.

"Assuming Olver and your husband figure out how to keep the Doray from collapsing the wall with magery, the Dalm can still do it the old-fashioned way; it will just take them a little longer. Since they know about the chambers, can maybe destroy them, we need more ways of slowing the attack."

"Yes. I have one."

Kieron looked at Ellen, waited for her to continue.

"Once it is full dark, Dur and I plan to get in range of their engines and go to work on the ropes."

Kieron shook his head. "In range of the trebuchets is in range of any mages on the other side of their earthworks; they don't need light to see any more than you do. Even if Dur's range is as long as yours, which I doubt, someone is going to perceive you — the Doray have strong mages. All of us together couldn't take on the Doray mages — I'm damn sure you and Dur can't do it by yourselves. You go out, you don't come back, and we are down to one fire mage."

"They won't see us."

He gave her a puzzled look, said nothing.

"Watch."

Ellen pointed at the lamp on the table; it kindled. She reached into the flame, drew out a thread of fire, with flickering fingers wove a fabric of flame, stroked it down her body. "Close your eyes and look at me."

In a few seconds Kieron opened his eyes again. "You can make yourself invisible to perception?"

Ellen nodded.

"How I got to the postern gate without either your mages or theirs seeing me. It's the same principle as the containment sphere — you can't perceive through that either. I plan to put it on both of us. As long as there aren't any lamps or torches casting light far enough to reach us, we should be safe enough."

"If you start killing people, won't they spot you?"

She shook her head. "We don't plan to kill anyone. If the Dalm realize we can get in range without being seen they will find some way to stop us doing it again: Doray mage traps, caltrops, ... Our plan is to damage the

trebuchets in ways that won't be obvious. Things keep breaking. Eventually they quit for the day, take everything apart and replace any rope that won't hold under tension. I expect the dock area can provide enough ropes, but it's all a matter of time."

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Walic looked around the group of officers, spoke to Imre.

"Have you figured out what happened to the engines, why the ropes broke?"

"Istvan says a fire mage. We have enough rope, between our supplies and the shipyard, to get the engines back into action, but how do we keep it from happening again?"

The prince turned to Istvan.

"Shouldn't the mages you had on picket duty have spotted an enemy before he got close enough to burn through ropes?"

Istvan nodded. "If he was coming from the citadel. But I didn't have pickets watching behind us."

"So it could have been an Eslandi mage who didn't make it into the citadel. This time ring the engines with mages, ours and our allies, watch both ways, make sure no Eslandi fire mage gets close. If he tries, kill him."

"Your Highness is assuming that the damage was done by the enemy."

The prince gave Istvan a startled look.

"I assume you didn't do it."

"I'm not the only fire mage this side of the siege wall. There might be one of ours who doesn't want Your Highness to come home as a hero."

"One of my brother's people? Could be."

Veder, one of the company commanders, looked up.

"It doesn't have to be ours or theirs — it could be the Doray. They want us to kill the prince and king for them, but ..."

"But every time I propose to leave the citadel under siege, head out and finish the job, they say no. Maybe they figure two small kingdoms are less danger to them than one big one. Especially two small kingdoms at war with each other."

Walic thought a moment, turned to Istvan.

"Start with our fire mages — call all of them together, ask some questions. I'll lend you Foris to make sure they are telling the truth. If all of them are ... the Doray only have three fire mages and one of them is Arius; if he had been hanging around the siege someone would have noticed. You can find the other two, ask them how they think the Eslandi managed to burn the trebuchet ropes. Vitos to translate."



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"I have a question. And an idea."

Olver recognized the voice of his oldest friend, looked up.

"Yes, the spell Coelus and I came up with works; we tested it with His Highness this morning. The air mages are out applying it now. With luck, the damage you and Ellen managed last night will give them enough time today to secure the dirt over the chamber and at the base of the wall before the engines start throwing.

"What's your idea?"

"That wasn't my question."

Olver waited.

"The static earth spell. What triggers it? Why does it only process when the shaft hits the wall or the boulder the ground?"

"I could show you the schema — it's here somewhere." Olver looked down at the untidy pile of notes. "But the short answer is heat. The shock of impact heats the projectile and the sudden warming is the trigger. If someone threw one of our shafts into a fire he would discover a new and messy way of putting fires out. That's how ours works and my guess is that it's how theirs works too — I couldn't think of any easier way of doing it.

"I'm not sure how much heat how fast would be too much; you will have to calibrate. I'll find the prince and see if we can make you some sample rocks to try it on."

Dur nodded. "Their charged rocks will be by the engines. If they don't throw all of them before dark..."

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"The Dalm prince wants to speak with you. He doesn't look happy."

Justin reluctantly stood up, abandoning his half-finished breakfast.

"Send him in."

Walic's tone was that of a man with his temper under tight control.

"By dark yesterday, we had the engines working again, all the damaged ropes replaced. Threw a few rocks just to check. One of yours among them, but it was a dud, hit where your map says the second chamber should be and bounced.

Justin said nothing, waited.

"When the engineers came out this morning, all they could see of the engines were the tips of the throwing arms poking up out of the dirt. Imre set some of the troops to digging them out.

"The engines were most of ten feet down. So were your rocks — and everything that had been close to them, including chunks of the wall. Do

those damn earth spells of yours have a timer? A long fuse? Something that sets them off if you don't use them?"

Justin shook his head. "No. Leave the rocks long enough and the spell fades off, but that takes days."

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"How soon will you have the engines dug out?"

"Half a day more, Highness. Two or three hours of bombardment before dark. Are the Doray going to enchant more rocks for us?"

Walic shook his head. "The Doray got us into the city, but their attack on the citadel flopped and their help since then has done more damage to us than to the enemy. We have a lot more men than the defenders, we have engines to break down their walls. We can do it without any more magery. Ordinary rocks to crack the chamber we can see, then more to break down the curtain wall. And once that's down ..."

There was a brief silence. Imre turned to Istvan.

"Did you find out who damaged the ropes?"

Istvan shook his head.

"None of our fire mages and none of the Doray — I spoke to all of them and Foris says they were telling the truth.

"I don't know if they tried for the ropes again, but someone got close enough last night to set off the spells on the rocks that were supposed to bring down the wall, and he did it without being spotted by the mages guarding the engines. So we go back to the simplest theory, a fire mage from the citadel. We know they have one, because he killed three Doray mages during the first attack — that's why they dumped the job of taking the citadel on us.

"And we know something more. According to the Doray, the mages he killed weren't in range of either the curtain wall or the underground chambers in front of it. That's why they thought there must be a third chamber not on their map and farther forward. It didn't occur to them that there might be a barbarian who outranged their mages. A fire mage that good could have gotten close enough to scorch the ropes on the engines, night before last, without our watchers spotting him. Also close enough last night to set off the spells on the rocks we were planning to throw at them, assuming he had some way of doing it."

Imre looked up. "If that's how it was done, if they have a second Durilil, how do we stop him from wrecking my engines every night? Do we just fix them every morning, throw till dark, hope to knock down their wall before we run out of rope?"

The Prince shook his head. "No need to stop at dark. Once you have the wall targeted, just keep throwing. Rocks are cheap and the wall isn't going anywhere."

He turned to Istvan. "Can we push our observers farther forward to keep him off — or catch him? If that puts them inside his range, is there some way to protect them?"

Istvan thought a moment.

"At the edge of his range even a strong mage is weak. If I'm close behind I should be able to shield them. Once Imre takes out one chamber, we can push forward on that side."

A brief silence, all three thinking. Imre broke it.

"He'll be coming out the front gate of the curtain wall — gets him closest to us. And doing it as soon as it gets dark, to stop us throwing."

Istvan nodded.

"I could have my boys target the front gate before dark, drop a couple of loads of small rocks in front of it just after. No guarantee on the timing, but we might get lucky."

Walic nodded, turned to Tamas.

"Leave dealing with masonry to Istvan. Push our line forward, sandbags, shovels at night, you know the drill. Build Istvan protection for his mages, as far forward on the right as he wants it. Coordinate with Imre. If he can't break the wall, use the ram on the gate, ladders, all the usual stuff. We have a lot more men than they do, and I'm getting tired of sitting here.

"If the Doray don't like it, we have a lot more men than they do, too."

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Two days later...

Kieron turned away from the window, a grim expression on his face, spoke to the assembled officers.

"You all know the situation. Our mages stalled them for three days, three different tricks for a day each. The same trick twice gets dangerous — we could have lost a mage or two if nobody had noticed them targeting the front gate just before dark. When both sides ran out of tricks the Dalm kept coming, and they still outnumbered us ten to one. We held them today, but it cost us more than a quarter of our men and three mages. They have what's left of the curtain wall now — at least we made them pay for it — and by morning they will have hundreds of crossbow men on it, more than enough to suppress what are left of ours in the keep. Their ram will be out of the mud and pointed at the front gate. This is the end.

"I expect Walic to offer us terms first thing tomorrow morning. I plan to ask permission to send out the staff and our wounded. I do not intend

to surrender. His ram will finish what the engines have already started. When they storm the keep we can kill a few more. The longer it takes, the better the chance that Eskil gets here in time to trap them inside the walls before they decide to move out."

Kieron stopped; for a moment there was silence. Captain Torgeir stood up to speak.

"We still have more than a hundred men uninjured and most of our mages. We could open the back gate, attack the company blocking it and try to fight our way free of the city."

Kieron shook his head. "They have had three weeks to prepare their position. And if we do break through, what then? They have cavalry to pursue us; even if we get our horses through alive, there are not enough to mount more than a handful."

"Enough to mount Your Highness and a few of the mages to protect you. Odds may not be good, but at least we could try."

Coelus stood up to get the prince's attention. "I have a better solution, Highness. One that gets none of us killed."

"Surrender?"

"No. Three years ago, when Ellen was researching the containment sphere around the College, she built one. She plans to build another."

The prince looked at Coelus with astonishment. "Your lady can build something big enough to hold us all?"

"The sphere she built then was only about a foot across, but all it takes to expand it is fire."

Kieron looked doubtful. "We only have three fire mages and your lady is the strongest of the three. If she could only get the sphere up to a foot, adding the other two is not..."

Coelus interrupted him. "The fire does not all have to come from a mage, Highness. Pile up everything that can burn, starting with firewood, set it ablaze for Ellen to channel. She plans to start here in the Great Hall, so set up the bonfire on the hearth here. Fetch whatever we will need to stay alive until the relief forces arrive — food, water, medical supplies, bedding if we have time. When the sphere is big enough, pull everyone off the defenses and into it."

"You are sure this will work?"

"Nothing is certain, Highness — the enemy might attack before our sphere is complete. But Olver, who designed the sphere that protects the College, believes it will work."

The prince turned to Olver. "We were always told that the sphere protecting the College could not be penetrated by force or magery. Is it true?"

Olver shook his head. "It cannot be broken by force. With enough magery anything can be broken, but breaking is much harder than supporting and we have strong fire mages to support it."

The prince drew a long breath. "Do it."

An hour later he was sitting in the great hall watching with fascination as Ellen, Dur, and Coelus went to work. Dur was sitting on the chest of gear that he had brought with him to the citadel two and a half weeks earlier. One of the handles had a rope tied to it. Coelus, holding the other end, was laying out a circle around the chest, placing chairs to mark it — Kieron, watching, guessed the radius at thirty feet or so. Ellen was standing, reading over a scroll — presumably the schema for the spell. One of the keep servants came in, added two logs to a growing pile on the hearth of the great fireplace. Another was pulling a cart with a water barrel on it. A third brought in a bucket of burning coals, placed it by the wood.

Dur looked up. "Leave that barrel here, but the rest go into the cellar right under us. Food too."

Coelus gestured to Dur, pointed at the stairway behind him, several feet outside of the marked circle. Dur nodded, picked up the chest, moved it towards Coelus. Coelus went around the circle rearranging the chairs, then noticed the prince and walked over to him.

"We need to know where to center it before Ellen starts the sphere."

"We will have access to the cellar?"

"The cellar and the stairway to reach it will be inside the sphere; we plan to store food and water under us to save the work of carrying them up from the store rooms. I spoke to Wadard after you approved our plan; he's getting everything moved, having people bring firewood here, supplies down below. If there isn't enough firewood, there's always furniture.

"Now, if Your Highness will excuse me, they may need my help."

Ellen and Dur had moved the chest again; now Ellen was kneeling where it had been, her hands cupped at floor level, lips moving. Kieron closed his eyes, reached out with his mind. Between her hands was a tiny bubble of fire.

Ellen stood up, stepped back from her creation, took both of Dur's hands, said something to him. Kieron closed his eyes again, reached for the mages. They were fire now, the outlines merging. He had read of mages pooling their power; that must be what he was seeing. What had been a bubble was a sphere now, a foot across and growing, fire pouring from the two mages into it.

He turned at a sound. Coelus was standing back from the fireplace, an empty bucket in his hands. Where he had poured the coals, smoke was rising. He picked up sticks from one side of the pile, put them on, added a

small log. Another. Stood back. A faint breeze blew through the hall, fanning the fire.

It was a roaring blaze when one of the two mages, Kieron was not certain which, spoke a word. The fire went down, almost out. Turning back, Kieron saw that the sphere had grown again, almost doubled. Again a breeze, the noise of the flames again catching on the wood. Again the word, the fire suddenly silent, the sphere pulsing outward. To Kieron's perception the two linked mages were pulsing too, brighter and then darker as fire poured into one, gathered strength, through the other into the sphere. He opened his eyes. Ellen and Dur were still standing by the chest, the older mage resting his left hand on it, his right holding Ellen's left, her right hand pointed at the sphere, its top almost chest high to her. Growing.

Kir. Mari. He might see them again.

## Chapter 33

*[The capital]*

In fifteen years with the royal companies Lieutenant Thorgil had had a lot of errands he liked better than this one, but none of them had been given to him by his king. One hand on the reins, one steadying the lance held upright, its base resting on his stirrup. He was riding alone into enemy territory, the white pennon at the lance's tip his only defense. He hoped it would be enough.

The first Dalmian was less than a mile from the east gate of the capital, a single soldier, on foot, standing in the middle of the road, lit by sunlight through the trees. Thorgil brought his horse to a standstill, waited. The man looked up, startled, called out something in his own tongue. Two more came out of the woods, one on each side of the rider. He turned his head, first left then right, to look at them, held the lance steady; the breeze spread out the pennon. One of the two stepped back into the woods, came out with a companion who spoke to Thorgil, his speech heavily accented but understandable. "Are you coming in to surrender?"

Thorgil shook his head. "I am coming under flag of truce to bring a message from my king to your commander."

The other pointed at his sword. "You are armed."

"Travel is dangerous." Thorgil unbuckled his sword belt, handed sword and belt down to one of the Dalmians. With odds of four to one and likely more in ambush, a sword would be of very little use to him.

"Come with me. I take you to my captain."

Two hours and three levels of officers later Thorgil was in a room in the palace, facing someone who looked important. The other was the first to speak: "I am Walic son of Willem and in command of this expedition. I am told that you have a message for me from your king."

"I do." Thorgil reached into the wallet at his side, moving slowly, withdrew the paper. "His Majesty wishes to negotiate your withdrawal before more people are killed, on either side. Here are the terms he offers."

One of the Dalmian guards accepted the paper, handed it to Walic. The prince unfolded it, read it, put it down, looked back up. "Your king generously offers us permission to leave the city and the kingdom. He does not offer us any reason to do so."

"Only your lives. In a few weeks His Majesty will have the entire force of the kingdom under his command. You are in our territory, far from any source of supplies or reinforcements. His terms then may be less generous."

"I will consider the matter. It would be of more interest to me if His Majesty was prepared to offer us something more, in gold or land, in exchange for peace. Boris-on-Tam and the left bank above and below were once ours."

The prince fell silent, looking expectantly at Thorgil.

Thorgil shook his head. "I am only a messenger; His Majesty has not authorized me to negotiate on his behalf. I will report your response. He may send someone else or he may come himself. In force. Have I Your Highness's leave to return to him?"

"I will first need to prepare a response for you to take to your king. It is growing late; you may leave in the morning. Until then my people will take care of you."

Taking care of him turned out to involve several Dalmian officers, curious but not unfriendly, and quite a lot of beer.

"Alem says you told the prince that your king was coming with a big army. Is there going to be a real battle this time?"

Thorgil shrugged, took a drink from his mug. "If you come out to fight, there will be a big battle. I expect more of us than of you, but only the gods know. Or you can stay in the city and starve."

"We won't do that; we're running low on beer already. Your people make good beer, but not enough of it."

"That why you came? Beer back home wasn't good enough, had to come steal some of ours?"

The other grinned, took a long drink from his mug. "Yours is good, but I come from Lopek, where it's even better. Now Mati there," he pointed at one of the others, "is from the south, where they only drink the beer when they can't get any horse piss."

Mati took a slow drink before replying. "Reason Veder came was that our women won't have anything to do with the men from Lopek unless they wash; if they did wash they couldn't go back home — nobody would let 'em in. And the mares run too fast for them. Hoped women here would be less choosy. Or at least the mares." He drained the rest of the mug. Thorgil refilled it for him, lifted his own mug to his lips, took a slow drink that left it still half full, refilled it from the pitcher in his other hand.

For the next ten minutes the exchange continued, pulling in additions from others. Thorgil continued to match their drinking half a mug to a mug, doing his best not to be obvious about it. Not something he could get away with at home, but here...

When they ran out of insults, the conversation again turned serious.

"Truth to tell, don't know why we came. Your king must have done something to make the Doray really mad at him. Orders to kill him and his brother if we found them. Crazy — ever catch anyone that big, sell him



back and retire. Never heard Willem had anything against them anyway, less you count some land his grandfather lost to theirs, has to be our allies."

Veder reached over to refill Thorgil's mug. "But since you're here, you can tell us where we should go next. Is the beer better north or south in your kingdom? Going to get killed fighting, might as well die happy."

"That's easy. Best beer north in the Marches, where I come from. Best fighters too, so maybe you should head south instead. Hear the women down there are good looking, not so particular as ours. From what Mati says, should suit."

Veder gave him a glare, Mati a grin.

A third officer cut into the conversation. "How about we split the difference, head east? How are the beer and the women that direction?"

"Where I...when I was stationed east of here, the beer wasn't bad, but not as good as at home. Women too."

"Prince Walic's been wanting a real fight ever since we got here, prove he can do better than his brother did against the Forsters four, five years back. Expect prince'll be happy to go fight your king, supposing he can figure out where he is." The officer looked at Thorgil expectantly.

Thorgil shook his head. "My orders were to deliver a message, invite your people to go back home, not set up a battle. If battle is what you want, all you have to do is wait."

Veder refilled his mug, drank, turned back to Thorgil. "How about we play guessing games? If I guess where your king is, you pour me another."

"No need to play games — happy to pour."

"I'll guess anyway. First guess is north, in the Marches, where you say the best fighters are. If I wanted an army, where I would go. Beer too."

He waited for a response; Thorgil said nothing.

Mati was next. "My guess is south. Easy women."

The third officer — Thorgil hadn't gotten his name yet — cut in.

"If you're king, all the women are easy. I'll split the difference, guess east of here. Heard that's where you train your mages. Armies need mages. All the Doray we've got, you'll really need 'em this time."

Pompi, sitting alone on the other side of the wall, opened his eyes, made a note in his tablet.

Thorgil picked up the pitcher; all three officers held out their mugs, waited.

He filled them all.

There was silence while they drank. It was Thorgil who broke it. "How come you are sitting here instead of going out looking for someone to fight? City folk, afraid of getting lost if you head out into the woods?"

The three officers looked at each other; it was Mati who answered.

"Up to me, we'd leave a company here to keep what's left of the citadel under siege, head out with the rest. What the prince should be doing. Instead of sitting here waiting for your king to put an army together and come to us."

Veder shook his head. "It isn't the prince — up to him we'd have headed out a week ago, maybe two."

Thorgil looked puzzled. "Thought the prince was commanding."

"Prince commands us. But he has to listen to the Doray — we need their mages. Doray want us to hold here — don't know why. Expect the prince'll get fed up with them one of these days, but hasn't yet."

The third officer drained his mug, put it down. "Doray want royal heads, prince and king. Now that they know the king is out there somewhere, maybe they'll be willing to let us go looking for him."

"If your prince does decide to come after us, which one of you ends up staying back here watching the citadel while the rest get to fight us?"

Mati considered the question. "Figure at least one company stays, maybe two. With luck not mine."

"Or mine."

"Or mine."

"With luck none of ours." That was Mati again.

The next morning Veder brought Thorgil to where his horse was stabled, helped him with saddle and bridle, escorted him to the east gate. They were met there by an officer carrying Thorgil's sword. He handed it up. "And this is from Prince Walic for your king." A flat package, wrapped in silk. Thorgil took it, slid it into a saddlebag.

"My thanks for the beer. Expect I may be seeing you again, supposing your prince doesn't take up His Majesty's offer."

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"We now know where the royal fool is — east of here. My thanks to your mage. We need to catch him and kill him while his army is still assembling."

Walic fell silent, watching Justin. In a moment the mage replied, "I agree; the order not to go farther never made sense to me. But I will have to put the matter to Arius. It is his and his master's command, not mine or my master's. If he agrees, how long will it be before you can have your army ready to move out?"

"One day, two at most. And if he does not agree? Could we leave him and his mages here with the forces guarding whatever is in the keep while you and yours accompany us?"

"He believes he has authority over me and mine."

“You have as many mages as he does. I have an army and am getting impatient. Between us...”

The mage closed his eyes, reached out with his mind. Two Dalmian guards at the door to the throne room. In the next room three more Dalmians and Pompei. Any of the Magistrate’s mages in the palace were too far for his perception and almost certainly for theirs. He opened his eyes, looked at the prince. Nodded.

## Chapter 34

*[The capital]*

*“Our allies have attacked and breached the citadel but some of the defenders are still holding out in the keep.*

Arius paused, looking at what he had written. It might occur to his master that with so many Dorayan mages, almost half of his master’s and as many from the Archon, breaking a barbarian hold should be easy. Especially one that, at this point, was defended entirely by magery. So far it had not been.

*The Dalmian commander believes that the Eslandi king is still alive somewhere east of here and wants to go after him.”*

Footsteps outside the door. He blew gently on the ink to dry it, pulled a blank sheet over the sheet he was writing on, reached out with his mind. The footsteps were Justin. It would be worth speaking firmly to him, and others as well, about dealing with what was left of the citadel’s garrison; surely someone on his team could solve a riddle set by a barbarian mage. Until the barrier was broken and any royalty it contained had been dealt with they could not take the next step in the plan, the withdrawal of the invading army, leaving what remained of the capital for the local lords to fight over. The Magistrate had made it clear that that would be the test both of the Dalmians’ willingness to follow the plan and, more important, the Archon’s. A pity that, never having learned the language of the western barbarians, he had to rely on Justin and some of his people to arrange matters.

Justin was not alone. Two other mages with him, several more people behind. Arius reached out farther. Two more mages by the back door, a dozen others. Armed men. Something was happening, something disturbing. With two quick words Arius brought up a barrier against magery.

Justin entered without knocking, followed by two of his mages, four Dalmians with crossbows. Disturbing indeed.

“Aulus is claiming the Magistracy. I am here to demand your surrender.”

As he spoke, two more mages, three more Dalmians, came in from the back door, spread out along the wall behind Arius. A compliment, but not a welcome one.

“I can see that you have the advantage of me here, but do you think you can overpower all of my people? There are as many and stronger of ours than of yours here.”

"Yesterday there were. Today five. Perhaps by now four. You were leaving three thousand Dalmians out of your count. All mine."

Which answered one question, but there was another. "And at home?"

"I have promised Walic our help in dealing with the Eslandi king — it should not take long. Once that is done, we run downstream with a certain wind. In three days Aulus has us back and makes his claim. Do you think that half of your master's mages, taken by surprise, will be a match for all of ours? And we have allies at home as well."

Justin fell silent, waiting for a response. There was a long pause while Arius considered his options.

He himself was a dead man or, worse, a prisoner — given enough time, it might be possible to break his bindings, make him into a servant of the usurping traitor. There was a chance that he could kill Justin before he himself died, fire stronger than earth, but more likely not — the other would be prepared and he would have only a few seconds in which to work.

What of his master? The Magistrate was no fool — fools did not rise to that position. He might have resources that Aulus, like Arius, was unaware of, had left out of his calculations. Justin spoke of allies, but surely most of the other archons would prefer the ruler they now had, one who ruled with a light hand, to an upstart from their own ranks. If two or three of them came in against Aulus...

If his master was taken as much by surprise as Arius himself, there might not be time. If only there was some way of getting him a warning. Attack and die now or surrender and hope for a later chance of escape? Justin had been very clever but Arius knew himself the better mage, both in power and skill.

"I surrender. What now?"

"You will be brought with us when we return home, bound with both iron and magery. A pity that I cannot convert you here and now — you would be very useful — but our binding witches are not with us."

"And the war here? Once you have dealt with the king what will become of your allies, with no mages save a handful of their own?"

Justin shrugged. "Once Aulus is where he belongs, he will consider matters. If the Dalmians have taken all of Esland by then and put a suitable puppet on the throne, our control over one kingdom will suffice for two. If the local barbarians have succeeded in expelling them, they may at least reconsider the risks of angering us again. Best if the Eslandi prince is dead, by our hands or one of his rivals, but if not we are no worse off than we were before, perhaps a little better.

"It is the great prize that matters. In a few weeks Aulus will have it. The real purpose of this campaign has been served."

## Chapter 35

*[Northpass Keep, Northern Marches]*

"Your boys are being fed while Nick and some of my people arrange quarters for them. Can't squeeze all of them into the west barracks but the rest can pitch in the courtyard. Now tell me why you are here and what I can do for you."

Carl hesitated a moment, arranging answers and questions in his head. "We were at the ford of Aron, ten companies, in case Duke Morgen couldn't manage the Bren. Week and a half ago, Princess Mariel reached us with word of the fall of the capital. She had escaped with the prince's son and one of her mages, sent the boy off to Earl Eskil with the mage as escort, rode post east to bring word to us and Morgen.

"She said to..." He hesitated. "Her advice was to bring as many of our companies as we could back west to help retake the capital. Would take more men than we have, but everyone knows what the Earls can raise if they want to."

Bertil nodded. "As we saw three years ago. But this time..."

"This time they will be on our side, or so Her Highness believes. She wouldn't have sent the boy to Eskil if she didn't trust him. Eskil raises troops, Finn raises troops, Morgen comes west to join us. Adds up to a considerable army. Feeding them all, Eskil's problem."

"And mine," Bertil interrupted. "Supplies are in fair shape, can get more if needed and I expect they will be. Farms around here are happy to trade meat and grain for gold. Do we know if Morgen...?"

Commander Carl nodded, continued. "Problem in the East turned out to be raids by a couple of Bren hotheads. Morgen persuaded a couple of other Bren to raid them while they were off raiding him. Problem solved, so he should be free to come back west. I took Her Highness' advice, moved six of my companies north by water to where the north road crosses Aron, west by land. Another to Southdale to protect the College, see what help we could get from them. Her Highness says the Dalm have Doray support, which means we need all the mages we can get.

"Three companies left at the ford, just in case — didn't have supplies to get my whole force here anyway. We've been living off the river, grain barges up from the south, local fishing boats. After we left Aron supplies were what we could carry. One reason I'm here and grateful to you for feeding my boys — we've been on reduced rations for the past week.

"Second reason, I figured if Her Highness was wrong about the earls, you could use us. We gave Finn's keep a pass on our way west. My intelligence officer had a brother in the garrison here three years ago. Been

telling the story of how Earl Eirick tried to trick you into letting him into the keep, pretending to be reinforcements. Got some of my officers worried about trusting Marchers and ending up dead. Me too."

The commander fell silent. The castellan responded to the unasked question. "I don't think you need worry. Eskil guested here most of a week ago on his way to meet with Finn. He had Eirick Iolensson with him. Turns out the boy escaped from the Einvald's court a couple of months back, ended up with the prince and princess. And Kir, the prince's son. The two boys, cousins, about the same age. Hit it off. Decided to be brothers.

"Eskil brought Eirick along to make it clear to anyone in the Marches who wants to put him on the throne — and some do — that he isn't his father, doesn't want the job. Iolen only had the one son, nobody else left from the side that lost out after the old king died. Most of twenty years, but it looks like that fight's finally over. I expect some here want the Marches out of the kingdom, a few might like to go Forstish, but with Eirick and both earls against it..."

Bertil fell silent.

Carl waited a moment to be sure the castellan was finished.

"Eskil says he is loyal. Eirick says he doesn't want the crown. How sure are you it's the truth? Another reason Eskil could have Iolen's boy with him..."

Bertil interrupted him. "Is to help raise another rebellion while the rest of us are busy with the Dalm?" Carl nodded

Bertil smiled. "After the rising the prince decided we could use a truth teller so he sent us one. She's still here. Said they were telling the truth. Besides, Kieron sent me word a month back that Eirick was with him and friends with his boy. He trusts Eirick. I trust Kieron — hard man to fool. Hope we still have him."

Carl, looking a little less worried, responded to the change of subject. "Any word? All Her Highness could tell me was that both king and prince were in the capital when the Dalm took it."

Bertil shook his head. "So far as word from either of them, no. The story coming out of the capital is that both of them were killed, which makes Kir the heir — no other kin but Eirick till you go up to King Thoma's sister, down to her grandkids. If Petrus or Kieron got out alive I expect he would have made it to Eskil or here, or maybe the College to recruit mages. We should have gotten word by now. Best hope is that they made it to the citadel and are holding out there.

"Eskil's brother has people scouting in the direction of the capital. Might bring back word whose flags are flying where."

## Chapter 36

*[Troutvale]*

Noon meal, the crowd in the great hall thinning out, din fading. Anders looked up from his plate at a familiar face. "Sigurd. Didn't know you had arrived."

The other nodded, slid onto the bench across the table. "Arrived yesterday, been talking with Asgeir. He thought I should talk to you."

Anders gave him a curious look, said nothing.

"About Prince Eirick. Earl's going slow, cautious, hasn't named him yet as heir."

Anders shook his head. "Earl Eskil announced that Eirick was his heir two, three weeks back."

"Not heir to the kingdom, though. Royal companies arrived today, camped down by the road, six companies, six hundred men. More'n we have and near as good – and Earl Eskil's been sending men west to Sven. Companies fought us over Iolen. Don't expect they'll take his son as heir. Asgeir figures we need to name our heir soon as we can, make sure we have enough folk here to make it stick."

Anders put down his cup. "How do you figure Eirick for kingdom heir?"

"Didn't you hear? Hrolf Ivertson brought the news, came in from the capital week and a half ago. King and prince both dead, killed by the Dalms."

"Mebbe. Still leaves Kir, prince's son. Prince was the king's heir, prince's son his."

"Prince's son was in the capital, Dalms got him too. Or he's their prisoner, and that's worse. Hrolf says Dalms have Doray mages with 'em. Expect they can make him do what they want. Willem has daughters. Marry the kid to one of them, soon as she bears, prince's kid meets with an accident, Willem declares his grandson heir to Esland, himself regent. One more reason to declare for Prince Eirick soon as we can. Don't want the Dalms ruling us."

"One problem with your story, Sig. Kir isn't dead. Isn't a prisoner either."

"How did he escape the Dalm then, where is he, and how do you know?"

Anders grinned. "That I can tell you. Got out of the capital with Princess Mariel and the Learned Elinor. Mari rode east to fetch her father, Ellen came here with Kir. Reason I know he's alive is I was playing chess with him this morning. Boy's pretty good."



There was a long silence. Sigurd broke it. "Doesn't change anything important. Iolen was the real heir, his dad being the one King Thoma chose. Prince Eirick is Iolen's heir. Companies will back the kid though. Need a big enough force here to make them give up, accept Eirick."

Anders refilled his mug from the pitcher, drained it. "Dalm and Doray in the capital aren't enough of a problem, you want the Marches at war with the Companies? Likely with Morgen too — Mari is Kir's stepmother, expect her dad will back him.

"Besides, there's no need. Kir and Rick are oathbrothers, closer than most kin. Good kids both of them. Last twenty years we had two men on the throne, king and prince, brothers, even if only one of them wore the crown. Make Kir king with Eirick at his side, our heir's where we want him without us having to fight anyone but the Dalm."

Sigurd pulled the pitcher over to his side of the table, refilled his mug. "Three years back you were backing Prince Eirick's dad. Earl even made you his herald. Easier, not harder, now the king and prince aren't around anymore. You just don't want to fight. Comes of going south to that college, turned you soft. Should have stayed in the Marches."

"Happy to fight the Dalm. Fighting the Companies just does the Dalm's work for 'em. You never did have much sense about who to fight, Sig — I remember you trying to take on Sven back when we were both younger. Ended with you in the pool where we used to fish. Course, you were drunk at the time, mebbe Sven figured a dunking was what you needed.

"Couldn't keep your head once the beer got to it. Still can't. Sober up, then tell me why we should be fighting the rest of the kingdom 'stead of the folk that invaded us."

"Takes more'n a couple of mugs to get me drunk. More'n one pitcher holds, and we've been splitting it. Expect you've probably forgotten times I drank you under the table, walked out on my own feet."

"Sometimes. Sometimes we had to carry you out. Expect those are the ones you don't remember."

A pause in the conversation, Sigurd searching for a suitable reply. Anders spoke first. "Like you said, I was in the rising. Saw how it turned out.

"Don't know if you remember, but a bit before the mountain blew up, all Earl Eirick's food stores went up in flames. Figure the prince and his mages did it somehow. With no food and no Forstish army, we were in pretty poor shape. Prince could have offered terms a fair bit worse than he did, asked for the Earls' heads, maybe some others, maybe mine. Sent all of us he didn't trust north, put his people in the holds. From where he sat, we were traitors tried to bring in a Forstish army, take his capital, mebbe

kill him and his brother. Not a lot we could have done to stop him once the rest of the royal forces showed up — can't keep an army in the field without food.

"I was the one brought the prince's terms back to the earl, good terms considering. Didn't even know the prince was in the keep till he stood up to name the terms and guarantee 'em.

"One part you don't know, cause I never told anyone but the earl. Morgen's daughter that's Princess Mariel now, prince's wife. Maybe widow. At the College with me. Knew her pretty well. After I got the terms from her father, prince endorsed them, still wasn't sure we could trust 'em, considering what rode on it. Asked Mari. Prince had proposed to her during the siege. Figured she should know.

"She said they would keep the terms. And why. Prince and duke wanted to tie the kingdom back together, had worried about it a long time. Reason to give us generous terms. Reason to keep them. Told Earl Eirick. He accepted the prince's terms. They kept them.

"Try to break up the kingdom, steal the throne from the prince's heir, I'll do what I can to stop you. Asgeir too."

Both men fell silent. Finally, it was Sigurd who spoke. "Don't want t' turn a friend t' enemy over politics. Argue it with Asgeir. You persuade him that we can't afford the fight, that Prince Eirick will end up the way Prince Kieron did, sharing with the king, I'll go along.

"Rather drink than fight. You think I can't hold it. I think all those years in the south, you probably forgot the trick. After dinner, meet back here and see. I'll bring the beer."

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"Rick there?"

Eirick and Kir looked up from the chessboard. "I'm here. Come in. If you want the next game, we'll flip a coin for who plays you."

Anders opened the door, entered, carrying a beer mug. Eirick was sitting on the bed, Kir on the room's one chair, table and board between them.

"Maybe later. Something I want you to watch."

Anders took the head of the bed, looked briefly at the board then up at Eirick. "Ellen told me you had talent. Filtering. She thought I might help you learn to use it, that being my talent too.

"I'm not a magister. Don't know enough to teach much. Ellen was here she could do it, but she headed back to the capital. Didn't say what she plans to do there. Hope they don't catch her and kill her.

"Can't teach, but thought you might learn by watching. Did Ellen explain about perception?"

"Helgi did. On our way here he told me, helped me do it. It's what his kind of mage is good at. I have to be pretty close, though."

Anders nodded. "You're still young. With your eyes closed, can you see this?" He lifted the mug.

Eirick closed his eyes, in a few seconds opened them again. "Yes. A little fuzzy."

"Move closer and watch. Not the mug, what's in it."

After a few minutes, Anders put the mug down on a corner of the table. "Did you see?"

"I think so. You seemed to be separating something out, up and down."

"The something was the part of the beer that makes you drunk. Taste the mug, just from the top."

Eirick took a sip. Another. "It doesn't taste like beer."

"Doesn't make you drunk either, long as you stick to what's on top."

Kir reached for the cup, looked up at Anders. Anders nodded.

A taste. Kir turned to his brother. "You're right. It tastes different. There's no bite to it."

Anders retrieved the cup, took a long drink, another. "Now try what's left."

Eirick took a swallow. "Burns my throat." Kir tried it, nodded agreement.

"That's the part of the beer that wasn't in what you drank first. Like cider that's had some of the water frozen out of it."

"This evening have a drinking match with an old friend after dinner. Want you to watch and learn."

Eirick looked puzzled. "What can I learn from that?"

"How you can match someone drink for drink and still stay sober."

"Noon meal today, Sigurd claimed the College made me soft, couldn't stand up to him for a drinking bout any more. Figure it's only fair to use what I learned in the College to win it."

"You sit around the corner of one of the hall pillars, out of sight — show you where before dinner. Get to see what your talent can do, get a feel for how to do it. Not as good as what you could learn in the College, but mages were doing stuff for hundreds of years before there were magisters to explain it to 'em. Might never want to play drinking games, but I figure getting someone drunk when he's trying to get you drunk could prove handy one time or another."

## Chapter 37

*[Encampment of the Royal Companies south of Troutvale]*

Early evening, only a little light coming through the open door of the command tent as the officers filed in and took their places. The commander touched the candle burning on his desk to the wick of the oil lamp, handed the candle to his adjutant. In a few seconds the other two lamps were alight as well. He waited until everyone was seated before he spoke.

"I've been up to Earl Eskil's hold, spoke with the earl, told him we were making camp here. Place is crowded as you might expect, I'm guessing three or four hundred retainers, so no room for us inside. Plenty of room outside, but here we can build a proper fortified camp; I'm not sure the earl would appreciate our digging up his home field. Besides, putting it here blocks the main road in case the Dalm make it this far. And there's grass south of the road for the horses."

Antonio cut in. "And if the Earl sends anyone out, messengers or troops, unless they go wide we will know. Station a few of our people along the main road a mile or so out, east and west and not too obvious, and we'll see those too. Put a few more between here and the hold and nobody can get to us without we see them coming."

Carl looked at his intelligence officer curiously. "You're still worried about another rising? Bertil, the castellan at the keep, was pretty sure they weren't planning anything."

Antonio shook his head. "Bertil would have let the earls' forces in three years ago. It was Duke Morgen who suspected something, didn't open up."

Gelbert, Carl's adjutant, shook his head. "Who told you that? It's not how I heard it."

"Like I told you, my brother was there. I have had the story from him more than once. I wouldn't advise risking the companies on Bertil's guesses. Not when Iolen's son is in the hold. He's the earl's nephew and heir."

One of the captains looked up. "You're sure about that?"

Antonio nodded. "I heard it from one of the men in the keep day before yesterday. Talked to some of the earl's people here today while Carl was talking to the earl. Mentioned Eirick Iolensson. He's there. One of the men I talked to wanted to know if we would support him, said he figured Eirick was the royal heir, everyone closer being dead."

That brought Carl back into the conversation. "Not everyone. Princess Mariel told me she made it out of the city with the prince's son, sent him to Eskil with one of her mages as escort. The king and the prince might

have been killed when the Dalm took the capital, hope not, but if they were, Kieron's son is the heir."

Antonio did not look convinced. "The princess sent the boy here but that doesn't mean he made it. Or, if he did, is still alive. The man I talked to seemed pretty sure. It could be he knew something we don't."

Gelbert shook his head. "Eskil may be keeping it quiet that he has the heir. Even if the earl is loyal, that doesn't mean all his people are. Besides, if the Dalms hear where the heir is, they might come after him."

"What's your reason to think the marchers are planning another rising, aside from one man in the hold asking if we would back Eirick?"

"I just told you," Antonio responded in an irritated tone. "Eirick Iolensson is in the hold, nephew and heir to the earl. And the earl has been sending troops west to his older brother, who was banned from the succession because he supported the rising."

"The boy has been nephew to the earl since he was born — his mother's the earl's sister. Eskil doesn't have children of his own or a wife to bear them; his sister's son is his closest kin. And I expect he has a better idea of whether he can trust his brother than we do."

Carl raised a hand to interrupt the two officers. "I already knew that Eirick Iolensson was with Eskil; Bertil told me. They stopped at Northpass Keep on their way to Earl Finn's to get his help taking back the capital. Eirick was along to make it clear to Finn and anyone else interested that he was supporting his cousin the prince's boy, not trying for the throne himself."

"That's what Bertil told you that they told him. Could be they were going to Finn to get his help finishing what his father and Eskil's started."

Carl shook his head. "I put that to Bertil. His truthteller had checked them. Also, he had word from Prince Kieron that Eirick had escaped from the Einvald's hold in Forstmark and was with them, oathbrother to Kieron's kid. I'll take the prince's judgment on someone he knew over Toni's guesses about people he's never met."

After a brief discussion of guard duties and supplies the meeting ended. Carl turned back to Antonio. "I'm going with Gelbert's read of the situation. Bertil knows the Marches better than either of us. And what he had from the prince about the boys fits."

Adjutant and captains went out, only Carl and Antonio remaining. Outside was full dark; the oil lamps threw unsteady shadows on the tent walls.

Carl spoke again. "But I could be wrong — your point about the earl's brother is a little worrying. Just in case I am, tell me what you think we should do. I'll think about how much of it we can manage without offending our allies, what might happen that would change my mind."

Antonio thought for a moment. "The first thing I would do if it was up to me is demand that the earl turn the heir over to us. Even if Eskil is loyal, it's not likely that everyone in the hold is — Gelbert had that right. The boy is safer here. If the earl refuses to hand the boy over, that's reason to worry. If he won't even let us talk to the heir, that means the heir is dead and the earl or one of his people killed him."

"And then?"

"Once we're sure the earl has turned traitor we find some excuse to get our people into the hold or get him out, take him and his nephew prisoner, with luck take the hold. The Marchers are pretty good but we're professionals; with equal numbers we win. And just at the moment, thanks to all the men sent west to the earl's brother, it looks as though there are more of us here than them."

Carl thought a moment. "The first part sounds right to me. But we're going to have a hard time dealing with the Dalm without Marcher help; attacking the earl is a sure way of not getting it. If both dukes bring armies to join us we might have enough but I'd rather not count on that. Worse still if we push the Marchers into allying with the Dalms, which they might do if we seize the earl and their heir.

"I plan to avoid an open break if I can. Once Morgen arrives there should be enough of us to persuade any of them thinking of a rising that they are better off helping us fight the Dalms instead."

Silence for a moment, then a change of subject.

"What you say about the Marchers is mostly from your brother. I expect I've met most of our officers over the years. Where was he stationed other than Northpass Keep? You never said what his name was."

"Cris joined down south, the same as I did. He spent his first two years on the Bren border, part of a company that helped with Duke Alessandro's campaign there. He was shifted north to the company in Northpass Keep after His Highness got worried that the Forstings were up to something. That was maybe three, four years back, before the rising. Last I heard he'd been shifted again, west to the Dalm border. I'm hoping he wasn't wherever their army came through on its way to the capital."

"I've never been stationed south, or anywhere west of the capital, and I don't know that many southerners. What's 'Cris' short for? Is he a lieutenant too? Flashy dresser like you? That I might remember."

"'Cris' is the short form for Cristoforo. Last I heard he was second to his company captain, but I don't remember the captain's name. He dresses plain, doesn't drink much, never touches cards or dice."

Carl laughed. "Not much like you. Doesn't ring any bells. Probably never met him."

"Likely enough. Cris is a quiet sort, not someone you'd be likely to notice."

Antonio stood up to leave, paused. "With your leave, I'm going back up to the earl's hold tomorrow, poke around a bit, talk to people, see what I can learn."

"Do that. Earl Eskil invited me to come up tomorrow to meet some of his people, make more plans. Maybe I'll ask about the heir, see if he's willing to let us have him. We can compare notes after."

## Chapter 38

*[Troutvale]*

By the time Sigurd arrived at the table with a small cask on his shoulder Anders was already waiting, Eirick seated just out of sight around one of the pillars that ran down the center of the hall supporting the roof. Aside from the three of them the great hall was empty save for one group at the far end. Sigurd put the cask at the edge of the table. Anders held the pitcher under the spout of the cask, turned the tap, filled the pitcher, put it in the middle of the table.

Sigurd untied two mugs from his belt, handed one to Anders. Anders looked at it carefully, weighed it in his hand before filling it from the pitcher. Put it down, reached out his hand. Sigurd handed him the other mug. Anders poured the contents of the one mug into the other, exactly filling it, handed it to Sigurd.

Sigurd grinned. "Don't trust me?"

"Your mugs. Oldest trick in the book. Man has to be careful."

Anders took a long look at the pitcher, picked it up, filled his mug. Tasted it. "Good."

Sigurd nodded. "Not like that watery stuff they drink down south. Ketil in the brewery a cousin of mine. Said he'd fill my cask up with something good."

He drained the mug, put it down, smiled. "Did, too. Stuff has a bite to it."

Anders emptied his mug in turn, filled his and then Sigurd's from the pitcher.

"Been what, bit over a year since I saw you, back at Flosi's wedding?"

Sigurd took a drink. "About that. Saw Ingeborg with the baby month or two back."

"How old?"

"Didn't ask. Wouldn't surprise me if they started early — been courting a fair while by then. Was waiting till he had enough to buy the meadow south of the family farm, build on it."

He paused for another drink, continued. "Hear about Roth?"

Anders shook his head. "What's he been up to?"

"Let a bear get too close. Mostly healed now, but a fair bit less handsome."

"Too bad. Might leave a few more girls willing to look at you and me instead."

Anders drained his mug, put it down, waiting. Sigurd finished his, held it out. Anders filled his own, then Sigurd's.



It had been half an hour of casual conversation, the first pitcher emptied and refilled, the second nearly empty, when Sigurd, lifting his full mug, let some of the contents slop over. Anders took the mug from him, brought it back to full from the pitcher, handed it back. "Feeling the beer already?"

Sigurd shook his head. "I'm fine. Just got careless."

"Mebbe. Drink up. I think I'm winning."

Anders slowly drained his mug, waited while Sigurd drained his, refilled the pitcher, set it down in front of him. "Think you could balance on one foot now?"

"Mebbe. You go first."

Anders stood up, lifted one foot, balanced on the other, stood for a minute, his eye on the pitcher. Sat down.

"Your turn."

Sigurd stood on one foot briefly, then caught himself with his hand on the table.

"Can still manage two feet."

"So far. Have another mug."

Anders refilled both mugs, handed Sigurd his. Sigurd took it carefully with both hands, drank a little, put it down. It was Anders who spoke. "Talked to Asgeir yet?"

Sigurd nodded.

"He say anything?"

"Told him what you said, Kir in the hold. He hadn't known."

"Willing to give up on getting Eirick named kingdom heir now that he knows Kir's alive, safe?"

Sigurd shook his head.

"Maybe I should talk to him, see if I can convince him."

"Won't do any good. Too late."

"Too late for what?"

"Too late t' change anything. 'Geir said if the prince's brat hadn't been killed by the Dalms he'd take care of it himself. Tonight."

He lifted his mug, took another long drink.

Anders looked at him in astonishment. "Asgeir plans to kill Kir? Murder his uncle's guest? How? When?"

"Probly done it already. Remember trout pond Sven dumped me in?"

Anders nodded.

"Asgeir said he'd get the kid to go fishing there, tell him he'd seen a big one. Both of 'em go to the pond. Only one comes back. Expect it's all over. Can't say I like it, but..."

He was speaking to an empty bench. Anders was on his feet, moving only a little unsteadily.

Eirick was up and moving as well. His first thought was to catch up with Anders, join him in the race to get to Kir before Asgeir killed him. Asgeir was bigger than Anders and formidable. Two would be better than one.

He couldn't cover the distance to the pond, most of a mile, as fast as an adult. Every minute mattered. Best to follow Anders, catch up with him at the pond, help as best he could. Better if he had Jarl but no time to go back to the room to fetch him.

Anders, making it through the great hall as fast as he could, stumbled twice but caught himself each time. Once out of the building, the cold evening air sobered him. No time to get a horse or help — he might already be too late.

Down the path that followed the stream that fed the pond, running as long as he could keep it up, walking, running again when he had enough breath. Shadows long, sunset painting the sky to his right, but not yet full dark.

When he reached the shore of the pond he saw them. Kir was lying on the ground, a dropped fishing rod half under him, Asgeir stooped over the body. In his hand a rock. Anders shouted, "No!"

Asgeir looked up. "What the hell are you doing here?"

"Stopping you from murdering your lord's guest, shaming yourself and the kindred."

"No business of yours. Going to do what Pa and Grandad couldn't."

"Plan to boast to your father that you murdered a kid? Eirick takes the throne, think he'll be grateful to the man who killed his oathbrother to give it to him?"

"Kid came down here to go fishing. Slipped, hit his head, drowned. Nobody'll know different."

"I know different. Sig knows different — got drunk and told me. Won't be the last time he gets drunk."

"You won't tell. Once the kid is dead you can't bring him back. I'll deal with Sig."

"Hell I won't." Anders took a step forward. "Mebbe you don't care about the honor of the kindred but I do. Nobody's going to believe your story anyway. First thing Eirick does when he's king is find out who killed his brother. Kings have truthtellers."

"Truthteller can't read my mind if I'm not there. Once I'm done, I head west, help Father stop the Dalms. Worst comes to worst, can always die doing it. Can't read my mind then. You I can deal with now."

Asgeir took two quick steps forward, bringing him in reach of the smaller man. Anders raised his arm to block the blow, Asgeir batted it aside with his left hand, struck with the stone in his right.

Two bodies now, both breathing but not for long. The kid easy, Anders more of a problem. Nobody would believe two accidents. Drown him here. Carry the body as far as he could with the whole night to do it in, strip it, dump it. Any luck nobody would find it before the wolves did.

Anders would be missed. Some way of getting him blamed for the kid's death, let people think he had run away after? Something to think about. Sig might be a problem. Stupid to have told him, but too late now. If he had to... Better, persuade him that both of them should head west, join Sven, help block the Dalms. Far as possible from truth-tellers, questions about what happened to the kid or Anders.

Enough thinking. The first step was to drown the kid. Asgeir leaned over the unconscious body.

"Get away from my brother."

He looked up. Another kid, a little taller than the prince's brat, hard to make out more than that in the gathering dark. "How d'ye plan to make me?"

"You try to kill my brother, I'll do my best to kill you."

The kid had a dagger out. Asgeir dropped his hand to the axe at his belt. "Can try. Don't think I'm the one ends up dead."

"You can't make me king if you kill me."

Asgeir's axe came up. He stopped, look again at Eirick, lowered it.

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"My head hurts. What happened?"

Eirick looked down at his brother. "I told you there were people here who backed my father, wanted to back me?"

Kir nodded.

"One of them was my cousin Asgeir. He decided to kill you, make me the heir. Anders found out, he and I stopped him. Anders got hurt, not sure how bad; I've sent someone to fetch Brita, Uncle's healer. She should be here soon."

Kir felt his head, sat up slowly in the bed. "I was fishing — someone in the hold told me he had seen a big trout in the pool, evening the best time to catch it, said he'd show me where. I can't remember anything after that."

"Asgeir. His plan was to knock you out, drown you, make it look like an accident. When Anders showed up to stop him he would have killed him too. But he couldn't kill me — not if he wanted to make me king. I brought you back on his horse, got him to carry Anders." Eirick gestured to the figure in the other bed. "Didn't know what else to do."

"How did you persuade him to bring Anders back? And what happened to him?"

"I made a deal. If he would help me get both of you safe back here, I would give him a day before I told Uncle. I know — he should be outlawed for trying to kill you, attacking Anders. I expect he will be. But I'm not strong enough to carry you that far, let alone Anders, and I wanted to get both of you to the healer as fast as I could."

"Where do you think he'll go?"

"I expect his plan was to kill you, then join his father fighting the Dalms, far enough from here so he wouldn't get questions asked. I doubt his father will protect him, once he learns what he did. He might go north instead. The Einvald or one of the Jarls might have a use for him. Or Fredrik."

## Chapter 39

*[The College]*

Bertram started speaking as soon as he was through the door. "Jon has been bringing cows into the College, Majesty, cows — there is a herd of them on the Masters' lawn, trampling the grass. And pigs — I smelled them when I was in the refectory. And heaps of straw in the Cloister, and when I told him to take it all out again he said it was on your orders."

"It was. I expect it to be weeks before our army arrives to break the siege. I put Jon and Arthur in charge of getting enough supplies to make sure we didn't starve to death before that happens."

"And one of Geffron's officers has his men pitching tents on the lawn just inside the gate."

"A hundred and thirty of the men who have been protecting us have taken refuge within the sphere. We have to put them somewhere. If you have a better idea, maybe getting students to double up so as to free rooms, speak to Geffron about it."

The king turned to Jon, who had followed Bertram in. "Do you have a count on our supplies? Do we have enough to feed the company that came in yesterday from the ford as well as the rest of us?"

"I think so, Majesty. Five cows for milk, can butcher 'em if we have to. Twenty pigs. Two hundred bushels from the harvest, mostly grain, some oats and barley. Threshed and winnowed that should give us about five tons, except that some of it will go to feed the cows, along with straw from threshing and what they get by browsing the College lawns. Gave Arthur the count, he worked it out, thinks with that, what we already had and what Geffron's people brought in we can manage three weeks, maybe a bit more. Past that, get hungry."

"Good. I'll leave you in charge of turning all of that into what Arthur and the cooks can use. You have the gear and people you need?"

"Yes, Majesty. Flails and fans. One of the servants used to be a butcher, most of 'em know enough to deal with the grain. Few of the students too. No problem."

"Then I will let both of you go, Jon to deal with food, Magister Bertram to try to find someplace to house the soldiers better than the front lawn."

Nathan held the door open for the two mages, spoke with someone outside it.

"Lady wants to speak with you, Majesty."

"Let her in."

Melia entered. Petrus motioned her to a chair.

"Some of the soldiers got wounded slowing the enemy's advance forces to give the Learned Jon time to finish getting grain and beasts in for the siege. Can you and your students deal with them?"

"Of course, Your Majesty. But that isn't why I wanted to speak with you."

He gave her a curious look, waited.

"Your Majesty believes that inside the sphere we are safe against the attackers?"

"So Magister Henryk assured me. He said there was no way of breaching it."

"Hal is mistaken."

There was a long silence.

"You are saying that you believe the sphere can be breached?"

"It has been breached. Once. No reason Hal would know. How much did your brother tell you about events here three years back involving him, Lord Iolen, Magister Coelus, and my daughter?"

Petrus thought a moment. "Coelus had invented a spell that could be a very dangerous weapon. Kieron wanted to make sure word of it didn't get out. Iolen somehow discovered it, planned to use it against us. What does that have to do with breaching the sphere?"

"The first time the Cascade was tried, the mage at the center of it used the power it gave him to tear a hole in the containment sphere. That showed that with enough power it could be done."

"You think our enemies might know the spell?"

Melia shook her head. "Not likely; Kieron did a pretty good job of keeping it quiet."

"Could they have worked it out for themselves? Might there be some other way they could break the sphere? They know more about magery than anyone else — they invented it."

"They didn't invent magery. They were just the first ones to find out how to control it. Three hundred years ago that put them ahead of the rest of us. Fifty years ago Olver figured out not just how but why; nobody had done that before. The Doray still have more strong mages than we do; they breed for them the way we breed horses and cattle — my good luck I wasn't born there. More spells too, although that's changing. But they are fifty years behind in theory. It's theory that designed the containment sphere. And the Cascade. They aren't the sort of thing a mage could discover the old way, by accident, not even in three hundred years."

"Creating a schema to break the sphere would take a mage who understood theory at least as well as Olver, who designed it. The Doray don't have anyone like that. Even if they did, it would be a project for months or years, not weeks. A strong enough mage could breach the

sphere by brute force but there are no mages that strong, there never have been, not even in the League."

"You said it could be broken. How?"

"The way Maridon did it, by the combined power of multiple mages. There are ways that two mages can pool their power. We don't have a schema that can pool more than two but I asked Marcus and he said they do. Ten or twenty strong mages might add up to enough power to tear a hole in the sphere."

"Are you saying that we should all have run a week ago?"

Melia shook her head. "It might not occur to them to try pooling; brute force isn't their style. They could spend a month trying spells in the hope of discovering a weakness in the sphere."

"I weave. Dag is fire, and so is one of the students. There might be some way to weave more fire into the sphere, make things harder for them. If Olver were here, or Coelus, or Ellen..."

Petrus raised a hand to interrupt her. "Just a minute."

"Nathan."

The guard standing by the door looked up. "Your Majesty?"

"I want to speak with Magister Henryk and the Learned Leonard. Magister Dag as well. Find them or find someone who can and ask them to come here. Tell them it's urgent."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

He turned back to Melia. "I need more opinions — whether you are right about the risk and about what we can do if the Dorayans tear a hole in the containment sphere for the Dalmian army to attack through."

A few minutes later the door opened; Nathan ushered the three mages in, Henryk in the lead.

"Your Majesty wanted to speak with us?"

"Yes. You said the sphere could not be broken. The Learned Lady here says it can be."

Hal turned to Melia. "I have always been told that it was unbreakable." Dag nodded. "As have I."

She shook her head. "Nothing is unbreakable if you have enough force. Maridon tore a hole in the sphere just before he died, using Coelus' spell to channel the power of multiple mages."

Dag said, his tone puzzled, "Excuse me, lady, but that was two years before you came here."

"Coelus was part of the spell. My daughter was watching. I had the account from them."

"You are saying that Maridon tore through the sphere and it killed him?"

"He tore through the sphere; something else killed him. If the Doray can pool enough mages — Marcus says they know how to — they can do the same thing."

Petrus interjected, "There are two questions we need answers for, and fast. One is whether the Lady Melia is correct that the Doray can tear through..."

Melia interrupted, "May be able to tear through."

"May be able to tear through the sphere. The other is, if they do, can we use soldiers or magery to keep them from taking the College?"

"How big a hole are we talking about?" Leonard asked. "Once they tear it, does it stay open? Can they keep tearing more?"

Melia shook her head. "The more mages they use, the bigger the hole. Assuming ten or twenty, I doubt they could open a hole much more than six or eight feet wide. And they have to keep holding it open. It's like pushing on a spring — when they run out of power and stop, it closes again."

"The mage channeling the power has to be close to the sphere, since magery weakens with distance. I have been warned, by someone who should know, that if you are pooled with another mage and he dies you may die as well. If we stop them the first time by killing the channeler, they may lose the whole pool."

Leonard thought for a moment. "Soldiers against soldiers, if we are talking about a hole only one or two people wide, we can hold it — two men with shields in front, two or three crossbows and an axe behind, more shields to fill in when someone is killed. Could probably do better than that with more men, a killing zone just our side of the hole. If they have mages it gets harder. You said Doray — are we dealing with Dorayan mages or just Dalm?"

The question was put to Melia but it was Petrus who answered. "We believe there is a force of Doray mages with the Dalmian army."

"I didn't know that." Henryk sounded worried. "With the Doray, all bets are off — we don't know what they can do. They use compulsion spells. If they get control of one of Len's shield men..."

Melia cut into the conversation. "The spells they use to bind their own mages take hours to put on. I don't know how fast they can get temporary control of one of our people but I doubt it's instant. Not unless they have a static spell prepared in advance and get the mage who has it in touch range, which would be the front line — not where mages want to be. And we have mages too — that should balance things a little."

The next question was from Petrus. "It sounds as though we might be able to hold them if enough of our people are ready at the point where they



break through. So we have to have people all around the inside of the sphere. What is the circumference?"

It was Melia who answered. "The diameter of the sphere is three hundred feet, so the circumference is about a thousand."

"We have a hundred and thirty soldiers and they have to sleep and eat. Say eighty available at any one time. How many of the magisters can help with combat?"

Henryk shook his head. "Not I. Shaping isn't much use in war."

"Everything is of use. Your talent can fix a siege engine, repair armor. At touch range you can kill."

Leonard turned back to Petrus. "Of the magisters and visitors, five have some experience in war. Four or five more have talents that can be used for combat. I have discussed it with them." Leonard glanced at Dag. "None of the students have been trained in war magery, but of the third years I think ten or fifteen might be of some use — I have talked to them too and tried to teach them what I could. Another five of the second years. Maybe twenty-five mages all together."

Henryk added, "We have about a hundred and twenty students. The ones who can't help as mages can still help as soldiers. Some of them — all of the men from the Marches — know how to use weapons. The Marchers probably have weapons, swords at least, very likely mail. If Geffron can arm the rest out of spare gear, they could join his soldiers. Some of the servants too. That could nearly double the numbers. Figure a little better than one fighter every ten feet, one mage every hundred feet. I have no idea how much time they would have to converge on a breach before it got big enough to let enemies through." He looked at Melia.

She shook her head. "It depends how much force the Doray have to use, how many mages they can and do pool."

The king spoke slowly. "If the Learned Lady is correct, we do not know if we can hold the College against them but we at least have a chance."

He turned to Leonard. "Can you find Captain Geffron and speak with him? The two of you need to work out how to station the troops to defend against a breach.

"I need a little more speech with the Learned Lady."

The three mages went out. Petrus waited until the door had closed, turned back to Melia, sat down facing her.

"Henryk has been a magister in the College for more than twenty years; my brother took classes from him. Dag for ten years that I know of. You are not a magister and have lived in the village for only a year or two. Yet you are much more confident than either of them of the nature of the

sphere that contains the College. I am, as you saw, relying on your account. I would like to be sure I am justified in doing so."

She nodded. "I wondered when someone would ask that question."

Petrus said nothing, waiting for her to continue.

"The sphere is woven fire. Olver designed the schema, but implementing it required fire and weaving and Olver is a Shaper. Durilil provided the fire. I wove it. To make the sphere we had to pool; it was Dur who warned me of the danger of doing so."

For a few seconds he remained silent, looking at her.

"So you knew Durilil?"

She smiled. "Very well."

There was a long pause before he spoke again.

"For a year and more you taught healing in the village inn without ever mentioning that you had helped work the greatest magery in the kingdom and knew its secrets. Nobody knew. Why?" The king's tone was of honest curiosity.

Melia spoke, for once slowly.

"It all comes back to Olver. Fifty years ago, after he realized how dangerous what he was learning might turn out to be, he decided to publish nothing more until he fully understood the dangers and how to deal with them. He swore those of us who had worked with him to silence. He couldn't call back what he had already published, which is where Coelus got what he needed to create the Cascade. If you and your brother both survive this, ask him about it."

She hesitated a moment, watching the king's face.

"For myself, I like a quiet life."

## Chapter 40

*(Troutvale, the Marches)*

"The Commander trusts the Marchers. I don't. That's why we're in armor. Stay together — anyone who wanders off might not come back. If I sign trouble fall into block formation, shields in front, crossbows behind. We don't want a fight, but if one happens I plan to win it. If you have to kill I'll back you; they know there are six hundred more of us back in camp."

Antonio fell silent, looking at his men.

Out of the camp, where soldiers with shovels were working on the wall and ditch that surrounded it, across the main road, following a path through the woods, the stream on their left in sight through the trees. Less than an hour brought them to the hold, the gate open but guarded. Antonio paused the troop to consider his next step.

"Sir." He turned, looked where the soldier behind him was pointing. A group of armed men coming downhill towards the gate. At their head... Grey-haired, big, like Earl Eskil but even bigger. Next to him the biggest dog Antonio had ever seen. If that meant what he thought it did...

The gate guards were ignoring him and his troop, staring at the new arrivals. He turned to the nearer. "Is that...?"

The man answered without turning. "Never thought I'd see him again. It's Earl Eirick. And Theodrick. Biggest of the pack — must have left the rest up north."

Antonio hand signaled to his men, turned, spoke to the leader of the group. "Are you Eirick Svensson, sometime earl here?"

The other stopped, looked at Antonio and the men falling into formation behind him. "Ye have my name. What's yours?"

"Antonio. Antonio di Bonia, lieutenant in the royal companies."

"So what can I do for you, Lieutenant? Plans to deal with the Dalms, best talk with my son — he's earl here now."

"You can come with us back to our camp."

"Could. Mebbe will — things to discuss with your commander. But after two days crossing the high pass, can use a meal and a good night's sleep first. Not to mention kin I haven't seen for quite a while." He turned away from Antonio, started for the gate, his men behind him.

"Halt. Try for the gate and we shoot you down. You will drop your weapon and come with me."

Antonio spoke to the men behind him without turning. "Cock your bows. Hugh and Rolf are on the old earl. Rob and Jarrauld on his dog. The rest on any of them who try to stop us."

One of the guards at the gate turned to the other, said something, vanished into the hold. The other moved forward to put himself between Jarl Eirick and Antonio's men. "You plan t' kill our lord's dad, better think again."

"If you try to stop us I don't mind killing you too. Odds look pretty good at the moment."

Jarl Eirick turned to say something to his followers, turned back, his left hand on the dog. "Likely can kill us if you want to — might lose a few. Maybe make it back to your camp alive. Then what? Either your commander surrenders you to my son as murderers or he tries to fight a war against the Marches. Whoever wins has to fight the Dalm with what he has left. Whose side are you on anyway?"

"Killing an outlaw isn't murder. Either you pull the axe from your belt and drop it or my men shoot you down."

"Killing an outlaw isn't murder. Good thing I'm not an outlaw any more. Got permission to come back a week ago."

"You're lying. The king and his heir are dead, can't lift your outlawry even if they wanted to, which they didn't. You are coming with me or dying — your choice."

"He is not lying."

Antonio turned back to the gate. A boy and unarmed.

"I gave him permission."

"And who the hell do you think you are? You don't look much like King Petrus to me."

"I am Kieron son of Kieron son of Thoma. My uncle is not here. Neither is my father. Maybe they are both dead." Kir kept his voice steady. "In their absence I speak for the crown, as my father spoke for it two years ago when he gave terms to the Marches. Jarl Eirick has my permission to return to the kingdom, my request to aid us against the Dalm."

One problem Antonio had not anticipated, but perhaps...

"You don't look royal to me. More like a Marcher brat with more gall than sense. Ren, if the kid tries to stop us, he's your target."

"No, sir."

"Are you disobeying a direct command, Ren? Want a flogging?"

"Better than being hanged, sir. I've seen the prince's son before."

Antonio hesitated for only a moment. "Go back to camp, tell the officer of the day you are under arrest. I'll take your bow."

Once clear of the formation, Renald walked over to Antonio, who had a hand out to take the bow, carefully transferred the quarrel to the quiver at his side, uncocked the bow and handed it to the officer.

Antonio turned back to Kir.

"You say that you are the prince's son and that you gave the old earl permission to come back. That is not for me to judge. Best both of you come back to our encampment, let the commander straighten things out. If you are the heir, safer with loyal men around you."

"That will not be necessary." A voice Antonio knew; it took only a moment to pick out Carl in the middle of the group of men coming through the gate, the earl next to him.

"What am I supposed to straighten out and what are you and the rest of them doing here?"

"I told you I was planning to visit the hold this morning, sir."

"You didn't tell me you planned to bring a full squad with you. In armor."

"As escorts. It seemed safer, all things considered. When I spotted Eirick Svensson coming back from Forstmark, breaking his exile, I thought I should bring him back to the encampment. I would have, but this young man claimed to be Prince Kieron's son, said he had lifted the outlawry."

Kir interrupted. "He threatened to kill Earl Eirick if he wouldn't come. Then he told one of his men to be ready to shoot me. He refused, said he recognized me, so the officer threatened to have him flogged, told him to go back to camp. That one." He gestured towards Renald, standing a little way off watching.

Earl Eskil moved to the front of the group of men. "You told my father he was free to come back?"

Kir turned back to answer. "Helgi was going home by the High Pass, so I gave him a letter for Jarl Eirick telling him I was lifting his exile, giving him permission to come back. You said it would help. My brother thought so too."

"Niels was on gate, tried to protect me. The lieutenant threatened to kill him too." Jarl Eirick fell silent.

Carl looked at Antonio. "Are you trying to pick a fight with our allies? You couldn't have done it better if someone was paying you to make trouble. It's lucky I was here."

Antonio shook his head. "I'm not trying to make trouble, just to enforce the law. Nobody's paying me."

The tall man standing next to Earl Eskil said something quietly to him. The earl gave him a startled look, came forward to face Antonio.

"Did the Dalmians pay you to make trouble?"

Antonio shook his head.

"Did the Doray?"

"Of course not; don't be absurd. The Crown pays me, nobody else."

Eskil gave the tall man a questioning look. He came forward, spoke. "Someone is paying him. The Dalmians aren't. The Doray are."

Eskil turned to Carl. "Auðun is my truthteller, got here a week ago. Happen you have one of your own, welcome to check him."

Carl shook his head. "Bertil has one at the keep; I'll send for her. Until she gets here, Lieutenant Antonio is under arrest on suspicion of treason."

## Chapter 41

*[Troutvale]*

The guard at the camp gate looked up curiously at the mounted stranger.

"Lieutenant Thorgil from Captain Geffron's company, garrison by Southdale. Need to speak to your commander."

"Right. Hugh, Jerrald, take the lieutenant to the Commander's tent. Rolf, take care of the lieutenant's horse."

Carl was in the tent writing when Thorgil arrived. He looked up in surprise. "Thorgil, isn't it? Long way from your garrison."

"Yes, sir. His Majesty's orders."

"His Majesty? Petrus is alive?"

"Was a week ago when I left Southdale. Didn't Nic get to you at the ford with the king's message?"

Carl shook his head. "Her Highness rode post from the capital to bring word of the attack to His Grace her father, stopped by us. We took her advice to come here. I expect we left before the messenger reached us."

"Was a messenger to Earl Eskil too. Hugh. Friend of mine. Hope he's all right."

Carl shook his head. "He never got here. Might show up yet; better late than never. But if he was the messenger, why are you here?"

"Bringing word to you and the Earl that there might be a Dalm army coming this way, mebbe a couple of days behind me. Might not be, but..."

"You saw them heading this way?"

Thorgil shook his head. "Majesty had me bring a message to the Dalm in the capital, telling 'em to go home before he finished raising an army and came after them. Figured they would try to follow me home, catch him before most of the levies came in. So he told me to come here instead. Hope you and the earl between you..."

"Not just us — someone came in from Duke Morgen late yesterday, riding ahead of the army. In another couple of days they should be here. Eskil has forces west of here under his brother, watching in case the Dalm move, and more assembled in the keep. Finn should be here pretty soon too. I have six companies. All together two or three thousand men plus whatever His Grace is bringing and as much of the keep garrison as Bertil decides to send us. I don't suppose you got a count of the Dalm?"

"Not a count, but maybe a hint. One of the officers I was talking with said it would take one or two companies to guard the citadel if the rest of the army went out looking for us. It sounded as though all three were from different companies, were hoping none of them would have to stay. So at

least four companies, probably more. Don't suppose you know how big a Dalm company is?"

"Bigger than ours. It's supposed to be five hundred men, most of the time more like three or four hundred. Four companies would be close to sixteen hundred, so at least that many. If they come after us and leave one behind, twelve hundred or so. If it isn't too much more than that, we should have considerably more than they do."

"By the numbers, but remember the Doray. Expect they'll have more mages than we do and better. I've heard stories."

"There is that. The first thing for us to do is go up to the hold, tell the earl your news."

An hour later Thorgil was in Eskil's council chamber repeating his story to the earl.

"His Majesty was worried that the Dalm would take the citadel, kill His Highness and the garrison. Decided to be the bait to get them out of the city. All Geffron has is a half company, less since the king sent some of us off with messages to the lords. He told me to come here. That way, if they try to follow me to the king they come to you instead. Majesty figured by this time you would have an army."

"I do. And Carl here does. And Morgen will be here in another couple of days with another. Finn too. Three thousand easy, likely more. The Dalm haven't gotten to my brother yet — he would have fired the beacons. I'll send word to him to expect them."

"You said His Highness. Is he alive too?"

"One of his mages made it to the College, said when he left the prince was in the citadel with two companies and most of his mages. Reason His Majesty wanted to pull the Dalm out of the city, have them go looking for him instead."

"And it sounded from what the Dalm said as though the garrison is still holding out."

"King sent a lot of us out as messengers. Hugh was supposed to come here. I gather he didn't make it?"

Eskil shook his head. "You are the first we've heard from the king. Before that it was just people coming from the city, told us the king and prince were both dead. I was hoping it was some Doray trick, afraid it wasn't."

"Doray are there all right. Pretty sure I saw some. And one of the Dalm officers thought it was the Doray who pushed the invasion, got orders put out to kill His Majesty and His Highness."

"After he'd had some more beer — Dalms don't hold it the way we do — he said the Doray had tried their own attack on the citadel, mage craft with a few of the Dalms to help. Got a bloody nose, told the Dalms they



would have to do it. Didn't sound like the Dalm were all that fond of the Doray."

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"Your Grace. Commander. Captain Halstein. First, the good news. Lieutenant Thorgill here came in yesterday from the College by way of the capital. He says His Majesty got out of the city before the attack, is safe in the College. His Highness made it to the citadel, sounds as if he was still holding out there as of four or five days ago.

"Before we make plans, some things we need to know. The first is the size of our combined force. I have about eight hundred men here, another six hundred at the western edge of the Marches under my brother Sven."

Duke Morgen was the first to answer. "Four hundred horse camped outside your walls. Nine hundred foot should be here tomorrow."

Finn's captain was next. "I have six hundred, mostly foot. My lord remained behind to raise more."

Finally Carl. "Six companies, six hundred men. Three more were left at the ford of Aron with orders to follow us as soon as they could accumulate sufficient supplies."

Calder looked up from his tablets. "Including Sven's people, that comes to three thousand here now, nine hundred more soon, with another three hundred of the companies and an unknown number from Finn expected later."

"Yes. We don't know how many the enemy have — could be as little as sixteen hundred, might be a lot more. I don't suppose anyone knows what their full levy would come to?"

Nobody responding, Eskil continued, "The next issue is supplies. I can feed my own men but not all of yours."

Carl looked up. "We're down to our last couple of days, but Bertil told me he would be sending more after us as soon as he collected it and enough wagons to haul it. With luck it will come in about the same time as His Grace's foot."

"I passed his wagons on the road yesterday, with a company from his garrison for escort." That was Morgen. "We resupplied east of here, buying from people I know. The question is whether we should wait here for the enemy to come to us or move west to force a battle as soon as the rest of my people arrive. It's your territory not mine."

Jarl Eirick glanced at his son, spoke. "If the Dalm believe the king is here raising troops they won't be prepared for a battle somewhere farther west. Surprise is always an advantage."

Mari, sitting by Kir and Eirick in the back of the council room, stood up to get the men's attention. "The farther west we meet the enemy, the sooner we get to the capital to lift the siege of the citadel."

"One more thing." That was Eskil. "If the Dalmians started east following Thorgil the day after he left the capital, as he figured they might have, my brother's people should have seen them by now and fired the beacons. They haven't. That might mean that they are moving slowly. It might mean they didn't take the bait, are still sitting in the capital. If so, we need to go to them, with luck combine with forces from the south."

There was a brief exchange of whispers between Eirick, sitting on the other side of Kir, and Mari. He stood up. His uncle signaled him to speak.

"It might mean they have found out where the king really is. We don't want to sit here waiting while they take the College, kill His Majesty and the magisters and everyone else."

Eskil looked around the room. Nobody else spoke.

"We move west as soon as Duke Morgen's infantry and Captain Carl's supplies reach us. With luck, tomorrow."

## Chapter 42

*[Southdale]*

"I see it. What the hell is it?"

Veder shook his head. "I don't know, Highness. Looks like the thing in the keep, just a whole lot bigger. And it's right on the path where the Eslandi mage school is supposed to be. Want me to fetch Istvan?"

"Fetch Istvan. And fetch the local we found here; he may know something. Gently."

Walic turned to Alem, sitting his horse on the other side of his commander. "While we're waiting, see what happens if you shoot at this one."

Alem dismounted, lifted his crossbow from its saddle scabbard, cocked, aimed, released. "Bounced off, Highness. Like the other." He walked forward, picked the bolt up from the grass, looked at it carefully, put it back in his quiver. "Want me to get one of our people with a siege bow, see if it can put a bolt through?"

"Do that."

A few minutes later Veder returned, accompanied by a smaller man in the robes of a mage. He followed the path to where it met the wall of mist, reached out to touch it, closed his eyes. "It's woven fire, Highness. Like the other one but huge; I've never seen anything like it. Abran, one of my people, worked in Esland for a while year before last; I think he visited the College. I'll see if he knows anything."

Next to arrive was the local, a scared-looking farmer escorted by two of Walic's men. The prince looked down at him. "Don't worry, we don't bite. What's your name?"

"Rolf, Lord."

"What's that?" Walic pointed.

"It be the College, lord. Always been like that. Where the path is, gate they can open. Strike t' bitty bell sits on the pillar wi' the hammer to tell them. Inside once, had a pig for 'em. Same from the inside, mist like."

"Thank you; that's very helpful. Do you know how many people live in the College?"

"A hundred, two hundred, mebbe?"

"All mages?"

"Students and magisters. Cooks and housemaids and such mostly live in the village, some in College. Niece cooked fer College, 'fore she got married."

"If she comes back, she's welcome to cook for us. What about soldiers?"

"Garrison a bit north of here, Lord, by the king's road. Buy stuff from us — grain and pigs, apples, barley fer brewing. Sometimes see a few of 'em in the village."

"Where are the soldiers now?"

"Don't know, lord. Bunch of 'em around past few days, didn't see where they went to."

Walic looked down at the man. "My boys treat you all right?"

"Yes, Lord. Better'n I expected. Apples on one of my trees ripe, one of yours asked before he picked one. Thanked me, too."

"Good. You stayed when the others ran away, that means you are under our protection now. The king's soldiers probably told your neighbors that when we came we would burn their houses and barns, murder them in their beds. They were lying. This is our village now — no point to killing our people, burning their stuff.

"Besides, we need to feed our troops — can't do that if we burn everything and kill everyone. Anyone brave enough to come back, tell 'em not to be afraid, we'll treat them decent. If your neighbors had stayed we'd have bought from them. Since they didn't, I figure what they left behind is ours, but if anyone comes with food or beasts to slaughter, we'll pay for them."

"Yes, Lord."

"Don't suppose you know where the innkeeper got to?"

"No, Lord. Expect Sam was afraid."

"He did us one favor — left the beer behind. Speak to anyone who might talk to him, tell him we're grateful — he could have dumped it all out before he left. My boys are running his inn now, but I expect he could do it better if he came back. Especially if he brought his cook with him."

"Yes, Lord. Might be able t' find a few people. Don't mind if I go off?"

Walic shook his head. "Not a problem. This is Pali; he spent time in Esland a few years back, speaks your language." He gestured to one of the soldiers. "Pali will go with you now, make sure nobody takes anything from your farm without asking, let my people know that you are free to go where you want."

"Thank'ee, Lord."

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Walic looked around the inn table — Istvan for the mages, with Abran beside him, four of his other officers, Justin for the Doray. The pitcher was being passed around as men filled their mugs. Late morning light through open windows at the back of the room speckled the table with the shadows of leaves.

"We have a problem. The king of Esland is in the College. The College is inside some sort of magical barrier, a bigger version of the one in the citadel keep. A hundred or so mages are in the College too, along with as much of the king's army as he's managed to raise so far — can't be that many unless they are all standing on each other's toes."

Veder looked up. "I worked out the numbers, Highness. With two thousand of them in the sphere, each could have space five by six. That's not allowing for buildings or cook stoves or anything else, but they could still pack a lot of men in for a bit."

"Fair enough. Mati, your men saw some of the enemy. About how many?"

"Not two thousand, Highness. Nothing close. Maybe a hundred, skirmishing with our advance scouts. Once the main body of my company showed up they left pretty quickly. I think they were just trying to slow us down."

"Right. The only local we have so far is Rolf; Pali's been making friends with him. I'll see what he can tell us about how many of the king's men were in the area before we arrived. For the moment, we'll assume something between a hundred and two hundred soldiers in the College, along with a hundred mages, mostly students. I'm planning to station two companies where Rolf said the gate was in case they decide on a sortie — break out and run, get the king away."

"All that is assuming that the king and the mages are still in there. What's the report from the men Mati sent wide ahead of us — how sure are they that no enemy made it out?"

He looked at Mati. The officer responded. "Enemy fired a beacon night before last, when their scouts spotted my company a fair while north and west of here. I had men watching the road east of the village by then. Not very many — if the king and his people picked up and ran as soon as they saw the beacon we couldn't have stopped them. But we would have seen what way they were going and how many of them there were."

Walic nodded. "And with any luck we could have caught them. But the Eslandi king didn't know we were coming till the last minute, thought we were haring off into the Marches after his messenger. Once he saw the beacon he could have made it out by himself with a few of his soldiers, but not a hundred mages. He didn't. He's still there — maybe he thinks the barrier protecting the College will hold, keep us out."

"Could be it will; we know it can stop a bolt from a siege bow. Like the other one. What else do we know?"

He looked across the table at Justin. The mage shook his head. "There should be a record of the schema somewhere — I'm guessing that it's

something of ours from back when Esland was in the League. But I've never heard of it and there isn't time to send someone back home to ask."

Istvan shook his head, turned to Abran, sitting beside him. "Tell His Highness what you told me."

"I spent six months in Esland two, three years back," Abran said, "working for a man in the capital who made carriages, wagons and such, needed a tempering mage for the springs. A few other things too — a batch of crossbow prods for one of the companies. One of the mages I got to know in the city had gone to the College, told me about it. He wanted to go back, visit some friends, thought if I came along one of the magisters who taught tempering could maybe give me some hints on doing it better, things my master didn't know."

"The first thing that struck me when we got to the College, Highness, was the containment sphere — my friend had mentioned it but not said much. I'd never heard of any construction near that big. So I asked about it — my friend, the magister he pointed me at, a few others in the College. They claim one of their people made it fifty years back or so, a famous fire mage. It's supposed to protect the world from the College and the College from the world."

"And we're the world. And the thing has the king of Esland inside it. I tried ringing their doorbell, but the door didn't open."

Walic turned back to Abran. "Did any of them give you any idea how strong it was, if there were ways of breaking it?"

The mage shook his head. "No, Highness. It sounded as though they thought it couldn't be broken."

"We will hope they were wrong."

Istvan raised his hand to get the prince's attention. "One thing magery can't do is make food. Do we have any idea what supplies they have?"

The prince shook his head. "Not yet. If the king decided to stand siege he would have tried to stock up, get meat and flour and whatever else he could from the farms around. Rolf might know; that's one of the things I told Pali to get from him or from any of his friends and neighbors he persuades to come back. But if he only had a day to do it in, I don't expect he could get all that much. Three, four hundred men eat a lot of food. We should ask about water too — if they don't have their own well that might be a bigger problem for them than food."

"I would rather storm than siege — somewhere out there, the Eslandi lords are putting together their armies. If we can get their king and whatever force he's raised out of the game that leaves four or five different armies in the field, some of them fighting each other. And ours will be the biggest."

"I want you and anyone you think could help to take a close look at the barrier, see if you can work out a way to get through it — this time it really matters. And I want Tamas to see if there is any way of breaking the barrier without magery — there must be some limit to how strong it is. Maybe a battering ram can crack it, or a whole lot of men pushing, or something else I haven't thought of."

He turned to Justin. "You and your people work on it too. Even if you didn't make it you might be able to figure out ways to break it."

## Chapter 43

*[The Lucrece, anchored downstream from the capital]*

A knock on the cabin door. Isabel looked up, glanced at Alys. "Your brother, Majesty."

Isabel smiled. "Come in."

Alessandro entered the cabin looking excited, breathing fast, sword at his side. His usual elegance had been replaced by a mail shirt, but the padded gambeson under it was velvet. The queen was seated on the chair by her bunk, Alys on the hammock that had been slung for her, swinging gently back and forth as the ship rocked, one toe brushing the floor. The cabin walls were paneled in polished wood, painted with nautical scenes. He smiled at Alys, spoke to the queen. "We attack tonight."

"Without waiting for the Marchers? Do we have enough men?" She sounded surprised. Her brother responded in a rush of words.

"We caught a fishing boat coming downstream from the capital. They say most of the Dalms pulled out four days ago; we should have what's left outnumbered, not even counting whatever Kieron may still have in the citadel. And the chain is down — we can sail the whole fleet upriver, dock on the east bank, smash the forces sieging the citadel from behind, join up with Kieron and the garrison, then clear out the rest of the city."

"What about the cavalry?"

"Not what we need for street fighting. If they make it to the capital before the fighting is over they can deal with any Dalms that decide to cut and run for home. But we have well over a thousand men on the ships; that should be easily enough."

Alys gave him a puzzled look. "Won't they bring the chain back up as soon as they see your fleet?"

"We're anchored out of sight of the capital; I don't plan to go farther upstream till dark. Any fishermen that make it to this side of the bend aren't going home today — Rafael and the galleys will make sure of that."

Alys shook her head. "They lower the chains, upstream and down, to let the fishermen out in the morning, back before dark. They have to, we live on fish. Won't they just pull the chain tight when it's getting dark? It's what the companies always used to do."

Alessandro thought a moment. "I'll ask the fishermen — they should know. If you are right we have a problem — I doubt the *Lucrece* can break the chain and I have no desire to tear her bottom out trying. Do you happen to know where the windlass for lowering it is? Maybe if we send a couple of small boats..."



Isabel was the first to respond. "It's on the right bank, the west side of the river."

Alys nodded. "In its own little fortification, just inside the city wall. Could you send one of your boats in before dark, pretend to be fishermen? If most of the army has gone and most of what's left are on the other side of the river sieging the citadel there can't be much of a guard. Wait until dark, seize the windlass for the downstream chain, lower it?"

Alessandro smiled. "Better yet, use a real fishing boat — we have at least one, maybe another by now. I'll buy all their fish to empty the hold; that should make them happy. Make my soldiers happy too — fresh fish for dinner. We'll keep a couple of the real crew — I'll have Robert check which ones we can trust to help us. The rest of the boat's crew will be our people, with more in the hold along with armor and weapons. I'll question the fishermen first to find out how careful the Dalm are being, but it should work.

"At full dark Raf will whistle up a breeze and I'll bring the fleet upstream. Once the chain has been lowered our people get back in the fishing boat, float downstream, let the rest of us know the job's done. Just to be safe I'll have a mage in the lead boat checking that the chain is really down."

Alys stopped the hammock's swing with one foot against the floor, stood up. "Your Grace's people are all southerners; they will want someone with them who knows the ground. And can see in the dark."

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Sail down, the fishing boat closed slowly on the dock. Gerhart, standing in the bow, waited until the gap had shrunk to a foot or two before jumping, rope in hand. A few seconds were enough to secure the bow rope to a bollard while Arnst, the boat captain, fended off with a pole. The current tried to push the boat downstream, the rope held, the boat swung towards the dock. Arnst tossed the stern rope to Ger. A moment later the boat came to rest against the tow-stuffed bags that guarded the dock's edge.

Captain Nico, dressed in clothing borrowed from the fisherman nearest his size, looked curiously around. Three other boats were already tied up at the dock, their crews busy unloading fish. He turned to Arnst. "How do we explain not having any fish to unload?"

"Probably don't have to. A week back there would've been a Dalm officer with a squad to ask stupid questions, a blue robe to make sure. Half the robes got scragged by the Dalm four days back, maybe five — I saw some of the bodies. Most of the Dalm marched out the next day. Now they have one man keeping an eye on things just in case, probably a couple more

in there," he gestured towards a door in the row of buildings that lined the dock, "drinking, playing dice, maybe sleeping. Maybe a woman.

"Anyone does ask, we're waiting for a wagon from a customer who wanted the whole load. Don't know what for, but he paid good silver."

As it grew dark, the dock emptied. The one soldier vanished through the door Arnst had pointed at earlier. From across the river they could hear the sound of the windlass pulling tight the chain across the river, the rhythm but not the words of the work song. Nico looked at Arnst, Arnst nodded, signaled Ger. In a minute the ropes were cast off, Ger back on board, the boat drifting downstream. A minute more and the two men had the triangular sail back up. It caught the wind; the boat slowed, reversed direction. Arnst leaned on the tiller and the boat turned, moved slowly across the river. The other bank was a gentle slope; Arnst ran the bow of the boat up onto it, turned back to Nico. "Unload off the front, less mud that way."

The two men lifted the hatch cover, lowered a ladder into the hold. A second short ladder was stowed near the bow; one of the soldiers slid it over the edge, swung it to vertical, lowered the bottom end to the ground. Alys, who had been standing near the stern, walked forward, climbed carefully over the bow and down the ladder, moved a little farther to get out of the way of the men following her.

In a few minutes the dozen men of Nico's squad had joined her, some from the hold already armored, the rest, still dressed as fishermen, carrying armor bags, a few with shields as well. She felt in the wallet at her side, found the clay firebox, opened it, dropped in a little tinder, blew gently. Once she had a flame she used it to light the candle in her lantern, held the lantern up to provide light for the men still getting into armor. "I'll go ahead with the lantern, you follow. When we get there I'll try to draw them out, give you a count and some idea where they are. Don't attack until you have to."

"Let me go first, lady." That was Bertrand, the youngest of Nico's squad.

"Can you see in the dark?"

He shook his head, spoke in a puzzled tone. "No. But it's dangerous."

"I can."

Nico put one hand on Bert's shoulder, spoke. "Single file behind the lady till we come to the wall, then spread out to get clear shots. Everyone ready?"

He turned to Alys. "Once it starts, get back and out of the way; we have armor, you don't. If we bring you back to His Grace with a couple of bolts in you, he is going to be very unhappy. Her Majesty too, I expect. More unhappy if the bolts are ours." Alys nodded, started forward through

the tall grass of the river bank, the lantern at her side faintly illuminating the path ahead of her.

It was only a few minutes until its light showed a stone wall, reflected off the armor of the man standing in its gateway, behind him flickering firelight. He looked up. Alys spoke. "I must have gotten turned around in the dark. Which way is it to the King's Arms, the inn by the bridge?"

The guard looked at her, turned, said something to someone inside, came out. Two more joined him, one with a lantern. He held it up, looked at Alys, spoke.

"Late t' be out, miss. Cold. We've got fire, wine."

She backed away, casting worried glances at the three men. One of them said something in Dalmian to the other two. He moved slowly towards her, smiling, grabbed for her wrist. She wrenched free, yelled.

"Now!"

He clutched at his throat, eyes wide. A second bolt caught him in the chest. One of the remaining guards tried to charge the archers, invisible in the dark, and died. The other made it back through the gateway, slammed the gate. From inside a cacophony of shouts, followed by a loud trumpet call. Heads showing above the wall in the faint lantern light.

Nico called out, "Drop the lantern, lady."

Alys turned towards the sound of his voice with a puzzled expression.

"Drop it, they'll — "

She dropped it, stepped back. One of the crossbow bolts missed, the other took her in the leg.

"Damn. Jay, get to the lady, cover her."

Alys dropped to the ground behind Jaymus, sheltered by his body and shield, hesitated a moment, drew a long breath, pulled the crossbow bolt — luckily the head was not barbed — from her leg. A strip torn from the edge of her tunic made a hasty bandage. She looked up, closed her eyes, spoke through gritted teeth.

"Six of them still inside."

"More of us, but they have the wall. And someone may have heard their signal. I don't think this is going to work."

Alys thought a moment. "If I soften the metal of the hinges, do you think you can get through the door?"

"Can try. Toni, Ben, you have shields, consider yourselves assigned as battering rams. Bert, behind them, use your axe on any heads that pop up. Everyone else, if you see anything... but make sure you don't hit our people. Once they have the door down, everyone in fast. Let us know when we can go, lady."

There was a pause, Nico whispering to the others. Two bolts struck the shield Alys was hiding behind; one going the other way glanced off a helm.

Alys turned in the direction Nico's voice had come from. "I've done what I can to the hinges."

Nico spoke again to the two shield men. They charged, Bert behind them. Bolts flew in both directions. A choking cry from one of the defenders. The two men hit the door; with the noise of metal tearing, the door sagged inward. A confused melee as Ben and Toni pushed through, swords out, then more, some with crossbows, some with swords, Bert with his axe. In a minute it was over.

The men clustered around the windlass. Jay joined them carrying Alys. There was an oil lamp on the table, along with the remains of the defenders' dinner. By its light Nico found the release catch, tried to pull it open. "I can't get it up — we need to take off the tension."

The men seized spokes, on his word heaved against the weight of the chain. It did not move. Alys spoke. "Cut the rope."

Nico nodded, drew his sword, hacked at the thick rope that was wound around the shaft of the crank. It parted, whipped away into the dark by the chain's weight.

"Back to the boat. I'll take the lantern, Jay and Bert use Jay's shield to carry the lady."

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When Alessandro and the queen arrived at what had been the siege of the citadel, they found Kieron watching some of his men help the southerners with the grim job of stripping enemy corpses, piling the bodies in a pit a little in front of the curtain wall. He was the first to speak. "You and Petrus made it safely to the College?"

The queen, standing with her back to the bodies and looking paler than usual, nodded.

"Is he still there?"

"When I left he was. That was a couple of days after the capital fell; one of your people had just brought us the news. Petrus was going to evacuate the College, move everyone farther from the attackers, but then Magister Henrik told him the containment sphere would keep them safe. Before I left he was sending messengers to the lords and figuring out how to get in supplies for a siege."

"He may need them; most of the Dalm went east three days ago. It could have been for Southdale."

He turned to Alessandro, standing beside his sister. "Make sure whoever is interrogating the prisoners puts that question to them — where the army was going. Also how many men Walic has. And check that they are all telling the same story."

"We will do that, Your Highness. Is there anything else you need done? We have healers with us, if any of your men are injured, and quite a lot of supplies."

"Food and drink would be appreciated — we drank the last of the beer a week ago and our water was running low, the enemy holding the courtyard with the well. Mages we have," he gestured at the cluster of unarmored figures standing a little way off listening. "Our healers have had several days to do what they could for the wounded."

"The question is whether His Majesty is at risk." He turned back to Isabel. "Do you know how well supplied the College was? Can we afford to wait for the Marchers to get here?"

She thought a moment. "I left before Petrus had finished making his plans, so I don't know. But if they are only five days ahead of us, the College can't have been under siege for very long yet."

Kieron nodded. "So we can wait for reinforcements. Good."

There was a brief exchange of whispers among the mages, then Ellen came forward. Kieron smiled at her. "Learned lady?"

"I am sorry, but if Hal said the sphere was a safe protection he was mistaken. As Olver told you, with enough power a sphere can be breached; Coelus and I saw it happen once. Dur and I could have held our sphere against anything the Doray could do, but we are not in the College."

She hesitated a moment. "I am told that one of the Doray you captured was a prisoner of the others. Let me talk to him. He may be willing to tell us things."

Kieron turned to one of the officers. "Escort the Learned Lady to the palace to speak with the prisoner. Take some men with you — there are probably still a few Dalm wandering around."

He turned back to Alessandro. "If the Learned Elinor is correct, we cannot afford to wait for Eskil to get here — it may already be too late. I can have all my people back here in an hour or two. While we wait for them we should be able to assemble enough of the city militia to deal with any of the Dalm we missed, arm them with gear our enemies no longer need. Maybe bring some of them with us. How soon can you have your men ready to move?"

"A couple of hours to assemble them all, but we'll need longer to find wagons for the supplies and teams to pull them."

The prince shook his head. "The soldiers, yours and mine, can carry two days' rations with them. Leave a few people behind to find wagons, load them, follow after."

"I can do that if it is Your Highness's command, but..."

"But?"

"Our best estimate, from residents of the city we talked to, is that Prince Walic started with ten companies, three or four thousand men. He left one company behind, so he still has something near three thousand, maybe more. I have a thousand infantry from my ships less however many we lost last night, three hundred cavalry that with luck should arrive today or tomorrow. Your Highness has...?"

"About a hundred and fifty left of the four royal companies that were stationed in the capital. And my mages."

"If we attack before the Marchers arrive, that leaves us outnumbered by two to one. If we wait for them, the odds shift the other way."

"And if we wait and the Learned Lady is right, by the time we get there the Dalm will have taken the College and killed His Majesty. As well as a lot of other people. I am going to follow the Learned Lady to the palace, see what we can learn from the Doray prisoner. For the moment assume we are heading out today, coordinate with Captain Torgeir. Think about ways to take pressure off the College short of a full-scale battle."

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Arius had managed to spit out most of the water his keepers had poured into his mouth the previous evening; they had not yet come back to try again. Already he could feel some of his power returning. If Vitos and Banios were counting on thirst to make him drink they would discover their mistake by the end of the day.

There remained the problem of getting free of his shackles, out of the cell, to a boat that could carry him back to warn his master. He was considering that problem when the door opened.

Of the three who came in, he recognized one — the barbarian princess whom he had captured and then lost. She was accompanied by two men, one with grey hair. All, by their dress, Eslanders, barbarians from the local tribe. That might explain what had happened to his keepers. And the other barbarians. If so...

The princess looked at him with a surprised expression, smiled. Her gaze fell on the water jug on the table at the far side of his cell, well out of his reach. She closed her eyes, lifted out the stopper, smelled it, spoke slowly to him. "In my wine?"

He nodded.

"Keep weak?"

He nodded again.

The younger of her two companions spoke to Arius. "Ellen will remove your gag so we can talk. Please do not attempt any spells. It is possible that we are no longer enemies."

This one fluent, by the accent coast province or one of the nearby islands. Marcus? Another defector?

Arius moved as far from the wall as the chains would allow to let the princess get behind him. Once free of the gag he took a deep breath.

"I thank Your Highness. Do you have water?"

She gave him an amused look, lifted a leather water bottle, unstopped it, raised it to his lips. He closed his eyes a moment to be sure, then drank. Again.

"I am further in your debt. Perhaps..." He glanced up at the manacles on his wrists.

The younger of the two men responded. "Perhaps. Tell us how you ended up as a prisoner."

If they had any sense, one of the three was a truth teller. If not, the truth would still do as well as any lie he could think of.

"Aulus, one of the archons, is trying to seize power from my master. His mages seduced our allies to join their treason. They killed the loyal mages, imprisoned me."

"Where are they now?"

Arius shrugged. "Somewhere east of here killing your king, I think. I forbade it, but Justin and Walic...overruled me." Which was even true. Not likely to occur to them to push for more.

The door opened to admit yet another barbarian, this one unshielded, an earth mage. He glanced at Arius, spoke to the princess. More conversation, mostly too quiet and too quick for him to follow but one of the words he caught was "Highness." So they knew who she was — the wrong name had made him wonder. Another question from the princess. "The spell, power to pool. How many in pool?"

An odd question, but no reason not to answer it. "At the Great Festival I have seen work done by a pool of forty."

She turned to the earth mage, said something to him about a sphere. The younger mage took up the questioning. "How many men does Prince Walic have?"

"A little more than three thousand when this started."

"And mages?"

"Justin had forty. Fewer now if any of mine managed to defend themselves."

"When did they leave here?"

He thought a moment, feeling back through memories blurred by the drug. "Five days I think, perhaps six?"

"If we release you, what will you do?"

“With your leave and assistance, return to my master to warn him. You have seen the consequence of having us as your enemies. Consider what you gain if we are instead your friends.”

“We will consider the matter. Until then you will be provided with food and water. We may have more questions.”



## **Book IV: College**



## Chapter 44

*[Southdale]*

Istvan was the first of the officers to speak. "No, Highness. If there's some way of unweaving that thing, I still don't know what it is."

Tamas was next. "No more luck using brute force. Might as well take a battering ram to a mountain. Tunneling under doesn't work either. Far as I could tell, the barrier keeps going down."

Istvan nodded. "My guess is that it really is a sphere; the other one was. We're just seeing the top half."

He looked around the inn room at the other officers, continued. "One other thing, Highness. The farm house I'm bunking in doesn't look like a place that people cleared out of at the last minute in a hurry — too tidy. Food that's easy to carry is gone, the animals are gone, some other stuff buried — Emre spotted one cache three or four feet down. Digging that far to bury it would have taken a while." Istvan fell silent.

Walic smiled. "Send Emre around the other farm houses to see what else he can find — I don't expect they were planning on hiding it from mages.

"But I take your point. I'll have Pali see what he can learn from Rolf or one of the other locals about when they were warned we were coming. Maybe the king got worried we might hear where he was and warned the villagers, then decided to trick us into going north instead. But if he told them we were coming about the same time he sent his man off to us...."

Tamas was the first to respond. "Your Highness is thinking that there might have been two tricks, one inside the other?"

"Yes. The obvious trick was to get us to follow his man north into the Marches. We saw through that. Maybe he expected us to. We think we're being clever, come here instead, spend a couple of weeks beating our heads against the sphere. Then the army his people are putting together somewhere else, maybe the Marches, shows up behind us."

"You want my boys to build you a fort, Highness? Just in case?"

Walic nodded. "Three things we need to do. First is to send Mati a ways north to see if anyone is coming, a couple of his boys all the way back to Jani in the capital to make sure he's still there and the Eslandi aren't. Second is to lean on Justin, make it clear that we need to crack that sphere now, can't afford for him to spend another week playing mage games, trying to figure out some clever way to get through it. He claims his magery is a world ahead of the Eslanders' — time for him to prove it.

"Third is for Tamas to build a field fortification big enough to hold all of us. Just in case. Far enough from the College to be out of range of their mages."

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Nine mages around a table in the biggest room of the farmhouse they had occupied, Justin at the head.

"Our allies are getting antsy, worried that if they sit here too long the Eslanders might show up with an army. Prince Walic wants us to crack that barrier — yesterday. Any ideas?"

For a moment there was silence. Then a tall mage with a bandage over his eyes spoke. "It doesn't matter if the Dalmians kill the Eslanders or the Eslanders kill the Dalmians as long as nobody kills us. Helping Prince Walic conquer Esland was never the point of this expedition. Where we want to be is back home, helping our lord take down the Magistrate. If we can't do what Walic wants as fast as he wants it done, best we get out of here before the Eslanders' army shows up. Once we make it to the river and grab a few boats, I guarantee you a good wind home. For that I don't need eyes."

Two of the others nodded their agreement. Justin shook his head. "The Dalmians may be barbarians but they aren't stupid and they know they need us to crack the barrier. Walic has one company blocking the road back to the capital, two others encamped on either side of the three farms we're using; I'll give high odds they have men watching us. I don't swear none of us could get past and out, but the odds of all of us doing it don't look very good. Man for man we're better than they are, but there are forty-five of us — thirty-eight mages and seven guards — and twenty-five hundred of them.

"Sextus' plan would be the right one if we could pull it off but I don't think we can. We need to crack the barrier for Walic, the God willing. Then the army heads back for the capital. We retrieve Banos and Vitus, grab Arius, go. Once he's got what he wants, Walic won't be so worried about our leaving. And if we are lucky, someone inside the barrier knows the schema for making it and can be made to tell us. It could be useful.

"Now how do we break that barrier?"

There was a long silence. Finally Kaeso, grey haired, the oldest of the men around the table, spoke. "I can stress the mesh — grab a strand of fire and force it sideways. It's hard — I never got it distorted enough to tear, wore myself out pretty fast trying. But with enough power I could do it.

"We know how to get that power. Using it, I can tear open a hole for our allies, hope they get enough men through it before we run out and it

closes again. It's a brute force solution — no prize for cleverness — but to do better I would have to understand the sphere and I don't."

Kaeso fell silent, looking at Justin.

"What you propose is that enough of us pool with you to give you the power to tear open a hole in the barrier?"

Kaeso nodded.

"You know the risks."

"I know the risks if one of us is killed and the pool collapses. But with ten or fifteen in the pool, a few more helping our allies deal with anyone who happened to be on the other side of the barrier when we broke through and protecting the pool in case some of the people we are fighting are mages, and a whole lot of Walic's boys pushing through the hole between us and the enemy, it ought to be pretty safe.

"If Walic can't get enough through before the hole closes, we have another pool with Lucius instead of me, another company of the Dalm ready on the other side of the sphere. With the enemy all paying attention to the first attack, the second should be a lot easier. Once we get a full company inside the barrier, figure we've done our part, the rest is up to the Dalm." The mage fell silent.

"Not the answer I wanted." Justin looked around the table. "Does anybody have a better one? If this is really something cobbled together by a barbarian mage, we should be able to break it."

There was no response. Finally he shrugged. "Then we go with Kaeso's plan. Carefully. I don't want to have to explain to Aulus that I lost twenty of his best mages dealing with a static spell conjured up by a barbarian fifty years ago."

## Chapter 45

*[The College]*

Katarina briefly shifted her gaze from the ten feet of the sphere that were her charge. Tam, clockwise of her, was reaching blindly down to retrieve a slice of buttered bread from the plate at his feet, eyes fixed on his section. In the other direction Gian, sitting on the desk chair from his room, was turning his head one way and then the other to scan his. Beyond him a squad of Geffron's men, one of them watching the inside of the sphere, two playing dice, two sleeping — all in armor. She turned back to the sphere.

The plan was simple. Three four hour shifts a day left enough time to eat and sleep, a couple of hours over for Kat to study healing with Melia, Gian to study war with Leonard, Tam shaping with Magister Henryk. When and if the Dorayans opened a hole in the sphere someone would see it; the nearest soldiers would hold the breach until the reserve forces, waiting in the refectory at the center of the College, arrived, providing enough men to hold back the enemy until the breach closed.

Not all of the students — nor, she suspected, all of the magisters — were convinced that the sphere could be breached, even by the Dorayans. But Katarina, after a month of classes, trusted the Magistra's judgment over that of any of the magisters. And King Petrus had approved the plan.

It was hard to pay attention for hours to a wall of mist. By the end of each day hard to even keep her eyes open. Two hours into her second watch her mind was again wandering — which could be dangerous.

The Magistra had said that the sphere was woven fire. Kat herself was a weaver. Perhaps...

She closed her eyes, reached out with her mind.

"Kat. Wake up."

She opened her eyes. "I was awake. Is something wrong?"

"Your shift is over — it's my turn. Your eyes were closed — I thought you had fallen asleep."

She shook her head. "I see better that way."

She closed her eyes again, traced the intricate interweave, each thread itself woven from finer threads, each of them...

In front of Tam the mesh was distorting, pulled out of shape by something. She opened her eyes. He was still staring at the barrier — with her eyes open it looked the same as always. She closed her eyes again. It was real, the mesh was further out of line, the beginning of a gap.

"Tam, look. It's opening." She turned the other way, towards the soldiers, yelled as loudly as she could. "Breach."

She tried to force the mesh back closed but her mind could get no hold on it. Something the Magistra had said. Weaving and fire. Tam was backing away from the opening gap, his hands over his stomach, blood leaking between his fingers. Healing, she had been learning healing. She had taken a step towards him when the first of the squad of soldiers came past her, his shield raised to cover the breach. It had grown too big for one shield to cover but there was another soldier there now, and a third, with an axe, just behind them. The other side of the hole was two men, also with shields, trying to push in. Next to Kat a soldier with a crossbow was maneuvering for a shot, behind him Gian, more students. The door into the College was open, men in armor coming out of it, reinforcements.

From the other side of the barrier someone said something in the True Speech. The shield man on the left froze.

Kat closed her eyes, reached out. A tangle of threads binding him. These she could get at, untangle. He was free but down, knocked backwards by the enemy pushing from in front, but that gave the crossbow man a clear shot from the side. The attacker, wounded, backed out of the fight, another attacker replaced him. From the other side Gian pushed into the gap with a shield that she was pretty sure had been a cabinet door a few days earlier. He spoke, True Speech, she tried to remember what his talent was. The man in front of him was sinking, his head down to the level of Gian's shoulder. Earth? The axeman behind Gian swung.

Again a voice, a spell, this time both Gian and the shieldman beside him froze. Kat stepped forward, closed her eyes, reached out for Gian to free him. Stabbing pain. She looked into her own body as she had been taught. The bolt had gone deep, between two ribs. Darkness.

By the time Katarina again became conscious, the breach had closed. The Magistra was kneeling by Tam, one hand gripping the butt of the crossbow bolt, the other against his belly, the shaft between her spread fingers, her eyes closed. The shaft came out; more blood followed. Stopped. She looked up at one of the cluster of soldiers watching. "Get him to a bed somewhere — be gentle carrying him, a stretcher if you can find one. Lots of water. With luck he'll live."

A wounded soldier came forward, several others behind him. The Magistra stood up, with one hand gently lifted the pad of blood-soaked cloth that he was holding over his wounded cheek, put the other hand over the wound, closed her eyes.

It occurred to Kat to wonder about her own wound. A scar under her left breast where the bolt had gone in, the skin sore to the touch but not bleeding. The bolt itself was gone. Looking around, she saw a pile of bodies a little way back from the barrier.

One of them was Gian, lying crumpled on top of his improvised shield.

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"Go."

Lucius spoke the first words of the schema, the other mages, hands already linked, joined in. A surge of power. Eyes closed he reached out with his mind, seized a strand of fire, pulled. For a moment the mesh held. He drew more power from the pool, used it. A gap opened, a man's width. Two men's. On the other side a startled young man looked up, started to yell, was cut down. Veder's men surged through, their captain just behind them.

In front of them a narrow lawn bounded on one side by a curved wall of mist, on the other by the wall of the College. A scattering of people along the inside of the barrier, further along a group in armor, another on the other side. Someone in one of the groups yelled something. Both charged, but the attackers had gotten enough through to form a shield ring, a half circle in front of the gap, axes behind shields, with more men coming through behind them. One of the shield men was down, a bolt from one of the windows. Istvan was through the gap, a shield man in front sheltering him. He pointed at the window, the crossbow man beside him aimed, released.

At Veder's quick orders the attackers split, one group right, one left, driving the outnumbered defenders back to where the lawn, at each end, tapered to a point between College and containment sphere. More men poured through the gap. In the middle of the wall, the row of windows, was a wide door, a way into the College. Veder yelled orders to his men, pointed.

The window of Henryk's office opened on the magisters' lawn, now a battlefield. Out his door into the corridor of the magisters' wing, left to the main corridor, the east door of the College. He slammed it shut, shot the bolt.

Eyes closed, arms spread, hands touching both edges of the door as high as he could reach, he spoke a Word. As he slid his hands down the door its material melted, flowed, merged with the brick on either side. The door sealed, he turned. At the other end of the corridor, where it ran into the refectory, one of the servants was standing in the open door holding a tray.

"Breakthrough here. Get soldiers."

The servant hesitated for a moment, put down his tray carefully, went back through the door at a run.

Veder looked around. At each end of the lawn a heap of bodies, mostly defenders. In front of him a door, now closed. He turned to Elek, the largest of his shield men, pointed at the door. "Open it."



Elek hit the door with his shoulder, bounced.

"Balas. Istok. You have axes — use them. Foris, Lukas, take your squads through the windows."

Axes battering on the door. Henryk saw the corner of a blade come through, reached up, reshaped the blade, sealed closed the split it had made. Down the side corridor the door of his office opened, someone in armor was coming through. The windows — too late to seal all the doors. He turned and ran.

Dag, asleep in his room across the side corridor from Hal's, heard the pounding of axes on the east door, came out to see what was happening. Hal's door opened, someone in foreign armor came through, saw Dag, lifted his sword to swing, clutched his head, fell. Down the corridor another Dalmian, still within range. Two down. He stepped across the corridor into Hal's room, saw yet another enemy crawling through the window, killed him. Three. To the window to see what was happening. Men still coming through the breach. He closed his eyes, reached out — mages were the most dangerous enemies. One there, no defense up that he could see, the brain always easiest. Four. One thing fire was good for.

The crossbow bolt took him in the throat.

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"The attack failed, Highness. Gap closed, most of the company never got through."

"Veder may be having better luck on the other side. If not, we try again tomorrow. We've proved that the unbreakable sphere isn't."

A runner, dusty and out of breath. "From Mati, Highness. Company is under attack — don't know how many but pushing hard. Asking for reinforcements."

The prince looked around. "Alem. Tell Ambrud to take his company, reinforce Mati. Then to the other side of this, tell Veder to cancel, pull his men back to the camp. Some of Justin's people will be with both of them — send those to help Mati, he can use more mages."

He turned to the cluster of runners waiting his orders. "Tok, Tamas' company, tell them to assemble at the camp, ready to move out from there. Avran to Foris, same. Gerg, tell Alberd to get his boys mounted, left end of Mati's line, I'll be there to tell them what to do. 'Lind, Elek's company, tell them to come in on Mati's right."

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Walic looked around the command tent. The lantern, hung from a spoke near the center pole, threw moving shadows of his officers on the tent walls. "Orban has camp and sentries. Everyone else is here. No contact

with the attackers since half an hour before sunset. I want your reports. After I hear them, we decide what we do tomorrow.

"Mati can start — he was the beginning of the fight."

The officer looked up. "Couple of hours past noon, one of my scouts came in to report enemy troops north of here moving through the woods either side of the road. My boys were already dug in, clear line of sight across open fields where the road feeds into the farms around the village. Told them to get ready.

"Enemy came out of the woods on the far side. Standard tactics, double line, crossbows and axes behind shields. Looked like a big force, line longer than ours and more behind it, so I sent a runner for help.

"They were trying to use their numbers to flank us on both sides — until they ran into the surprises our allies had set up for us day before yesterday. Hard to walk when the mud's waist deep under you. That stopped the advance. They traded bolts with us for a while — my guess is they were waiting for their earth mage to arrive and deal with the problem. Then Alberd showed up on my left, started pushing them in.

"Problem with earth traps is they catch both sides. Alberd slowed down and that gave most of their right time to pull back. Elek came in on our right, lengthened the line so it was longer than theirs — if they had kept coming they would have been the ones flanked, our archers behind them instead of in front. Not being stupid, they didn't.

"By that time the rest of our reinforcements were showing up in the center, so we started pushing back. No air mage in my company to tell me if it was natural or not, but the wind was blowing our way — their bolts reaching us, ours mostly falling short. About then Your Highness took over command of the center."

"Yes. Most of you saw the rest of the day's fight. By the time we got to them, the enemy had earthworks just our side of where the trees close in on the road. We tried an advance but this time they were the ones with traps, must have set them up while they were pulling back. Also, they had engines — siege bows, little stone throwers. Tore us up a bit. I pulled the center back, had the wings come in on either end through the woods. By the time they got there the enemy were gone — pulled back, heavy weapons and all. I didn't fancy following them through terrain their mages had had a chance to play with, not with the light going. Just to play safe we withdrew into the fort.

"That's most of what happened in the fields north of here. Any of you have anything to add?"

For a few seconds everyone was silent, then Alberd spoke. "One thing Mati didn't mention. When we hit their right, most of it fell back, some panicking, some retreating in good order. Part of why we stopped was the

mud but the other part was that north of the traps there was a formed-up body of men waiting for us, regulars of some sort, enough long spears to make things hard for horses.

We pulled the nearest of the enemy out of the mud for prisoners, also our men and horses that had gotten in — the horses were harder — then fell back in line with Mati."

He fell silent. The prince looked around the tent, spoke. "What about the attacks on the College?"

Ambrud was the first to respond. "Doray opened a hole for us like they said they would. Almost as soon as it opened there were troops on the other side, regulars with big shields blocking us. Doray helped a bit, freezing the defenders so we could push them out or chop them down, but it wasn't enough. They must have had an earth mage, turned part of the dirt under the gap to mud. By the time our mages turned it back again they had filled the hole in their line.

"One of the Doray knew enough of our talk to warn us when they weren't going to be able to hold the gap open much longer, so we pulled back, gap closed. Must have killed a few of them, but not a lot. By the look of things we were fighting a mix of regulars and armed civilians, at least one mage, more of the regulars coming in at the end. One of ours was killed, trapped in the mud and an axe got him. Four wounded, but Ilona thinks they'll all make it."

"We had better luck," Veder said. "Where the gap opened there was one man, maybe a student. No armor, no shield. Bad luck for him. By the time the regulars tried to close the gap, a small squad coming at us from each side, we had enough through to deal with them. Drove them back in both directions, trapped them between the College wall and the barrier, killed them. Along with more civilians, some of them armored up, some not.

"The only way through was ahead of us. Windows along the College wall and a big door in the middle, open when we arrived but someone had the sense to shut it, bolted solid enough so Elek, heaviest man I've got, couldn't break through. Set some axes to take it down, more of my men, two squads worth, through the windows. Nobody in them, aside from the body of one archer we'd already dealt with. Most of the company were through the gap in the barrier by then, nothing stopping us but a door two of my boys were turning into kindling. Figured even if the Doray couldn't hold the gap much longer, we had enough through to take the College.

"Then Alem showed up with Your Highness's orders. I had my trumpeter sound the recall, got most of my boys out before the Doray let the gap close. When we come back tomorrow I'll bring a ram for the door."

"Casualties?"

Veder thought a moment. "We lost Istvan. Got his body out. No mark on it, so probably a mage got him somehow. Aside from that, nine men dead or missing, five wounded. Judit thinks only one of them is really bad. I figure we killed easily thirty, maybe more."

Walic turned back to the other commanders. "Your casualty count?"

Mati responded first. "Light. A couple of dozen wounded, mostly crossbow bolts. Haven't heard back from the healers yet. Five men killed."

Alberd was next. "Four men killed, twelve wounded. Lost fourteen horses, counting the ones we had to put down, got three back to Miklos. He thought he could save two of them."

After the other captains had given their count, Walic summed up. "Ten soldiers and a mage lost attacking the College, nine men wounded. Nineteen dead in the main battle, forty-seven or so wounded. I figure we'll lose a couple of the wounded, have maybe half of them back in action in a day or two — 'Lona and Judit are good, why we brought them.

"So much for today's fighting. What do we know about the enemy?"

He looked at Foris, waited. The truth teller responded. "I observed the questioning of the prisoners, finished half an hour ago. Pompei was there too. Between us, with what they said and what they didn't say, I think we got most of what they knew.

"They were all southerners, following the southern duke. Came north by boat, got into the capital a couple of days back, broke the siege of the keep. The next morning they headed out here. They didn't know why — just obeying orders."

The prince nodded. "All southerners means a smaller army than ours. Either the other lords haven't gotten their armies together yet or the lords don't trust each other.

"Another breakthrough like Veder's and we have the College. Even without that, a couple more days like this and they run out of men to fight us with.

"But we're not doing it tomorrow. Making two attacks on the College ties up a quarter of our force and pretty nearly all our allies. That isn't safe until after we have dealt with the enemy army. If we kill their king and they kill us, they win."

Veder looked up. "What if we use two companies to take the College, keep the other seven here? If nine companies can take them in the open, seven should be plenty inside a field fortification. Then the next day we take the whole army and go after them."

Walic looked around the tent. "Comments?"

Nobody spoke. He looked across at Justin, sitting silent at the back of the tent. "If we try the College again tomorrow, how early can we start?"

“Late afternoon at the earliest. My mages held the breaches open as long as they could; they won’t be good for much until they have had at least a full day to recover.”

Walic looked around the tent, spoke.

“We have the numbers; we spend tomorrow using them. Force the enemy to battle. Break them. Then we take the College and the king, persuade Petrus to trade his throne for his head. Deal with the next lord fool enough to think he can beat us and make himself king. Eventually one of them will figure out that he is better off with us than against us.”

## Chapter 46

*[Near Southdale]*

Prince Kieron looked around the tent. The flickering light from the candelabra at its center touched on silk hangings, tent walls of brilliantly dyed canvas, chairs of carved oak. When the southern duke went to war, he did it in style.

Alessandro himself was seated in the front row facing the prince, along with three of his officers. Behind them were Torgeir, Coelus, and Ino, the commander of the city militia contingent. Kieron was the first to speak. "When the Learned Elinor left Troutvale a little over two weeks ago, Eskil was starting to assemble an army in the Marches. How long would that take him?"

He looked across at Torgeir.

"At least a week, Highness, more likely two. Longer if he waited for Finn to get all his people together."

"Thank you. Assume two weeks, add a week more to get to the capital then two days to Southdale; that gets him here sometime in the next week. If Morgen pulled free of the Bren when Her Highness reached him with the news from the capital that gets him here about the same time. Either one of them gives us enough men for a fight. We just need to keep the attention of the enemy off the College for another few days.

"Given the numbers, we would prefer to do it without getting pulled into a real battle."

There was a long silence before Alessandro responded. "Unless Walic is incompetent, it can't be done; they have twice our numbers plus a pack of Dorayan mages. We might play games with them for a day. Longer than that and they either crush us in one fight or wear us down in several."

"What if we make it a fighting retreat? Harass them at range. Every time they are getting close enough to be dangerous we retreat, leaving a few traps behind to slow them down. What we did today. With luck they chase us to the capital and we get there about the same time as Eskil and Morgen."

Torgeir shook his head. "I'm sorry, Highness, it sounds pretty but it doesn't work. We're mostly infantry. All they have to do, once they figure out that we don't want to fight them, is get a few hundred cavalry and a couple of mages past us, find a choke point, block it long enough to hold us for a few hours while their main force catches up and breaks us. The bridge over the Divey, maybe, or someplace a bit farther west."

"If a fighting retreat doesn't work, what does? My brother is under siege and I'm damned if I'm going to abandon him."

Again it was Alessandro who took up the challenge. He spoke slowly, looking at Kieron. "If the Doray can break the sphere, your brother is dead; by my sister's account he had less than half a company of regulars. A single Dalmian company, even half a company, could take the College once it got in, and Walic has eight or nine of them. Plus forty or so Doray war mages. And he has had six days to do it in.

"The only hope for your brother is that the containment sphere is holding. If it is, His Majesty and the magisters are safe. They might get a little hungry, depending on how much food they stored away, but it takes more than a week to starve to death."

He turned to Coelus. "Thirst is more of a problem; how does the College get its water? With the sphere closed are they limited to whatever storage barrels they have full?"

Coelus shook his head. "There is a deep well in the northeast lawn, next to the kitchen — it's why they put the kitchen there. It may have been one of the reasons Durilil and Feremund decided to use the old monastery. However long the siege lasts, the College isn't going to run out of water."

Alessandro turned back to Kieron. "If they are safe, all you are doing by attacking is getting yourself and us killed to no purpose.

"If His Majesty is dead and you get killed, which Captain Torgeir has just told you is what is going to happen if we follow your plan, the next in line is a thirteen-year-old boy with no army, no lands, nobody in allegiance to him. What keeps someone, maybe one of the Earls, maybe one of the royal cousins, maybe one of your other relatives a little further from the throne than your son but older and more powerful, from deciding to offer Walic part of the kingdom — or the allegiance of all of it — in exchange for Dalmian support?

"If the Doray can destroy the sphere it is too late to save His Majesty; with him dead, you are too valuable to risk. If they cannot, there is no need to stay here and get ourselves killed. Either way we should be pulling out tonight, getting everyone across Divey, setting up to hold the river line. We are two miles north of the enemy already, assuming they are back in their fortification for the night. If we move out tonight we should get safely away. That is what I will be telling my officers to do."

For a moment nobody spoke. It was Coelus who broke the silence. "The situation is not quite as simple as Your Grace imagines it. According to my lady wife, whose perception is much better than mine, the sphere was still there as of a few hours ago. None of us believe that the Doray can destroy it; what we are afraid of is that they can create a breach wide enough to attack through. Magister Dag is fire and Jon is earth; either of them should be able to block an attack for longer than the Doray could hold

the breach open. As could a squad of the soldiers that Her Majesty reported were in the College."

Alessandro turned around to face the mage. "You are saying that the first time they attack they might be stopped if the right people happen to be in the right place. What about the second? The third? Two or three weeks ago I saw a single Dorayan mage, in a space of a few seconds, freeze three people with his spells. The enemy have forty of them."

Coelus hesitated a moment before replying. "Even if it is possible to open a breach by brute force, as I think it is, it may not have occurred to them yet to try. And once they do, it will be at least a day, perhaps two days, before the mages who held the breach open will have recovered enough to attempt a second attack. So it may not be too late yet."

Alessandro looked skeptical. "Olver told us that the sphere could be broken. The Doray got to the College five days ago. You don't think the most skilled mages in the world have figured it out yet?"

"Olver knows more about the sphere than anyone else alive; he designed it."

"More than the Dorayans?"

"Yes."

Alessandro turned back to the prince. "If the magister is correct," he accented the first word, "it is possible that His Majesty is still alive and in danger. If we had more with us than my forces and the remnants of the city garrison, it might be worth trying to fight, but we don't. Eskil is coming, very likely Morgen as well; with their forces we would have the enemy heavily outnumbered. Throwing everything away now by fighting when the odds are the other way around is madness. I will not be a party to it. If we withdraw to the Divey and the enemy choose to pursue us, that should take pressure off the College. I do not see how we can do more than that."

"And if I order you to the contrary?"

"I am sworn to His Majesty, not to Your Highness. I do not believe that His Majesty would want us to throw away our lives, most particularly your life, in a desperate and almost hopeless attempt to save him. You know your brother better than any man alive. Do you disagree?"

Kieron made no reply.

Ino broke the silence. "I too am sworn to His Majesty — thirty years in the Companies, ten more as a commander in the militia. All respect to Captain Torgeir, His Highness, and His Grace, but I believe I have more experience of warfare than anyone else present. I agree with His Grace that if we have no way of holding the enemy in play until the Marcher forces reach us, our best hope is an immediate retreat at least across Divey, maybe all the way back to the capital."

Kieron said nothing. Alessandro smiled.



"But one of the lessons I have learned over the past forty years is that the simplest answer to a tactical problem is not always the best — because that is the answer the enemy will expect. Is there no solution other than what His Highness proposed and the captain dismissed? Might there, for example, be some way to convince the enemy that our reinforcements have arrived, perhaps illusions created by magery? They have gone to the trouble of building a field fortification — can we persuade them that they are safest inside it?"

Kieron nodded. "Thank you. I willingly concede that most of you have more experience of warfare than I. I put it to all of you — can you find a better way than what I suggested to hold the enemy in play? If none of you can come up with one, I will concede the strength of Duke Alessandro's argument and agree to withdraw my forces along with his."

An hour later, the prince's question still unanswered, there was an interruption, voices outside the entrance to the command tent. One of the guards opened the door, spoke.

"Your Grace, there is a lady here who wishes to enter."

"Admit her."

Ellen came into the tent. Kieron was the first to speak. "You are welcome, learned lady. Are you in search of your husband?"

She shook her head.

"No. I have just been to the College and back. I thought Your Highness might want to know what I have learned."

There was shocked silence. It was Kieron who finally broke it. "Very much. Is my brother still alive?"

"I did not speak with His Majesty, but yes. According to my mother there were two attacks today on the College. The first was blocked by some of Captain Geffron's men and a few of the students, who His Majesty had spaced around the inside of the sphere to give the alarm if the Doray succeeded in breaching it, as they did. The second had cleared the magisters' lawn of defenders and was forcing its way into the College when the attackers withdrew, I conjecture to deal with our attack."

"How did you get to the College?" Alessandro sounded skeptical. "Wasn't there an enemy army in the way?"

"I walked. I am good at not being noticed."

He turned to the prince.

"You believe her?"

Kieron nodded. "A week ago she made it to us in the citadel through a city held by the invaders. Showed up at the postern gate and politely asked to be let in. We were under siege and not expecting visitors."

"Then Your Highness is right about what has to be done. I still do not see how we can do it."

Ellen gave him a puzzled look. "What has to be done?"

"That is what His Highness and I have spent the last two hours arguing about. He wants us to find some way of keeping the Dalms' attention on us instead of the College until the Marchers show up and we have enough men to fight them. I thought that if the Doray could get through the protective sphere they would have done it already and if they could not there was no need to keep their attention on us. The magister," he gestured back at Coelus behind him, "thought they might still be trying. It appears that he was correct.

"Which leaves us with the problem of how to keep the full attention of an army twice our size without getting ourselves killed doing it."

Ellen shook her head. "That may not be necessary. I can channel fire and my mother, who is already inside, can weave it — as she did when the sphere was first crafted. We should be able to strengthen the sphere, make it more difficult for the Doray to breach it."

Kieron turned from Alessandro to Ellen. "You intend to return to the College tonight?"

She nodded.

"And you believe that you and your lady mother can prevent the Dalm and the Doray from taking the College?"

"We can at least make it considerably more difficult. If they could have opened the breach wider or held it longer they would have."

"You have our thanks." He turned to Alessandro. "I accept what you proposed two hours ago. I leave its implementation to Your Grace, Captain Torgeir, and Commander Ino."

## Chapter 47

*[Southdale]*

Walic came back into the main room of the inn, took the chair at the head of the table, spoke. "They realized they were too weak to face us; when Mati advanced on their positions this morning, they were gone. We can use all of our strength to deal with the College and the king today, chase the southern army tomorrow. When Abran was there, the magisters dined at the seventh hour past noon. With luck they still do. We will attack then.

"According to the map Abran sketched for me, the rooms for students and magisters run around three sides of the square, leaving the south side open. Our first attack will be from the north to pull their reserves, the second from the south." He turned to Justin. "Have your people in position half an hour before."

Justin nodded.

"Arnst commands for the first attack, Veder for the second."

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"We couldn't open it."

Justin gave Kaeso a puzzled look. "Couldn't? You managed yesterday."

"The barrier is stronger today. I pulled it open a foot or so but holding even that was hard, so I let the breach close and released the pool. You'll have to tell the prince..."

Justin shook his head. "Take your people over to the other side of the College to join Lucius. I'll send the rest over as well; his pool is going to be everyone but you and me. We have been using fifteen-man pools because fifteen was enough. Now it isn't.

"With you to burn down the defenders as fast as they come, me to make sure the ground stays solid for our allies and thirty-six more to open the gap and keep it open, this time it works. Just remember to hold something in reserve in case they have a fire mage too."

Kaeso nodded agreement, turned to go back to his team while Justin walked over to explain the new plan to Prince Walic.

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"Go!"

Lucius raised his hand, spoke the words, heard them echoed around the ring of mages, felt power pour into him. He reached out with his hands, caught a thread of woven fire, pulled. For a moment it held. He drew in

more power, used it, watched the gap appear, widen. On the other side a startled student saw the breach, yelled, dropped his sword, clutched his head, died.

Kaeso opened his eyes. The other side of the gap was grass dotted with trees, two or three cows grazing. Beyond that the pillars of a cloister, stacks of hay, a door into the College.

Shield men were through the gap now, past the body of the student he had killed, more coming in behind them. Defenders, regulars in armor, came from both sides to block the attacking force, formed a half ring around them, shields pushing against shields, axe men on either side trying to get a killing blow over the shields in front of them.

Kaeso closed his eyes again, struck. One, two, three, four. Enough to break the line, not enough to exhaust his power. The attackers pushed forward, Kaeso just behind them, the surviving defenders falling back or dying.

Jon came through the passage from the masters' lawn to the cloister, past the corner privy and the stairway that led to the upper rooms. His view was partly blocked by one of the milk cows, but he could see that enemy troops were pouring through the barrier into the orchard. The gap was beyond his range — even if the enemy had no earth mage to counterspell him, and they probably did.

He drew his belt knife. Two steps put him behind the cow and just to one side; he slashed her rump, yelled. She bolted for the gap.

Kaeso saw the cow coming at him, soldiers scattering from in front of it. He hesitated for a moment, stepped to one side, closed his eyes, struck with all the power he had left.

Soldiers were coming out of the College now, past the piled hay, forming up against the attacking line. The middle of the orchard was a tangled fight, twenty or thirty men on either side, a few crossbow men farther back looking for targets. Beyond them smoke was beginning to rise from the stacked hay. Kaeso closed his eyes, reached out. The stacks were catching fire, behind them two women. Witches perhaps, but they did not seem to be doing anything and the attackers could easily enough go around the fire once the defenders were dealt with. In any case his power was spent — time to get through the gap and out of the fight before a random crossbow bolt brought him down. The dead cow had been pulled clear of the gap in the barrier — his chance to get out and away.

Patric, pushing through the narrow passage from the front lawn to the cloister, remembered the advice Leonard had given to him and Dag. The first rule was not to attract attention, because anyone who saw an enemy fire mage would try to kill him. Two steps to the left put him behind one of the cloister pillars. The second was to put up a defensive shield and

reserve enough of his power for it, which would be useful if Dag had ever taught him how.

Leonard's third rule was to target the most important enemy within his range. Patric closed his eyes, reached out with his mind. A fire mage, facing away from the fight, for a moment paused. Within his range. The mage staggered and fell.

The haystacks went up in a burst of fire, then out. Men on both sides paused in their fighting, for a moment blinded.

Patric opened his eyes again. No more enemies were coming through the gap.

Or could.

The closing of the gap struck Lucius like a physical shock; he staggered, caught himself, drew power from the pool, reached out again to catch the threads and pull them back open, let go with a cry of pain. Where he had touched the threads their lines were burned across his palms.

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"Explain to me again why your people let the gap close with mine still inside."

"They didn't let it close, Your Highness, the defenders closed it. I don't know how; there was a flash of light and the gap was gone. Lucius couldn't force it back open even with all the strength he had from the pool; he burned his hands trying. Your people weren't the only ones inside — I lost my best fire mage."

"Can you open it again?"

"We can try tomorrow. I am hoping that whatever they did won't last, but since I don't know what it was..."

"We lost too many today when the gap closed, but they lost men as well and they don't have many to lose. One more should do it. This time keep the gap open."

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Melia bent over a wounded soldier, her student beside her.

"Watch carefully, down as fine as your perception takes you — closing a wound is one of the skills you need, especially if the Dalm keep attacking. You would think they'd have enough sense to give up by now, but sense isn't something you can count on, as you will discover. Do the blood vessels first, both kinds, big before small. When you have joined up as many as you can, holding the wound closed like this so the ends are together — where the axe blade came through his shoulder some of the smaller ones can't be saved, but with luck enough can be — then you

reweave the cut flesh." As she spoke, Katarina saw cut veins and arteries joining, the wound closing as the mage wove the flesh back together.

"That was the only dangerous one. See if you can close the cut on his shin and the other one over his ribs while I work on someone else. When you are finished, make sure someone is going to take care of him, get him to bed and give him plenty to drink — water or beer, but not anything stronger."

A dozen wounded men were sitting or lying on the grass, waiting for the healers to get to them. Melia turned to the next. Beyond her, Ellen was working on one of the others.

"Lady, Geffron sent me to ask you..." Melia looked up at Leonard briefly, replied, "I'm busy," turned back to the wounded man.

"To ask if you expect another attack tonight."

Ellen responded for her mother without looking up. "Not in the next few hours at least. Maybe tomorrow. Tell him that we will need more stuff that burns — straw if there is any left, firewood if there isn't. Split to burn fast."

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"You wanted to speak with us, Magistra?"

Melia nodded to Patric without rising from her chair; Katarina did not think she had ever seen her teacher look so tired. Ellen was standing behind the chair, her hands on her mother's shoulders. Melia spoke, the words coming more slowly than usual. "My daughter is a fire mage; please keep that fact to yourselves. The reason she wasn't helping Patric with the fight is that the two of us were using the fire from the burning straw to force the gap closed, which takes both weaving and fire.

"If either of us had been killed during the fight — there was an enemy fire mage there, the one Patric killed — the gap would have stayed open and the Dalm would have taken the College. That might happen next time.

"Patric is fire and you, like me, are a weaver. I want to teach the two of you how to work together to reinforce the sphere, first with Patric's own fire then, when you have that down, with fire from burning straw or wood or whatever there is to burn. The nice thing about a pile of straw or paper is that Patric can light it himself, as Ellen did. With wood, you have to start with kindling and then wait until there is enough fire to be of use to you.

"The first step is learning to pool; I've written down the schema for that spell and I think both of you are advanced enough to learn it. Be careful; pooling is dangerous.

"After that, the schema for reinforcing the sphere. Olver wrote that one himself, gave it to Ellen to bring to us. Then finally the one for using natural fire instead of Patric's.

"None of it is safe. You should wait until I have had a night's sleep — I'm not young any more — so the two of us can monitor you. Try just the pooling tonight if you are up to it; be ready to drop the pool — the instructions on how to are with the schema — if you feel it going wrong. Come back tomorrow morning for the rest of it.

"I am going to bed now. Katarina and Ellen should look over the wounded, make sure nothing has opened up since we worked on them, then go to bed too."

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Justin looked over the mages assembled in the kitchen of the farmhouse they were occupying. When he spoke, his tone was less calm than usual. "I want to know what the hell is going on with the barrier. The story Walic claims he got from one of his people was that the sphere was created by some famous mage, long since dead. So who strengthened it after our first attacks? Who forced the breach closed this time? It looks to me like the work of someone alive, skilled, powerful, and inside the College. And not some idiot barbarian."

"Marcus is the only one of our people with them. Could he be in the College?"

Justin looked at Pompei. "I thought of that. But Marcus worked under me for the past ten years. He could have been reporting to the Magistrate — one of my people was. But he was not all that strong, refining not fire or weaving, and if he had spells not in the book he never showed any evidence of it.

"My guess isn't Marcus. It's that the Magistrate planted a high-level mage with the barbarians, possibly as one of the magisters in the College, and didn't happen to mention it to us. One of Arius's boys might have made it out of the city alive and come here — and the Magistrate's man decided to get his revenge, tie us up here trying to break the barrier, maybe get some of us killed. Maybe all of us if the Eslanders show up with a bigger army tomorrow. Some of the archons have long suspected that the magistrates had spells they kept to themselves, powerful ones not in the book. The barrier might be one of them."

Pompi stood up to speak. "We have a more urgent problem than the College. According to yesterday's prisoners, the Eslanders have retaken their capital. If Vitos and Banios didn't manage to kill Arius in time the enemy have him. If they let him go ..."

Justin gave him a worried look. "I hadn't thought about that, but you're right. The army belongs to the southern duke, who is under the influence of one of the Magistrate's people. Arius may be on his way south

already. If he reaches the Magistrate before we get to Aulus, we lose everything.

"We need to be out of this as soon as we can, maybe while Walic is plundering the College, assuming we manage to get him in again. Once we have a ship, we can move a lot faster than Arius, thanks to Sextus; with luck we might even catch him."

Pompi shook his head. "Waiting for Walic to take the College gives Arius another day; we need to get out tonight. Mati's company is still the one blocking the road the enemy attacked from. Grab one of Walic's runners. Make him believe he has a message from Mati for Walic, another attack by a larger force. Walic either goes north to meet them or pulls everyone into the fortification; we head south and west for the river. Leave some earth traps behind to slow Walic down when he figures out what happened."



## Chapter 48

*[North Bank of Divey]*

"It wasn't really dangerous, Highness. The reason Asgeir wanted to kill Kir was to make me king, and he couldn't make me king if he killed me."

Kieron shook his head. "Everything he had done was for you and you were ruining it. The next time you stake your life on someone thinking before he acts might be the last."

"What should I have done?"

"Kept your distance, planning to run, not fight, if he came after you. If you got away alive that would end any chance of his pretending Kir's death was an accident. And the longer it took before he killed one of you, the better the chance that he would calm down enough to decide not to."

Mari, who had been watching the conversation between her husband and the two boys, interrupted. "When you finish lecturing Rick on how not to get killed keeping his brother alive — we will hope he doesn't have to do it again — can we discuss the more immediate question of who is sleeping where, now that we are finally back together? Earl Eskil has been squeezing the boys into his tent along with Rick's grandfather, but since he is also running the largest contingent of our army out of that tent I expect he would be happy to have them back with us where they belong. And I don't expect Father will object to my leaving his tent for my husband's."

Kieron smiled at his wife. "For the last few days I have been sleeping under a tree, like most of the rest of our army. The only tent was Alessandro's and I preferred to be with my own people. It's a big tree; all three of you are welcome to join me."

He paused, got no reaction, relented. "But as it happens, Hako and Anna arrived from the capital this afternoon with a wagon full of supplies, including canvas and blankets; things seem to be gradually returning to normal in the city, with people, including our house staff, drifting back in now that it's safe to do so. I expect that by the time we get back to where they are setting things up, they will have a tent for us."

"Now that that question is answered and I have a little time before I am supposed to show up at Alessandro's tent to have two dukes, an earl, Commander Carl, Commander Ino and Rick's grandfather tell me what I should be doing with the very large army I am supposedly in charge of, we might think about plans a little farther ahead. Once we have lifted the siege of the College, freed my brother and, with luck, persuaded Walic to surrender instead of fighting—I expect he can do the arithmetic as well as I

can — and gotten back home, what do the two of you,” he looked at the boys, “plan to do next?”

Mari said, “Rick is obviously welcome to stay with us in the capital but there are also his kin on the other side, his mother and his uncle, in Troutvale, where I expect he would also be welcome. At some point he will want to study at the College, but that won’t be for a few more years.”

“Uncle wants me to spend part of the year getting to know our people, since I’m his heir. That lets me be with mother too. I was hoping Kir could come with me.”

“No reason why not. Kieron and I visit Fire Mountain Keep every summer when my mother and father are there; the two of you could come with us, get dropped off in Troutvale, come back home later. Kir should be getting to know people in the Marches as well; some day his life might depend on them. The rest of the kingdom too. Next year or the year after he could make Troutvale the first stop on the Grand Tour — the Marches, then Father’s lands in the East, Alessandro’s in the South, the lesser lords west of the capital.”

Kieron turned to his son. “For a trip like that you will want a decent escort, people you can trust not only to keep you safe and fed but to be polite to your hosts, listen to what the people around them are saying and take notes. You have a year or two but you should start thinking about names now.”

“Something mother told me a very long time ago — the one art that matters is choosing friends.” Mari looked for a moment at the two boys, then over their heads at her husband.

Kir looked up at his father. “Rick will be with me, that’s the first name.”

Eirick added “Anders. A friend of ours in the Marches and a mage.”

Kir thought a moment. “The soldier who refused an order to kill me. His name is Ren. And when the lieutenant asked him for his crossbow, he made sure to take the quarrel out and uncock the bow before giving it to him.”

Kieron gave him a curious look. “I don’t think you have told me that story.”

Mari smiled. “He will. And all the rest of it. We may not get a lot of sleep tonight.”

## Chapter 49

*[Southdale]*

Between the encampment of the royal army and the Dalmian field fortification, a long bow shot from either, a table, dappled by shadow from the oak above it. On each side, three men. Petrus was the first to speak. "Good day, Your Highness."

Walic nodded. "Good day, Your Majesty. I have, as you proposed, brought with me Foris, my truthteller," he gestured towards the taller of his two companions, "and my scribe."

"I did the same; this is Magister Jerik. It should make matters easier. Here is the situation as I see it and the terms I am prepared to offer you."

"If our count is correct, you attacked the capital with ten companies, between three and four thousand men. You lost some of them attacking the citadel, left one company behind when you moved against the College, lost a few more fighting here, leaving you now with about three thousand or a little less. Is that correct?"

"Reasonably close, Your Majesty."

"Our combined forces now total more than five thousand and grow daily."

Walic looked across to Foris, who nodded. He turned back to the king. "You are leaving our allies out of your calculation."

"Your allies abandoned you three days ago, judging by when they last attacked the containment sphere. I am guessing, from what Arius told my brother, that they were hoping to get home before he did. Between Duke Alessandro's ships on the From and our cavalry pursuing them by land I do not think they are going to make it, but we have not yet received word of their capture."

"Nothing is certain in war, but you are heavily outnumbered in mages as well as soldiers. Whether you try to meet us here or to make it back to the border, it is not likely that you will succeed."

"Here is the alternative I am prepared to offer you."

Walic said nothing, waited.

"Your unprovoked attack did harm to both Our capital and its inhabitants. When you have fully compensated the victims and repaired the damage, you will be free to go home."

The prince shook his head. "Bringing dead men back to life is not in my power. Nor can I make houses rise from the ashes."

"You can, however, pay compensation to the heirs of the dead. My people in the capital are attempting to compile a list. I intend to check all claims with the use of truthtellers — you are welcome to have yours

present as well. The traditional formula for blood money, still practiced in parts of the kingdom, is forty gold or four hundred silver for a killing, scaled down for lesser wrongs, including rape.

"As to making houses rise from the ashes, all that requires is timber, brick, stone, tools and men's hands to use them. The raw material we can provide.

"If you agree to my terms, your wounded will be sent home. The rest of your force, disarmed, will be held, both to assist with the rebuilding — your engineers should be especially useful — and as hostages to guarantee the payment of your debt. Every time you pay blood money for one of those killed or an equal sum in compensation for lesser injuries we release one prisoner, and similarly for every house rebuilt.

"To speed the process we will invite His Majesty your father to send us craftsmen in exchange for some of our prisoners — carpenters, masons, bricklayers, their assistants and apprentices. When all damage is repaired and all compensation paid, any of your people still left will be free to go home. If all your men have been redeemed before all the damage has been paid for, I will take responsibility for the rest."

"Who feeds the craftsmen? Who pays them?"

"We feed them. You pay them — they are repairing damage you did."

"I will consider your offer, consult with my advisers. Can we meet here again in another few hours?"

The king nodded. "Before you go, there is something more I would like to discuss.

"Your attack was proposed, supported and, we believe, financed, by the Doray. Do you know why?"

"Tell me."

"When our kingdoms broke free of the League, the Doray replaced direct rule with a network of agents inserted, bought, or controlled by magery. My brother has spent twelve years hunting down their people in Esland; he thinks he got most of them. Your invasion was the League's response.

"If we succeed in capturing the Doray force, their ransom will be their remaining agents, one mage sent home for each agent exposed. Once they hear that Arius has escaped his bonds and vanished from the city — it seems that, with sufficient time, a Dorayan fire mage can rust through iron — I expect they will be eager to pay the ransom as rapidly as they can.

"When Justin has betrayed all of his remaining agents, there may still be mages unransomed. We will offer to accept the names of agents in Dalmia and Brenland as well. We prefer not to have our neighbors under the influence of our enemies."

Walic shook his head. "We start to clear the Doray agents out of Dalmia with your assistance, as you have been clearing them out of Esland. Then the Doray persuade one of our neighbors, perhaps the Forstings, to invade us with their help, as they persuaded us to invade you. I am not sure I like this plan."

"That you will have to decide for yourself. Consider what the willingness of half your Doray allies to help you massacre the other half says about matters in the League. It might be a good time to defy them."

There was a brief exchange between the prince and Foris in their own language. Walic turned back to the king. "Are you proposing an alliance against the League?"

Petrus shook his head. "First we settle accounts between our kingdoms. After that ..."

# Epilogue

*[The capital]*

Alys and the queen sat where they had been a month before, the same chairs, the same table. The queen was the first to speak. "Your home seems to have survived the occupation unharmed."

Alys nodded. "When I got back, a few of the bolts of cloth were missing, expensive ones, including the cloth of gold. One of the looters must have been a tailor, or worked for one. They ended up in one of the houses down the street, along with other abandoned loot. When my neighbor got back—she was one of the ones who made it out of the city the first morning—she found the bolts and brought them back to me. I plan to make her something once everything has settled down again.

"The drawer of needles is empty — a lot easier to carry off than a bolt of cloth — but I can get more. Martin is always willing to trade his needles for my help tempering his stock."

"You plan to stay in the city? I thought Sandro..."

"Your brother is handsome, skilled, and generous," she looked down for a moment at the ring on her finger, "but I prefer to remain my own mistress."

"Good. I would miss you. If you are ever tempted to change your mind, you might want to first discuss the matter with Cristina."

Alys gave her a curious glance, said nothing.

"I haven't been south since Sandro married, but I gather Bianca has strong views and is willing to act on them. Cristina decided she preferred to live somewhere where she didn't have to be quite so careful about everything she ate or drank. My brother recommended her to my service here, I accepted."

"I ... see. I should make an opportunity to talk with her sometime; it could be interesting. But I do not plan to change my mind. I prefer my own bed.

"Speaking of your service, will Kat be joining it? I am happy to do what I can, but you should have a mage in your own employ."

"Katarina plans to stay in the College for her final year, I think more for what she can learn from the Magistra than from the magisters. After that, assuming none of the male students has carried her off, I expect her to come to me."

"If she is here before that, let me know. Her main interest at the moment is healing, and very useful that is," Alys looked down at her own leg, its wound now marked only by a fading scar, "but there are other

things weaving is good for and, from what Ellen says, her mother should be able to teach them as well. There might be possibilities for some joint projects."

The queen smiled. "As a future customer, I will take care to remember. Her family lives in the capital; I expect she will want to visit with them for the college break. I will get someone to make sure they are all right and let her know."

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The room was small and comfortable, a refuge from the chaos beyond it where the palace servants were busy restoring the palace to its accustomed condition after three weeks of occupation by the invaders. The blaze in the fireplace took off most of the evening chill. Petrus reached his hands out to it, warmed them, turned to his brother. "How are the boys?"

Kieron smiled. "Happy to be home, adventures over for a while. I think I finally got all the stories out of Kir. Back when the rumor was that both of us were dead, one of Rick's cousins tried to kill Kir to get Rick the succession. Rick stopped him, but it was a near thing. Then Rick's grandfather showed up, having been invited south by Kir who had decided that if we were dead it was up to him to speak for the crown. A company officer in the pay of the Doray tried to kill him to make trouble and it was Kir who saved him. Each of them at considerable risk to himself. Brothers.

"Kir's rooms are crowded for two; I have been thinking about how to make more space for them. We could use part of the attic, with a ladder up from Kir's bedroom, but there's Rick's dog, and dogs can't climb ladders."

"Is the house all right then? There was a little looting here early on, but Walic was planning to use the palace himself so I gather he stopped that pretty fast."

Kieron nodded. "They didn't find Mari's wedding jewels. The rest are missing; I expect she will go back to the old jeweler from Southdale, assuming he made it through the occupation. But no serious damage."

He hesitated, changed the subject. "I have been thinking. About Ellen and Dur."

Petrus said nothing, waited.

"Watching Ellen and Dur working together... They knew each other, were comfortable, like old friends. Or lovers."

"Perhaps they were."

Kieron shook his head.

"I don't think so. Coelus doesn't always know what to pay attention to but he certainly pays attention to his wife. And he isn't a fool. He didn't seem at all worried, let alone jealous. I have a different answer.

"A couple of years ago I was discussing Ellen with Mari's mother. Duchess Gianna was curious about her — Gianna is curious about everyone — and so, of course, was I. Her Grace mentioned something interesting. Ellen talks freely about her mother but never mentions her father.

"I think Dur is her father, her mother's lover not hers. That explains why her husband wasn't jealous."

Petrus looked up from the fire. "Melia told me that the Doray breed for magery, the way we breed cattle or dogs. You told me Ellen was a very strong fire mage. How strong is Dur?"

Kieron thought for a moment.

"When Ellen made the sphere to protect us she needed all the fire she could get. I would have thought Otto was stronger, but she chose to pool with Dur instead. It could be he shields to hide his strength — Ellen does..."

He fell silent.

"Melia told me that making the containment sphere for the College required a fire mage and a weaving mage. Ellen and Dur made the sphere that protected you."

"You think she must be a weaver like her mother as well as a fire mage, talents from both parents? I hadn't thought about it, but she did tell me that she wove fire to shield herself from perception."

Petrus, who had been watching the play of the flames as they talked, looked up. "Something else that fits. When Melia told me that she had pooled with Durilil to make the sphere for the College she said she had known him very well and it was obvious what she meant."

Kieron shook his head. "You have the wrong Durilil. The one who was with us in the citadel is fifty at most, probably younger. He's the right age to be Ellen's father. But the famous Durilil, the one who made the containment sphere, the one who was supposed to be the strongest fire mage anyone had ever heard of, died in his search for the Salamander fifty years ago — and if he hadn't he would be at least a hundred by now, probably older."

Both brothers were silent, thinking. It was Petrus who finally spoke. "You say he was a very strong mage. Is there a way he could hold down his age?"

"If I knew the spells I could hold my age down by a year or two, provided I didn't want to do any other magery. Durilil was much stronger than I am, so perhaps he could have managed four years or five, but not fifty. The only one who ever did anything close to that was King Theodrick, two hundred years ago; supposedly he kept himself alive during his last war with Forstmark by using a team of mages working in relays to hold



down his age. But not by fifty years. It was getting harder and harder as he got older, so he eventually gave up, named one of his grandsons as his heir, sent the mages off to fight the Forsters and died. That's not it."

"Could it be something else? Dur came to you with Olver, and you said Olver invented spells. Could he have invented one that kept Durilil from getting older?"

"He invents spells, including one that was very useful for us. And Coelus invents spells and does it using the theory that Olver created. But if Olver had a spell to keep from getting old he would have used it on himself. He's in pretty good shape for his age but he looks at least seventy, probably older, which is about what he should be."

"Maybe it only worked on a very strong mage. Or he tried the spell on Durilil and it worked but the next four people he tried it on died, so he gave up."

"Maybe. Or it used some very rare reagent and he only had enough for one. I suppose it's possible."

"And then it occurred to Olver and Durilil that if people knew he had done it they would want him to do it again and wouldn't believe him when he said he couldn't."

Kieron nodded. "So Olver and Durilil came up with a story about the Salamander, the elemental that was supposed to be the source of all fire and very dangerous. And Durilil announced that he was going looking for it. He got hold of a body somehow, burned it to ash, put something of his on what was left so people would think it was him and the Salamander had killed him."

Petrus finished the story. "And changed his clothes, grew a beard, dyed his hair, and went off somewhere that he wasn't likely to meet anyone who knew him. And that's why Ellen never mentions her father."

For a little the two were silent, then Kieron said, "The question is, what do I do to find out if it's true?"

"Nothing. You don't want to know."

Kieron gave his brother a curious look, waited.

"How many spies do you have in Morgen's court?"

"None. He is powerful, clever, and on our side — even more on our side now that I am married to his daughter. I don't need to spy on him and the last thing I want is to offend him."

"How many of your wife's attendants spy on her for you?"

"None. The condition Mari set when she agreed to marry me was that I accept her as an ally, not a servant. I agreed to it. That was one of the two best decisions I ever made."

The two exchanged affectionate smiles. It was Petrus who spoke next. "If our guess is correct, there is a group of mages, some of them very

powerful and very skilled, who know more about magery than you or anyone else, more even than the Doray, and who are sufficiently on our side to have saved the lives of both of us within the past two weeks. They have a secret they have gone to a considerable amount of trouble to protect. We should let them continue to do so."

Kieron was silent for a moment looking into the fire, then turned back to Petrus. "Take good care of yourself, brother. You are a better king than I would be."

Half a mile away, in the living room of Olver's house, Durilil lifted his hand from the chest sitting beside his chair, turned away from the fire to his daughter. "All fires are one. Petrus and Kieron have figured out who I am."

Ellen gave him a worried look. "All of it?"

He shook his head. "They think Olver came up with a spell to keep me from getting older. To keep it secret, Olver invented the Salamander, I announced I was going to look for it, faked my death and went into hiding. I want to make sure they keep thinking that. In a few years I should push my age back down to what it was when I was in the citadel and let Kieron see me again."

"How old do you plan to be until then?"

"Older than fifty. Holding it that far down means I can't afford to be away from the Salamander for more than a few hours." He glanced down at the chest. "Seventy or eighty is much easier, and as a jeweler I have a good reason to have a furnace close at hand."

"I have thought of going back to Southdale and announcing that your mother and I are getting married, two old friends spending their last years together, but I am not going to. Or I could go back to my shop, let your mother move into the College, assuming they finally admit that she is a magistra, and let people make any guesses they please about what, if anything, we have to do with each other. But I am not going to do that either. Kieron and Petrus have already put two Durs together with Melia and you — if I add Master Dur the jeweler it might occur to them that they are all the same person and he isn't always fifty. Better to stay here until your mother decides she has taught enough of her art to the College and it is time for us both to go home."

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Marcus looked about the basement laboratory, the shelves of reagents and scrolls, down at the stack of cards on the table, beside it the schema he had written out, spoke to the younger of the two mages.

"And that is how I was trained to filter facts."

"You just write out the facts on the cards, and the ones that end up on the top are ...?"

"The ones on the top are true and important. You can write them on the cards the way I just did, but it's better to use the documents that brought the facts to you. Shuffling is easiest for cards, but I've dropped a stack of documents down a stairwell, with the spell set to pull to the bottom stair. Anything works that should mix the facts at random, but of course you have to modify the schema accordingly. With enough practice you can sometimes abandon the physical apparatus and do all the filtering in your head but that's harder, so training starts with the cards. And people find it less convincing if there is nothing they can see."

They were interrupted by a voice from above, calling down through the open trap door. Coelus translated.

"Dur says you have a visitor."

"Probably someone from the prince. I will come back down if I can. And I may need you to translate."

Coelus shook his head, smiled. "I don't think so."

Puzzling — the only other Eslanders he had met who were fluent were two of the students at the College, from the southern region adjacent to the Doray coastal holdings. Had the prince arranged for one of them to come to the capital as a translator?

It took only a minute to climb the stairs; he came out in one corner of the living room, saw who was waiting for him, froze.

"That's impossible; you're on the island."

Mada said nothing, only smiled at him.

"I dreamed of somehow coming back and rescuing you, but ... How did you do it? How did you get off the island, get here, find me?"

"They assigned me to the kitchen for the construction camp on the south shore. When I helped get things at the market there were girls I knew from the palace and we talked. They told me you had vanished, rumored to have gone to Esland and the Archon was angry at that, much angrier than before. I thought I would be safe, at least until I had the baby, but then I got orders to go see Helvia. I knew about her; she was the witch who women went to when they were with child and didn't want to be. I think the Archon must have been very angry."

"The cook needed a few things from the market, so I volunteered to get them, took the money, went straight through the market to the dock. There was a ship there, so I got on. I didn't know ... but anywhere was better than Malar. When I finally got up the nerve to ask, they told me it was a trading ship to the coast, then upriver to Bonia, and I had enough to pay passage. I think the god wanted our story to come out right."

"In Bonia I took a job at an inn, cooking and waiting tables. The owner was from the islands, a lot of the customers were sailors, and a lot of the people in Bonia speak Doray as well as Eslish. I learned enough words to take orders, and I think the owner liked having a Doray waitress. He gave me a room over the inn, mostly left me alone; Marcia, his wife, worked in the inn too. I became friends with her, told her my story, and she told me about the odd scene she had seen a couple of months earlier, that ended with a mage being put in a cart and carried off north. She knew the carter, asked him for the name of the mage who hired him.

"Eduard got back to Bonia two weeks ago. I told him my story; Marcia translated for us. He brought me to the capital; the Prince had one of his mages bring me here. The old man who let me in spoke Doray well enough to tell me he would get you. He did."

Marcus took a step forward, hugged her, her face against his shoulder. Against his stomach he could feel the bulge of hers.

# Appendices

## Concerning Magery

More than fifty years before *Brothers* starts two prominent mages, Durilil and Feremund, offered to teach one spell from their extensive collection to any mage who would give them a spell in exchange. Over time the collection grew, eventually becoming the core of the College library.

Olver, then a young man, used their collection of spells to research the nature of magery. It had long been believed that magery was based on the elements: Earth, Air, Fire and Water. Some mages fitted that pattern, were chiefly talented in one of the elements, but not all. Olver found in the collection pairs of spells, sometimes even triplets, that produced the same effect using different talents. Following out that clue he developed the theory of basis stars, sets of four talents such as the four elements. Each star was a complete basis — any point of one star could be represented as a weighted sum of points from any other. As Coelus put it in his opening lecture:

*"The belief that all magic is tied to one of the four elements is both true and false. All magic is indeed earth, air, fire and water, in many combinations. But all magic can equally well be seen as hot, cold, wet and dry, or woven, shaped, refined and tempered. Hot magic may be combined of air and fire, but equally fire magic is combined of hot and dry."*

It followed that if a spell could be done using some combination of the four elements it could also be done using a suitable combination of talents from any other basis star. That explained the pairs and triplets that Olver had noticed. It also provided Olver and those familiar with his theory a way of deducing new spells from old.

The four points of the craftsman's star are Weaving, Shaping, Refining, and Tempering. Each includes its opposite; a tempering mage can make a hard material soft as well as a soft material hard. A weaving mage can unweave — magical bindings as well as physical materials — as well as weaving. A refining mage can use his talent to filter, separate two liquids or two solids or truth from falsehood, or to combine two things currently separate. A fire mage can remove fire, make a flame go out, just as he can add fire.

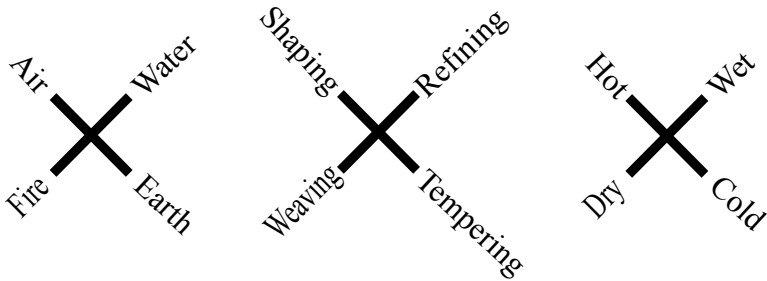
It had been accepted doctrine that female magic users, witches, did something fundamentally different from male magic users, mages. One implication of the theory was that the difference was of degree, not kind. Female mages were much more likely to have talents from the craftsman's star, male from the elemental star. But a woman could be an elemental mage or a man have one of the craft talents. Ellen is both a fire mage and a

weaver, talents from two different stars, and, unlike most such cases, strong in both.

Another implication of Olver’s work was the existence of elementals – beings, more nearly forces of nature, each of which was the basis for all of one sort of magery. The Salamander, the fire elemental, was believed to be the source of all fire – Coelus speculated that the reason the sun had not yet burned out was that it was continually fed fire from the Salamander.

If you want to know more about magery in the world of *Brothers*, read *Salamander*.

**Three Basis Stars, from Olver’s *Second Treatise***



## Significant Characters

### Esland

#### Royals et. al.

<b>King Thoma</b>	<i>(dead)</i>
<b>Queen Elinor</b>	<i>(dead)</i>
<b>King Petrus</b>	Son of Thoma and Elinor
<b>Queen Isabel</b>	Wife to Petrus
<b>Duke Alessandro</b>	Chief southern noble, brother to Isabel,
<b>Alys/Alyson</b>	Isabel's dressmaker and friend, tempering mage
<b>Prince Kieron</b>	Brother and heir to Petrus, earth mage
<b>Nan</b>	<i>Kieron's first wife (dead)</i>
<b>Kir/Kieron</b>	Son of Kieron and Nan
<b>Princess Mari/Mariel</b>	Kieron's second wife, truthteller
<b>Duke Morgen</b>	Feudal lord of the east, father to Mari
<b>Prince Josep</b>	<i>Brother of Petrus, failed claimant to the throne (dead)</i>
<b>Lord Iolen</b>	<i>Son of Josep, failed pretender to the throne (dead)</i>
<b>Rick/Eirick Iolensson</b>	Reluctant pretender to the throne, son of Iolen
<b>Jarl</b>	Eirick's dog

#### Royal Companies

<b>Captain Carl</b>	Officer stationed at the ford of Aron
<b>Lieutenant Antonio</b>	Carl's intelligence officer, southerner
<b>Captain Geffron</b>	Officer commanding the garrison near Southvale
<b>Lieutenant Thorgill</b>	An officer under Geffron, Marcher
<b>Len/Leonard</b>	War mage in Geffron's company
<b>Captain Torgeir</b>	Officer in command in the citadel, Marcher
<b>Bertil</b>	Castellan of Fire Mountain Keep

#### Other Mages

<b>Ellen/Elinor</b>	Fire mage, weaving mage
<b>Melia</b>	Mother of Ellen, healer, weaving mage
<b>Dur/Durilil</b>	Legendary Fire mage
<b>Olver</b>	Theorist, shaping mage
<b>Otto</b>	Fire mage stationed in the citadel
<b>Francisco</b>	Fire mage stationed in the citadel
<b>Rorik</b>	Mage stationed in the citadel
<b>Gervase</b>	Mage in service to Kieron

**Marchers**

<b>Eirick Svensson</b>	Deposed earl, in exile in Forstmark
<b>Earl Eskil</b>	Eirick Svensson's younger son and successor
<b>Sven</b>	Eirick Svensson's older son
<b>Asgeir</b>	Sven's son
<b>Kirstin</b>	Daughter of Eirick Svensson, wife to Iolen, mother to Eirick Iolensson
<b>Fredrik</b>	Deposed Earl, in exile in Forstmark
<b>Earl Finn</b>	Son of Fredrik
<b>Anders</b>	Filtering mage, friend of Mari and Ellen
<b>Hrolf</b>	King's guard, cousin to Sven and Eskil

**The College**

## Magisters

<b>Bertram</b>	Nominal head of the College, water mage
<b>Hal/Henryk</b>	Shaping mage
<b>Dag</b>	Fire mage
<b>Jerik</b>	Librarian, truthteller, refining mage
<b>Coelus</b>	Theorist, husband to Ellen, air mage

## Students

<b>Patric</b>	Fire mage
<b>Kat/Katarina</b>	Weaving mage
<b>Gian</b>	Earth mage

## Others

<b>Jon</b>	Assistant librarian, earth mage
<b>Arthur</b>	Cellarer

**Forstmarkers**

<b>Einvald Asmund</b>	Ruler of Forstmark
<b>Haldorr</b>	Head of the kenners' quarter of the mage guild
<b>Helgi</b>	A kenner, friend of Eirick
<b>Gunnar</b>	Head of the casters' quarter of the guild
<b>Grimr</b>	One of Gunnar's people
<b>Sigrid</b>	Life mage in the Einvald's employ

**Doray**

<b>Junius</b>	The Magistrate, ruler of the Dorayan League
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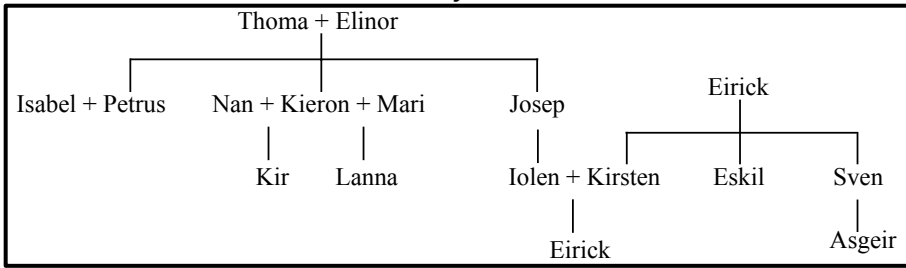


<b>Arius</b>	Fire mage bound to the Magistrate
<b>Aulus</b>	An Archon, ruler of Malar island
<b>Justin</b>	Earth mage bound to the Archon
<b>Kaeso</b>	Fire mage under Justin
<b>Lucius</b>	Fire mage under Justin
<b>Marcus</b>	Mage under Justin, refiner
<b>Mada</b>	Concubine to Marcus

### **Dalmians**

<b>King Willem</b>	Ruler of Dalmia
<b>Prince Walic</b>	Son of Willem
<b>Arnst</b>	Company commander
<b>Veder</b>	Company commander
<b>Gasi</b>	Company commander
<b>Jani</b>	Company commander
<b>Ambrud</b>	Company commander
<b>Alberd</b>	Cavalry commander
<b>Tamas</b>	Engineering company commander
<b>Imre</b>	Engineer, officer commanding the trebuchets
<b>Istvan</b>	Fire mage

## Family Tree



## Foreign Words

*Einvald*: Single ruler — the paramount jarl of Forstmark

*Galdraguild*: Mage's guild

*Galdrakennari*: A kenner, perception mage

*Galdrameistari*: Master in the guild

*Galdramann*: A full member of the guild

*Galdragraethar*: Life mage

*Galdrakona*: Female mage

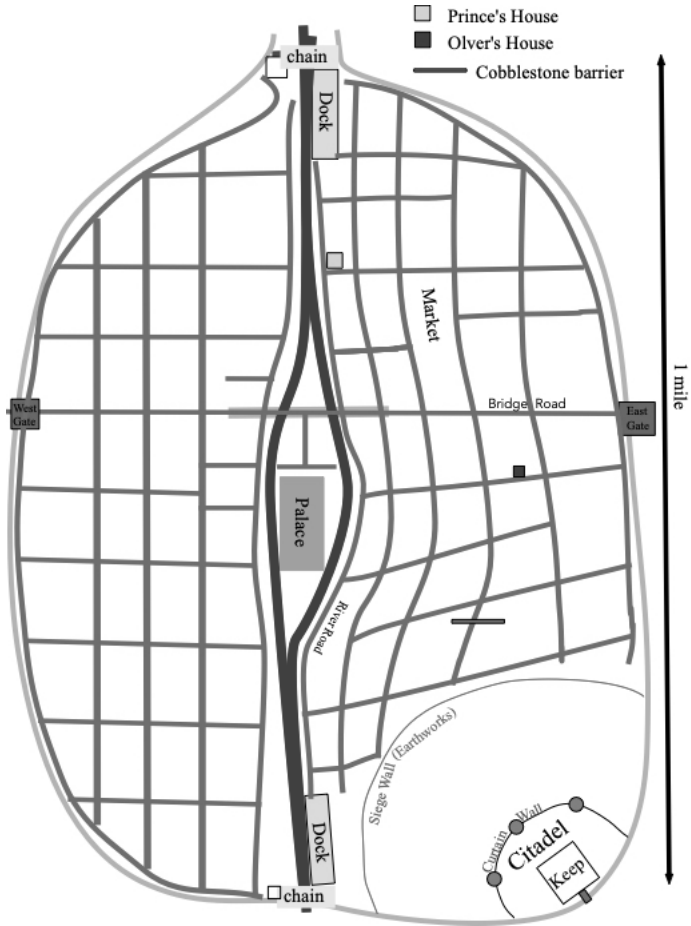
*Gerningmeistari*: The head of the casters' quarter of the guild

*Graetharmeistara*: The head of the life mage's quarter of the guild.

*Lorisvein*: Apprentice in the guild

# Maps

## The Capital



The College

