

Volume 1

# Who Can You Trust?

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# Cadeau -Volume I - Who Can You Trust?

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# Prologue

## LaPhere Duchy, Mandolin Province

### Month of Richesse ~ Human Year 972AA

Eric kept his eyes closed, listening. The stench of too many men housed in a space designed for no more than three strangled his breath. He had rarely slipped off to sleep in the twelve days since their uncaring enemy, the ren, had captured them. Last night had been no different. Now, however, it wasn't fear of the ren that had him on edge, it was his shock and disbelief at his fellow soldiers. These men, who had sworn loyalty to Duke Zuriel Arison and the LaPhere Duchy, were planning an escape that would break that very life oath. Marquis Paul Arison, the young heir to the duchy, lay unconscious beside him.

*I don't know how he can still live with no water or food for the last twelve days.* Eric had carried the marquis on his back after the attack that had dropped Paul. Soon however, the eight-man squad found itself surrounded, and Eric demanded their alien ren captors allow him to bring the unconscious man. Surprisingly, the enemy leader agreed. Eric and the squad were blindfolded and shackled for the march to their present prison. Eric became distrustful of the ren's agreeable nature, worrying that it might suddenly wane as they traveled, but the ren kept his word.

Now, in the early morning hours, he listened to the escape plans of his comrades that included leaving the marquis behind. Bringing him would guarantee the failure of any escape effort, yet Eric knew the sworn oath they had all taken demanded they either take Paul or remain in captivity with him.

*If I complain they will probably leave me behind also, and worse, they might tie and gag me to protect their plans.*

With eyes still closed Eric recognized the voice of the oldest veteran, Dorian, griping, "These ren may be formidable warriors but they are lousy guards. We could have escaped anytime these last two days. It is as if they don't care."

Dorian had been none too happy at the demand of his liege to return to arms after recovering from a serious wound as the war with the ren lingered for these nearly ten years.

*Thank God Dorian was captured with us. It was his idea that we take shifts to keep count of the passing time so we can track how many days we are imprisoned. By knowing the approximate time of day we might get the chance to escape.*

"Well, good, if they don't care then let's get out of here. The sooner the better!" Marcellin demanded. The youngest son of Marquis Ronald Catoire, Lord Marcellin frequently spoke to the others in commands, though he was the most recent recruit, he was also a few months younger than Eric's barely sixteen years. Since Marquis Paul's injury, Marcellin began to assert himself to the point of obnoxiousness.

Annoyed, the old veteran responded, "It could be they don't care because there is nowhere for us to escape to. These sandstone caves are a labyrinth of tunnels, and we were blindfolded when they brought us in. We will have to use care and scout ahead to find the best way out." Dorian paused and cleared his raspy throat, "There might be an underwater river that runs beneath these caves and pours out into the Lucien River. If we can't find an opening to the surface of the plateau, I think we should search the lower tunnels

for a water source. Though the ren are a different species they still require drinking water, and my bet is that wherever that source is will be our exodus.” Dorian’s words spoke hope into their miserable existence.

As he lay listening, Eric too gathered a small strand of hope. *If they really believe the ren don’t care, perhaps I can use that to persuade them to take Paul. I need to convince them that if Paul lives when the war ends, their leaving him behind will cost them their lives. Even if he dies, I need to instill fear in the idea that if anyone slips up and reveals the truth, that they abandoned the marquis, the duke will take retribution.*

Eric was scared. If he examined his feelings, he would admit the fear of being left with their captors was so strong that he too wanted to quietly sneak out without the risk of taking Paul. However, there was one emotion stronger than fear of the ren that held him to his oath, shame.

He knew he could not live with the shame of betraying Marquis Paul to save himself, even if no one outside this prison ever learned the truth. *I would know, and I have to live with myself. What kind of existence would it be if I knew each breath I took came at the expense of my bond word? If I could disregard my commitment now, it will only be a matter of time before I break it again. I’m either a man of my word, or not.*

“We should leave at dusk tonight,” Dorian suggested to the hotheaded Marcellin. “We need every advantage even if it seems they don’t care if we escape.”

Marcellin groaned but didn’t dispute the older soldier’s council. “Then we will rest in the afternoon to be ready as we have no idea how long we will be on the move before we reach safety.” The others muttered agreement and stopped discussing the plans.

Eric remained lying where he was for a long while after, and only arose when the guards brought the morning meal, zluuf stew. *I wonder if they know how to cook anything else? We’ve eaten zluuf stew **every** meal of the twelve days we’ve been in captivity!*

As he ate his small bowl of stew, Eric prayed for courage to open the topic of taking Paul when they left the caves and for wisdom in choosing his words to persuade the others. Setting his bowl down, Eric stood and looked directly into Marcellin’s sullen blue eyes.

“If we manage to escape without the marquis, we will have to explain why he didn’t make it out alive. You know the duke is most adept at recognizing between the truth and a lie. How much do you trust these men to be able to convince our liege that his son was dead when we departed?” Eric stopped to let his words sink in and build doubt in the minds of the men.

Dorian stood, pulling his belt off. “Then we will just make sure it is the truth.”

Eric swallowed roughly, “You will still have the same problem. Duke Arison will ask how his son died. Do you want to be the one that is eventually blamed for murdering our unconscious heir?”

Dorian scowled but replaced his belt and returned to sit in the cramped space.

Marcellin shook his head, his long black locks falling across his face. “No one is killing the marquis. Your bond oaths to a liege are irrevocable.” None of the men pointed out that as the only other nobleman his comment was very self-serving.

“Maybe just a few of us should try to escape and get word to the duke. If only one or two of us go, our chance of succeeding is greater. Then the duke would know where to send a rescue squad,” another soldier suggested.

“We all depart together or none of us leave. If a few escape these ren may decide to kill the rest of us,” Marcellin ordered.

*Now that Marcellin has taken the stand that we must keep our bond oaths to nobility, he is forced to appear like he cares about us. It seems he's wise enough to recognize it would look cowardly if he agreed and chose to be one of the escapees. Well, I don't mind what his motivation is, as long as the result is that we take Paul with us.*

Eric let himself relax a little for the first time since he awoke hearing them planning their escape. The one thing he did agree upon with the young lord was if anyone were left behind their captors would kill them.

The day dragged on, and they barely touched their second bowls of zluuf stew brought shortly before dusk by their captors.

“You had better eat the stew, you will need the energy tonight and they will be returning for the bowls and wonder why we haven't eaten,” Dorian instructed. Quickly the men forced the unpalatable meal down.

A few minutes later the guards removed the bowls. Dorian stood up in the cramped space and motioned with his finger for silence. From the small sconce on the wall near the opening he took the lone glow stone, that had been their only source of light, and handed it to the largest of their group, Sander.

Dorian motioned to Eric to help lift the marquis onto the old veteran's back so that Paul's arms hung over his shoulders. His height kept Paul's feet from dragging and Dorian gave a nod at Marcellin. The young lord nodded back, and turned to the two largest men, who would lead the escape, and motioned for them to move out.

The room they had been kept in was a natural cave at the end of a long hand-carved tunnel which turned left once. Another sconce was in the hall and Sander grabbed its glow-stone also, sliding it into his pocket. Several side openings led to other tunnels and rooms between their cave and the opening to the warren. There were no doors on any of the openings so the two front soldiers scouted ahead checking for ren before signaling the others to move forward.

As the scouts continued to verify that the rooms and passageways were clear, they approached the turn in the tunnel. Sander crept ahead slowly to the corner and stole a look around the edge. In the distance a ren guard paced back and forth outside across the opening of the shaft. The scout backed carefully away from the corner and signaled to the rest of the captives that the exit was not clear.

They retraced their steps looking down the side tunnels searching for an alternate exit. Nearly to the cave where they had been held, they found another small natural cave with a draft of fresh air coming from little more than a wide vertical crack in the back wall. Fortunately the opening was large enough for the men, although Sander would need to move through stooped over.

Marcellin gave Sander a nod, waving his hand at the crack in the wall. The tall soldier grimaced, held the glow stone out in front of him, and stooped to enter the dark hole. Remembering the other glow stone he stopped and removed it. As he pulled it out, Marcellin reached forward and took the second source of light. Sander turned back to enter the crack.

His fellow scout followed him and then Marcellin. Dorian trailed along next carrying Paul, and Eric was right behind him letting the others choose who took the rear position. It was cool in the crack as they wormed their way between the oppressive rocks that surrounded them, yet they soon had rivulets of sweat running down their bodies due to the exertion.

Eric's eyes stung from both his sweat and the strain to see in the dim light that reached them from the glow stone Marcellin held. He could hear the ragged breaths of the veteran ahead as Dorian struggled to meet the challenge to keep Paul's head from hitting protrusions that were barely visible. *I wonder if Dorian has volunteered to carry Paul in hopes that his eagerness to kill him before will be overlooked when we stand before the duke. Whatever his reasons, as long as I'm alive I'll not allow him to murder our marquis.*

Over their rasping breaths the sound of rushing water suddenly penetrated Eric's conscience thoughts. A few moments later the squad exited the crack and stood above a short steep incline to the bank of a wide underground river. Stalactites and stalagmites shimmered with an iridescent glow that would have created an enchanting atmosphere, had they not been running for their lives. Eric helped Dorian climb down and lower Paul's limp body, and the older man sank to the edge of the riverbank to splash his face before taking a deep draught. A moment later the others joined him, taking their fill of the refreshing water.

Not far downstream Eric saw the reason for the roar of the river; the water came to an abrupt end as it rushed over the brink to cascade down an unseen distance. Lying beside him, Marcellin rolled over onto his back and wiped the water from his eyes.

Eric sensed the danger from Marcellin's sudden stiffness before the young lord managed to gasp out a frightened cry. Instantly he glanced above and saw the cave ceiling change, where it had been light before it was now darkening in a wave of movement. He edged away from the water toward Paul hoping to provide some defense to the unconscious young man.

Dorian heard Marcellin's strangled cry and noticed Eric's odd behavior. His eyes followed theirs to the ceiling. "Arm yourselves with anything you can find, a rock or whatever!"

The men scrambled for the rocks lying about, most still unaware of what menaced them from above. Eric found a sharp stone that just fit into his hand and lifted it threateningly toward the ceiling as he knelt over Paul. The movement continued for a moment, then stopped as a loud piercing sound emanated from the darkened ceiling.

Sander had found two stones and stood at his full height shaking his rock-filled fists at the dark. "We aren't scared of you!" He yelled, a squeak changing the tone of his deep voice. His face did not agree with his defiant words.

The pitch of the sound grew until they were forced to hold their hands over their ears. Abruptly the *ceiling* dropped, twisted in a flash and released long appendages downward. Before Sander could throw a rock, the large canvas-looking creature opened its maw and the canvas encased him. His dangling feet kicked rapidly for a moment, but as the creature wrapped itself tighter, his efforts stilled. The men looked fearfully around the cavern, and especially across the ceiling.

"Get back to the tunnels!" Dorian ordered in a fear-laced voice.

Eric picked up Paul to carry him as he had seen Dorian do. At the incline he realized he would not be able to climb encumbered by Paul. His chest constricted with his desperation, but then he felt arms lifting the weight from his back. He turned to find Dorian and Marcellin each securing their liege on either side. Marcellin gave him a nod and they scrambled back up the steep slope to the crack in the wall. No one had a glow stone, yet fear of what lay behind them kept them pushing forward ignoring the bumps and cuts they were taking in their haste.

They collapsed on the floor of the small natural cave, but Dorian soon prodded them into action again. “We have no idea if more of those creatures live in there, or if they will follow us to these tunnels, and the ren will soon notice we’re gone if they haven’t already. We need to find an alternative escape route now, or go back to our prison and hope they don’t discover we tried to escape.”

Marcellin stood up, “We will look for another route. If we stay in that prison eventually we’ll all die.”

Eric looked at the young lord. *I believe he is actually thinking of all of us instead of just his usual self-interest. Maybe this experience will develop in him the character qualities every vassal prays for in their liege.* Not quite recovered from their harried flight out of the lair of the cave creature, Eric ignored the aches in his lungs and muscles and stood up. “I’m okay to help with Paul.”

Dorian assigned scouts and the search renewed. “Check every room as we go through the tunnels.”

Most of the rooms were long rectangular spaces with barely enough head room for the shortest of the escapees. Eric saw food preserves for winter, animal hides, cloth and lumber in most of the storage rooms as he passed. A few rooms were natural caves, one of which was empty except for a giant oval pool in the middle. He was relieved when they quickly moved on, not wanting to encounter any new predators.

Nearly an hour later, exhausted and his nerves raw from tension, Eric paused to catch his breath. Gently lowering Paul to the floor of the tunnel, he squatted against the tunnel wall, took a deep breath and closed his eyes. *If we don’t find a way out soon...*

Dorian tapped him on the shoulder and put his finger to his lips. Motioning in the direction the scouts had gone he then pointed up and formed a small circle in the air. Grinning he reached down for Paul and lifted him by his arms, nodding his head for Eric to grab his feet. Together they hauled their liege past three openings to a fourth at which Dorian turned them into a smaller square room. On each wall were three sconces with glow stones. No one spoke. They all stared at the hole in the ceiling which had a complex rope and pulley system with a rectangular basket hanging through the opening.

*Of course they would have to have some kind of lift system from one level to the next. But how are we going to be able to take advantage of it without drawing attention. For all we know they might have guards in the room above.*

No sounds were emanating from the hole but that didn’t mean guards were not posted up there. Eric and Dorian carefully lowered Paul to the ground again.

The older veteran examined the release lever for moving the lift. In hushed tones Dorian commented, “From the look of it, after we lower the basket, we will need to send up two of the strongest men first. It will benefit us two ways, both for lifting the others later, and should there be guards above, those two would have the best chance of defending themselves.”



Marcellin shook his head, “No, not two, three. There are seven of us now since Sander...” He stopped mid-sentence pausing to look around at his men. “I will go up with the first team, and then we will raise young Eric with Paul. You and one of the men will be lifted in the last basket.”

Dorian definitely didn't like the young lord's plan, but he didn't disagree with his orders. He shrugged, and stepped to the lever, releasing it and lowering the basket. Several of them let out their breath slowly as no ren showed their faces at the hole in the ceiling. Marcellin and two men climbed into the basket and Dorian tried to turn the crank to lift them, it wouldn't budge. He motioned for another man to assist him, and each man took hold of the crank handle and together they slowly lifted the basket.

Eric gasped a deep lungful of air after they cleared the opening and climbed out, he hadn't noticed himself holding his breath. When the basket was again lowered to the floor, he quickly moved over to climb in. Dorian and the last soldier lifted Paul over the edge and Eric set down Paul's feet, holding him upright under his arms. As the basket rose Eric closed his eyes ignoring his dry mouth and tightening chest. *I've never feared heights, but if we fell now we could both be injured, and I've no doubt they would leave us behind to our fate.*

They crested the opening and Eric opened his eyes as hands reached out to pull Paul from his grasp. Soon they all stood together in another small square room. A few feet away was a second pulley system running upward again into another hole in the ceiling.

A scout checked the open entry doorway which led into yet another tunnel, but after looking both ways, turned back and shrugged. “It seems these lower levels are simply for storage and it is very possible that no guards will be found until we reach the occupied sections.”

“Do we keep going up hoping to find an opening to the surface, or do we try to find another exit on this level?” Eric wondered.

Marcellin turned to Dorian, “What chance do we have of exiting a lower level without again facing the beast which consumed Sander?”

“No way of knowing for sure but I'd rather die facing the ren in hand-to-hand combat than be eaten like that.”

“Then we keep moving up until we reach the surface or come across the ren,” Marcellin decided.

“The canyon is over ninety meters deep. This level isn't more than fifteen meters above the Lucien River, which means we have approximately ten more levels until we reach the plateau surface. Once we get to the surface we will have to travel over forty kilometers to reach the northwestern cliffs. I think we had better search some of these storerooms for rope and anything else we can use in our escape.”

Marcellin nodded his agreement with the veteran's suggestions, “Some of those winter food preserves are a priority.”

Dorian took the scouts to search.

Eric, mouth dry from all the physical exertion, rubbed his hand through his unwashed hair. “We are going to need water more than food. If we don't find a water source on this level, perhaps we should go back to the room with the pool and secure enough water to keep us alive for a few days.”

“Well, let’s see what they come back with before we risk anyone going near a cave with water.” Marcellin reached up to wipe away the beads of sweat that stood on his forehead. Eric noticed the lord looked up at the ceiling more than once while they waited for the men to return.

Each man had a bag over his shoulder and another in his arms. Dorian passed his extra bag to Eric, “Dried meat and fruit, nuts and filled wineskins. There is an entire room filled with kegs of wine. We also have plenty of rope and a large tarp we can use to create a makeshift litter to carry the marquis.”

Marcellin took one of the bags from a scout, “What about water? The wine is good, but we need water.”

As Dorian pulled open his bag he nodded, “We each have an extra skin for water if we can find a safe source to secure it. I don’t trust getting water from the lower level, more of those creatures could be waiting.”

“Then we go up and hope we find another accessible water source.”

Five levels above when they climbed out of the basket the sound of water could be heard. Once everyone was together, Dorian sent the scouts to check on the water source. They quickly returned unsuccessful.

“At the end of the tunnel there is a large cavern. At the back is a small waterfall that cascades down through an opening in the ceiling. It forms a pool, and from that pool an elaborate system of pipes sends the water out through the walls in several directions. There are four ren workers monitoring and maintaining the system.”

Dorian grabbed his bag and moved to the basket lift. “We had better get moving. This is an occupied level and from here on we will increase our chances of a confrontation if we explore for water. Best we just get on top of the plateau as fast as we can.”

No one argued. They moved through the next four levels without talking or stopping and finally stood looking up to an opening that showed dim moonlight peeking around the last basket. Dorian motioned for two of the men to crank and lower the basket, while he brandished a small shovel that he pulled from his bag. No sounds were audible from above as the basket settled on the floor. Dorian got into the basket with the two scouts and they were raised up.

Eric was over his anxiety about falling after the repeated experience of being lifted with Paul. His mouth was very dry as he climbed from the basket to stand on the plateau surface and he pulled open his wine skin and took a long draught. *Something about how easy this has been is hard to believe. If they didn’t care whether we escaped, why capture us in the first place, and why secure us in the depths of their warren?*

Taking another long swig, he looked around while the basket made its last trip down. They were standing in a corner of a great covered open structure. Although there were no walls, his view was mostly blocked by large crates full of vegetables. Off to the side of the structure were several wagons and a corral containing garn.

Dorian shook his head, “This makes no sense. Since leaving our level, throughout the entire cave system, we only found ren working at the waterfall pipe room. Someone has to be working the fields and hauling their food supplies.”

“I am beginning to think they want us to escape because they believe we will die in the effort,” Marcellin scowled as he climbed out of the basket and looked around in frustration. “We can only hope that we make it to the northwestern cliffs. Even then there is no guarantee we will be able to scale down them and find a way across the Great Expanse River.”

Dorian looked at the unconscious marquis, “Not much chance of that considering...” He cut short whatever he was going to say as Eric stepped between Paul and the veteran.

“Brreee, brreee!” The penned garns suddenly squealed in alarm, stamped their feet, and crushed each other into the far side of the corral.

Eric’s breath caught in his throat and the hair on the back of his neck instantly stood up. He noticed all the men shuffle nervously as they looked around for the danger that had frightened the animals. A strange growling sound emanated first from behind a stack of nearby lumber and a moment later again from above in the dark of the overhead canopy. Dorian looked up and lifted the shovel he held while the others drew close together around Paul and Eric.

“Do you suppose it is another of those creatures that attacked Sander?” Marcellin wondered as he peered into the dark.

“No, whatever these creatures are, those growls are coming from mammals.”

Eric felt the air move before he saw the large winged creature dive at Dorian, who swung his shovel at the flying beast, but was unable to make contact. While the veteran was distracted defending himself, another of the same species, but slightly different in that it was wingless, leapt at his back from the crates’ shadows. Before he could turn to fend off the second attacker it snapped its jaws around his leg bringing him down on one knee. A gurgled scream was instantly cut off as the flying one swept its talon tipped wings across his neck and sliced open his jugular. The shovel fell to the ground from his lifeless hand. The wingless beast released its locked jaw from his calf, and Dorian’s deadweight fell to the ground. The flyer settled onto the body and pulled its wings in.

“Surrender and you will live!” A ren female, with close cropped black hair that formed a heart shape around her deceptively sweet, and exotically beautiful alien face, stepped from the shadows and held them in the sites of her crossbow. Marcellin sat his backpack on the ground and raised his hands. The rest of the men quickly followed his lead knowing that if one ren was here, another was surely nearby. Ren warriors fought in mated pairs. “Good, at least you have some common sense.” Her striking looks and petite form were attractive even to human males, but they knew she and her mate were formidable enough a pair to kill them all, even without their beasts or crossbows.

Without a sound her mate moved around from behind the men where he had been covering them with another crossbow. His build was similar to hers, and his features, as with all ren males, were nearly as delicate and beautiful. None of them grew facial hair or would be considered handsome or rugged. His voice, however, was deep and smooth like rich dark chocolate. “Step out from under the canopy and line up there near the garn corral. If any of you take action to escape or attack, all of you will be tonight’s meal for our bacra.” With a nod he indicated the beasts resting on Dorian’s corpse.

The others complied quickly, but Eric hesitated, hovering over Paul. “The marquis is still unconscious I need help to move him.”

While he was speaking four more ren pairs joined their captors. One pair wore engraved gold bands just above their biceps. The male band-wearer shook his head, "That won't be necessary. You may remain here with your injured comrade."

*Why would they let me stay here? Are they planning to kill Paul and me? They said they'd use us for food for their beasts. Or are they separating us for another reason? Eric's thoughts ran wild for a moment before he caught himself. I need to stop letting my imagination take me on ridiculous trails of thought. God hasn't saved us for them to feed us to their bacra.*

Marcellin, his face pale as flour, stepped out of the line. "I am their leader, uhm, since the marquis was injured." He paused and swallowed, his Adam's apple was sticking a bit as he cleared his throat. "I ordered them to attempt this escape. If you are going to take retribution I am the one you should punish." Sweat beaded on his forehead and trickled down the side of his face.

"Yes, and well we might have chosen to kill you, but instead we have determined you are worthy of life," the lead ren replied as he stepped out to look over the humans. "Originally you were captured to provide us leverage for a future armistice. However, the young one," he waved his hand towards Eric, "his efforts to keep the marquis alive and safe gave us greater hope that true and lasting peace may be possible between our species. We decided to test you all. While we still see an underlying selfish trait in your people, there is also willingness for self-sacrifice, and even an ability to learn and improve those character flaws some of you displayed while being observed in captivity." He said this last as he gave Marcellin a long appraising look.

Marcellin lifted a shaky hand to wipe the sweat off his brow. "What do you intend to do with us now, if you don't mind my asking?"

"You will be our guests while we determine how best to proceed with peace talks. Comfortable rooms and a variety of nourishment will be provided, but you will not be allowed to leave until we have worked out our plans. Our medical staff will provide attention to those of you needing it. Unfortunately, I don't know if there is anything we can do to help your marquis. He appears to be in a comma and whether he recovers, only time will tell."

Eric closed his eyes briefly, and for the first time since their capture let himself believe they might see home again.

*None of this was random, Paul will be okay. Now peace is possible, not guaranteed, but I think we humans are tired of war. The duke and king should welcome a treatise. Thank You, God for answering my prayers.*

# **PART ONE**

## **TRAITORS**

*30 years later*

# CHAPTER I

## LaPhere Duchy, Mandolin Province, Marquis Township Lord Eric Levine Holding Month of Mystere ~ Year 1002AA

“...but when in battle the foe were met,  
The Douglas found him sore beset,  
With only strength of the fighting arm  
For one more battle passage yet-  
And that as vain to save the day  
As bring his body safe away-”  
Robert Frost

Laughter could be heard throughout the Levine holding, as the children were routed from their beds while the light of day was just breaking. Lord Eric, his face now aged in all the right places, had deep chocolate eyes that typically danced with delight when spending time with his family. He generally wore his dark brown hair short, but recently he had allowed the hair on top to grow out a few inches and it was mussed as he tickled his youngest, Maddie, into a fit of giggles. She reached up to scratch the stubble on his usually clean-shaven cleft-chin, complaining of its scratchiness.

Stretching his muscular physique to his full height, he rubbed at the stubble, and agreed that a shave was the next thing on his morning agenda. Although Duke Zuriel Arison had bestowed a lordship on him after the Ren War, he carried himself with a dignified stance that emanated from his humble character. He had many important duties as a lord, but never let them keep him from showing affection to his three offspring. This morning he was taking the time to personally awaken each one before he left to join his liege, and friend, Duke Paul, for what he knew might be several months.

He wasn't seriously worried about the upcoming battle, but he had long ago lost the taste for fighting. He viewed these days ahead as moments of his children's lives that would be stolen from him. Not that he blamed Paul. It was Marquis Jacques of Darkwood who Eric would enjoy taking his frustration out on.

Paul was sacrificing too by leaving his castle to cross the duchy in order to deal with Jacques's out of control behavior. However, the duke was used to being separated from his daughter, Naomi, where Eric had seldom been parted a day from his family. Of course, no one wanted to be traveling for the reason Jacques gave them. The Ren War was still a fresh ugly memory for many people Eric and Paul's age.

Reaching over to ruffle the dark brown locks of his younger son, Paul, as the family lingered over the morning meal, Eric felt a deep sorrow he couldn't quite put his finger on. *Duke Paul's message was clear. He doesn't expect any serious resistance.*

The duke's castle and main holdings were on the far side of the duchy from the wayward marquis. This show of force was to remind Jacques that the duke would take action, with full measure, should one of his marquises refuse to keep their covenant.

*So why do I feel as though I am leaving my children for the last time? I couldn't refuse my friend, even if he weren't my liege. Yet, I can't shake this sense of impending disaster.*

He glanced to the end of the table, where his oldest child and namesake, Eric, sat glowering, refusing to eat. *I'm sure he thinks he is old enough to ride out with me to join the duke, but how can I take him with*

*me with this sense of danger I'm feeling. Better that he stay behind to bolster his mother and little Maddie. This separation will be hard enough on Abigail, without her fretting about her firstborn as well as her husband.*

~

Abigail sensed his concern and gave him a supportive smile. *He is not as assured of the outcome as he led on, but every time I ask him, he simply shrugs and says they don't expect this to be a serious battle. Yet, if that were true, he wouldn't mind Eric riding along.*

Reaching over, she laid her hand on his and squeezed gently. The lord looked over at his tall, voluptuous wife, and gave her his warm smile, which always drug her deep into his soul. *So handsome! After all these years, he still makes my heart stop. I'll miss him fiercely, but I need to let him feel I can handle this separation. It is not as though I'm some young bride, weepy with uncontrolled emotions.*

Maddie was a miniature version of her mother from her towhead blonde waves to the pert smile. Wrinkling her light tan nose that was sprinkled with freckles, she slipped off her chair and ran around her brother Paul, to climb into her papa's lap. Looking up at him with Abigail's green eyes, she perfected a sweet pout as she begged, "Do you have to go? Can't you send the other men and stay home with us?"

Eric gave his daughter a tight squeeze, pulling her to his chest. Looking over her head, to first his wife, and then his sons, he sighed, "Eric will be here in my stead to keep you all safe, and Paul will be his captain of the guard. Be good for them, and I'll bring you something special when I return." He kissed the top of her head before giving her another hug and setting her down on the floor, to return to her seat.

"You're going to the eastern coast papa. Can you bring back a model ship, or some shells, like I've seen in a merchant's store in Marquis?" Paul asked.

Young Eric smirked, "You act like a girl wanting presents. He is going to fight a battle, not leaving on a shopping expedition."

Paul looked down at his breakfast, murmuring an apology to his father, but Lord Eric simply asked, "So, you don't want me to look for a telescope from a sea-shop for you Eric?"

"I'm not a child. You know what I want." Eric replied before getting up and stalking off.

Lord Eric frowned, but Abigail piped up before he could react, "Go to him Eric, you know he idolizes you. Being left here, to keep the holding safe, to him is like being left to babe watch. You remember how it felt to be his age, don't you?"

Eric stood and started to walk away, but turned and pulled his wife up into his arms. "You know, there are moments I know God blessed me more than most men, and this is one of them. What did I do to deserve you, my sweet Abigail?"

Laughing, Abigail hugged him back before pushing him off to go search for his oldest son. "Remember that when you are shopping at the seashore," she said, in a soft husky voice.

~

Lord Eric found his frustrated namesake in the stable brushing down his father's garn. "You believe this is just my way of leaving you behind because I don't think you are ready for battle. Whatever you may think Eric, I would be proud to take you with me. Right now, however, I need you here. How can I leave your mother here alone with the younger children?"

"I know it's no use trying to change your mind pa, but I still hate it. Don't expect me to be glad you're joining the duke's forces without me at your side. I may not have the training that an heir to one of the royalty is given, but I can ride as good as any man, and you've seen to it that I can fight as fiercely as the personal guard to the duke."

"If you were an heir to royalty, you would still be at the training center for another year. The fact that you are as competent as you have proven to be is why I feel confident in leaving all those most precious to me in your hands. Do you really feel I could leave the holding in Paul's care?"

Eric stopped brushing and leaned his forehead against the garn's withers. "No pa, I know you can't."

"Then saddle my garn for me. We will leave soon."

~

## **LaPhere Duchy, Mandolin Province**

Lord Eric and his men rode out of the gate, heading north towards Didier's Fjord where the East and West forks of the Merchant River first formed just east of Didier's Holding. It was an ideal place for the Marquis de Mandolin's lords to meet so they could then travel further north together to join Duke Paul on his march to the coastal provinces. Eric took with him forty skilled fighters. Not all were seasoned soldiers, but none were novice in the use of weapons.

It was a two-day journey along the western banks of the river by garn. One member of the traveling party, however, was not counting the hours until they arrived at the fjord. Instead, he watched the hours pass, until they were far enough away from the holding that they could not turn back in time to rescue those left behind. When the riding party stopped for a break in the late afternoon, for the midday meal, the falconer's scrawny squire took his master's falcons and walked off into the woods. On a knoll he released two. One flew away unseen by anyone, the other returned within the hour.

~

## **LaPhere Duchy, Mandolin Province, Marquis Township Lord Eric Levine Holding**

Alphonse saw the bird circle his position, in the hills a kilometer from Eric's manor, when it was still before the evening meal. He smiled tightly, his right lip pulled down slightly due to a scar running from his right mid-cheek and halfway down his neck. The falcon stooped, diving to land on the bulging muscle of his outstretched forearm. There was no message. The simple arrival of the bird said everything. He pulled a large piece of meat from a pouch, and fed the falcon, before sending it again into the sky.

Each of his two lieutenants commanded forty of the eighty mercenaries he had with him. He turned to them and gave his orders, "Everyone! No one is to be left alive."

"But sir..." one of his lieutenants started, confused at the order.



“Everyone! Remember if you fail to enact your orders, the price will be your family. Leave his family for my pleasure to deal with.”

The sickness of Alphonse’s soul showed itself in that moment, but his lieutenants ignored the chill that ran down their spines and turned to obey their orders, knowing the motto “Aucune Pitié”, tattooed on his neck, would apply equally to them and their families.

As they moved out he altered his orders, “Wait! Let the kitchen boy live. Send him away with a garn to warn his master.” The warning will come too late, but that’s exactly what we planned. His smirk, as he rested his hand on his sword, gave his face a distorted parody of a smile.

Lord Eric had left only a minimal guard at the manor to watch over his family. This area of the country was considered safe. He hadn’t had to deal with marauders in years, and there was no known reason for concern of the safety of his family. Only fifteen soldiers remained to guard his family, servants, and those few other families that lived directly under his care in the holding.

Quietly, for armed men, the soldiers descended from the hills in three directions onto Lord Eric’s holding, where it nestled on a cliff above Lake Marquis. The watch sounded the alarm, and archers appeared on the battlements to fire arrows at the attackers. However, the enemy numbers far outweighed the defenders, and even taking loses, Alphonse’s crossbowmen were quickly able to remove the holding’s few bowmen.

Mercs soon scaled the stone walls with ropes and hooks, opening the wooden gates for their comrades, after losing only two more of their forces. Although outnumbered nearly five to one, Eric’s remaining men fought valiantly, but vainly, to their deaths. More than sixty men poured into the compound and into every doorway. They took whatever valuables they saw and set fire to everything else.

The gate breached, Alphonse made his way directly to Eric’s residence. As he stepped up to the doorway, two of Lord Eric’s soldiers ran around the corner at him, swords drawn. A seasoned soldier, Alphonse stepped quickly aside, and with his left arm grabbed the wrist of the first soldier’s sword arm. He spun, pulling the man as he twisted the arm to impale the oncoming second guard. Alphonse ripped the sword from the still living guard and swung it, easily decapitating him.

Dropping the bloodied sword to the ground, he straightened his garments and walked inside. Eric’s wife and daughter were hiding in the master bedroom, terrified at what was happening. “Cowering in the corners,” he said with spite. “Nobles!” He pulled his own sword now, and advanced on the women, teeth bared in a sneer.

~

“Leave them alone,” young Eric, blonde locks falling forward challenged from behind Alphonse, where he stood with a short sword drawn. Courage and fear shared an equal place on his sixteen year-old countenance.

He had been angry that morning at his father for leaving him behind, wishing his younger brother Paul could be left to the babe watching duty of the holding. That morning, after his father left, he had bitterly taken his anger out on young Paul. The youth had ridden off to Marquis Township and not yet returned.

Hearing the screams of women and children from outside, Eric faced the certainty of their own deaths, and instantly prayed, *Don’t let him return now God, whatever happens, please let Paul live.*

~

All other buildings were burning when Alphonse emerged from Lord Eric's home. A child's cry was suddenly cut off, and his men moved around looking, but found no one left to fight or kill. As he strode past two of his men piling their bounty in the yard, he stopped them. "You may burn the manor house now. There will be no one else coming out."

Fifty-three men abandoned the burning compound, all carrying their newly found wealth, and most of them sadistically congratulating themselves on a job efficiently done. Fire and smoke rose into the air behind them, as the lone boy, in despair, rode furiously off to find Lord Eric, report the destruction of the holding, and the massacre of his family.

~

### **LaPhere Duchy, Mandolin Province, Didier's Holding**

Lord Eric looked at his lanky kitchen boy with disbelief. How could his home be in ruins and his family dead? His mind was still trying to grasp the facts as his men surrounded him, some demanding to return and take vengeance, others seeking his counsel.

"You are certain they are all dead? Could perhaps the attackers have taken prisoners for ransom?" Lord Eric asked with small hope.

"They held me prisoner, and made me watch to see the manor and your entire holding put to flame before sending me here to inform you." The boy replied with tears running down his face. "My Lord, I would rather they had killed me also, than to live to have to tell you all that I saw."

Lord Eric placed his hand on the boy's shoulder reassuringly, "This was no mere chance attack Gerard, and I hold you to no blame. Obviously someone wants me to return, and that someone is waiting to taste my sword. You will remain here at Didier's holding, get some rest, and wait for word. Your life will not be safe as the only witness to those committing this crime. Do you remember anything that can help me identify these murdering gatten?"

Gerard lifted his arm, and wiped the tears from his reddened face with the back of his hand. His wet black curls stuck to his scalp as he shook his head slowly, "They weren't in any livery, only hired mercs that I could tell. I never saw their leader."

Eric squared his shoulders, and turning, barked out quick orders, "Alain, you and our best twenty men with me. Malik, you will take the other twenty men and ride to the duke. Explain to him why I will be late joining him; that it may be a few weeks before I can find the gatten filth and kill them." He turned to his men, "I know all of you want to ride with me to find the holding's attackers, but we have a duty to support Duke Paul."

Eric's men looked at each other for a moment, but no one argued, and the two parties were formed within moments. The dark skinned Malik squared his shoulders and nodded once at Lord Eric before turning his garn with his knees and riding off north in the lead of his men.

Lord Eric galloped away to the south with Alain and his guardsmen. They rode straight through, with short breaks only to rest the garns, grabbing a bite to eat and what rest they could, although none could sleep. Any who tried, found images of the holding in flames, and worse, that kept them from closing their

eyes. Exhausted, they rode up to the burnt shell of their master's holding a day and a half later, arriving at evening; three days after the torches had been lit.

"Look around and find in which direction they set off." Eric commanded. He did not get off his garn, his face tight with pain.

Alain came to him before a half-hour passed, "They appear to have headed for Mandolin, although there are other holdings on the way that might be at risk."

"No, I don't think so. Whoever did this is making no attempt to hide, and they wanted me to return and follow them. Marquis Gilbert Desmarais has also sent off his best men to ride with the duke. It seems someone's strategy is to leave all of us weak and use the opportunity to enact whatever they have planned. They are days ahead of us; we have no choice but to try to reach Gilbert in time." Eric's face showed none of the emotion warring inside him at the death of his family. If duty was all he had left, then duty is what he would cling to.

They rode the five kilometers to Marquis Township, replenished their supplies and traded their garns for fresh mounts. Several of the townsmen offered to join them. Eric nearly accepted, but then shook his head and replied, "We have no way of knowing the plans of these attackers. Every able-bodied man should go home, gather his family, and bring them into town. It appears they have headed for Mandolin, but we cannot be sure. Secure Marquis Township and your families. My men and I will ride on to find these murdering gattens."

Riding out immediately, Lord Eric did not have the opportunity to learn, hidden by a family friend at her small home, just outside of Marquis, his youngest son still lived.

~

## **LaPhere Duchy, Mandolin Castle**

The Marquis de Mandolin might be in ill health these days, and therefore unable to join the duke in the march east, but he still held court and kept strict rules about how many men might enter the city at one time with any lord. Further restrictions were on how many armed men were allowed into his castle courtyard. Although the twenty-one men Eric brought with him were not a violation, he was allowed only four men without weapons inside Gilbert's reception hall. Impatient and irritable after the many days of hard travel, Eric nearly forgot to have his men disarm. If it weren't for Alain, he would have.

"My Lord, your men cannot enter with you before Gilbert armed. As loath as any of us are to be without protection right now, if we hope to gain audience, we will have to leave our arms outside with our other men." Alain's deep gold-brown tan wrinkled around his dark blue eyes as he looked concernedly towards his lord. A few centimeters shorter than Eric, Alain's broad mature build was well-toned, and he sat sturdily on his garn, taking pride in the fact that, even though he was over a decade younger than his liege, Lord Eric never dismissed his concerns.

Eric nodded, "You're right, but something doesn't sit right with me over all this, Alain. I have been playing it again and again in my mind, all the way here, and none of this makes sense. Especially as we questioned the town guards at the gate, and they said no large parties of men have entered. Even if they were smart enough to break up into smaller groups the guards also said few strangers have recently come to town. Alain, I want you to take ten of the men and wait outside of Mandolin. Exit the southern gate and wait in Shinter. If we do not get word to you, or come ourselves by tonight, ride out immediately to join the duke,

and inform him of what is happening here in Mandolin as he marches eastward. This all seems too opportune, and I doubt whoever is behind this attack hasn't planned for my arrival."

"Yes, my Lord," Alain couldn't keep the disapproval completely out of his voice, and Eric gave him a wane smile.

"What does my life matter now, better that Duke Paul will know of this scheme that seems to be so conveniently unfolding while he is occupied across the duchy."

Alain nearly stopped and turned back when they reached the southern gate.

*How can I ride off to safety when everything in me says my lord is going to die today?*

He looked at his men, knowing they would gladly turn back in support of Eric even at the chance he would be angry for their disobeying his orders.

*I hate that he is right. If this is all a set up to draw my lord off and kill him, then Duke Paul needs that information.*

Shaking his head he kicked his garn harder than he meant and rode out of Mandolin, his wavy brunette curls, lightened by the sun, swept back with the force of his gallop, and his men were forced to urge their mounts to catch up.

~

Lord Eric entered the courtyard to Mandolin Castle. Slipping off their garns, his men looked around the stable area frowning. Gilbert usually kept a very tightly run household, but today no squires came out to greet them and offer care for their garns.

Eric shrugged and said, "Perhaps with the need to send support, the castle is short on help." He picked four men; they removed their weapons, and gave them and their garns to the care of their comrades.

On approaching the castle hall, they were greeted by ill-kept guards who questioned their business with the marquis. "The marquis isn't well these days and prefers Lord Diente Alterra to handle any minor issues. If you believe you're truly in need of an audience with Gilbert, you will have to explain that to Lord Alterra."

"I'll explain myself directly to Marquis Desmarais, or he can explain to the king why he refuses aid to his loyal vassal whose lands have been attacked by marauders. We have evidence these murderers rode here to Mandolin." Lord Eric demanded.

The guard looked at him as if to argue, but then shrugged, and let him and his four men pass. As Eric walked towards the great chair in the court, he noted the ailing Gilbert's tall frame was bent and thin from aging quickly since the recent loss of his heir. His white hair was very sparse, and his grey eyes seemed unable to hold their focus. His usual well kept appearance was lost to a scruffy beard and wrinkled, unwashed clothes.

Gilbert frowned and looked at him suspiciously, "Why are you here, and not headed north with my other lords to support Duke de LaPhere?"

“My Lord,” Eric hesitated, in his fury and despair. “My holding has been destroyed and my wife and children,” again he paused, “everyone is dead. I followed the men responsible here to Mandolin.”

“Here? What do you mean? Do you accuse me of attacking your holding?” the elderly Gilbert demanded.

Surprise showed on Lord Eric’s face, “Of course not, My Lord, but I believe you may be in danger. Whoever has taken advantage of the duke’s call to arms from his vassals has come here.”

Marquis Desmarais now hesitated, turning to the clean-shaven, elegantly dressed man beside him. Lord Dionte’s black eyes turned from their watchful stare of Lord Eric, and he bent his sleek blonde head a few inches to catch the weak spoken question, “You are certain of what your landholder claims to have seen?”

Lord Dionte looked at Marquis Gilbert with deep sincerity. “You have my word on my life, My Lord. My men and I are here to guarantee your safety against this criminal.” He moved his tall frame to kneel before Lord Gilbert, blocking Eric’s view, and then added with decided malice and violence, “I am here for your disposal!” Pulling a concealed knife from his sleeve, he swung his arm in a backward arc, slicing deep across Gilbert’s neck.

Dionte’s men turned in that same moment and took Gilbert’s two closest guards by surprise, killing them with dirks they also had hidden, and taking the guards’ swords, turned to dispatch the two that rushed forward from their posts at the door. Eric’s men, weaponless, turned to run for help, but were stopped as the doors burst open and ten men came at them with swords.

Dionte rose from his point of murder, and looked down into the eyes of a stunned Eric, his own appearing slightly maddened at the death he had just caused. “Gilbert’s murder will not go unpunished. Because he believed you to be behind the destruction of several villages, he refused your offer of protection and the claims of your family’s murder. In your madness of grief and anger you killed him. But I was here! Yes, I was here.” Dionte slowly stalked forward, his blade dripping blood, toward a surrounded Eric, and his men. “And I avenged Desmarais.”

“You’re the one who killed my family!” Eric spat out, eyeing the bloodied blade with little hope of taking it.

“No, I am.” A voice dripping with pride declared from behind Eric. “I must say,” added Alphonse, “Your wife was a treasure.”

As Eric turned in fury, Dionte’s knife slid into his stomach, between his ribs three times, and Eric’s body slipped lifelessly to the floor. Lord Eric’s personal guard tried to defend him, but Dionte’s men easily ended their struggles, and the assassinations were complete.

Lord Dionte and his men quickly staged the scene to focus the guilt of Gilbert’s death on Lord Eric before rushing out the doors proclaiming the horror of the elderly marquis’ murder. Within moments the remaining six men, waiting in the courtyard for Eric, were placed under arrest and taken away.

# CHAPTER II

## LaPhere Duchy, Northern Paris Province Month of D'or ~ Year 1002AA

Fifty kilometers southeast of the Caché Pass, Duke Paul waited to gather an army of over fifteen thousand men to march along a northern route across his duchy to the eastern coast of Mardeaux. They marched to attack the wayward Marquis of Darkwood, André Jacques, for his constant incursions into Marquis Jean Piot's province. Early that morning Paul had received a report that Jacques was amassing his own army.

The duke had previously estimated that, if Jacques had any warning of the troops coming toward his lands, the marquis would have between five and eight thousand soldiers available to oppose the duke's fifteen thousand troops. Therefore, he made certain his force was large enough that, if there was resistance, the battle would not last longer than an afternoon. Keeping the lost lives to a minimum was his priority. His vassals might be under obligation to fight, however, he was not a man who took their sacrifice lightly. Hence, his plan had been to spread his army throughout the wilderness hills to re-group where three marquises' lands converged at the point of entry into Jacques's territory. The additional time this maneuver would take was frustrating, but the cover and distance would hide their true numbers from any enemy recon.

He had fully expected, best case scenario, to arrive with a show of force, and slap the troublemaker's wrists with a tribute of money and livestock to cover the costs of this needed action. The levy would also repay Marquis Piot of Seahold, and his landholders, for their recent losses. Worst case, he had contemplated removing Jacques as the marquis after a more protracted battle. What he hadn't expected was the treason he had discovered.

The night prior, Marquis Philippé Perret had unknowingly revealed a plot to ambush their army, which gave the duke an opportunity to devise a counter attack. Perret's lands were at the western border of Marquis Jacques's territory. Thinking of his vassals, Duke Paul had revised his strategy for the last leg of the journey, in order to bring an element of surprise of his own to the upcoming battle.

He only knew part of the organized betrayal, but not who was maneuvering Jacques and Perret. Yet, he was sure they were being manipulated. The duke's telepathic ability had uncovered that Perret himself didn't know the identity of the mastermind behind the game of treason being played out. André Jacques's attacks had been purposeful to draw Paul out, but the actions came at the orders of some unknown person or persons.

He was also aware when the traitorous Marquis Perret sent out a courier falcon to Jacques at night with a message informing him on the advancing army's battle plans. The duke could have stopped the bird, and arrested Perret, but he didn't want to show his hand while he still had no idea who all was involved in the plotted sedition.

Already three marquises advanced with him. Each marquis would bring archers, cavalry, foot soldiers, medics, healers, and the needed food staples and support personnel for their own men. Gilbert Desmarais de Mandolin, elderly and in poor health, did not personally ride out with LaPhere. Desmarais had instead sent the required support under the leadership of the captain of his personal guard. Captain Lazare, a soldier who had proven himself during the Ren War, wasn't a young man either, but he was a great

strategist, and LaPhere was glad to have him. Both the duke and captain remained unaware of Dionte's treacherous murder of Gilbert and of Paul's friend of thirty years, Lord Eric.

When Malik arrived a week prior, with half of Lord Eric's men, Paul considered it more than just unfortunate timing, but his own troops were committed to dealing with the trouble in the east. All he had been able to do was insist Eric's men return to help their lord. Then he forced his concern for his friend to the back of his mind. Now as Paul waited for two marquises who were yet to unite their troop support with the larger force, he wished his trustworthy friend was at his side.

When Philippé Perret had crossed the southwestern border of Frosthold Province the day before, he brought with him only a few personal guards. With his plans of treason still a secret, as far as he knew, Perret had reassured the duke that his men would join the army once it neared Frosthold's southeastern border.

The duke also awaited Marquis Jean Piot, who would be the last to connect with the duke's short-term army. Piot, with nearly half of his troops, would join the duke in just over three weeks as they neared the battlefield. He hoped to divert Jacques from wondering if there was a flanking move from the south coming by actually joining the duke directly. Meanwhile, another contingent, led by his telepathic younger brother, Major Sebastian, stealthily moved through the northeast hills of Seahold lands into the southeast of the Darkwood territory. Sebastian was bringing the other half of Piot's forces to attack in a coordinated move with the main army.

Paul had a large contingent of his personal troops as well. They included an intensely trained regiment comprised of two select squadrons and a separate smaller reconnaissance platoon. The recon scouts who were regularly stationed in Jacques and Piot's lands and had up-to-date knowledge of the region would support the platoon. All the recon scouts were expert bowmen, and rode hardy mustangs. For this mission they wore finely woven barcothium chain mail beneath their clothing to blend in with the support forces. They were assigned to ride with the hunters until the main forces cleared the Caché Pass. At that point, they were secretly sent ahead to the Blackstairs Mountains to begin their deep reconnaissance.

Of Paul's two squadrons, his Special Forces team was trained in stealth attacks, while the elite squadron known across the duchy as LaPhere, "The Fear", were virtually unstoppable in the front line. The two squadrons wore essentially impenetrable barcothium armor and weaponry. The Special Forces squadron covered their armor with leather to muffle sound, painted their faces for camouflage, and carried small crossbows and short curved dirks. "LaPhere" company, however, wanted the enemy to know they were coming, wore a white plume at the crest of their helmets, and rode the highly prized Andalusian horses.

Jean Piot's good friend and southern neighbor, Marquis Remy Charpentier, led a final regiment to challenge the rebellious Marquis of Darkwood with a surprise rear attack. Bringing with him more of Piot's foot soldiers, along with his own troops, Remy would travel up the coast with fourteen troop transport ships protected by six frigates.

Piot had offered the additional foot soldiers to bolster Charpentier's troops who needed to secure the towns they would move through on their path to the rear of the enemy who was preparing for battle with the duke on the plains at the eastern side of the Chamberlain Mountain Pass.

Certain the enemy had full knowledge of his troop numbers and planned deployment, Duke Paul wrestled with the two alternatives; *One, I can publicly disgrace Perret, by removing him and the men I'm certain are involved with these plans. That might frighten others into abandoning any thought of treason. Two, I can continue to wait in hopes that we will outwit their plans at the last minute, keep the victory, and bring to light the entire plot. Whatever I decide, I must let Charpentier know everything I've learned now, so that he can plan his own strategy for dealing with the traitors amongst his troops and the crews onboard his ships.*

In the quiet before dawn, the duke focused all his attention on his closest friend, and reached out to him with his telepathic skill. ***Remy!***

From the duchy's southern coast, Remy Charpentier responded, ***I'm here waiting, Paul. Our troops are assembled here at the king's port, and the needed supplies will be loaded onboard the last of the transport ships today. Christophe arrived from his post at Rives Enchantées with the Ancient's Eye an hour ago. After the troops are settled onto their assigned ships tomorrow, we will leave the next morning at dawn as planned.***

***Very good, Remy. However, we have a major problem to solve before you give those final orders to set sail. I have discovered Marquis Perret is accomplice to Jacques in the attacks on not only Piot's lands, but elsewhere as well. And Remy, they have either by coercion, or paid cooperation, managed to subvert men from all over the duchy to this treason. You will need to find a way to verify which of your men are traitors, and deal with them in such a way that Jacques is not quickly made aware we know about the conspiracy.***

Stunned, Remy took a moment to reply, ***I'll find a way, Paul. No traitor will be alive by the time we land at Northport, in Claw Harbor.***

***Appoint your brother Commodore of the task force. I will send orders stating that to Captain Piot. Whatever you do to clear up the vipers amongst your men, you will need to do the same for Piot's.***

***I have an idea already of how to quickly weed them out.***

***Alright. I can't promise the same from this end Remy. If I take steps to contain this before I discover who is behind Jacques and Perret's actions, I risk their finding out and warning whoever organized this. Then we'd be fighting another battle again soon, or worse. I've determined I must let Jacques think I'm unaware of the ambush planned for as long as possible. Perret doesn't even know the identity of their leader. Whoever is coordinating this coup has been careful to keep his identity secret.***

***If Jacques is the only one who knows, we'll have to take him alive.***

***Yes. My orders to all the land troops were that he be delivered alive. Perret would be dead now, if it wouldn't have shown our hand. I will keep him alive, until I determine if Jacques has the information we need. If Jacques, too, is clueless to the identity of their leader, I will kill him and let Perret live. That way I can watch Perret, and through any contact made to him, trace back to the true organizer of this insurrection.***



~

## LaPhere Duchy, South Lakes Province Central Bay, Clements Port Town

Remy Charpentier frowned, his tall muscular frame taut, as he leaned his hands against the rail looking out to sea from the balcony of the king's harbormaster. No one would call him handsome, not with his angular face that gave him a hard air, until he looked at you directly with his light brown eyes. His true heart shone out from those eyes, and just now they held pain in them.

*It won't be easy or quick, with only the three of us, to mentally inspect three thousand troops, let alone all the crew aboard the ships. Yet we have no choice. I can only hope if our plan to disclose all those involved doesn't work, that any we've missed will be so frightened when they understand we're aware of the coup, that they will drop any idea of following through with this treason.*

A bit sick at what he was about to do, he realized he no longer had the stomach for war. *Fighting the ren seemed honorable when I was younger, but there is nothing decent about what I'm ordering my men to do. If it wasn't for the fact we will be certain of the treason, I couldn't give such a command. However, even if some of these men have been coerced into the planned ambush, I can't let them go free. I have to find a solution that allows me to eliminate those willingly participating, remove those that are under coercion, and keep whoever is behind it all from finding out his plans are exposed.*

Remy had his brother, Captain Christophé Charpentier, send orders for the inspection of the ships' crews to take place after the midday meal. Remy spoke to the shipmen aboard each ship as his brother along with Captain Theodore Arnault of the king's ship, the Solkei, walked up and down the ranks inspecting more than just the men's outward appearance. Remy's speech was carefully crafted to induce those who were untrustworthy to think of their personal loyalties, and expose the traitors by their own thoughts.

He was relieved and pleased that the percentage of men who had been found to be traitors was small. None of the ships were without a traitor, but Commodore Christophé's ship, the Ancient's Eye was found to have only one man who had been coerced into helping the enemy, by threats against his wife's family, who lived in Jacques territory. All together the three South Lakes province's ships contained seven men that were compromised. The Solkei had two.

"Order all crews to remain aboard ship tonight. We'll have the routine inspection in the morning, two hours early, before we inspect the land forces," the commodore ordered his captains. "There is little chance we can keep our troop movements secret, as Jacques probably has spies in port, but we don't want the traitors to have any opportunity to follow through with any planned sabotage. Take them into custody quietly tonight and keep them in the hold under guard."

~

The three longshoremen entered The Garn Tavern with faces that showed the day's wear. Shuffling across the room, through the shifting shadows, they took the only open table left in the nearly dark room. Small glow stones rested in a clear glass bowl on each table, but several of the room's inhabitants dimmed the light from theirs by half covering the dish with a hat or kerchief. This was not a place one stared long at another's face without instigating a fight.

The barmaid, Synth, with long brunette hair swaying in a ponytail, negotiated her way around the tables, filled with drunken men, to get to the newly arrived occupants. Several times on her way, she slapped the

too friendly hands of the seamen aside, but only once had to stop to shove one away hard enough that he lost his balance upon sitting back down, and landed with a crash on the floor. Several snickers could be heard at tables around the fallen pursuer. She was inured to such moments, as her mother had also been a barmaid when Synth was growing up. The girl's tall, attractive looks had required her to learn at an early age how to fend off drunken men.

"What will it be tonight? A plate for each of you, or just tankards of aged dingin all around?"

"We're hungry and thirsty, and not necessarily in that order. Bring us plates, but if those tankards on your tray are full, we'll start with those." The self-appointed leader of the three replied in a surly tone.

Synth quickly placed the three tankards at the end of the table and turned to retrieve the ordered food. There was no need to ask what they would like to eat, the small tavern only served one choice for dinner; whatever the cheapest catch of that day had been with biscuits and batter fried squash. When she returned to place the plates before them, the surly one was complaining loudly about their day on the docks.

"I don't care if they are paying us extra, working like garn for those nobles going off to play soldier ain't worth it. I say they put those three thousand troops to work loading the supplies they need onto the ships themselves. Then they'd know what an honest day's labor was really like."

Synth didn't react to the conversation, as the man's friends added their own opinions, but she took in the information for later. As the last few customers staggered up to leave, the door opened and a younger man gave the room a cursory glance before making his way to a stool at the bar. Synth closed and locked the door after the stumbling inebriants, and slipped onto a stool beside the newest arrival, a lock of her wavy hair falling across her face.

"Cap'n."

"Synth. What do you hear?"

"Depends," she said turning to nonchalantly rest her elbows on the bar behind her while crossing her legs, as if she wasn't that eager to earn the money he would pay for information gathered during her long days serving the crews of various ships at port.

Coal black hair worn loose in waves to his shoulders, with a two day scruff for a beard, the Cap'n had a charm that was aided by his almond-shaped blue eyes that sparkled in his deep brown tanned face. He placed a gold coin on the counter, but kept his hand on it as he waited for the promised confidences.

Synth was not unaffected by the young man's charm and good looks, but she kept much of her gathered knowledge undisclosed; giving him only enough to peak his interest. "There are several transport ships headed north tomorrow."

The hand holding the gold moved a bit, but his tattooed index finger remained on top. "And?"

"They aren't anything that would appeal to you. Supposedly they'll be transporting about three thousand troops. What's more, they'll have not only Charpentier's frigates along with them, but possibly some of the king's as well. At least the Solkei is going out with them."

After the Cap'n gave Synth one of his long searching looks, that always left her feeling vulnerable and shaken, the finger pushed the gold coin toward the girl, and the captain got up, and left without another word between them.

Synth fingered the gold as she locked the door again behind him. *I wonder what is so valuable about the information I gave him. He usually only gives me a few silver coin when the information isn't to his benefit.*

Outside in the street the Cap'n took a moment to let an unbecoming sneer cross his face. *I would pry the information from your mind sweet Synth, and never pay you anything, but I find it enticing to prey on your weakness and watch how it erodes your soul and spirit.*

~

Dawn was still an hour away, but the troops were already mustered on the docks, in an at-ease position while waiting for inspection before boarding. In the semi-dark before dawn, shadows moved across the dock performing last minute duties for the departing ships. Here and there a cough or mumbled cursing could be heard through the swirling fog.

“Once we’ve found them, divide the traitors across the transport ships. Have each traitor paired with a team of two to three loyal men,” Remy ordered, as his breath steamed out to add to the early morning fog lying across the bay. He and Commodore Christophé were about to repeat the process with the land forces that they had used with the ships’ crews the day before.

The ships crews had just finished their regular morning inspection, a few hours early, so that the captains could ensure all were present and accounted for. Fortunately, the removal of the nine traitors aboard the ships the evening before, to below deck, was accomplished without anyone asking questions later as to their missing comrades. While it was unusual that Christophé’s sailors would go AWOL, it was not unheard of or impossible.

The dawn had turned to daylight and the fog had completely evaporated as they finally began the inspection of the land troops. Now their roles were changed, and Remy inspected his own people’s minds, with Christophé, while Captain Theodore gave the speech. Again they found men both coerced and bribed. Those whose families living in Perret and Jacques’s lands, and were being threatened, totaled fourteen, while a total of fifty-one men had been corrupted. Although there were six coerced men from one region in Charpentier’s lands, the rest were individual men who mostly owed gambling debts, and had easily been suckered into such deep debt that they agreed to sell out their neighbors and friends to clear their accounts. A few others had been offered power and position once the coup had succeeded.

*Well, more than I hoped for after last night’s small numbers, but a good deal less than the duke is going to have to deal with.* Remy sent to Christophé and Theodore. **Get them on board.**

Commodore Christophé gave the order, “Post! Carry out the plan of the day.” The troops having been dismissed to board their assigned ships, moved out with a beat of their feet that carried across the wharf and into the town like a drum sending out a warning message.

Once the Ancient’s Eye was out in deep water, with several hours between them and Central Bay, Commodore Charpentier rang a bell, and a flag was raised for the other ships to follow his lead. He didn’t have the men who were coerced killed, but they were all taken into custody at the same time. Assigned to every traitor were loyal men who, at the signal, cut the throat of the rest of the traitors and threw the

bodies overboard. The only exceptions were those who had been coerced, and these fourteen men were locked up below deck with the crewman who had also been discovered the day before, until the ships could land at Claw Harbor. There the commodore would place them in the custody of that king's harbormaster.

# CHAPTER III

## Eastern Coastal Waters, South Lakes Province

On a ship, far out beyond the sight of the Ancient's Eye lookout, stood the young captain of a well-disguised pirate ship. His men only ever called him Cap'n. To anyone observing, they would merely think he was lost in thought looking off toward the horizon. In fact, he *was* deep in thought. His mind followed a falcon as it flew high overhead, up the coastline following the transport ships.

As the traitors bodies were being tossed overboard, the falcon turned to circle lower once before returning to the pirate ship. The sharp-beaked avian landed on his bared arm as gently as a plesin. His crew was used to this sight and ignored their leader as he walked quickly into his quarters to write a message to Marquis Jacques for the falcon to deliver.

Again the falcon flew up and headed northwest across land, toward the Chamberlain Mountain Pass, where Marquis Jacques waited with his troops for the duke's arrival.

With the bird off to deliver its message, the Cap'n headed back to his cabin. Continuous use of psionic control over another, and especially over animals, left him seriously depleted of energy. It would take several hours for the falcon to reach the marquis, therefore, he would remain secluded while in such a vulnerable state.

Before going below deck though, he turned and ordered his helmsman to head the Stolen Hoard north, "Full sails." *We need to follow the ships heading north at a distance that will keep us out of visual range, but with the wind speed as it is, we can run at full sails and still remain unseen for a few hours.*

~

## LaPhere Duchy, Darkwood Province

The dark haired, fair skinned Marquis André Jacques held the tether to the falcon hard in his grip, uncaringly jerking it back and forth, as he stormed around his tent in a blind rage. The falcon, bating, beat its wings, screeching, trying to keep balanced on the flailing arm of the tantrum-throwing marquis.

"Who does the Cap'n think he is, sending me this message? He receives sanctuary in *my* harbors, and he will do as I order."

Jacques stomped over to the small table where he'd dropped the message after receiving it. Reading it again, believing somehow the words would rearrange themselves to say something different.

*§ Several transport ships, guarded by frigates, are headed north. Sources reveal they are headed for Claw Harbor. Unable to determine what is onboard the transports. Have some trading to do; will be unavailable for a few weeks. §*

Crushing the small note before tossing it to the ground, Jacques looked at the bird now resting, if a bit nervously, on his gloved arm. "I would kill you, if it weren't that I need you." He was not entirely directing his comment toward the falcon. Taking up a pen, he wrote his missive to the young pirate captain.

Marquis Jacques didn't wholeheartedly trust anyone, but his brother, Captain Bren Jacques, was the closest confidant he kept. *I don't believe for one moment that the Cap'n doesn't know what is being transported in the ships coming north. I'd better send Bren with the ships under his command, including Perret's, to find out what's on board the transports.*

Writing a quick message, he sent another falcon north to Glacier Port, where Captain Bren maintained his small squadron of three ships. He sent with it a second message for Marquis Philippé Perret, demanding support from his ships. Although related by the marriage of André's sister to Philippé, Jacques despised his weak-willed brother-in-law. *Perret had better agree to release his ships, or I'll feed him to the solkei myself when this is all over.*

~

### **Eastern Coastal Waters, South Lakes Province**

A little over an hour navigating at full sails, as the Stolen Hoard passed the site where Charpentier's crew had tossed the men overboard, the *ker'yaheen's* nest lookout called out, "Helmsman! Possible pickings afloat portside."

The helmsman would have ordered them to ignore the opportunity, but keeping the pirate crew satisfied meant letting them loot wherever chance provided. They took in their sails and two small boats were lowered from the port side with six men aboard each. As they neared the pieces of bodies still floating, the oarsmen slowed their rowing, and looked at the water with an uneasy feeling.

"Let's not bother with this, men, I suddenly have a bad feeling," the boatswain suggested.

"You always got a bad feeling, Bos'n. We're close enough to check that one for spoils, and I intend to do just that." As the sailor reached his arm out to grab a half-torso floating by, the boat rocked violently.

Turning he growled, "You dump me in the sea and I'll cut your throat."

The bos'n cursed him and started to stand. A rough knock to the bottom of the boat, directly under the boatswain, tossed him forward into the men sitting in the boat. The sailor, who had demanded they check the bodies, angrily assumed he was trying to dive at him, and threw himself onto the Bos'n. However, at that moment the small boat flipped halfway into the air dumping all but one of the six sailors into the water. It was only a moment of flailing before their screams pealed out. The other longboat turned swiftly making for the ship as a manta-shark jumped two meters out of the water to land across the nearly empty boat, with a loud crash and a snapping sound that left the craft in two pieces. A sailor's arm could be seen in its mouth; bloody flesh hanging from the end where it had been torn from its owner's body.

Fear drove the oarsmen of the second boat to a record speed, and they managed to regain the ship without drawing the attention of the manta-shark to their boat. The Cap'n, who'd returned to the deck during the incident, ignored the screams of the sailors left behind, and simply ordered the helmsman to bring the Stolen Hoard again to its northern heading. No one on board complained, however, because nobody wanted to return to offer either a rescue or check for loot at this point. The Cap'n returned to his quarters.

The next morning, as the falcon flew back to the ship, the Cap'n stood on deck as he guided the bird to come down the last stretch of the coastline. Again he watched through the falcon's eyes as several more ships joined those heading north, and noted the bodies that were being tossed overboard just north of Destiny Bay.

*Those are Piot's ships and troops leaving the docks at Repos du Bateau. That confirms it. Charpentier has somehow found out there are traitors amongst his ranks. Does that mean the duke knows Jacques's plans? Well, that's André's problem. He asked me to send word of what I could find out about the ships gathering in Charpentier's port. I've done that, to a degree. If he wants more information, he will pay for it. Of course, when the falcon returns it may bring further orders from him.*

The Cap'n ran his tongue over his teeth before taking a deep breath of sea air. *It could very well be Jacques was a poor choice in my plans.* With a mental shrug, the Cap'n pushed his self-doubt aside. *That is why I have contingency plans.*

~

### **Eastern Coastal Waters, Seahold Province**

*"Life every man holds dear;  
But the dear man holds honor  
Far more precious dear than life."  
William Shakespeare*

A fresh breeze, blowing against Remy's tanned face, and ruffling his dark russet locks, cooled the effect of the hot sun. Unlike his brother, he was not used to life aboard ship, and while some of how uncomfortable he felt was due to that, the rest probably came from Judah's response to being at sea. He had compassion for his Ancient friend, but kept these feelings of dislike of being at sea under tight reign.

***If Christophé and Gideon can do this, we can. At least the herbs are helping our seasickness. I'll be blessed if half my men are able to walk off the ships ready to fight.***

Christophé sent, ***You forget Remy, Gideon and I have been on the water on some kind of vessel since we joined. Even at the Training Center I couldn't be kept from spending hours on the lake. It nearly cost me the opportunity to receive an ancient.***

***Along with the fact that you show no remorse, even to this day, for snooping on the privacy of others!***

***You were broadcasting.***

***And you're a lying gatten! I haven't broadcast since joining with Judah.***

***Okay, I was snooping Remy, but only to check and see if you were as sick as you look. Under that handsome tan of yours, is a very decided pallor. You were always too proud to admit when you were ill.***

Remy turned to look across the deck at his younger brother. It was obvious to any observer that they were brothers, with their similar build and looks. They had always been close even before their joining experiences, but Remy had never stopped thanking God that Gideon had accepted Christophé for the joining, in spite of his penchant for water and his lack of social etiquette.

***You could not have possibly seen my face from where you're standing at the helm!***

***You have been standing there at the prow for hours. I have walked by you three times, and left you alone to your thoughts. It is my responsibility to be sure all those on board are physically and psychologically sound.***

***I'm fine.*** Remy sighed. ***However necessary this conflict might prove to be, taking my friends and neighbors into a battle, vassals who look to me for leadership and protection, isn't something I find I'm prepared to do. And what of Marquis Jacques's men? Seeing how he has frightened some of my people into treason, gives me a good idea how he has probably used intimidation on his own vassals.*** Remy paused, pain etched on his face.

***People are going to die Christophé, a lot of good people. Children will wake up to learn their fathers are dead, and wives will have to face providing for their babes alone. I know we have no choice except to stop Jacques from his violence and the corruption he is fostering, but that doesn't mean I'm going to feel victorious, even when we are done with this battle and home again.***

***Your love of your people and willingness for self-sacrifice on their behalf is what I admire most in you Remy. I hope there is very little sacrifice, and that this is brought to a close quickly.***

~

A fathom below the water, aft of the task force, the steady beat of its nine meter fin span created an undulating wake two meters long at the tips. Harmless to larger ships, like the frigates and transports, these creatures were usually virtually ignored. However, having tasted the prey it now stalked, the beast waited for another opportunity.





~

## **Eastern Coastal Waters, South Lakes Province**

The expected “orders” came with the falcon, and the Cap’n noted the veiled threat of exposure from Marquis Jacques, and tossed the message out the porthole.

*If he believes that he can intimidate me, he has the brains of an autruchet. He cannot expose our port hideouts without implicating himself.*

Sending a message far north to his second, Captain Jonny, who held seven pirate vessels in harbor waiting for orders, the Stolen Hoard continued north to join the vessel he requested meet him off the eastern coast of Jacques’s lands in Crystal Bay.

*I’ll use this time, while Christophé Charpentier’s ships are busy here in the north, to take possession of an unguarded transport in the south. With our frigates and crews disguised as transport protection, a harbormaster in a southern port will easily be convinced we are legitimate. When we sail to a western port, the sale of the cargo will make for a very nice profit.*

~

## **Northeastern Coastal Waters, Darkwood Province, Glacier Bay**

Captain Bren Jacques read the message from his brother, André, appointing him commodore and directing him to enlist Perret’s ships. He immediately contacted the two captains of Andre’s other ships. He also sent a message to Perret’s captains in the northern Gelé Bay. Perret grudgingly agreed to give aid, but sent only two of his three frigates to join the newly appointed commodore’s squadron, claiming he must keep a ship off his own shores for the protection of his coastline. Bren was angered at the snub to his authority, but knew that neither he nor his brother presently had the time to deal with this insubordination.

Except for being fair skinned, Bren looked nothing like his brother André, who took after their mother’s father, but rather was a twin to their own father, his namesake. Tall and wiry, his blue eyes were soulful, and had won him the hearts of several young ladies. His sandy brown hair waved slightly, as he wore it long, and he was forever pushing a lock off his brow. His youthful face contradicted his intelligent focused mind, which had earned his brother’s confidence to place him in charge of his squadron of ships at a young age.

Commodore Bren now took the five ships in his command, and headed east before turning south along the coast to Crystal Bay. Leaving four frigates in harbor, he traveled on alone with the Northern Jewel, through the serene arctic night, to arrive the next day in Claw Harbor. Entering the bay, his ship was met by the Crown Star, the king’s flagship for the eastern coast.

Here, in this frigid northeastern harbor, were stationed three royal ships. These ships, along with the eleven other royal vessels that were spread along the coast, were under the command of Admiral Giovanni Goldstein, captain of the Crown Star. He was specifically charged to keep the peace between the marquises of the eastern and northeastern coasts, protect the merchant transports, and root out the pirates who had so far eluded capture.

~

## Eastern Coastal Waters, Darkwood Province

As the Crown Star drew along portside of the Northern Jewel, a red flag was raised by the admiral's men indicating that a boarding party would check the ship, crew, and cargo before allowing it entry to the bay. Commodore Jacques raised his own wine colored flag, crossed with silver, indicating he desired a personal conference with Admiral Goldstein.

They met in longboats while the inspection of the Northern Jewel was being carried out. Giovanni listened to not only what Bren spoke, but also to what he was thinking when he requested the king's commander join him in confronting the twenty ships heading for Claw Harbor.

*He didn't even have the common sense to ask me if I knew the ships are coming or if I have knowledge of the cargo on board the transports. He is so busy trying to appear innocently interested, as the commander of the local marquis' squadron, that he isn't thinking that any movement of ships of this amount would likely have been brought to my attention days ago, if not actually planned with my approval.*

Out loud Giovanni replied, "Fourteen transport ships with frigates guarding them you say? Certainly we'll need to check the situation out. Also you're right in suggesting we contact them before they arrive here. That way we can send for assistance if they prove to have any ill intentions for the king's harbor."

*He is so pleased with my offer, and the suggestion that we might possibly need additional assistance, he has failed to comprehend that my exact words didn't include assisting him in protecting Marquis Jacques's interests.*

Admiral Giovanni returned to the Crown Star. He gave a quick command to his first mate before seeking the solitary space of his quarters, "Head for the twenty incoming ships upon the return of the boarding crew." His men could be trusted to accomplish all they had been commanded to do.

**Remy, Christophé!** Giovanni knew that due to the distance, and the unanticipated mental contact, it might take some time for them to connect, therefore, he was pleased by Christophé's unexpected immediate response.

**Giovanni, I'm here.**

**I'm here also.** Remy interjected.

**Good. Commodore Bren Jacques, in the Northern Jewel, is following the Crown Star to inquire of you why your ships are headed for Claw Harbor. He has instructions from his brother to find out what is aboard the transports. I don't know how they know of the ships yet are unaware of the cargo. More interesting than that, is Commodore Bren's personal concerns. He believes you are transporting troops, however, he now thinks his brother is likely to lose this battle in spite of the traitor's ambush. Bren is hoping to appear to have clean hands of the whole treason. After Marquis Jacques has been captured and either killed or denounced, he hopes to gain the title and lands his brother possessed.**

Remy replied, ***Treason carries a punishment of removal of all title and lands from the entire family line. Any decision to place those into Bren's hands would have to come from Duke de LaPere, and possibly be agreed upon by King Marix.***

***Unfortunately for Commodore Jacques, the duke will have complete knowledge of his complicity with his brother, in both this treason and his involvement in the piracy, which I have been investigating since taking over this command,*** Giovanni explained.

Christophé's pleasure at this unexpected information was evident as he sent his cheerful reply. ***So, you have been able to ascertain the Jacques brothers have been providing harbor to the pirates!***

Remy interjected, ***I know that each time a transport is captured by the pirates you take it as a personal failure to complete your obligation as Commodore of my squadron of ships, but that is a fight for another day, brother. Today we deal with the ship in front of us.***

~

As the two northern ships approached the task force, off the coast of Grayson Harbor, the frigates moved forward and spread out in a crescent formation with the Ancient's Eye in the center lead position. The Ancient's Eye lowered a boat to portside with Commodore Charpentier and three mates aboard. Admiral Goldstein's men rowed over to the Northern Jewel, where Commodore Jacques joined him in the admiral's longboat. They immediately rowed over to meet Commodore Charpentier and the crew of the Ancient's Eye.

Drawing up to Christophé's longboat, they threw a line to stabilize the two boats. Commodore Jacques, empathically encouraged by Goldstein, never gave notice to the four rear frigates suddenly moving out of the crescent formation to surround the Northern Jewel.

"Your fleet has me a little nervous Charpentier," Jacques began, his tone non-combative. "It isn't that we mind trade with the central ports, but naturally you'll understand, as commodore of my brother's squadron, I'm concerned when I see several frigates heading into our southeastern harbor."

Christophé nodded in understanding and replied, "Naturally, but with all the piracy recently we've decided it is more expedient and prudent to send a large transport all at once with several frigates working together, than to send individual transports with a lone frigate to defend them."

At Bren's relieved look Christophé found it hard not to chuckle that he actually was being swayed to believe they were only here as protection for merchant transports.

*I suppose I shouldn't be surprised with Giovanni sitting next to him. Rumor has it none of his crew have ever been insubordinate with him. He seems to have an extraordinary ability to charm those around him, I wonder if somehow that is connected to his joining with Havilah.*

Bren avoided eye-contact as he nervously brushed the hair off his sweating brow. "Well then, if it is simply that, I'm sure your frigates won't actually need to enter the bay, as Admiral Giovanni's frigates maintain tight control of Claw Harbor, and no piracy has ever hit the ports inside the bay. What type of cargo are you carrying?"

Christophé sent to Giovanni, ***The one piece of information his brother demands he gather is not going to help him. We could tell him everything and he still will never share the facts with André. Yet prudence is smarter at this point.***

“We have a variety of cargo; garn, food stores, medical supplies, and more. All of it is being delivered to Harbor Master Sándor at Northport. Two of our frigates will precede the transports into the bay, while the remaining five will anchor at the mouth of the bay.”

Commodore Jacques nodded his approval, “That sounds reasonable. Well then, perhaps I should lend my ship as an extra guard against the pirates.”

***He desperately wants to appear innocent of his brother’s corruption.*** Giovanni sent to Remy and Christophé.

***Well then, perhaps we should give him the chance to prove his loyalty to the duchy. Explain the reality of his circumstances and see how he responds.*** Remy sent to them both.

“That all depends on your answer to a few questions Bren. First, I need to inform you that your ship is virtually surrounded by our frigates, and second, that the more cargo I mentioned is four thousand troops, which will be disembarking at Northport,” Christophé enlightened his peer. “We are completely aware of the traitors your brother, and Marquis Perret, have waiting to ambush us, and have in fact dealt with all the conspirators amongst our crews and troops at sea. Admiral Giovanni will be sending men to take command of your ship. You can surrender, and be taken into custody, or we will simply kill you and drop your corpse overboard.”

Bren’s fair skin took a sickly pallor as the full implication of his position became clear. *Maybe they only think I’m possibly involved with André’s treason. Perhaps I can convince them I am loyal to Duke de LaPhere and knew nothing of the plans of my brother and Philippé.*

“I am shocked at these plans of treason you speak of. I know André and Piot have been at odds over land disputes, but I knew nothing of any plot to attack anyone. I will order my crew to surrender their weapons. Not one of my men will refuse.”

“Agreed, but you will surrender your weapon now, and before we board your ship you will wave the white flag yourself indicating a demand of surrender,” Admiral Goldstein ordered. Bren nodded his agreement.

A few hours later the task force was under way again, along with the newly commandeered frigate. Jacques’s crew had surrendered peacefully, if unhappily. Most were put under arrest anyway, as several men unknowingly revealed plans for further mutiny in support of their marquis.

*Days like today I really thank God for the telepathic gift Judah enables me to use,* Remy mused. He had given his quarters to Commodore Jacques, moving himself in with Christophé for the remainder of the voyage. *I am done with all this waste of life. There is no way anyone is going to approve Bren to receive his brother’s title and lands; however, if he sticks by his decision to remain loyal to the duchy, perhaps he will be worth redeeming in some way that he will find livable when this is all through. I would rather gamble on some good left in him than kill him now.*

Overhead a falcon turned and flew northeast toward Crystal Bay.

~

## Northeastern Coastal Waters, Darkwood Province Crystal Bay, Caché Port

On board the Stolen Hoard, the Cap'n watched everything through his falcon's eyes. *Telepathy has its advantages. Now what do I do with this information? Perhaps Captain Rohn LaPerouse will be interested in purchasing information that will ingratiate him with his cousin, Marquis Jacques. Of course I will only give him the facts that Bren is in custody and has surrendered his ship to the Admiral. I need to keep something of value for later bartering.*

~

Captain Rohn gladly paid for the facts on his cousin's apparent capture. *Maybe now André will give me the chance to show him that I have a greater skill to command than his brother.* Carefully crafting the message he sent by falcon, to show concern for the marquis' interests, as well as Bren's welfare, Rohn didn't have long to wait for André's reply.

*§ You have command. Take the Night Star and the three remaining ships immediately to intercept the transports. Get me information on what is on those transports. Delay entry into the harbor if you find there are troops aboard the ships. If possible, rescue Bren. §*

The newly appointed Commodore Rohn was aware the marquis might go into one of his rages for Rohn disobeying the order to depart straight away, but first he sought out the Cap'n, hoping to hire his seven ships for support against the force he was ordered to take on. Asking the whereabouts of the Cap'n was not something men did without some sense of requesting they be allowed to meet a crest viper; you never come away from the encounter completely whole, if you live.



It was dusk when he opened the door to the Caché Inn, and stiffened at the rank odor of bodies, too long strangers to a hot bath and bar of soap, mixed with the hot smell of various sea life fried in ertap fat.

*Personally, he thought, any creature that tough, and unpalatable, should not be sought for its fat in which to cook other dishes.* What's more, although Rohn had known what to expect, it wasn't his custom to spend time in places one might be served pieces of prior customers in the meat pie. He looked around

the dim, crowded room and easily spotted his objective, as the Cap'n sat alone at a table where six large seamen could easily have taken their meal in comfort.

Doing his best not to touch any of the inhabitants, Rohn approached the owner of the Stolen Hoard. "Cap'n. May I sit and share a tankard with you?" he tried not to shout his request above the drunken revelry and clatter of dishes.

Sitting back, and wrapping his arms around each of the chair edges of the backrest, while stretching out his legs, the Cap'n replied. "I see no reason to ruin my meal by suffering through a tankard with a barnacle rat."

Rohn opened his mouth, but then closed it, unsure of how to start the conversation in a way that would lead to his procuring the use of the pirate ships he desperately wanted. Blinking rapidly a few times, he squeaked out, "I'm, uhm, here on behalf of Marquis Jacques."

"Well then, I suppose I'm obliged to listen to your sniveling request, aren't I?" The Cap'n said sarcastically. He pulled free his curved dirk from his waistband, and lifting it, drove the blade into the tabletop. Not removing his hand from the hilt, he continued without waiting for an answer, "The Stolen Hoard and the Swift Beast are leaving port for other business. However, for a price of two hundred fifty gold coins per ship, per week, my Deputy Commander, Captain Jonny Cutlass, of the Phantom Falcon, and the other four of my ships are for hire. If that price is too high, you can see if you'll make it back out the door before my blade finds a place in you to slack its thirst."

Relieved, Commodore LaProuse set on the table the standard half up-front payment, and hastily left.

Immediately upon reaching his somewhat secure quarters on the Night Star, he sent another falcon to Marquis André, explaining his strengthened forces, and asking for fortification to be sent to the border of the king's land, where he expected Marquis Charpentier would most likely disembark. He knew perhaps he would not see an answer return before he was engaged in the conflict with the incoming ships.

~

The Stolen Hoard and Swift Beast left Crystal Bay in the moonlight, heading south again. Although his curiosity was stirred as to the events about to take place south of Claw Harbor, the Cap'n had learned, over the last millennium, to ignore those inquisitive tendrils that reached out to tempt him to get involved with the common man's issues. *After all, this play in the game appears to be falling apart. Better to position myself for the next move with one of my contingency plans.*

# CHAPTER IV

## Eastern Coastal Waters, Darkwood Province

Commodore Rohn stopped the Night Star far out at the eastern tip of the Claw Peninsula coastline, and the captains of the other eight frigates joined him in his quarters. He directed his instructions to the pirate second in command, Captain Jonny Cutlass.

“I don’t expect you to engage over twenty ships alone, but instead to use a ruse that you’re carrying merchandise, which they may possibly be interested in purchasing or trading with you. This could give us the chance to gather the needed information on their cargo. André fears they have troops aboard. If they do, send a falcon with a detailed report to me. It is also important to keep any forces from entering the harbor. Use decoys and other diversions, like feigning several attacks from different directions. Delay their transport until dusk when our ships will have joined you. Together we can engage them if necessary.”

“Just so we’re clear between us. We were hired to assist your fight if need be, not do it for you. If those transports aren’t carrying any troops, and you tuck tail and run, whatever we take from them is ours, and we’ll come looking for you when we’re done relieving them of their cargo,” Jonny threatened.

Rohn flushed, but held his tongue, as the five pirates left his ship. The Phantom Falcon, and the other four pirate frigates, followed his instructions, and sailed on toward Charpentier’s vessels; three disguised as small merchant ships with the other two as their hired protection.

~

In early daylight, Cutlass approached the transport with the disguised Phantom Falcon, Night Raider, and the Corrupter, leaving their two sentinels, the Crimson Blade and the Midnight Crescent, at a distance that showed they weren’t looking for a fight, but would not be defenseless if one developed. As the “merchant ships” neared, the eight waiting frigates spread out in front of the transports. This time they created a formation of five ships in front and three behind.

Jonny raised the deep-blue, edged in gold flag, indicating the desire to trade, and was a bit wary when the con worked, and the commanding frigate raised the matching flag accepting the offer. He and his most presentable mates, dressed as a merchant trader and his crew, rowed across to the command ship to discuss terms. Commodore Christophé had them checked for weapons before escorting Lord Hart to the captain’s quarters to meet with the marquis.

Remy looked up as they entered.

“This is Marquis Charpentier. My Lord, I present Lord Hart. He believes he may have merchandise that you would be interested in taking a look at.”

“I am a man of limited interests, what cargo do you carry?”

“I’m a tradesman of special merchandise from all three seas. What cargo do you carry that requires so many large transports?”

“What I carry is unavailable for barter under the king’s orders. If I have interest in your merchandise, I will be paying in gold. So what is so special about your cargo?”

“I carry rare spices and the most exquisite fabric from the Crown Islands.”

“Fine linens might please the ladies of the court, and rare spices would interest my cook, but I’m on king’s business and have no room in my holds for procuring further cargo.” Commodore Christophé interjected, “I could use a few of the mercs you have aboard, if they’re for hire.”

*Wait...* Wary, Jonny tilted his head as he searched for a response, “Uhm, what mercenaries, My Lord?”

“Your five frigates are crewed by some of the most wanted men on the eastern coast, Cutlass.”

“How did you...”

The marquis cut him off mid-sentence, “I offer you this deal. You and any of your ships’ crews that will join the duke’s fight against Marquis Jacques will be offered amnesty, land and gold. They will of course have to give up the life of piracy permanently.”

Jonny pondered a moment, *I would give up half my cargo to find out who betrayed our plans.* He raised his hands and proposed in return, “Okay, okay, but the two waiting frigates will expect to see some action or they will never come close enough for you to capture.”

“Not to mention that Commodore Rohn, and his four ships are waiting beyond the eastern coastline, and will be expecting to hear a report from you before moving in to join you at dusk, right?”

Cutlass opened his eyes wide and scrambled to try to save his ship and crew. “Look, how about you take the men from just two of your ships, we light the decks on fire, nothing serious mind you, but enough to look convincing at this distance. The waiting frigates will believe I’ve managed to do what Rohn demanded. That is, that I’m keeping you occupied and out of Claw Harbor. They will move in to join the fight. Meanwhile, I’ll send a message to Commodore Rohn and tell him the cargo is supplies destined for the king’s port.”

Remy glanced at his brother and nodded. Christophé replied, “We’ll want your men to come onto our ships a boatload at a time. We’ll inspect them for weapons, and then those who agree to our terms will be spread amongst our crews for the duration of the voyage to Northport.”

“What of those who don’t agree?” Jonny already knew the answer as he looked at them. “These men aren’t dumb; they’ll all agree even if they hope to turn on you at the first opportunity.”

“We have ways of finding out the truth.” Commodore Charpentier let a cold thin smile settle on his face. Jonny actually felt a chill run through him similar to the reaction he felt when the Cap’n gave him one of his searching looks.

~

Although no one expected the captain of the Night Star to believe it, Captain Cutlass sent off the false message to Commodore Rohn, claiming the transports simply carried medical and food supplies to the king’s port. Many of Jonny’s pirates did honestly accept the terms offered, and were spread throughout



the ships crews. However, fifty-three were taken into custody, and placed in the hold of the Crown Star until all three ships crews had been inspected.

Admiral Giovanni didn't hesitate when Christophé sent him the "*all clear*". Moving his ship a hundred meters north from the formation, he had his men pull the untrustworthy pirates from the hold and kill them. As the bodies of the fifty-three were dropped overboard, four fathoms below the surface, the beast moved silently from its position at the rear of the transports, and this time it was not alone.

Christophé gave the order for small controlled fires to be lit on Charpentier's other two frigates, setting the ploy Jonny had suggested into play. The two waiting pirate vessels quickly responded to the deception. As they neared, a few mates on each of the burning ships played out a planned scene of fighting, giving added credence that the fires were genuine.

~

On board the Crown Star, Jonny stood at the rail watching his suggested plan unfold. He ignored the ache in his gut at the loss of his ship and command.

*I'm no better than the Cap'n, selfish as an autruchet, and as cold blooded as a manta-shark. There is no way Captain Defue will surrender, and her crew will defend her to their deaths.*

He scowled and narrowed his eyes, his mouth forming a bitter frown as he looked toward the east where the Crimson Blade maneuvered to flank the frigates.

*In a few moments I will lay aside my honor between pirates for the chance to regain the title and land stripped from my family over thirty years ago, a bittersweet redemption.*

He glanced over his shoulder at the handful of king's men and pirates fighting on the portside deck of a nearby ship. The smoke billowing amongst the fighters appeared to increase the numbers of men in battle. Giovanni and his crew were playing their part, pretending to be pre-occupied with the trouble off their port side. A mate passed him to throw the bloodied wastewater, from the bucket with which he'd cleaned the deck, over the rail. He jerked back dropping his pail, "What was that?"

Noticing his reaction, the bos'n asked, "What was what?"

The mate muttered something to his bos'n, and stepped back to the rail to lean out a bit to get a better view. Below the surface the movement of the manta-sharks as they fed on the bodies of the dead pirates turned the white caps red.

Jonny glanced at the water, but ignored the terrifying creatures and the shipmates' conversation as he focused his attention on the two pirate ships. He watched Defue aim her ship for Giovanni's vessel and use a spyglass to scan the deck. Quickly, Jonny stepped behind the complaining crew member and used him to block Defue's view.

*If she sees me, our pretense will be found out.*

The bos'n scowled at the sailor and shouted, "Get rid of that bucket and grab a sword!"

Jonny bent and grabbed the bucket tossing it down an open hatch, careful to keep his face turned from the approaching ship. The waiting for action had never been easy for him. Just now, however, he both wished

the moment of action would never come, and longed for it to be over. A movement at the helm caught his eye and he saw Giovanni, still facing away to port, lift his sword high. That was the signal to take the other ship. Jonny spun around, grabbed his rope with his left arm, and swung, sword drawn, to the deck of the Crimson Blade with the rest of Giovanni's thirty-man crew.

He only had a moment for the thought to slip in and out of his mind, *How did the admiral know the ship had arrived? He never moved from his position of watching over the port side.*

Jonny gave a grim grin as those mates of the Crimson Blade, who had planned to board the Crown in the same way, were caught unprepared. It took only a moment for them to react. However, that moment had given the advantage to Giovanni's men. The sound of screams cut short mixed with the clang of swords in combat. Boots slipped on the bloody deck as the opponents cursed each other amid the grunts of battle.

Captain Lorage Defue, long blonde hair swinging in its ponytail, turned from slicing the sword arm off a mate to find Jonny holding a short sword to her neck. She swallowed roughly, as the beading sweat on her brow slid down past her dry, piercing blue eyes, leaving streaks like tears on her cheeks. "Whatever they've offered you to turn on us, you will never live to enjoy. The Cap'n will hunt you until the day he finds you, and he won't be offering a quick and easy death."

Jonny shrugged, "Charpentier knows everything. When you only have one option to live, you take chances you might not otherwise. Besides, the Cap'n rules the sea, and I will be enjoying the life of a lord, with land and gold to sustain me far from any harbor." He moved the blade letting it bite into Lorage's neck, leaving a crimson trickle down her chest. "The deal is available to your crew as well, if you order your men to surrender."

"A promise of death now at your sword, or later at the hand of the Cap'n, begs me to choose the quicker end here, if you can kill me." At that last remark, she twisted, and beat his short steel aside with her left cutlass, swinging her right blade in an arc slicing up from his navel.

Jonny eluded the death blow with a quick step back, counter attacked, ripping a slice into her forearm, and tried to reposition his cutting edge at her neck. However, with blood running down her arm to drip off her elbow onto the deck, she evaded his attempt to force her into a position that would cause her to surrender.

He tossed his weapon into his left hand, turned on-guard, and grinned down at his petite opponent. "I'm glad you didn't make it easy on me Defue; much more fun to put your flame out in a good fight."

As the two captains fought neither noticed Captain Joanna Piot's frigate, the Addoli, draw up alongside the Crimson Blade, cutting it off from escape. A moment later her men had also dropped to the deck, and soon the still living crew were subdued. All eyes now turned on the death dance of the two pirate captains.

Lorage stepped in, and harshly slapped her right blade against Jonny's short sword, lifting her left weapon within a breath of his chest. As the fight continued a vise seemed to close around his lungs and the need for air slowly bled away his attention. Each move became like a single grain of sand dropping through an hourglass.

For just one moment he thought he might even the chances when he had her left sword-arm twisted behind her back, but she quickly kneed him, and broke free from his grasp. They stumbled apart, and shaking his head to clear the dizzying pain, he moved forward to impale her chest, but she blocked with

both blades. Within a moment she had disarmed him, and when she brought her weapons backhanded across his chest, he barely remained out of her range.

Before she could bring her arms to strike again, he instantly dove, wrapped his arms around hers, pinned them to her sides, and both of them fell to the deck. Defue's head hit hard, momentarily stunning her. He reached out, jerked a dagger from a body lying beside her, and sheathed the blade into her heart.

Taking a ragged breath, he staggered to his feet, and wiped the sweat from his brow with the back of his fist. "No man ever gave me a fight that brought me so close to my end."

Rotating around he met silence from Charpentier's men scattered across the deck. He walked over to where his sword had fallen, picked it up, sheathed it, and walked to the rail where he grabbed a rope and swung back to the Crown Star, landing in front of Giovanni.

The admiral was quick to express his respect, "I'm glad I didn't have to endure that fight. You are not only an accomplished swordsman, but also few men I know would have admitted they came so close to dying at a woman's hand. You showed her respect in death as much as in life."

Jonny stared a moment at Giovanni, wondering how the Admiral could have heard his quiet comment to Defue's still form on the deck of the other ship. Before he could formulate the question in his mind, he found he couldn't quite remember what he meant to ask, and walked away instead, wondering why it meant so much to him to have the respect of a king's man.

~

The crew of the Crimson Blade was not the only one to suffer loss. The Midnight Crescent, captained by the young Spice Lemaich, made its move on one of the "burning" transport ships. Waiting on the transport's deck, as thirty some pirates dropped in to take possession, were over a hundred soldiers, who were the first wave of five hundred. As the fighting progressed, Captain Lemaich, who had sent his first mate across, saw the folly of their situation. When the troops started to swing over onto the Midnight Crescent, Lemaich ordered the ship to pull away, but it was too late. Captain Spice and his surviving men were soon surrounded, and when offered the chance to surrender, took it. Forty-three men were scrutinized telepathically, eighteen were allowed to live; Spice was one of the survivors.

~

Long before dusk, two falcons high in the sky stooped, to land on LaPerouse's gloved arm only minutes apart. Anxious to receive Marquis Jacques's message, he neglected to go below deck to his quarters, and was disappointed when it revealed that André only agreed to send five hundred troops to the border. Then he pulled off the pirate's message, again without returning to his quarters, and quickly scanned it, a scowl forming across his brow. Staring out to sea, he worried at the gamble he must take, for he had no choice but to fulfill the orders of the marquis.

At dusk he moved his ships just within visual range. The night was clear, and the moonlight, shimmering through the ever changing light patterns in the sky, gave him a good view of the burning ships.

*Something seems off with all of this. The ships could be burning because the pirates attacked to take what they could for further compensation. Yet, what of those rumors I heard in Crystal Bay of men being thrown overboard in both Central Harbor and Destiny Bay? If there was no validity to André's*

concern over troops on the ships, why was Bren taken prisoner and his ship confiscated? Rohn stood thinking over his choices.

He was not of the same caliber as his cousin, Commodore Bren, and soon decided to send the Corsier, captained by their younger cousin, Gabriel Cohen, and one of Perret's ships, the North Sword, with a flag of truce as a ruse.

*While they have the attention drawn on them, Perret's other captain, John River, will have positioned the Silent Warrior to the south of the transports. Disguised with the king's flag, he may be able to get close enough to observe what is happening, and get word to me of what is aboard those ships. I'll be sacrificing the Corsier and the North Sword, but Marquis Jacques must have the information he demanded if I'm to keep command of his ships after we're finished with all of this. I'll stay back, and if I'm right, that this is a ploy, at least my ship will remain free. I'll have to get another message off to the marquis. He will need to know what I suspect is happening.*

Rohn sent the undesirable message to André, and then enacted his plan. The Corsier and the North Sword headed southwest to intercept the unmoving task force.

~

Remy, Christophe and Giovanni, stood on deck of the Crown Star, watching the ships from the northeast drawing closer with their white flags flying. In longboats, hidden in the shadows alongside the waiting frigates, were nearly one hundred men. Getting that order obeyed was the hardest task they had faced since leaving Destiny Bay. Word had spread of the manta-sharks, and no one wanted to be lowered to a dark sea full of hungry beasts.

***If not for your presence Giovanni, I'm not sure we could have convinced them to obey orders even with our own abilities.*** Remy sent to the king's commander.

They were all communicating telepathically, even though they were physically able to hold a conversation.

***Well, I think the two of you had as much to do with it as I did. When you got into longboats yourself it left them little choice, unless they wanted to appear like frightened babes.*** Giovanni shook his head once with a brief wry grin.

***It only made sense to show them they had nothing to fear, as the manta-sharks had feasted on the traitors only a few hours before.***

~

Captain Theodore and the Solkei had moved to the rear of the transports after the attack by the Midnight Crescent. A shout from the lookout brought him up on deck, and he quickly saw the reason for the alarm. Coming from the south was a large frigate flying the king's flag. Theodore took a breath, and focused, reaching out telepathically to the captain of this as yet unspecified king's ship. He met no response.

***Remy!***

***I'm here.***

***I have a ship headed our way from the south bearing the king's flag, but no response to my telepathic greeting. It might be I'm tired and not projecting well, but I'd bet it is another ruse by Jacques's commander.***

***I'll try to reach their captain. A few moments passed before Remy again sent to Theodore, No contact. You must be right. We'll let them think they've played us, be ready!***

***Oh, my crew is definitely ready. They have been complaining for hours that your crews are having all the fun!***

~

Moving in under cover of dusk, the Silent Warrior gained speed with both a swift current and a good wind. Captain River didn't agree with Commodore LaPerouse's plan, he thought trusting pirates was sheer folly, but he was aware that his own marquis had obligated him and the crew of his ship by siding with Marquis Jacques.

*We must win this battle, or the consequences for our treasonous action will be devastating to our families back home.* On the deck beside him was a caged falcon, should he see the proof sought after by so many ships already, he would be ready to send the warning that he felt certain would be his last as captain of this crew. Lifting the spyglass again he noted the small fires that continued to burn from the ships at the head of the transports. Scanning across the over twenty ships, he confirmed that several of the frigates were those of the pirates, but doubt encased his heart as the scene didn't make any sense.

Then he saw a movement in the dark water, beside a transport frigate. At first, John thought he had imagined it, but then he noted it again.

*Yes! There are longboats in the water. What the...?*

Turning his telescope further to the northeast, he saw that two ships were nearing the transports and frigates with flags of truce. Bringing the spyglass back to bear on the dark water, Captain River was just in time to see why the longboat had moved out of the deeper shadow a few moments earlier.

Sitting in the longboats were many nervous men, and some smart enough to be outright frightened. They had kept to the deeper shadows close to their ship, and at first all seemed to be calm. Then as the enemy frigates neared, a rough wave knocked the boat against the ship. Although men were displaced, no one was thrown out or injured, but within moments another, stronger hit to the starboard side had the boat slamming roughly against the ship again. Had the men not been holding on this time, some would have been dumped into the sea.

The coxswain turned the rudder, and ordered the men to row out a few meters from the side of the ship. A few men grumbled that this would only make it easier for the beasts below to pick them off, but they obeyed orders all the same. As their oars slapped the water, pulling them the desired distance away, a pair of two meter high waves turned and headed straight for them. In less than the time it took to draw breath to give warning, the giant manta-shark crested the water, leaped through the air to crash down on the longboat, knocked the oars from the hands hoping to use them as weapons, and turned the boat over with the impact. The screams were short lived.

~

On board the Corsier, young Captain Gabriel stared, as he suddenly saw the huge beast fly out of the water and crush the longboat that had unexpectedly appeared from the shadows. Unsure of what to surmise of the longboat, whether it had been an envoy being sent to negotiate, or an ambush waiting for them, he felt his mouth go dry at the instant loss of the entire crew.

*No matter what, we aren't putting longboats into the water! We'll pull alongside and let them take us before I send my men to their death that way!*

Now with sudden earnest, he hoped the commodore of the transports' task force would believe the flags of truce and offer them the chance to surrender.

~

Admiral Giovanni and Commodore Charpentier were surprised as the first ship closed in, and drew up, with the unoccupied crew standing visibly with their weapons discarded and their hands in the air. Giovanni reached out to feel the emotions of the men aboard, and he confirmed a great deal of fear held them all. Searching the deck for the captain, he spotted him and read his emotions as well as his thoughts. Giovanni sent to Remy, Theodore, and Christophé, *We can board and take the crew into custody. **Captain Gabriel is seriously surrendering. It appears he and the crew witnessed that manta-shark take down our longboat, and they would rather take their chances with us than the beasts in the water.***

Within moments the passive crew of the Corsier had been relieved of their weapons and ship.

~

Captain Bruce Blanchett of the North Sword had not witnessed the manta-shark attack, but from a half nautical mile behind the Corsier, he did watch Captain Gabriel surrender his ship without a fight. *What does the transport force have that has given them such an advantage that so many of our ships have come under their control? Gabe's just handed him over his ship, without lifting a sword. Do I try to turn and outrun them? Even if I managed to escape, they know I'm Perret's captain. They can simply follow me to our homeport, and they would most likely deal harshly with us for pretending to surrender and then fleeing. Since they don't appear to be killing the crew, I would be in a better position if I surrender now, and state that we were under orders to attack, but that I never had intentions of committing treason. Hopefully Gabe has thought of this scenario.*

“All hands, remove all weapons. Those not on watch, raise your arms as we come along side their frigate.”

The first mate looked as if he would argue, but Blanchett removed his own sword and handed it to the bos'n. The crew immediately complied, although some under-the-breath cursing could be heard as weapons were removed and taken to the armory below deck.

~

As the North Sword drew closer to the Corsier, Commodore Charpentier had two of Piot's frigates come along either side. With both Captain Gabriel and Captain Bruce's surrender of their ships, Remy gave

orders that none of the crew would be executed. Instead all were placed in their own holds, to be inspected, and a decision made, once the transport task force reached Northport.

To the south the Silent Warrior had drawn close enough to the transports to enable Captain John to see not all the men on the decks were ship's crew. Having watched the Corsier and North Sword surrender, John River now also found himself flanked by a true ship of the king, the Solkei. Without waiting for further proof, John wrote a short message to Commodore Rohn, and released the falcon. Then he ordered his men to also surrender.

Archers on board the Solkei shot arrows at the fleeing messenger, but the only mark they found was the dark sea.

~

Sitting in his quarters, Commodore Rohn removed the message and read it.

*§ Transport filled with troops. Capture imminent. §*

*Well, I'll not wait for Marquis Jacques to order me to throw away this last ship. I'll head north, and send off a message updating him after passing Crystal Bay.*

# CHAPTER V

## LaPhere Duchy, Darkwood Province, Blackstairs Mountains

Duke de LaPhere had received regular reports from Charpentier. Although Paul had said there wasn't much he could do to stop the traitorous ambush from his end, without tipping off the enemy, he did send out thirty recon scouts. Of those sent out, five were killed and six were captured. The men who made it through sent telepathic messages that provided vital information for Duke Paul on hard numbers of the ambushers waiting in the cliffs above the Chamberlain Pass.

Paul had also sent ahead, to the foothills only kilometers from the Blackstairs Mountains, his Special Forces team, under the command of Major William Sacre. The dark-skinned William towered above the average man, and was formed stronger than a cart-drawing garn, yet he was surprisingly able to creep up on an opponent as quietly as mist rolls down into the valleys at dawn. His simple presence was intimidating, however, once he went into action the observer understood why he was chosen for Special Forces.

While Remy was first meeting with "Lord Hart", William led his insurgence to remove the archers in the pass. Splitting his squadron into two companies of two hundred men each, he placed one company under the command of his cousin Captain Nathan Cohen.

The troops loved to tease the cousins because they were so completely different in physical appearance and personality. Nathan had a fair complexion and red hair whereas William had skin the color of coffee. None of that affected Will and Nathan's close-knit bond. The two had been as devoted as twin brothers for many years because they shared the telepathic gift of all those who passed the testing at the training center.

William and his men took the northern cliffs leaving the southern side to Nathan's troops who hiked through the dense forest covering the foothills leading up to the mountain's jagged cliffs for most of the day. Suddenly, breaking clear of the trees, they found a lake between them and their goal and were forced to circle around the water.

After doing recon of the area, Nathan ordered the team to break for a quick meal and to refill their water skins. Rinsing off the hours of dirt and sweat accumulated during the hike, the men remained alert for any enemy activity, and quickly finished their meal before starting around the lake.

The undergrowth was thick here, where the water supply was plentiful. It was turning dusk as they neared the far side of the lake, and found themselves swatting at the numerous insects that created small swarms around them. Several men pulled out ointment to smear over their exposed skin, and kept the biting insects off, while others marched on refusing the relief in a display of male bravado.

The northern team avoided the insects, since they found only a few swift moving creeks at which to refill their canteens. They moved with stealth through the less dense undergrowth and forest, and managed a slightly faster pace than Nathan's troops to the south.

When they broke through from the forest it was to a large rocky slope leading up the face of a cliff, where they found the only way to continue was to climb the cliff or retreat several hours in order to work their way further north. William was aware enemy scouts waited to the north, and decided to take his men up the cliff.



They were nearing the half-way point when the lead men spotted an opening to a large cave set back into the face of the cliff. Before anyone could move to check out the cave, three black-winged avian creatures the size of eigen flew out of the dark hole, screeching a call that pierced the air. The men slapped their hands over their ears in a useless effort to close off the painful noise.

The sound soon increased in pitch, until those closest to the creatures passed out. Across the cliff face men hung limply from their harnesses, and William felt a wave of fear as he realized these were the “mythical” *solkei* spoken of in bard’s tales. Several more arrived, as the first swooped onto their unconscious prey, and began to tear and rip at any exposed flesh. Some of the men regained consciousness, but were unable to fight off the beast making a meal of their tissue.

In that moment William sent out a mental command to his still conscious team to first, stuff their ears with anything they could find, and then to use their crossbows to shoot the feasting beasts. Several men had already begun to shoot, but stopped to shove small patches of cloth in their ears. It didn’t fully shut out the sound, and some men still collapsed, but those who remained standing were finding their mark, and soon the numbers of *solkei* dead inspired the remaining ones to fly away in screeching protest. Seven men were left wounded, two were dead.

***Nathan!***

***I’m here Will, what is it?***

***Solkei! They appear to live in the cliff caves, and the stories we heard as children didn’t even prepare us for what we just had to fight off. They emit a high piercing screech, which knocks out their prey, and then start eating their victims alive. Warn your men to have something ready to stuff their ears and to be alert with their crossbows. We killed several of them, and that seemed to deter the rest who left, but not before they killed two of my men and wounded seven others. I don’t think three of those wounded will make it through the night. They can’t stay here, those beasts are sure to return. I’ll have to send them back down the foothills with a small squad, some to carry those that can’t walk, and others to defend them. I’ll be down thirty men but it can’t be helped.***

***Thanks for the warning. The worst we’ve had to face so far is nasty biting insects. I’ll alert my men.***

~

## **Eastern Coastal Waters, Darkwood Province**

Commodore Charpentier ordered the transports, and the surrendered ships, to move on ahead with the Crown Star and the *Solkei*, in order to have the troops and prisoners disembark at Northport. Remy and Christophé then re-inspected the new recruits, and found many who were still hoping to find a way to rejoin Marquis Jacques’s forces.

After dispatching of the pirates, and commanding Jonny to send a clear message to the Cap’n explaining the decision that the remaining pirate crews were joining forces with Charpentier, the rest of the frigates also headed north. It was nearly morning when the last frigate tied up at Northport.

~

## **LaPhere Duchy, Darkwood Province, Ouvrir la Terre**

Marquis Jacques threw the bird from his arm, and it hastily flapped away. “Useless!” he stormed across the clearing to his tent; his pale face flushed deep red, as a vein pulsed angrily in his neck. The falcon flew off to the north, leaving the bitter marquis to his frustrations. *All of the ships but one taken. Even the pirate ships! And for what?*

He paced the interior of his quarters. *The transports are carrying troops, but I’ve got no solid numbers to tell me if I should split my forces to route this flanking move of LaPhere’s.* Walking to the flap, and pulling it back, he chewed his lip as he pondered his choices.

*LaPhere is perhaps two weeks from crossing into the pass with over twice the forces I have now. I can’t afford to break off half my men to fight a potential enemy when I have a defined enemy in front of me. Even with our geographic advantages, and the planned ambush, I’ll need every possible fighter. Yet, if those ships do land with several thousand troops, the five hundred I sent will be unable to even slow down such a force.*

*Perhaps I should send another five hundred to strengthen those at the border of the king’s land, and delay any action by Charpentier long enough to guarantee a victory here. Once I’ve defeated the duke, I can turn any needed forces back to the east to deal with that softhearted weakling Charpentier.*

*But I don’t have to weaken my forces here! I have men watching my southern border, only days from my eastern edge of the king’s lands instead of three weeks distance. That will leave my border villages and towns nearly defenseless, but again, better to deal with each situation on a most probable need basis, and the southern border troops haven’t reported any activity.*

Jacques sent a falcon to his commander in the south, and before the day passed, the additional contingent of five hundred had gathered and moved east to join his forces at the king’s border. Putting the released troops out of his mind, as his recon teams came back with reports on the movement of the duke’s oncoming forces, the marquis spent a sleepless night going over his strategy once more.

~

## **LaPhere Duchy, Darkwood Province Blackstairs Mountains**

Nathan looked around at his troops in dismay. Last night they had continued on late into the night and only stopped for six short hours of sleep. This was plenty for his team under normal circumstances, but Nathan now felt William’s men had faced the lesser threat the evening before.

Sixty-two of his two hundred were too sick to continue on, and he couldn’t leave them here alone in such vulnerable health; no more than William could have left his wounded for the solkei. Shaking his head he ordered twenty men to stay behind to watch over the sixty-two.

***William!***

***I’m here.***

***Make sure your men are using the herb creams to keep off the insects. I have sixty-two incapacitated from the miniature fiends. I'll have to leave twenty more to safeguard them until we return from the mission.*** His grim worry leaked into his words.

***You can do this Nathan. Your team could be halved again, and I believe you could still take those lazy mercs Jacques has hired.***

***Thanks. Well, we're moving out soon. Be careful!***

Grinning, William returned, ***You know that stealth is second nature to me.***

~

## **Eastern Coastal Waters, South Lakes Province**

On the Stolen Hoard, the Cap'n took the falcon to his quarters and removed the message. Placing the male bird with its female, he fed and watered the avian before bothering to read Jonny's carefully crafted note.

*§ No longer in command of our ships. Charpentier has taken all five, and killed many of the crew. Those he has allowed to live have sworn allegiance to Marquis Charpentier in exchange for amnesty, land and gold, which will be dispersed after we prove ourselves in battle against Marquis Jacques and Perret. If you are still on the seas when this action is finished, Marquis Charpentier intends for Commodore Christophé to hunt you, and the last two ships, without mercy. §*

The Cap'n sneered, his face now darkened with rage. *So, Charpentier thinks he can intimidate me. The marquis is ignorant of who he threatens. A new game to play! Unfortunately, I doubt this opponent is going to be any more of a challenge than those I've faced in the last millennium. Although this might take the edge off the boredom for the time it takes to play out.*

~

## **LaPHERE Duchy, Darkwood Province Blackstairs Mountain**

William and Nathan led their camouflaged teams, using their telepathic skills to find the concealed sentry forces waiting in ambush. They suffered less than a handful of deaths, while clearing the forested hills up to the cliffs of the enemy. Breaking down into smaller units, with two units attacking the enemy's squads in the cliffs by a tandem assault of repelling from above and a frontal attack, the Special Forces were also able to clear the crossbowmen on each side of the eight kilometers of narrow passage. It would have been suicide for the duke's troops to traverse this pass. As they overtook the enemy, the Special Forces gathered the outer clothing from the dead. Soon they had disguised themselves as the enemy's forces, and then spent the early hours of the morning clearing the dead away and planting themselves in the cliffs.

A week later, ten of the twenty men Nathan had left behind to provide protection for his ill troops, entered the camp from where he commanded. He didn't need to use his telepathy to realize they were rejoining the force because the bug bites had caused more than a severe illness. The report verified twenty-six had died three days prior, and while the rest of the sixty-two were recovering, it would be another week before they would be able to join the forces on the cliffs. Morale was low as Nathan's team dealt with the loss of so many comrades.

~

## LaPhere Duchy, Darkwood Province Claw Harbor, Northport

As the men disembarked from the ships, Remy faced the undesirable fact that many of his men now suffered from seasickness to such a degree that they were unfit for marching across land to provide the rear attack Duke Paul badly needed.

“I’ll need to give them a few days to recover, or they’ll be too vulnerable as we cross Jacques lands,” Remy decided.

“I wish I was going with you. Knowing the serious battle is going to take place in a few days, far from any coastline, is frustrating to both me and my crew,” Christophé replied.

“Your crew has displayed courage and intelligence. We could have suffered many more loses if it wasn’t for you and your men. And there are still pirate ships to track down and capture. If we let them go, they’ll soon be back to the number of forces they came at us with in the last few days.”

“We’ll find those last two ships Remy. I guarantee you we will stop the piracy, and leave a healthy fear amongst the seaports to discourage any new ventures into that line of work.” Remy glanced at his younger brother and, seeing the determined look, was glad he wasn’t going to face his sibling in battle.

Immediately, Remy informed Duke Paul of the recovery time needed. Paul was still a few weeks from crossing the pass, but knowing of the delay allowed him to give his own men an extra day of rest before breaking camp to move forward again. Major Sebastian Piot’s squadrons were already camped in several hidden locations near the border, waiting for the order to advance with his flanking move on Jacques’s forces. However, knowing the enemy had scouts looking for any sign of an attack from the south, he didn’t allow the delay to shift his troops into a relaxed mood. Diligently his recon combed the area for enemy movement.

~

In the morning the Charpentier brothers, Admiral Giovanni, and the king’s telepathic captains, inspected the prisoners of the various ships that had surrendered, and found most were glad not to be forced to commit treason. The marquis gave all of them the opportunity to gain amnesty through joining his forces, and between these men and the pirates, he increased his forces by over four hundred.

It was three days before his men were recovered enough to advance on the enemy. In that time, Remy sent recon ahead and discovered Jacques’s reception party across the king’s border. The enemy troops had formed bunkers in the hills where they now posted a few hundred crossbowmen. The rest of Jacques’s men were entrenched around the hills. The scouts had also discovered that another contingent of five hundred was arriving later that day. Remy studied the area over the border, and made the only decision he felt would get them to the duke’s aid.

He ordered the newly acquired pirate and ship’s crewmen to be distributed amongst the squadrons. Largely these men were unaffected by the seasickness as they were, for the most part, seasoned seamen. On the third morning in port, after inspecting the squadrons, he dispatched the troops. Meeting with his squadron leaders, he directed them to move north through the port town, and to enter Jacques’s territory hours north of the encamped opposition. He had no doubt that word would spread as they moved away

from the southwestern border of Northport, and that possibly the thousand soldiers, set in the bunkers, would be redeployed. That move was what Remy preferred, as he was certain his over four thousand strong force would be able to overcome the enemy if they were pulled from their advantage point.

*Honestly, I hope these men will be frightened at the overwhelming odds against them, and decide not to engage my larger force.*

The people of Northport were not unused to seeing soldiers and sailors, and yet, the number of men maneuvering through the town had the townspeople hanging out their windows and doors gawking at their southern neighbors. Frequently, curious children had to be snatched back from underfoot, and more than once the troops had to retrace their steps, as some unplanned for event had blocked their way and made it impossible to continue on the route scouted out over the prior days.

Standing on a balcony, watching his forces move past, Remy Charpentier was surprised to be informed that Admiral Giovanni had crossed the southwestern border to meet with the squadron commander of Jacques's forces.

*I have complete trust in Giovanni, but what is he up to? I'd better wait to ask him. If I interrupt him now, it might interfere with whatever efforts he is making on our behalf.*

Less than an hour later he heard from Giovanni.

***Remy!***

***I'm here.***

***You can take your men out the center gate; no need to continue through the town to the northwest gate.***

***If we take that route, we will be only two kilometers from Jacques's troops. I'd like a little more distance, and the opportunity to get all my men out where they can form up into fighting squads, before his ranks attack.***

***They won't be attacking today.***

***How is that?***

***I have convinced their commander that it would be suicide to attack a force over four times his own strength. He believes all the ideas are his own, and that waiting a day, to let you move ahead and between his troops and André's, will give him an advantage to flank you once you have engaged Jacques's rear forces. You, of course, will not advance as far as Ouvrir la Terre before turning and taking on this weaker force. However, he can't seem to think of anything except his brilliant strategy to squeeze you between their ranks.***

***This breaks our honor vows we took at the training center.***

***Yes, well, Jacques and Perret have proven themselves to be men with no honor, and in fact a force of great evil. You need this advantage Remy. Take it!***

***You have really left me no choice but to join you in this breach of honor.***

***Are you honestly angry with me?***

***I suppose I would be, if I didn't see how many of Jacques men's lives could possibly be spared. I'm certain not all of them are willing participants in the treason, and I hope to find a way to avoid shedding those men's blood.***

***You've done remarkably well so far in minimizing the losses on both sides Remy. Paul will be pleased.***

***Only in as far as he doesn't know we've broken our vows.***

Remy did give the orders to move out through the central gate, and by early evening all of his soldiers were gathered on land owned by Marquis Jacques. True to Giovanni's word, no attack came from the forces massed at the bunkers to the south, and Remy decided to have his men continue west for a few hours before breaking camp for the night.

Over the next day recon kept him informed of a clear route that left most of the larger towns out of their path. He gave strict orders for no pillaging or attacks against the locals, but continued to use the telepathic recon team to inform him where pockets of resistance were growing as word spread of their advance. To these areas he dispatched small squads in order to subdue any brewing resistance.

The third day into the march, in the afternoon, Remy received word from Giovanni, that the enemy's eastern border troops had broken camp to form a rear attack on him. Unconcerned for the present, as he understood the enemy would be waiting to move in and attack after he was engaged with Jacques's main forces, Remy did send two scouts back to gather the men whom he had deployed along their route west.

Before those soldiers had rejoined his larger ranks, a scout, out securing fresh meat, saw a large grey falcon flying overhead. Quickly he shot it out of the sky and found a message for Jacques from the marquis' border troops tied to the bird's leg. Reading it he smiled, knowing the message that the thousand men were coming a few days behind Charpentier's forces with a planned rear attack would never reach the enemy leader.

~

Two weeks after entering Jacques lands, Remy's recon informed him one morning of a large island town directly in their path, which they would need to enter, as it was the easiest way across the Isère River.

"Victory Island is in the Isère River, and only accessible from land by a bastion gated drawbridge to both the east and west," Ake, Charpentier's lead scout for this engagement, reported. "There is also water access at their port to the south, but this too, is strictly controlled by entry and exit gates for only trade goods and passengers. The entire island is surrounded by twelve-meter high stone walls that are a solid four meters thick. There are flying buttresses all around, with crenellations on the ramparts."

"I know of André's uncle, Lord Grant Jacques, landholder of Victory Island. He was commander of all the Darkwood forces during the Ren War. His quick intellect, and nerveless bravery, kept the Darkwood borders secure, and won him the reward of the island he then named Victory. If memory serves me, it was indeed a sweet prize, as control of the waterways surrounding the island was also granted to him."

“Yes. All trade up and down the river is controlled from the island. To the south, the river splits, with Isère continuing southeast until it branches off again to eventually reach the eastern coast waterways. The southwestern offshoot, Abundio River, leads into a lake before continuing southwest to also connect with other waterways. After crossing the western bridge, when we’re leaving the island, we would march along the Abundio and past Loranger Lake. At that point we will be about a week from engaging the enemy forces.”

“Mhm. While dealing with Victory Island complicates things, we may be able to use the ships at port to our advantage. I’ll have to think on the situation for a while, rash decisions lead to unnecessary loss of life. Good job, Ake. You’re dismissed.”

The rest of that day, Remy resisted the thought of the only way he knew they could secure the gate with minimal collateral damage. With the one thousand troops only a few days behind them, the marquis faced the bitter reality of breaking his training vows or killing numerous innocent townspeople.

~

The next morning Remy sent his two telepathic scouts ahead, ***I’ll need you to secure the eastern gate, as well as enlist aid from at least one of the ship’s captains, should we need the use of a vessel.***

The two recon scouts looked at each other before replying, ***How do you expect the two of us to overcome the town guards posted at the gate?***

***You will need to take mental control of the guards, and convince them they have nothing to worry about when they see our forces crossing the bridge. Get them to leave the drawbridge down and keep the gates open for us.***

Remy was expecting an argument he didn’t get. Both scouts simply nodded, and after replenishing their supplies, headed west.

# CHAPTER VI

## LaPhere Duchy, Darkwood Province Victory Island Mid-Month of D'or ~ Year 1002AA

Lieutenant Ake Danzik, at barely nineteen years old, wore his blonde hair in an untraditional style that drew the attention of the young ladies at court during the protracted year he was forced to endure at the palace. With long bangs, pulled behind his ears, his sides and back were cut quite short.

Although he was only one hundred seventy-five centimeters tall, he was an agile fighter. Immediately upon concluding his required year at court, he sought service in Duke LaPhere's Reconnaissance Unit. Many of the younger sons of the duke's marquises, who passed the testing at the training center, made this choice for their life. Duke Paul had assigned Ake to the Southwest Lakes Province. The young telepath was not power hungry, but this battle would be his opportunity to prove himself worthy of the duke's confidence.

Now, the able warrior leaned his slight toned physique against the wall inside the gatehouse overlooking the eastern drawbridge. This second level housed the mechanisms that controlled the portcullis and drawbridge, and four guards were posted to operate them.

One guard maintained a watch at the door, and another at the small crevice carved from the outer wall, which allowed a constant view of the movement on the eastern route. The last two sat on the ground with *crolek* dice; trying to win each other's month's pay. None of them gave a second glance at Ake. If they did happen to look in his direction, their minds assured themselves that the shadows were empty as usual.

Beside the long bastion passageway was a narrow room where his fellow scout, Esteven, waited below with the island guards. Esteven found it difficult to maintain control over the island's six archers posted behind the creviced wall to ambush any would be attackers, so three of them sat on the floor in a telepathic induced sleep. The other three ignored their inert comrades and stared resolutely out their assigned crevice.

Both scouts were relieved, when an alert sounded, as Marquis Charpentier's more than four-thousand troops came into view. None of the soldiers they maintained control over reacted, other than that the door guard closed the door, barred it, and returned to sit in the game.

~

Remy rode ahead of his men, and crossed the stationary portion of the bridge, stopping just out of range of the bowmen. Two crossbowmen, however, lifted their weapons and called out a warning. "Halt! What business do you have here?"

Looking up to the ramparts, Remy did not hesitate to do what he had required of his scouts, and sent to all the crossbowmen on the ramparts, ***King's business! You want to help us pass peacefully across Victory Island to continue our assigned duty.***

The men on the ramparts lowered their weapons, nodding their heads agreeably. Remy remained where he was until his troops had caught up to him. Then he led them through the bastion and into the courtyard where a barracks housed the eastern guards. As the courtyard filled, Remy found the minds of the guards at the inner wall portcullis that led to open fields and Lord Jacques's castle. In a moment, he



had convinced them as well, that they wanted to open the inner portcullis, and main gates, allowing his troops to freely flow out onto the island. It was only a short time, though, before a warning bell was ringing on the other side.

~

The great hall of the island castle was bustling with activity, as servants flowed from table to kitchen and back, serving the nobles and landholders. At the center of the large table sat a man, whose dark tresses were pulled back into a short ponytail, exposing the white hair at his temples and down his sideburns. A short salt-n-pepper beard covered his lower face, which had the milky white skin of the Jacques lineage. Lord Grant Jacques, toned and muscular even at the age of sixty-five, was sitting at midday meal, when the warning sounded that the eastern gates had been breached. He swiftly left the great hall, calling for his armor, sword and horse. His armor bearer met him in the courtyard; hurrying to help his lord into his protective gear with anxious, jerky movements that had Lord Jacques demanding to dress himself.

~

While the courtyard filled with fifty personal guards, a tall, fit young woman burst out the doors and charged down the steps. “Grandfather! I will ride with you.”

As she approached the men with their gowns and horses, her hazel eyes were bright, and her chin was tilted in a determined fashion. She quickly pulled back her hair and twisted it into a braid.

Grant turned a bewildered face at his favorite grandchild, and shook his head. “No, Ashley. This is no place for a young woman.”

Ashley stepped up to her grandfather, and placed her hand on his arm. She gave him her enchanting smile, “Of course not grandfather. But it is exactly the place you want your granddaughter to be, if any trouble happens. Right beside you; where you can be certain of my safety. No one can harm me if you are my protector.”

He began to shake his head again, but stopped, looking puzzled as he agreed with her. Turning to a squire he commanded, “Bring Ashley her mare and be quick about it.” Ten minutes later they rode out to join other forces that would have responded to the warning signal.

Ashley was grateful for the years of riding lessons, and her mare’s familiarity with her owner’s habit of not using the reins to guide her, because at this moment, it was taking all her focus to reach forward in search of the mind of whoever had breached their security.

~

Remy too, was having difficulty maintaining focus. His efforts to maintain control over so many was taxing, even for someone with his skill level and years of the use of telepathy. Of course he had never attempted to control others’ minds since being at the training center, so no one could blame him for nearly losing complete control when he *received* a very imperative inquiry about what he thought he was doing.

***Who are you?*** He sent in return.

*Lady Ashley Jacques, granddaughter of Lord Grant Jacques. I repeat, just what do you mean by using your telepathic abilities to control the minds of our guards and enter our walls uninvited?*

*Would we have been invited if we'd stopped outside and asked?*

*That is beside the point! Who are you and what are you doing here?*

*I am Marquis Remy Charpentier. I need to use the defenses of your island to take custody of one thousand troops that follow a few days behind us.*

*What are you doing in my cousin's lands? Who are the troops that follow you?*

*Your cousin has committed treason, and is a few days from attacking Duke de LaPhere, and his troops, on the plains below the Chamberlain Pass. André has conspired with others, and coerced many into this treason who would otherwise not have chosen it. The troops coming behind us are his. They plan a rear attack against us once we are engaged in battle with your cousin.*

*My grandfather and his personal guard ride with me to join others to attempt to stop you from taking our island.*

*How is it you, a young lady, ride with them?*

*You are not the only one who has skill at using the telepathic ability.*

Remy set his jaw as he privately digested this for a moment, but was unsure of what to think of a young telepath with the skill level to do what she claimed. *Is everyone going to break their vows before this battle ends, he wondered.*

*Perhaps, but if it will save the lives of those I love, I will face the Ancient Council itself if need be. Ancient Meridian agrees with me anyway.*

*It isn't polite to listen in on my private thoughts, especially those I wasn't broadcasting!*

*Oh! Were we being honorable and polite?*

Remy shook his head. *Alright, you win that one, but I need to know, are you going to help us or try to stop us?*

*I'm going to do what is necessary to keep the people of our island safe. Are you certain that André and the men following him are traitors?*

*Completely!*

*My father and fiancé left here a week before I returned from court. All grandfather knew was that they received a message demanding a hundred men ride with them to the western border to meet Marquis Jacques.*

*It is possible they have been coerced. We have found that to be the case quite often.*

***I doubt you will find that to be the case with father and Sadan. Father betrothed me to Sadan while I was away at court, knowing if I was here, and complained to grandfather, my granddad would use his position to force father to let me have a say in who I married. I would never willingly accept a proposal of marriage to that man. He is self-serving, and mean-spirited. He was actually sent home early from the training center.***

***And your grandfather? Whose side will he be on?***

***I can convince grandfather to cooperate, but you must tell him why you are here and ask for his support. If I speak out verbally in public too many times it will get folks wondering how I am able to be so persuasive. When you ask him for help, I will be able to get him to agree.***

***Alright, we'll try it. We are waiting in the open fields outside the eastern gate.***

***It will take us over half an hour to reach you. Others will reach you first, and I can't convince them to cooperate; only grandfather will be able to do that.***

***Don't worry, I only need to convince the leaders to wait for Lord Jacques. It really is my desire to keep bloodshed to a minimum, Ashley.***

***I believe you. We can't lie to each other.***

Remy lifted an eyebrow, *No we can't, Judah and Meridian would out us if we tried.*

~

As Grant rode out to defend his land, his islanders gathered on a hill to the west of the fields where Remy's forces remained waiting. Some wore his livery but just as many were in their ordinary work day apparel. Those who were not in armor carried a variety of everyday tools, from pitchforks to a blacksmith's hammer. All were obedient to the orders of the island commander who instructed them to hold for Lord Grant's arrival. The ride through the town, and to the waiting standoff, took Grant and his castle troops nearly an hour.

He raised his hand and slowed their pace as the fields and western hill came into view. When he noted the commander of the invading forces was riding out alone to meet him, he called a halt. "Wait here," He ordered his captain.

"But sir..."

"He is as vulnerable as I am captain, and I would like to find out who breaks down the door to then wait for a chat with the manor lord." With that Grant kneed his horse forward. Ashley kicked her mare and left the frustrated captain to wait as commanded.

Although he usually kept to strict rules of conduct, Grant wasn't feeling charitable in the circumstances, and so he neglected his normal greeting for meeting another commander, "Who are you and by what authority have you brought this military regiment onto my island?"

"Lord Grant Jacques, I'm Marquis Remy Charpentier." As the marquis spoke, the lord was unaware of the private thought that was sent to his granddaughter, *I'm glad you will be "encouraging" your*

*grandfather's cooperation Lady Ashley. I have enough regrets from this conflict already.* “Duke Arison will soon be engaging your nephew André and his troops at the Chamberlain Mountain Pass. A few days journey behind us advances a smaller force of one thousand of your marquis' men. They intend to attack us once we are engaged with the main forces.

Obviously I can't allow that to happen. We will stop their advance here. If you cooperate, my troops will not harm any of your vassals, but we will need to quarantine the island residents until we leave. After we have control of the situation, we will purchase needed supplies before we continue on to support the duke with a rear assault on André's forces.”

A lock of dark hair had come loose on the ride from his castle, and the long bang now curved in a half curl past his eye to his chin. He mulled over his options, and longed for the days when his father was marquis, before the Ren War. While Marquis Bren ruled the Darkwood lands, and Grant's brother, André Jacques I, was still living, young André II never would have considered the treason he now took part in. Yet Marquis Bren had changed after his first born son died during the war, and his bitterness had infected his grandson, the current Marquis of Darkwood.

*Still, I would never have thought my nephew would go this far.*

“Our loyalty lays with first the king, then the duke, and last the marquis, even though he is my nephew. However, you have given no explanation for the impending battle. What proof do you have that your actions are backed by the king?”

“None, but I am sure you are aware that your nephew has gathered a force of over eight thousand, many of them hired mercenaries. Some of those he hired or coerced are with us, including your other nephew, Commander Bren, his forces, and several hundred pirates hired by André to attack our transports at sea.”

Grant was genuinely surprised, and scanned the men behind Charpentier. Remy lifted a hand to wave forward Bren and Captain Jonny. Grimly Grant digested the truth. He turned immediately to his troops, “As of this moment you are under the authority of the Marquis of South Lakes. Any of my vassals or troops who fail to obey his commands will suffer the same punishment I would enact if you failed to obey my orders.”

Not a whisper of disagreement was heard, and several hours later the inhabitants of Victory Island were safely relocated inside the castle walls. Grant provided Remy with the necessary attire to disguise some of his troops as farmers in the fields and others as townspeople. This ruse, they hoped, would draw the pursuers to a point where they could trap them with a minimal loss of life.

As she rode away Ashley was surprised when Remy sent, *I am as relieved as you that neither of us had to use telepathy to coerce your grandfather. He is a man of dignity and honor, and a warrior that I'm glad is not my enemy.*

~

With a few days to prepare, Charpentier and his other telepaths were able to verify the loyalty of Grant's men; none failed the mental perusal. Remy understood their devotion as he spent time both in strategizing with the competent veteran and sharing meals with his host.

Lord Grant couldn't house all the troops in his keep, but the marquis and his senior officers took turns enjoying a meal at the lord's great hall. On the first evening, Ake and Esteven joined Remy at the castle.

Ake found himself glancing frequently at the lord's granddaughter. *Amazing, only a year out of training, and she has mental skills nearly equal to Charpentier's. I don't know any of the ladies at court who would have had the courage she showed when she rode out with her grandfather to what likely should have been a battlefield.*

*Did I really have a choice? Many people would have died if I didn't make use of the abilities my relationship with Meridian provides.*

Ake's charcoal grey eyes darkened to black. *You seem to have a habit of breaking the training vows. Those vows are instituted to prevent the abuse of those without the telepathic gift, and to insure that fellow telepaths can enjoy some privacy of thought.*

*Oh, I see. So like Charpentier, you feel you were justified in using your gift to manipulate those around you, whereas I am not granted that same rationalization.*

Ake moved uncomfortably in his chair, and glanced over to his commander, who was in a deep discussion with their host. *I believe you were justified in aiding your grandfather in an effort to protect the innocent people of your island. Casually reading my personal thoughts with Teshar is another thing.*

Ashley blushed, but fired back, *I'm doing nothing more than you and your fellow telepaths are doing; maintaining mental monitoring of those around me to insure no one is planning some kind of subterfuge. I could care less about your personal musings with your ancient.*

With that Ashley cut off their mental dialogue, blocking all telepathic interaction. Standing, she excused herself and left the great hall.

Over the next two days Ake was aware that Ashley frequently sought out his mind, and that she was irritated when she realized he was aware of her contact. When his amusement was evident during a short exchange, she was infuriated and left on a ride with her mare.

However, Ake was too busy to be more than amused. Each day he and Esteven shared the maintenance of their posts at the eastern gate with other recon scouts, who continued to monitor the guards so that no warning would reach the pursuing troops.

~

The day after Remy and his forces arrived, he rode down to the wharf where Lord Grant's guards had placed all ships and crews under quarantine. Searching the minds of the various captains in port that day, Remy was pleased when one merchant ship arrived whose captain, while a bit rough in appearance, had deep moral convictions. A light shadow of stubble covering his strong chin, the tall, white-blond Captain Victor Montes agreed to the use of his merchant ship for transport of any prisoners taken.

By the next day the marquis had also commandeered two barges. The uncooperative captains of the barges were persuaded that they did, after all, want to layover at the island. They gave orders, to the bewilderment of their crews, to offload the goods they had just purchased. This had the advantage of continuing to give an appearance of busy activity at the wharf, while freeing the space on the ships in case they were needed to transport additional prisoners.

In addition to these efforts to deceive the oncoming enemy, Remy marched half his contingent several kilometers south along the riverbank. This gave the facade that his soldiers had been refused entry to the

island, and therefore had traveled south to cross at a fjord. He actually conveyed them back to the port hidden in the barges. He gambled Jacques's forces would decide to take the easy route across the island rather than follow the footsteps of Remy's troop's exact movements.

On the third morning after Remy had taken command of Grant's guards, a slight breeze caressed the hot faces of those troops who waited beyond the hill, where the island forces had previously maintained watch over Remy's men. In the surrounding fields, men, who normally tilled their own soil in the South Lakes region, had taken the task of playing the local farmers. Others, dressed in various attire, scattered themselves throughout the town, while hundreds of armed men hid on rooftops and in homes and businesses. If the enemy paid close attention, they would sense something was wrong; no women moved on the streets of Victory Township.

~

Commander Rainier Favre rode his garn at the head of his thousand man force. His scouts reported finding tracks of the enemy leading south, along the river, away from Victory Island.

*Obviously, Charpentier was rebuffed by Lord Grant's defenses. However, I see no reason to compel my men to follow when we can enter the fortified island, take a day of rest and restock our supplies. I know where they are headed. This way we'll be fresher for the battle than Charpentier's men.*

Lord Grant's men verified his identity, allowed his troops to cross the eastern bridge and courtyard, and enter the main gates to the island. He accepted the instructions to take his men to an interior field, closer to the keep, and was pleased with the invitation for him and his senior staff to join Lord Grant for the midday meal. His forces were also offered to replenish their supplies, and given directions to several taverns and inns in town where they could get a hot meal.

Leaving his officers to settle the men before joining him at the castle, Favre rode on ahead to the promised meal. The hidden forces let him pass, and in his eagerness to enjoy the generous hospitality of Lord Grant, Rainier never noticed the sparseness of the townspeople or the absence of women in the streets. Upon entering the gates at the keep, he was immediately made aware of the circumstances.

Surrounded by numerous guards and relieved of his weapons and garn, the captain of the guard led him directly to Lord Grant's table where André's uncle sat enjoying the midday meal.

"Won't you join myself and Marquis Charpentier, my guest, Commander?" Lord Grant offered.

Certain the food would be as bitter as the taste in his mouth, Favre stiffly refused. "I cannot sit and eat with an enemy of my lord, Marquis Jacques. You have managed a brilliant deception. Will my men be killed?"

The man to Grant's left, who Favre had barely taken note of when he entered, took responsibility to answer that question. "That will depend on the choice of each individual. They will be offered the same opportunity given to the forces we took at sea. They can join us, and fight against the planned treason, or die."

*If the marquis is being honest and my men are not to be killed, perhaps I can find a way to turn the situation and destroy his plans. I will have to play along as though I will cooperate until I find an opportunity to move against him and this old garn who is a traitor to André, his own flesh and blood.*

~

Remy had needed to know Favre's true character so he felt the lie was worth it in the circumstance. He would actually put all traitors who didn't accept the amnesty terms or pass the mental perusal onto the ships going to Rincón de Ryan, the king's port on the northern coast at Destiny Bay. They would be kept there for trial until they had been found guilty of treason, whereupon they would be shipped to the Ile des Traîtres for the rest of their lives.

Lord Grant frowned, "I have placed my men under your command Charpentier. As I said my loyalty is first to the king and then the duke, but I would object to men who have surrendered being killed."

Again Remy was moved to a deeper admiration of Grant Jacques. Running his tongue across his teeth he stalled, looking for a way to bely the lord's concerns without giving Commander Favre information he wanted to hold back.

Ashley, sitting beside her grandfather, placed her hand on his arm drawing his attention, and with a smile she asked, "Grandfather, are we to have another guest at table?" She gave a quick glance to the marquis as she sent, *He has forgotten everything except the commander's refusal to share the meal.* Remy blinked, but made no complaint at her interference.

"I'm afraid not Ashley. Commander Favre doesn't appear to be in the mood to eat." Lord Grant replied.

Ashley looked up at the piqued commander and pouted prettily. "It seems a shame you have come all this way across the island and won't be joining us."

The commander shook his head as if to clear it, and then sighed, "I guess having a meal isn't going to compromise my loyalty." Ashley gave him her dazzling smile, and a servant quickly made space for him next to her.

The rest of the meal was eaten between Ashley's inquiries about the commander's home and family. Lord Grant and Marquis Charpentier wisely left off the strategizing they usually did at mealtime.

~

Out in the fields, Favre's officers were ensuring their troops set camp, before partaking of the offer to join their commander at the castle. It was an hour before they broke away, riding their garns toward Lord Grant's keep.

Soon the lower ranks also set out for the town, searching for the mentioned taverns that were available for their dining. Not finding the specified locations, some of the men began to stop and inquire of vendors and shop owners, who were watching the troops as they passed by. All the inquiries met the same answer, "Oh, just a bit further into town."

As they drew near the castle, a bell rang, and from rooftops and windows archers appeared, calling down a warning to halt. From what seemed like everywhere, foot soldiers poured out with swords drawn, surrounding Favre's men, and demanding their surrender.

Many of Favre's soldiers were still in the field when the bell rang, and they soon found themselves surrounded by the troops that had been waiting beyond the hill. Remy had issued orders that the

thousand men were to be forced to strip to their skivvies, and then be delivered to the town square, just outside the castle walls. From the ramparts Lord Grant addressed the humiliated troops.

“Vassals of Darkwood! Your commander and his senior officers are in our custody. It is not my belief that the majority of you are willingly committing treason against our king and duke, but rather that my nephew has coerced many of you through threats against your lands and families. Today, Marquis Charpentier is authorized to grant you immunity from all charges of treason, as long as you agree to renounce service to Marquis Jacques, and join the forces of the duke’s army. Should you agree to this, your clothes will be returned to you, but your weapons will be held until we verify your loyalty to the crown. You must make your decision now. Fifty at a time will enter the castle gates. You will be asked to choose where your allegiance lies.”

There was a swell of murmuring across the square, which instantly silenced when the castle gates parted. Guards ushered in the first fifty, and the gates were shut again behind them. Remy and his five scouts inquired of ten men each, and quickly those who genuinely held allegiance to the king and duke were cleared, while the men who still hoped for Jacques’s victory were removed to the castle dungeon. One hundred ninety-two men were imprisoned by nightfall. The rest were returned to the fields, under the watchful eyes of Charpentier’s troops. They regained their clothing, and ate a cold meal before retiring to their tents.

The next morning, the one hundred ninety-two were deposited on the ships. Captain Victor was placed in charge of the convoy, and with a number of Piot’s troops along to insure they made it to the king’s port, they placed the barely dressed men in the holds and headed southeast to Destiny Bay.

With more than eight hundred additional men, Charpentier’s forces now numbered over five thousand.



# CHAPTER VII

## LaPhere Duchy, Seahold Province Blackstairs Mountains

Nine weeks into the march from the west, the duke's main army was nearing his planned route through the Chamberlain Pass. Piot's forces had joined them the day prior, and only Perret's troops were not yet with them. After the midday meal, which they ate on the move, they crossed the Thaurion River south of Creuse Fork. Duke Paul had the forces make camp in the valley between the Thaurion and the Tour du Nord Rivers, fifty kilometers from the pass. Now, all the marquises gathered in Duke Paul's tent to discuss their battle strategy with their lead commanders.

"When can I expect your men to join us Perret?" Duke Paul asked the traitor, not listening so much to what he said, but instead to what Perret thought while he spoke.

"They are at Catoire's border, and can meet us at the western entrance to the pass three days from now, if they push hard. However, I've been thinking, perhaps a better use of them is to have my forces turn east, after crossing the border. Then they can take the Nord Pass coming onto the Ouvrir la Terre plains in a flanking move, from the north, against the enemy."

The duke didn't allow his face to show the contempt he felt for the betrayer. He knew full well Perret intended to bring his men in behind Paul's troops. They would first slaughter all those left to tend the camp he would have to set at the mouth of the pass, including the women healers and cooks, and then proceed to advance on the duke's rear forces with an ambush attack. Instead the duke pretended to ponder the suggestion, and even questioned other seasoned commanders on their thoughts about this strategy.

Catoire offered another suggestion, also playing along as if nothing was amiss with Perret. "Perhaps a better use of your men, Perret, would be to stay at the base camp as a rear guard."

Duke Paul wondered if his good friend had lost his mind, but then realized he was insuring that Paul's decision to refuse Perret's suggestion had a secondary reason backing it. "I'm not sure we need the full three thousand to remain behind to guard the camp, perhaps five hundred. Your strategy to go through the northern pass, Philippé, is missing the information of the danger there. We have reason to believe these mountains are the home of the Solkei, as some reports from our scouts have informed us of an attack from large avian creatures that killed and maimed several men. I think it is wiser we remain together, and therefore have greater numbers to defend against such an attack if they inhabit the cliffs of the southern pass as well."

Perret looked as if he might object, but then shrugged, and the men returned to the final arrangements of the troops for traveling through the southern pass.

~

Four days later scouts rode back into camp. Paul took their reports privately, but chose to share with his marquises that a force of nearly seven thousand men waited for them at the eastern entrance to the southern pass. The scouts had also spotted some archers waiting on the cliffs at either side of the pass. However, for the moment he kept that fact to himself and those marquises that were telepaths.

Jaw set in frustration, he shared with Ancient *Kochava*, *I can't reveal I know their plans for ambush, but how many lives will be lost just so I can root out who is behind this sedition? I'll have to keep up the appearance that I am unaware of their plans for a while longer. At least we are in control of the cliffs now, and Perret is left believing otherwise.*

“When Jacques sees the numbers we bring against him, he will fold, and we will be able to come to terms. We march on!” Duke Paul ordered.

He dismissed the meeting, but signaled Marquis Cohen, Sacre, and Piot to remain with Captain Lazare and himself. As these trusted friends convened alone with him, Lord Paul at last provided full disclosure of the betrayal their troops were about to face. He hoped he had not been mistaken to hold back the information until now. It wasn't that he didn't trust these men completely, but that they didn't have the same advantage of telepathy as Charpentier, Catoire and himself. They alone *could* insure which men they brought with them weren't compromised.

Marquis Christophé Sacre's dark skin flushed at the reality that his vassals faced, as well as all those who were loyal to the duke. “You can be sure my men are loyal, my lord, and when you call upon them, they will follow your commands, no matter how unpleasant the action.” Piot and Cohen hastened to add their own fidelity, and that of their men.

“I know you believe in your vassals, my friends, but I have already been able to ascertain that some men in each command have been turned against us. You cannot trust to turn your backs on anyone.”

“Is that how you feel about me as well, Paul?” Sacre asked, his voice tight with pain. The other marquises stood quietly, shifting a bit, and looking as if they were unsure if they too should take offense.

“If I didn't trust you all, I wouldn't be warning you; the first you would know of my disaffection for you would be when I ordered your death. I am as certain of your loyalty to me as I am of my own to King Marix.” Duke Paul replied.

Sacre relaxed visibly and nodded, “I'll do what I can to give you one less direction to worry over watching *your* back. We'll be waiting your commands; and remembering whose tabards turned coat.” The other marquises nodded their agreement.

“I expect the traitors will most likely have thought of that, and planned to use tabards of other lords in order to confuse and provide deniability. What is most important is ending this as quickly as possible by taking Jacques into custody alive. For now, we must not let Perret get any idea we know he is a traitor. I'll be meeting with the other two marquises in a few moments to instruct them on their positions. In fact, I have already given Catoire his real orders. I wanted you also to have foreknowledge, Piot and Cohen, as I've set you in the lead wave with half of the elite ‘LaPHERE’.

The enemy plan is that some of the traitors will drop back to join Perret in a rear attack on our troops, while others will turn where they are to attack your flanks. Captain Lazare and Sacre will hold their troops for the second wave attack, and Catoire will lead my men, and his, in the third. Should any men from the second wave turn back, Catoire will be ready to deal with them.

Our men will also be ready to turn on the last wave, Perret's troops. At the first sign of the ambush from behind by Perret's men, Catoire will take action. We have also secured the ridges, so our archers can be of some support as well. Hopefully, this last minute defensive move will minimize the losses; Perret should

be surprised when Catoire's men don't leave their rear exposed for him to take easily and when the archers shoot his troops, not ours.

I have reserved the other half of the elite 'LaPHERE' who will drop out before we enter the pass to circle around and take on Perret's five hundred, who intend to murder those left in camp. They will only have one hundred forty against the five hundred, but for 'LaPHERE', that is like pitching pugas against zluufs.

Furthermore, we have Charpentier and Sebastian bringing thousands in both rear and flanking attacks against Jacques. There may be difficulty with some of Charpentier's force, as they are now over a thousand stronger by men who previously swore fealty to Jacques. Yet even with that, between their two forces, they have as many if not more troops than Jacques. This should be over quickly."

Paul paused, and looked around at each of his marquises, "God's watch be over you, and your men, my friends." Each man nodded somberly as he took leave from the duke. Moments later he met with Catoire and Perret, giving them their orders to follow as the third and fourth waves of the attack force. Catoire already knew the real plans, but telling him with Perret kept the ruse up that Perret was unsuspected.

~

Two days later, when the army could see their target, on the plains beyond the eastern end of the pass, Paul called a halt of the massive force still filling the gap from the west. He rode to a small rise to the left of his forces, between the towering cliffs. He then sent two riders on garns to present terms. Within the hour the garns returned in a frenzied state with the rider's lifeless bodies stretched across their backs, and their heads hanging tethered to the garn's flanks. Enraged, the duke verbally cursed Jacques so violently that his men, used to their civil speaking lord, were taken aback. Not that they didn't completely agree with him.

Duke Paul ended his tirade, swung into the saddle of his horse, and turned to his troops. He called out, "A reward to the man who brings me Jacques alive!"

The sound of thousands of men marching in step quickened, and then turned into a pounding run, joined by cries of war.

~

### **LaPHERE Duchy, Darkwood Province Blackstairs Mountains**

Marquis Jacques, waiting for that very sound, sat back and smiled maliciously at the duke's predictability. *This trap is perfect.*

"Any man who is slow to act will die by my sword. Advance now!" His numerically inferior troops marched into the coming attack, and then also broke into a run.

The armies raced towards each other.

~

Duke Paul and his marquises watched their plans playing out from a small rise against the wall of the pass. He was cautious enough since Perret's exposure to wonder what his marquises were thinking as the battle began. Without turning from his view of the soon to clash forces, he began to peruse the minds of his marquises.

Most of them were focused on the scene before them, all but Sacre. With skin as black as a moonless night, Sacre's emotions were never easy to visibly read. His mind, however, was an open door for the duke. *He is frightened. Not of the battle though, but of the kind of insane evil that could fearlessly murder our emissaries in such a brutal fashion.*

If Paul had the time to care, he might have felt sorry for the gentler Sacre who had not been chosen to bond with an ancient telepath. As the enemy troops neared, Paul shifted his attention back to the very evil that frightened his shorter friend.

Finally Perret's part of the plot began to unfold. A portion of the marquises Cohen and Piot's troops, on either side of the charge were slowing, forming a unit in the rear of the advance, and then resuming the charge. From his vantage point Paul could see what was about to happen. There were now nearly one thousand traitors that would attack the main body of his first wave from behind them.

"Archers!" Paul yelled, adding a mental shout to his verbal one to insure all those on the cliffs *heard*. "Fire on our rear most column of the charge!" He noted some startled looks and hesitation, "NOW!"

"Archers!" Captain Lazare repeated Paul's command, but his deep bass could barely be heard above the noise of pounding feet echoing through the pass, "Fire at the rear column!" As they had all *heard* the duke their ability to hear the captain was unimportant. His men lifted their bows and fired. "Again, fire!" The second row of archers shot over the now kneeling first line of archers. Few missed their mark in the backs of the soldiers at the rear of the first wave, and nearly one hundred men dropped out of the thousand traitors.

With roars like pugas, the armies collided on the front lines; bodies flipped over each other as they collided. Their steel flashed in the sunlight as swords swung and became stained with hot wet crimson.

~

In this first advance were one hundred forty warriors of "LaPHERE," for whom the everyday battle practice was nearly as brutal as this real one. Fourteen squads of ten rode abreast, starting three lines back from the foot soldiers who were heading the charge. As the first men on either side died in front of them, these elite soldiers used the crashing bodies as vaults to launch themselves deeper into the enemy ranks upon their Andalusians. With their translucent black barcothium swords, they cut a path through Jacques's men like it was a field of thorn bushes waiting to be cleared.

It was Lyon's first combat in the feared white crowned helm and black armor of "LaPHERE." The foot soldier in front of him collided with the oncoming soldiers and died on the point of a mercenary's sword, falling to his knees. Without breaking stride, Lyon's steed jumped off the falling man's shoulders, and the feared warrior cutting down with his sword, flew past, splitting another enemy's helmet, slicing him in two pieces. He soared through the air, and his horse crashed into a group of three attackers. Lyon cleaved one more from the top as he landed. While the two other mercenaries faced a moment of shock, Lyon, spun his horse to the right, cutting one man at the waist, and letting his powerful warhorse use its natural weapons to crush the head of the third merc. He turned, plunging his sword in and out of another man's

stomach with a wrenching twist. As the man fell backward the Andalusian leaped over him, crushing two men beneath its hoofs as it landed.

Looking around, Lyon saw a man over two hundred centimeters tall charging him with his sword held high. The giant man swung a blow that was meant to separate one half of Lyon's body from the other. The attacker's sword met dirt, as a cloud of white and black swirled over him and Lyon stabbed backwards with his sword inverted in his hand. Burying it deep, as he severed the giant's spinal cord at the neck, Lyon was pulled from his horse. Eyes burning with battle lust, he jerked his sword free, ignored his mount, and walked toward the next enemy. There was a cluster of fighting to the left. Lyon dove into the fray. His Andalusian continued to crush anything that came into its path.

~

On the Ouvrir la Terre plains, Jacques rear commanders were desperately trying to reorganize their troops to compensate for the two-fold attack from the south and east. Sebastian's cavalry archers were cutting deep into the enemy's flank, even though none of his foot soldiers had yet moved forward. Charpentier also was holding back his main force, and using the advantage of the enemy's failure to reserve any archers to the rear of the advance against Duke Paul. Remy's cavalry archers sent wave after wave of arrows flying into the enemy rear forces. Nearly a thousand of the enemy fell in the tandem attacks before Jacques's commanders managed to turn and engage their troops with their opponents.

~

Toward the rear of the duke's first wave, those loyal men pushing forward were attacked from the traitors behind them while the arrows of the duke's cavalry archers found unbiased marks in friend and foe. At the front lines Jacques, gave the order for his archers to fire, but as the flag waved, he kept a feral smile, even when no archers stepped forward from his ranks on the plains...

~

Duke Paul sat grimly watching the battle unfold. Lazare's archers had sent their volley into the rear of the first wave, but he couldn't tell what affect it had and he would not lose more loyal men to another barrage into where now both sides were mixed together.

Lazare and Sacre now drove their men forward to join the first wave. Again Paul saw many who slowed at the sides and pulled back to fall to the rear of the second wave. Per his orders, Catoire and half the men under his command had waited for this moment. Now these loyal soldiers shot their own volley of arrows into the traitors attacking the second wave's rear. At the same moment the other half of Catoire's men turned back on the forth wave, to attack Perret's troops.

"Whose tabards are on those men who turned on us?" Paul questioned Lazare as the captain rode up to report to his liege.

"Many tabards seem to belong to Marquises Cohen and Catoire, my lord, but there are several of various other marquises. Yet, as you pointed out, they probably aren't wearing their true tabards."

"Yes," Paul took a moment then decided. "I've held back my cavalry. I will take the mounts to flank those traitors attacking your men. The ground archers are helping, and in a few moments they will be supported

from the cliffs again, but we have to use care or our loyal men will all be shot down in this chaos. When we have the victory here, I'll send the riders around the battle to capture Jacques. Return to your troops!"

Just as Paul gave that order, something caught his eye. Jacques's archery flag waved, but not one man stepped forward to fire from his ranks. Paul looked up to the ridges at either side. A line of fifty archers, in enemy tabards, on both sides stood with crossbows aimed down at his army. As he watched, however, half the bows turned east toward the rear of the second wave and shot their bolts into the traitors. The other half held their positions aimed at the forth wave full of Perret's traitors that was still to come past.

Paul hesitated, as soldiers were still charging into the fray, and sent to Catoire. *The ridge archers will help you, but you'll need to hold back so they don't wipe out your own forces. Move your men to the sides. I'll have the ridge archers aim at whoever is central.*—The duke sent the mental order to the captain of the archers waiting above, and then rode off at the head of his personal cavalry.

Several hundred of the traitors fell out from the ranks of the melee ahead, and leaving the battle that raged at the front, moved to join the fight at the rear. Duke Paul, and his five hundred cavalry men, crashed into their center and wrought havoc on the traitors. The ridge archers continued firing at the traitors, and as arrows flew all around, it seemed that for an eternity the only sound was the whine of air and the cries of dying men.

Some among their ground archers, as well as the cavalry, proved to be traitors also. As the duke rode, leading his men in support of the foot soldiers, no one noticed the arrow protruding from his left shoulder.

~

### **LaPhere Duchy, Seahold Province Blackstairs Mountains**

Back at the camp, all was chaos where Perret's expected five hundred men were actually re-enforced by nearly two thousand others that had come west through the northern pass. Amazing as the elite "LaPhere" were, with their barcothium armor and fighting Andalusians, they were finding the overwhelming odds a strain. Not even the fact that they had forty-four of their number who were telepaths worked in their favor. Arrows flew from a ridge to the north where the enemy had taken control and Perret's archers used the advantage of the elite fighter's preoccupation with the numerous traitors to pick them off.

The duke had also left a platoon of Catoire's men directly on hand in camp for defense of the women who provided field support. One man had a clear shot at an archer on the ridge, but as he drew back his bow a fellow soldier beside him drove a dagger into his ribs. Before the traitor could pull the dagger out, another soldier who had seen his vile act, dove upon him thrusting his dirk deep into the traitor's chest.

Major Carth Richardson of "LaPhere" turned in his saddle scanned the situation quickly, and sent an urgent telepathic request to Marquis Catoire, whose garn cavalry were the closest reinforcements. *Catoire! We are vastly outnumbered by Perret's mercs. He possibly has over two thousand now. They have taken the northern ridge and his archers are scoring hits we shouldn't be suffering. They must have barcothium arrowheads. We need immediate reinforcements or the entire camp will be wiped out.*

*I'll see what I can do to relieve you.* Both men returned their focus to the scenes in front of them; nevertheless, the reality of the enemy having barcothium arrowheads left their hearts locked in a cold dread.

~

Catoire, still at the western entrance to the pass, had been busy cutting through Perret's ranks. Yet, when he received word of the camp battle, he evaluated his choices in moments. His cousin, Captain Reinhold Catoire, of the garn riding cavalry, was one of his most trusted and capable commanders. He regretted the need to order him to ride back to the northwestern ridge in defense of the "LaPhere", but the price was too great if they lost the lives at the camp. *Reinhold! Captain Carth needs you to take out the archers whose advantage continues to disrupt the "LaPhere" attack on the numerous traitor forces in camp.* Again, he didn't need to say more; Reinhold returned a quick affirmative answer.

~

Carth did not wait for rescue at the cost of his men in camp. He had lost eleven men already; fortunately none of them were the telepaths. His forty-three telepaths were mostly in leadership positions with corporals, sergeants, and lieutenants overseeing the troops while a captain and four other lieutenants fought directly alongside their major.

*God, we cannot vanquish this enemy without your intervention. Help us now if we are to survive the hour! I believe this is the only way. Forgive me if this isn't your will.* Major Richardson prayed before sending a command to his lieutenant.

*All platoon commanders, return with your men to encircle us! We will need the coverage to stage a ruse. Captain Chadwick, ride away from us and send out to the enemy a disguised image of Perret over yourself. Then turn and ride up to the commander of the opposing forces, when you are within reach, kill him!*

Not waiting for a reply he continued, *Lieutenants, send a mental image out to the enemy that the men around them are wearing the duke's livery, and coming towards them to attack them.*

~

Captain Sasha Chadwick didn't blink at the order to redo her image mentally for the enemy in the guise of their leader Perret. However, she knew her Ancient, Kemp, would have plenty to say after the battle. He wasn't going to ignore this violation of the Training Center vows, but he would wait to complain to her at a time when the distraction wouldn't get them killed.

~

The fierce "LaPhere" squads fought their way back to their leader and had formed a barrier facing outwards. Within moments of his commands, the major began to see the results of the confusion and fear growing in the enemy forces. Carth *felt* the disbelief of his non-telepathic troops as they watched the enemy destroying themselves, and at the sight of their own captain riding straight for the opposition's commander with no hindrance. The lines of the enemy forces were soon in chaos.

~

## **LaPhere Duchy, Darkwood Province Blackstairs Mountains**

In the frontline of the battle, in spite of the treachery, the second wave of soldiers pressed through the original traitors to join with their fellow loyal men. These soldiers, led by Lazare and Sacre, swept to the front, where the heaviest fighting was taking place. Soon Duke Paul, and his personal cavalry on horseback, crashed through the lines. The troops found new courage, hearing the voice of their duke shouting commands and seeing him swing his saber, slicing through the enemy as if they were made of water, not flesh and bone.

Even though the duke's personal cavalry was outnumbered, the opposition on horseback was no match for the strength, speed and superior training of his soldiers on horses. The duke charged through the last few men surrounding the marquis and opened the way for his men to surround the traitor. Five drawn swords held Jacques from running while Paul turned back to reorganize the remaining cavalry. He kept a handful with him to rejoin the ground troops and re-energize them into finishing off any remaining resistance.

~

## **LaPhere Duchy, Seahold Province Blackstairs Mountains**

It was thirty minutes before Rinehold Catoire's garn riding swordsmen raced up behind the archers on the northern hillsides of the camp. Although a few archers managed to shoot an arrow into a mount or rider, it took only two passes for the garn cavalry to finish them off.

In the base camp, the man who had seen his fellow soldier taken by a traitor, and killed him, had turned and sought out other foes, dispatching traitors often before they could complete their attempt to kill his comrades. Others noticed the treachery also, and the chaos fracturing the enemy forces replicated itself like a tidal wave across the valley encampment.

Despite the heavy losses to the duke's forces, with the removal of the ridge archers and with the "LaPhere" deception, eventually Perret's men began to desert the fight. Many people for the first time in their lives personally understood the validity of these unstoppable fighters' title. As the camp cleared of the attackers, sanity slowly took over those remaining. The duke's men formed circles of friends of whose loyalty they were certain, and facing away from each other, began to wonder if they were killing foes after all.

A trumpet blast finally brought the camp to a momentary stand still. Captain Reinhold rode into the center and lifted his hand, "Men of Duke Paul, I order you to stop attacking each other. If any man chooses to lift weapon again, I and my men will assume you are not loyal to the duke, and you will be executed immediately." The camp was large, but Rinehold reinforced his verbally spoken command with a telepathically sent one. He knew in the situation no one would wonder why they could hear him from so far a distance. Around the camp men lowered their weapons.

Captain Catoire then sent a quick directive to Major Richardson, *Ride out after Perret's gatten. We will finish here.*

He saw the fierce grin as Major Carth passed the orders on to Sasha and their lieutenants. Rinehold grinned himself at the thought that the major wasted no time in following the order of a mere cavalry captain. Soon the fleeing traitors were being hunted by a living nightmare, the "LaPhere".



~

## LaPhere Duchy, Darkwood Province Blackstairs Mountains

On the eastern plains, many of the enemy surrendered quickly upon seeing their marquis taken prisoner; however, just as many of the traitors continued attacking mindlessly, either in a last desperate fury, or because they were unaware of the capture of their lord. As leather clad bodies fell all around, the duke himself rode through the battlefield, cutting the traitors down like wheat, hardly noticing the damp warmth now on his leg and shoulder, until the loss of blood was such that he could no longer lift his sword.

As the sounds of battle quieted throughout the pass and out into the open field, where the main battle had ensued, moans and cries for help could be heard. Duke Paul's men became uneasy when he did not return quickly to personally take Jacques in hand after the battle. The sergeant in charge had them tie and gag Jacques. Then they made their way on horseback, through the fields, searching for their liege.

When they found Paul, he was near death, drooping in a comatose state, on the back of his horse. "He's still alive!" Shouted one of the elite as he and another slid their duke out of his saddle and gently laid him on the ground. Catoire rode up, and seeing his friend's lifeless body, sent to his cousin a desperate cry for a healer from the camp.

~

"That is all I can do for him for now," explained Shirley Goodness, the woman healer who had been rushed from camp to her lord's aid. "You will need to get him to shelter and better medical treatment than I can provide him out here."

*I could do a great deal more if so many people weren't looking at every move I make. We'll have to pray, Mercy, that this is enough. We telepaths aren't invincible even with your symbiotic connection that helps us heal faster than humans who are without an ancient friend.* Mercy didn't need to respond for Shirley to know her Ancient agreed.

"Is it safe to move him?" Marquis Catoire asked, but then shook his head when she would have answered, and commanded, "We have no choice, I see. Fix him a litter, and we will get him to Piot's castle as quickly as is safe."

Turning, he noticed Jacques tied and gagged, and his anger burned. Catoire understood that many had died because Paul needed to discover who the mastermind behind the treason was. He would honor Paul's request to keep the traitor alive, for now anyway. However, 'alive' didn't mean he couldn't make Jacques suffer, and he had ways of making Jacques feel pain. He anticipated the satisfaction he would have in making this man pay for each of the lives lost this day.

"Bring him!" Catoire ordered, and then he began Jacques's torture, unbeknownst to anyone present. All eyes turned on Jacques as he thrashed in terror, trying to scream past his gag and desperately wrestling to get away, although no hand had been laid on him.

Later that day, the men loyal to the duke finished the job of ending the misery of dying men from both sides of the battle. As the healers searched for those they might save, they passed by the blood-soaked,

wavy, brunette curls of a man who had arrived only that morning by garn from the Province of Mandolin. He and his men, exhausted from their fast paced journey, fought valiantly against the traitors, but were amongst those overcome by the arrows cascading down from the ridges.

Thousands gathered that evening at a hastily formed camp a few miles from the original campsite to rest through the night. The next morning they began the arduous task of gathering weapons and valuables, and burning the dead to stave off disease. Other than the two hundred men who had taken the duke on to the safety and care of Marquis Piot's castle, their numbers were now just over fifteen thousand.

*"We felt as Men should feel  
With such a vast hoards of hidden carnage near,  
And horror breathing from the silent ground!"  
William Wordsworth*

~

### **Southern Coastal Waters of Mardeaux End of the Month of D'or ~ Year 1002AA**

Captain Christophé Charpentier turned the Ancient's Eye west as he passed the southeastern tip of the great southern island, known as Défense du Sud. Jonny Cutlass had given Christophé a detailed list of the pirates' usual ports and contacts for fencing their stolen goods. It made tracking the Cap'n quite easy. Several days earlier, Christophé received reports of a missing cargo transport that had been stolen from an eastern seaboard harbor a week prior. He had contacted each of the harbormasters on Jonny's list to notify them of the warrant for the arrest of the captains with their crews, and for the impounding of their ships and cargo.

~

After stealing the merchant transport, the Cap'n turned his ships west across the southern coastline, settling on a port in the LaMotte Duchy where he knew a few greedy longshoremen. *Once I sell the goods, I won't return to the ships.*

He felt no remorse for the deaths of the men who had served as his crew. As the two ships disguised as merchant frigates entered Mieux Harbor, with the larger cargo transport, the harbor master surrounded them with king's ships and those of Marquis Krohn.

*How did they know who we are?* The Cap'n quickly filled a small bag of carefully selected items worth a great sum that would provide him financing to travel incognito to the LaPHERE Duchy. Then, he waited for his ships to be boarded by the king's men. With ease he used his telepathic skills to appear as one of the king's own crew and when they landed he simply walked off the Stolen Hoard and disappeared into the crowd.

~

News reached Christophé that the pirate ships were entering Mieux Harbor with the stolen merchant transport. He was not sure what he would find aboard the two pirate ships that had escaped south during the battle over Darkwood lands, but through the Port Mieux Harbor Master he sent word to Marquis Krohn of all that had recently transpired and the urgency of catching the Cap'n. He hoped the arrests could be made without first alerting the leader of the pirates.

Unfortunately, though, upon arrival he found that the Cap'n was not aboard the ships. *I can't figure out how he managed to get off the ships when we had them surrounded.* He scanned each crewmember in hopes of getting information on how the Cap'n escaped and his visual image. *Nothing! They all simply thought he was still on board.*

While he was frustrated that the only visual he found was a vague average male with nothing solid to use to pursue anyone, he was grateful that at least he had gotten the image from Jonny Cutlass of the tattooed index finger on the left hand of the Cap'n. *It isn't much, but it may eventually lead somewhere. Even if he is on land now, I will ask Marquis Krohn to use his recon team to search for anyone with that tattoo.*

~

### **LaPhere Duchy, Piot Province Mid-Month of Réjouir ~ Year 1002AA**

Four weeks after the battle of Darkwood, Remy rode south through Piot's lands. Behind him rode his scouts who no longer were needed to ensure a safe passage. Among them rode a new recruit.

*Or should I refer to Lady Ashley Jacques as a volunteer?* Remy wondered.

When he had returned to personally deliver her fiancé and father's bodies to her grandfather, he had been surprised at her request to join his reconnaissance team. Even more unexpected had been her grandfather's agreement to the request. *I had expected at best a cool reception from them upon bringing back a dead son and father.* Remy shook his head at these thoughts. *Ashley really is unique!*

*Thank you.*

*I believe I made it clear that a condition of you joining my recon team is that you stop listening in on private thoughts of others.*

*Sorry. But how do you expect me to get to know everyone so I fit in? You have all been together a long time, and I am just me, alone among all you men.*

*I expect you to talk to your team, and get to know them, not pry personal information from everyone you meet. How will anyone trust you, and want to be a close friend, if they feel you don't respect their privacy?*

Ashley frowned, but didn't argue the point further and instead diverted the conversation. *I hope I don't regret my decision to become a scout for you. Although just about whatever I could do for you will be better than being married off into the tedious life of a lady of a manor house.*

*I doubt life with you is ever dull Lady Ashley.*

*And something tells me life will not be boring around you, Remy Charpentier!*

~

### **LaMotte Duchy, LaMotte Castle**

Captain Christophé glared at Duke de LaMotte, "Of course I don't think you should devote all your forces to capturing this one man, Your Grace." Christophé was in a very uncomfortable position. He had kept his

word to his brother Remy to capture the remaining pirate ships, but so far had been unable to track down the Cap'n.

Marquis Krohn's recon team had done no better than he had when searching the minds of those few who had seen a man with a tattoo on his index finger matching the one on the Cap'n. The best his men had been able to do was follow the tattoo on a meager trail north through the LaMotte Duchy. If Christophé was going to keep the Cap'n from escaping altogether, he needed more forces, but Duke Isaac was, surprisingly, being very intractable about offering support. He hadn't tried telepathically conversing since he had entered the court a few moments earlier, but now he decided to reach out to the older duke mind to mind.

*Isaac, this man is no ordinary pirate. He has plagued the eastern coastal lands with numerous attacks and nearly had one hundred percent success in his thievery until now. If he escapes he will likely set up a new base of operations from somewhere in your duchy as he has been cut off from all his prior followers. That will be financially bad for all the southern lands, not to mention the lives that will be lost.*

*You presume on our mutual ties with the ancients by speaking to me, a duke, as if I was your brother the Marquis de South Lakes.* The duke turned to his right and spoke quietly with his scribe. The man shook his head.

Duke Isaac looked back at the northerner and lifted his hand in a dismissive motion. "We do not believe this one man is of any serious consequence to our duchy. He is after all a man of the sea, and has from your limited reports been steadily moving north towards the LaPhere duchy where he originated. We will give no further attention to this matter."

Christophé had to bite his inner cheek to keep from snapping at the man. Taking a deep breath he turned on his heel without asking permission to be excused and walked out.

# **PART TWO**

## **BROKEN TREATY**

*6 MONTHS PRIOR*

# CHAPTER VIII

## LaPhere Duchy, Mandolin Province Eastern border of the Sagoron Territory 24th day of the Month of D'abord ~ Year 1002AA

*If you can force your heart and nerve and sinew  
To serve your turn long after they are gone,  
And so hold on when there is nothing in you  
Except the Will which says to them:  
“Hold on!”  
Rudyard Kipling*

Ker'iaddahs Aresifiil and his guardian comrade, Oreh, left the perimeter of the sagorons' territory, the *pah'mirsekuz*, behind at dawn, entering the human controlled lands. The humans called the sagoron's territory the Great Oak Forest due to the immense trees similarity to a tree species from their home-world. The two golden males felt a bit vulnerable, as much due to their obvious physical differences to humans, as from being out on open ground instead of in the safety of the *pah'mirsekuz*.

“Stay low, there may be locals or hired mercenaries about who could spot us.” Oreh directed his young companion. Aresifiil was heir to the sagoron kingdom, but he was a fledgling guardian and was supposed to follow the commands of his seniors.

Moving out from their forest homeland they found little cover in the small dark-brown and green shrubs dotting the fields beyond the trees, but Aresifiil shrugged off any serious doubts of their safety. *After all, human weapons can't penetrate our barcothium armor, and we haven't had a guardian death at our borders in over one hundred thousand sagoron years.*

Pink, purple, and deep blue streaks shimmered across the lighter blue of the new day's sky. The smell of dew on the tall grasses filled his nostrils with a light perfume he would have enjoyed if he could have taken the time to focus on it. *I hope we will be able to contact the human Henri. He is one of the few humans that father trusts. If not, perhaps we will have the chance to find some clues to the recent increase of incursions into our forest. Lately these breaches of the treaty are showing signs of organized planning.*

It seemed only moments had passed when he spotted a human riding a garn off in the distance and quickly flashed a warning sign with his hands to Oreh. A copse of elm trees nearby was a welcome sight. Keeping his voice low he said, “We had better get to those trees for cover until we can assess if the human saw us.”

“Yes, Ker'iaddahs, those trees at least will give us a defensible position. If our scouting mission has been exposed we will have to abandon our plans for today. We should stay in the trees until dusk, even if he hasn't seen us. This is only halfway to the woodcutter's dwelling, and later the night shadows will hide our movements.” Oreh too spoke in a hushed tone, his golden skin shining in the more direct light of the human realm.

“Yes, these were my thoughts as well. Actually, I've sensed we've been tracked since leaving the forest.” Aresifiil was quickly forgetting his junior guardian status in the thrill of enacting his secret mission.

“I hope I don’t regret agreeing to this unauthorized reconnaissance.” Oreh shook his head, but pushed aside the doubts that he may have used poor judgment in joining the younger sagoron’s plans. “If they do return to attack us, we’ll have the evidence to prove that last night’s border violence means the encroachments on the eastern border are more of a threat than the council has been willing to believe. We can use this to pry them from their complacency over the treaty violations.”

*Oreh seems almost happy we could be facing an ambush soon.* The guardian’s perpetually youthful face bore a determined look while his lavender eyes glittered in anticipation. As they entered the elms, Aresifil spoke a short prayer in sagoron, and the two rose from the musty smelling ground beneath the trees to take up observation posts on the tree limbs high above.

~

As guardians they were accustomed to long hours of quiet observation while they monitored the borders of their realm for activity or attacks from the humans. However, these trees were not as comfortable as the larger pah’mirsekuz. The Ker’iaddahs secured himself with his clawed feet as he sat and pulled his knees up, embedding his talons into the limb so he could relax his telekinetic hold and reserve his strength for later.

Oreh copied Aresifil’s actions, and then took a deep breath allowing the smells of the waking world around him to seep into his consciousness. It was spring here in the human lands, and the delightful assault of the new growth to his senses brought swift regret that their excursion here would likely lead to so much destruction. While he wasn’t opposed to the upcoming fight, as were so many of the older sagorons, he was still aware that their actions this morning could lead to war. He wouldn’t have agreed to join Aresifil, against the council’s wishes, if he could see any other way to deal with the mounting pressure the humans were applying with their frequent breaking of the treaty.

*Leaning back against the trunk of his tree, he looked over at his Ker’iaddahs, and thought, I had better pray now for his safety in case the human returns. Aresifil isn’t wrong to push the council to do something in response to the violations, but it doesn’t mean that taking action on our own is the wisest choice. He is also right that the council likely will never react until it is too late.*

*The attacks by the humans seem random and unorganized simply because the dimensional time difference spreads them out over years. Even though the council fully understands the time variance, the urgency of our situation has waned for them between the attacks. Aresifil is more in tune to the problem because even as Ker’iaddahs he serves as one of our guardian. Yet, his being only a few thousand years old probably has had something to do with how seriously they have taken his concerns. The elders always feel the youth are too impetuous. I hope our actions today don’t confirm that belief.*

The Ker’iaddahs, oblivious to his companion’s thoughts, gave him a wry grin. Aresifil’s deep sea-green eyes flashed with anticipation of the action soon to come. With his hands propped behind his dark golden-haired head, he leaned back before he retracted the claws of one of his open-toed boots from the limb. He let his leg hang beneath him, swinging it now and then.

*I may not be as young as Aresifil, but to most of the members on the council I am little more than the child they think him to be. It might help if we aged like humans, instead of keeping our youthful looks for tens of thousands of years.* Oreh stopped at that thought and shook his head. He let out a chuckle and Aresifil glanced over to him.

“Just wondering what it would be like if we aged like humans. Maybe the council would show us respect if we had white hair and wrinkles.” Oreh explained, his own star-shaped violet pupils dancing with amusement.

With another glance at his older companion, Aresifiil shrugged, “You could have their respect if you would take their side instead of agreeing with me. In fact, I think many of the younger council actually do see the need for action, they are just outnumbered by those unable, or unwilling, to face another war. Truth is Oreh, if we sagorons as a species were as casual about taking lives as the humans, we wouldn’t need to convince the council. I’m not sure I want us to develop the same taste for killing that the humans possess. When I’m Ker’agartet I will have to decide if the cost of war to our spirits is worth preserving our lives. For now that decision is up to my father.”

“Hopefully our search will provide him with some information that inspires him to choose action over this passive isolationism.” Oreh shifted his small frame in order to stretch first one leg then the other before he settled back against the trunk of the tree.

~

Forty men, twenty each from both south and east, moved toward the copse. Nearly half wore the garb of mercenaries or soldiers. Another twenty waited in position in the sparse woods to the north in order to ambush the two sagorons when they ran north to escape the pressing attack. Some of the men grumbled at the numbers called upon to take on only two of the small creatures, but their leader, Degare knew what the sagorons were capable of even with only a couple of them. He wanted to guarantee either their capture or death.

An amoral man still in his early thirties, he had jet-black hair that fell loose to his shoulders and forward across his broad, square scruffy face. His right eye was mostly milky white with a small glimmer of purple in the pupil. A man used to brawling, when he could use his stocky build to physical advantage over his opponent, he had suffered an injury many years prior. Now he was going blind in that eye which had a scar from above the right eyebrow straight down the eyelid to the cheekbone.

His mercenaries had finally been able to push the diminutive creatures into making even this small foray out of their own territory. Degare was under orders to turn any opportunity like this into an incident that could be used to trigger open war between the species. His instructions were to try to take at least one alive and force information out of him about the defenses in place in the sagorons’ realm. However, Degare had his own preferred plan in place.

*We will kill the sagorons. No one will doubt my story that we had to chase the murdering vermin down and kill them after they murdered an innocent woodcutter’s family that lives close to their border.* Degare had a malicious grin at his own thoughts.

For years the sagoron border guards had proved a significant deterrent to anyone trying to gain access, so the previous night Degare had taken in a raiding party for the first time under the cover of darkness. He had taken enough men to show whether an attack at night would improve their chances to overcome the enemy. It had proven very informative, even though ultimately most of the men who had participated in the raid had died.

Of course he had stayed to the rear of the attack and watched the outcome. One of the survivors later told him that at first, when they had managed to finally cross into the enemy territory, all of them had felt disorientated for a moment. The sagoron border was always hazy; it shifted like shadows at dusk.



However, what they saw was each other moving at different speeds. The feeling passed quickly though and his soldiers were able for the first time to take advantage of the few enemy numbers they found waiting. Unfortunately the humans were still unable to kill any of the sagorons. Their barcothium armor easily deflected the human made swords and arrows.

From where he had watched, Degare noticed the speed of the enemy attacks seemed to alter as his men neared the defenders. Even the thrown spheres and darts, which were the preferred weapons of the small creatures, slowed down the closer they traveled to the human realm. However, when any of the humans were inside the hazy woods nearer to the sagorons, no matter how far an object traveled, it maintained a level speed.

Now, in hiding with his twenty men to the north, Degare still didn't know what the speed changes meant, but he was contemplating the implications, as the other forty made their way to take on these two sagoron spies.

~

Planet Cadeau's star had moved and now cast long shadows from the copse of trees across the eastern field. Other shadows were also out in the fields to the south and east, but these shadows were moving in spite of the lack of wind.

"The humans come... many of them. I don't think they come as emissaries to exchange pleasantries," Oreh spoke quietly from his perch as he watched east.

The Ker'iaddahs deftly ran from branch to branch, and seemed to fly through the short open spaces between the trees to reach Oreh's vantage point. "More than a dozen men are approaching from both the south and east. Nearly half of these humans appear seasoned soldiers, although they don't wear the coverings signifying their allegiance with a particular lord."

"Undoubtedly they want their identities to remain a secret, which means most likely you have been right in that they don't attack us with the approval of either Duke Paul or King Marix," Oreh's ability to quickly analyze and assess in the midst of danger was one reason Aresifiil had chosen him for this fact-finding mission. His strong loyalty and great combat skills were other desirable qualities.

Oreh hesitated, but then continued, "Perhaps they spied us as we entered the copse, but are unsure of our exact positions and will pass by without seeing us up here." He paused and sounded as if he didn't believe his own words. "If it comes to a fight, we are better off staying close together, spreading out will make it easier for them to pick us off."

As the humans entered the woods it was obvious they were carefully searching not only the ground, but also the heights in the trees. Oreh caught Aresifiil's quick pained grin. "No escaping without a fight today," he grinned back at the younger sagoron.

Traditionally Cadeau had been a planet filled with peaceful inhabitants, but the presence of these aggressive human aliens for the past thousand years had encouraged the other species to study combat. The sagorons had become extremely adept warriors, even though they still preferred to find peaceful ways to end conflicts if possible.

Gifted through their faith in Yah'mir, Creator of the universe, with a power known to the sagorons as Ker'ah, they could move objects and manipulate matter with their minds. Humans referred to it as magic

and sometimes telekinesis. Often the sagorons were able to use their superior fighting skills and Ker'ah to disable rather than kill. When it was unavoidable, however, they had learned not to hesitate to end a life for the preservation of many others, especially in protection of the innocent.

The sagoron's weapons were built with both intents in mind. Every sagoron owned a ker'nortt, a staff made of barcothium. On one end it was blunt and had a six inch rounded blade that protruded from the side. The other end, came to a point, and on the opposite side projected a fierce looking triangular blade. Engraved down the shaft was a sagoron oak leaf design that made it almost appear alive. The sagorons could use Ker'ah to separate the Ker'nortt at the center to produce two weapons.

Barcothium, ten times stronger than the steel used by most humans for their weapons and armor, could cut through or pierce anything. Few humans had barcothium of any shape as it took the power of Ker'ah to forge it into usable form and the sagorons were very selective to whom they gifted or sold barcothium items.

Along with this formidable weapon, the guardians wore barcothium armor. Their chain mail tabard, woven so fine it was as fluid as a linen tunic, had small plates of solid barcothium fused to the mail. It was quite light, but the guardians still wore a karakiil linen tunic and shorts underneath for comfort.

Oreh's mouth dried and the grin left his face when a hiss and pop sounded as an arrow abruptly stopped in the tree only a few centimeters from Aresifiil. The Ker'iaddahs jerked back, barely gave the arrow a glance, and snapped into action. He jumped up and backwards, arching his back as he came around and grabbed the branch he'd just been sitting on, and catapulted himself to the ground in the midst of the humans who were now all looking to the treetops. Oreh followed seconds behind him. He dove acrobatically down on top of the nearest human, and crumpled him to the ground.

For a moment the humans were in total disarray from the brashness of the smaller creatures' attack. That was all the two petite warriors needed. Oreh pulled the two halves of his ker'nortt from where they were bonded at his shoulders, and used them as batons to begin his assault. He swung sideways with each arm, and shattered the knees of the men beside him. From his crouch, he jumped backwards in a high arching flip, and landed on the shoulders of the human behind him. With one blow, the guardian cracked the man's skull and rode the limp body to the ground.

~

Aresifiil stood straight up, surrounded by five humans who closed in with swords drawn. He released each half of his ker'nortt, placed the centers together, and melded them into one weapon with his mind. He bent at the knees slightly, took a defensive stance, and waited for their attack.

A sword crashed down from above and behind him. As he twisted around, he felt the air move, but the blow missed him. He brought his ker'nortt down on the man's wrists, broke them, and then delivered a shot to the back of the attacker's head. The soldier dropped.

Two more swords came: dodge, spin, parry. The blunt tip of his staff in one man's face, crushed his nose, and hot crimson spewed. A sharp thrust with the triangular blade speared a man in the stomach, and nearly tore him in two as the Ker'iaddahs pulled the blade free. Blood everywhere, other soldiers replaced the fallen, but Aresifiil was just warming up.

~

Oreh now bound the halves of his ker'nortt with Ker'ah and stood with one end of the staff in the ground in front of him. Arms extended he held the sagoron weapon with one hand, reached out with Ker'ah, and lifted up two men who were running toward him. Oreh's empty hand clapped against the center of the staff. The suspended men slammed into each other and dropped to the ground, broken. A sword swung at his head, nearly connected, but he ducked and watched as his ker'nortt sprawled across the ground.

Oreh reached out with Ker'ah again, and forced the human in front of him to his knees. Centimeters from the man, he bared his teeth and let loose a feral growl as he pushed with Ker'ah. The man slammed into a distant tree. More soldiers ran at the guardian. He turned to face them, and handfuls of small spheres rose from the pouches at his sides. As he thrust his empty hands forward, the balls flew into and out of the heads of the oncoming men. The dead men dropped, and the spheres returned to Oreh, cleansed of blood. Alone for the moment, he reached out his hand, and his ker'nortt flew back to him. He spun and ran to rejoin his Ker'iaddahs.

~

Aresifil weaved in and out of their dancing blades, avoided contact, and smashed bones as he moved. While he spun about, his ker'nortt changed from one weapon to two and then back again, as the center weaving released and then re-took hold. This altering of the sagoron weapon and the movement of the warrior made it a beautiful thing to behold, if not for the broken heads and limbs left at odd angles in his wake. However, a telekinetic gift and barcothium did not make a species invulnerable, and as he spun, a sword bit into one of his biceps. A cry of pain slipped out from gritted teeth, yet he managed to dodge a second blow that would have connected with his head.

From over the top of the advancing humans, Oreh leapt, thrust his ker'nortt as a spear and skewered the man who had struck the Ker'iaddahs. The blow to the man's chest carried more than just the pointed end of the ker'nortt. With the push of Ker'ah, which Oreh added to his thrust, the man came off his feet, flew backwards, and was pierced to a tree. In one motion the guardian leapt over another human, and brought the staff back to himself. He unwove it mid-air so that it landed in his hands as two pieces. Another leap over the man while he cut down with the rounded blade severed the head from the neck, and it rolled across the ground, to come to rest at another human's feet. The man looked up, and although he held his sword battle ready, the fear of the creatures in front of him showed in his face. Oreh straightened as he landed and re-wove the ker'nortt into one piece. He stood back to back with his wounded friend and breathed a little heavily.

"Are you badly injured? Too many of these fighters are trained soldiers. We had better look to retreat into our forest. Your father will never forgive me if you are harmed." Oreh spoke in sagoron.

"I'll survive." Aresifil, too, saw the wisdom of not communicating in the common tongue most species now used on Cadeau. "We can return home, we have the information we came for. I'm afraid the gathering of this many troops this close to our borders means the coming of war before we can send a delegation to King Marix to demand action for the treaty violations."

"I'll clear the way, follow me!" Oreh urged him. The older guardian's face showed deep strain from the near constant use of the gift. He turned to his left, and let loose several darts as three soldiers advanced on

them. Before the darts had even penetrated their skulls and chests, he leapt over them, grabbed a tree limb, and flipped up onto a branch in yet another tree.

Aresifiil followed, as he sent his own darts into an archer poised to shoot an arrow into Oreh's fleeing back.

*I hope we can break free from the remaining attacker,* Oreh worried. They left numerous wounded and dead humans scattered beneath them.

~

The sagorons leapt from branch to branch headed north out of the copse of trees. As they dropped down into the open, they quickly reset their ker'nortts on their shoulders to free their hands for weapons better suited for long distance fighting. They could have turned west and tried to cross the three kilometers of nearly open fields that led to the safety of the sagoron oaks, but unsure if the enemy had deployed all their men, they chose to speed across a short field to even denser woods to the north first. Aresifiil slowed abruptly when he saw a flash from the corner of his eye. The arrow just missed him as it traveled from their right, but found its mark in the exposed flesh where Oreh's neck and shoulder met, and he tumbled to the ground.

"Noooo!" Aresifiil shouted, but his voice sounded distant even to him.

Suddenly he staggered, as his feet seemed frozen in place. While he tried to force his legs to move, the humans who waited in ambush were immediately upon them. With the heartlessness of taktrons they stabbed Oreh with swords and daggers, and drove death into Aresifiil's friend wherever they could find an exposed piece of flesh.

Those few men who had followed them from the elms soon joined the attack. Yet, to Aresifiil's bewilderment, each swing of the ambusher's swords missed him. The next few moments were incomprehensible, even to him, as all the humans abruptly rose from the ground, suspended in the air.

On his knees Oreh bled from his ragged wounds, but with an act of sheer will in order to protect his Ker'iaddahs Oreh had reached out with Ker'ah to stop the attack. He stood slowly, raised his arms to the heavens, and yelled in defiance as he used the gift. A blast of power resounded as one word passed his dying lips, "Ker'celm!"

At that word, Oreh thrust his arms palms down, and every human suspended in the air above him crashed to the ground, broken and not moving again. The guardian collapsed, succumbing to his wounds and to the light that called him.

Suddenly, Aresifiil could move again and he flew to his friend almost without touching the ground. "Oreh, no..." he moaned as he pulled the guardian's lifeless body into his arms and didn't see the four archers who had remained hidden in the woods ahead.

Air ripped passed his ear as an arrow narrowly missed him. He looked up and stopped the next arrow with Ker'ah... and then another... and then the fourth. However, a fifth arrow slipped through his anguished mental grasp and slammed into his chest.

The Ker'iaddahs, jolted from the blow, lost his grip on his dead companion. Seconds later another arrow hit him, lodged in his thigh, and he fell back to the ground. Unable to focus, the world around him turned

first foggy, then black. His last thought was that the arrows had to be formed from barcothium, and he wondered who had betrayed his people by arming these men with the only weapon that could penetrate the sagoron armor.

~

Four human archers, who had never seen a display of telekinetic power before, approached cautiously in fear. To linger behind their comrades had been a cowardly act, but they were alive and unbroken, and they wanted to stay that way. Another, who had remained behind as usual, was their leader, Degare. He was shocked by this display of the sagorons' power, but only added it to the information he had accumulated on the enemy.

*It's a good thing the arrows I received from Lord Alterra worked as promised.* Degare, pleased with the outcome now hurried his men, "Let's get moving. We will need to recruit help to clean this up so it looks less like an ambush from our side and blame can be shifted to the sagorons."

In a raspy voice the oldest archer, sun-leathered skin with a crown of wispy silver hair, dared to question, "How is it that you plan on making anyone believe two lone sagorons outside their territory pose a threat to our realm?"

Degare wasn't going to explain his plans to anyone. He sneered at the archer, "Lord Alterra needs no convincing to accuse the sagorons of treachery. Get some of those darts from their pouches on their belts that the filthy creatures use and let's get out of here."

All four archers hesitated to get near the sagorons, and Degare laughed in disgust. "Do you fear the dead will rise to avenge themselves?" He walked over to Oreh's lifeless body and found the pouch of darts. He removed it, turned and left without looking to see if the archers followed. The others hastily joined him. They left thirty of their men behind dead and nearly that many dying of their wounds, unable to walk away.

## CHAPTER IX

*If you find yourself out at night  
Stay out of the golden oaks;  
You'll give yourself quite a fright  
This is not a hoax  
Run away, what they tell you is true  
The trees are alive and spying,  
They say the forest might hurt you  
So unless you want to be dying,  
Run away!  
Anonymous Mardeaux Rhyme*

Crouched hidden in the woods to the north a young woman waited in fear for the five men to leave. Tamara, Henri's daughter, was a handmaiden to the daughter of Lord Alterra, but was home for a visit with her parents. Early the prior day she overheard Rupert, a distant relative that lived in her father's house, as he talked with some men. Several were her parent's neighbors, but the others she only recognized as mercenaries. They planned to stage an attack that night into the sagorons' lands.

Although the mercenaries were apparently hired by Lord Alterra, his daughter, Lady Natalie, disapproved of her father's desire to exterminate their neighboring species. Tamara knew Natalie would need proof of the treason in order to seek help from King Marix. She slipped out that evening to hide until dark in one of her father's old woodsheds in the forest just east of the sagoron realm.

After the sun went down she watched the raiders enter the sagorons' territory, thankful for the two half moons that gave enough light for her to see. She had been gathering her courage to follow behind them when suddenly three of the raiders returned. Two of them were cut, bleeding, and barely moving. The third, a man with a scarred face, admonished the others to keep the details of their battle secret.

Tamara feared to return to her father's home during the prior night, so she waited until morning, hidden in her father's woodshed. Before returning home early in the morning, she picked some berries to give her an excuse for being out. It was then that she overheard the scarred man and a nobleman as they discussed the two sagorons who were hidden in the copse of elms. The men talked of plans for an ambush in the evening. The scarred man assured the nobleman they could successfully place the blame for the attack back on the sagorons. This lie would be believed because spies were planted in several of the border homes to find who the claw-lovers in the area were. They had discovered a local woodsman who was friendly with the "filthy creatures". After they killed the enemy they would murder the woodsman's family in order to show just cause that the sagorons had carried out an unprovoked attack.

Many other locals felt uncomfortable living on the edge of the sagorons' lands, but only a few appeared to hate them. Just as few were like her father, Henri who believed The Treaty of the Species was written to the benefit of the humans and had taken unfair advantage of the sagorons' good nature.

Henri was not a lord with an elegant manor, yet, his unique and exquisitely carved furniture was sought after by the nobles and royalty. The income gave his family a slightly better lifestyle than most of the locals, who barely managed to survive as farmers and woodsmen because of Lord Alterra's stiff taxes. Tamara's father's dwelling was large, and they often hosted various relatives and relations of friends. Currently, two guests were staying with them, Rupert and an orphaned boy, Beck.

Fear flooded her as she hid with her berries for another hour to avoid detection before she returned home. Once home, she found her father was out searching for quality wood. Fairly certain the family they planned to kill was hers, she watched Rupert carefully. At first she saw no sign that he had plans to harm them, but later, as she pounded a rug out on the line, she saw Rupert and Beck sneak away, headed southeast. Rupert glanced back, but then he patted the boy on the shoulder and they disappeared into the woods.

*Could it be both of them? Or did Rupert ask Beck to go along to cover his own actions? I can't be sure they aren't both spies. I know I should wait for father to return, but what if he comes too late and they kill the hiding sagorons and then come to kill our family?*

Not waiting to speak with her mother she took a picnic basket and a long shawl and left again. She wandered a bit but kept moving in the direction of her father's woodshed, which was close to the treaty border. As she walked she watched for lookouts and mercenary troops. Her careful observations kept her from stumbling into Degare's waiting ambush to the north of the copse.

Now, as the sweat trickled down her back, Tamara stood and let the blood return to her cramped legs. *That man with the ugly scar is the same one I saw leaving the sagoron woods last night. I'd better hurry and gather whatever evidence I can before he is able to enact his plans.*

Her heart and mind twisted back and forth, *I should head straight back and warn my parents. Even if it turns out they aren't planning to kill our family, father would chip a blade if he knew I was out here with these mercenary soldiers No, not soldiers, murderers! But how can I leave knowing their plans are to stage this battle as a sagoron raid in order to excuse their attack on the sagorons and provoke a war? Whether it is my family or some other they plan to murder, can I justify fleeing to save my family at the expense of so many more lives that might be lost?*

When she was certain they were gone, she slipped from her hiding place and approached the dead sagorons. *Somehow I must find a way to prove the truth of what happened here, and get it to Lady Natalie.* As she bent over the motionless sagorons she ached with the knowledge that she could not save her family, and would be hard pressed herself to stay alive.

*This one looks so young, and small, hardly more than a child, and the mercenaries nearly all died trying to kill them. What kind of power could make this possible?* Tears slid down her cheeks. She touched the leg where one of the arrows had hit the sagoron, and then jumped back as he moaned. She shook as she bent over him again and laid a hand on his chest. *His breathing is so shallow I can hardly feel movement. But he is alive, and if I can save him, perhaps together we can be witnesses of the lies these hired soldiers hope to spread.*

Tamara had grown up learning a great deal about the woods, hunting and healing. She knew these wounds were likely to kill the small sagoron regardless of any help she could offer, but she had to try. As she looked carefully over his friend, she confirmed what she was already sure of, the multiple stab wounds had killed him. Prior experience with wounds didn't compare to the gruesome deaths and carnage she had observed today, and she covered her mouth for a moment to gain control of her stomach that wrenched with the smell of blood and bodily fluids all around her.

*That arrow in the chest will be easier to remove since it pierced him all the way through, but I'd better wait until I have him where I can stop the blood flow after I pull it out.*

She broke off the arrows' wooden shafts a few centimeters from the body, and kept the heads as evidence which she tied into her belt at her side. Then she lifted him by his arms from behind and began the challenging task of dragging him away to the woodshed. The effort was especially difficult because, although he was the size of a young adolescent human, Tamara herself was only a little taller and he had his weapons on his shoulders.

After a few moments Tamara stopped and tried to remove the sagoron's weapons, but found they were melded to the back of the armor at his shoulders. She groaned in frustration and flexed her own shoulders before she lifted him again. A short while later she noticed that, as she dragged him, his body was leaving a trail the mercenaries could follow. Tamara laid him down and wiped the sweat from her forehead before she searched for a branch. Every few minutes she stopped to lay him down and re-walked the path to remove their tracks.

*This is taking too long, they'll return and catch me long before I can get him to the safety of the shed and he will probably die anyway.* Tamara felt fear tug at her and the urge to run while she had a chance to live. However, the slight hope that he might survive kept her moving when her spirit and body were nearly spent. *Father would be ashamed of me for quitting now and abandoning the injured sagoron, and so would Lady Natalie.*

Unsure of how she finally gained the slim safety of the shed, Tamara stood over the barely living sagoron, wiped her sweat-soaked sand-colored locks from her forehead, and gulped air heavily. Not waiting to catch her breath, she knelt down and removed his belt, armor tunic, and under garment. She tried not to disturb the arrow. His skin was hot and clammy as though he was burning with fever.

*How can he have a fever so quickly?* She probed the area of the arrow's entry in the left side of his chest. *Shouldn't an arrow piercing the heart have killed him instantly? Well, they may look like smaller versions of us, other than their clawed feet, but perhaps they have other physical differences that we can't see.*

A vicious redness and swelling surrounded the broken shaft and with the fever she was certain an infection had already taken root. *At the least I need wine to clean the wound.* She eyed his belt and noticed he carried a small flask. *If it is only water then he's no worse off than now, but if it is wine, perhaps it can help.* She grabbed the small container and opened it, sniffed the contents, poured a few drops onto the wound, and sighed, *Only water.*

*I know these arrows need to come out, but without better healer tools I might just be hastening his death.* Shaking her head, she set her mind to the task of removing them. As she pulled the one from his chest, he came awake with a groan that scared her, *If by chance a soldier is nearby, he could be alerted to our hiding place. I've got to keep him quiet.*

She covered his mouth with her hand and whispered, "Please, I'm trying to help you, but you have to stay quiet. I don't know if the soldiers have returned to the woods, but if they did and have found you're gone, they may search and find us here."

He blinked several times before he focused on her, but didn't moan again.

*With his unusual eyes it's hard for me to know for sure, but I think he is going into shock. He seems dazed and confused.*

"Jes'mir," he whispered.



“No. I’m Tamara.”

He moved his hand toward the flask and he repeated his whispered request, “Jes’mir.”

Tamara saw he was becoming agitated and then comprehension came. “Oh! You want a drink?”

He sighed and relaxed, and Tamara poured a small bit of his water into his mouth. She would have stopped when it caused him to cough and choke, but he grabbed her hand and pulled with a firm grip. *It’s amazing how strong he is in spite of his condition.* She continued to pour small amounts of liquid until he let go of her hand and fell back.

After Tamara removed his leg armor, and cut away his lower undergarment up to his thigh, she reached into the basket to get her mother’s cloth napkins in order to bandage his wounds. He didn’t even stir as she pulled the second arrow out of his thigh and cleaned the wound.

Even though she was haunted by the fear of her family’s probable demise, exhausted, she dozed off beside him. Animal noises startled her back to a hazy awareness of her surroundings and to her fears. A rustling and thumping outside had her sitting up with her heart pounding. When the sounds ended she found she couldn’t relax.

*What can I do? If I remain here with the sagoron and we are discovered, we will certainly both be killed. Yet, if I return home, the chance that I’ll be killed is also fairly certain. However, to not return home might alert the spy they’ve planted that I am aware of their activities.* Frustrated, she let a small groan pass her lips.

Tamara shook herself and made up her mind to take the basket and leave. She sent up a quick prayer as she glanced back at his still form, “God, please keep the sagoron quiet and this hiding place undiscovered until I can return,” She opened the door and slipped out.

The return trip home was a test of all her nerve. *I need to appear to be coming back from an innocent picnic, even if it’s late... perhaps from a lovers’ tryst. God, if only they haven’t harmed my family and I can somehow get safely home and warn them.* All the possible outcomes ran through her mind as she tried to appear to be naturally walking while staying alert to any lookouts or mercenaries in the woods.

A crackling of a snapped twig warned her of someone ahead on a cross path she would need to take to return home. She hesitated, but was unsure whether to move forward or back. Just then she heard leaves stirring underfoot as the unknown person moved onto her path and came around a tree that blocked her from their view. It was dark now, but even with little moonlight able to reach them she could make out her father’s familiar form.

“Tamara! Thank God! I heard a rumor of fighting in the area and hurried to return to the house, only to find you were out for the evening and hadn’t returned. Your mother is worried, let’s hurry home.” Her father, a tall thick built man, spoke brusquely but quietly. His love for her was apparent in the words he spoke, in the relief on his tanned and freckled face, and in his ice-blue eyes. He lifted his leather hat off his head and ran his calloused scarred hand through his sandy brown hair. He took her basket, grabbed her hand, and gave it a squeeze. Normally not demonstrative as a father, Henry’s action moved Tamara to tears to feel this assurance from him and the relief at realizing her family was still living.

She stopped suddenly, glanced around, and whispered to her father, “I overheard some men. They spoke of killing a family to shift blame onto the sagorons for treaty violation. Father, they killed one sagoron and nearly mortally wounded another; he may die yet.”

He turned to look around the woods, but continued to walk as he handed her back the basket and let go of her hand, to free his own hands to defend her. He spoke softly, “Where?”

“In the old shed,” she answered. “Father, they spoke also of a spy in homes of the locals. They mentioned killing a woodsman’s family that liked the filthy creatures. That would be us right?”

She saw a look of both confirmation and worry cross her father’s usually closed face. “We need to be careful now, but we must get home quickly if I’m to change the outcome of their plans. Tell me everything again from the beginning.”

Tamara grimaced as she told her father what she discovered in the last few days. She knew he would be upset that she hadn’t told him immediately and had put herself in danger more than once to seek proof for Lady Natalie of the crimes these men were committing. She was very surprised therefore at his response.

“I knew you would be strong enough to live in the Alterra manor and keep your wits about you, but today, Tamara, you have shown enormous courage and willingness to do right, even when the choices you face have life and death consequences.” The pride in his voice renewed Tamara’s waning strength, and she found her courage returned.

He had them approach the house with caution. They circled at a distance to see if the planned attack was already in play. The moonlit sky, which swirled with pinks, purples and blues, gave them enough clarity to verify nothing had occurred yet. They quickly made their way to the house where her mother waited while the rest of the household had gone to bed.

“You had us worried girl, what with rumors of some kind of fighting in the area this evening. You shouldn’t be out alone so late,” her mother complained, twisting her hands. Fear turned her normally light brown eyes a deep chocolate and her laugh lines now seemed to age her.

“I’m sorry ma. I know it’s late. I wasn’t paying attention to the time and dozed off. So, who said there was some fighting nearby?”

“Rupert. He urged us to all come inside and stay here where we would be safe. He and the children have gone off to bed, but he assured me he would sleep lightly in case your father returned without you.”

Tamara looked to see her father’s grim face matched her own thoughts. *Rupert is most likely the spy, as I thought.* “That’s sweet of him; I’ll just pop in to let him know I’m fine, after I put away my things.”

Henri laid a finger to his lips and motioned for his wife to follow him into their room. Tamara put away the contents of her basket, changed her bloodstained dress, and then slipped into the males’ room. As she had suspected, the boy was fast asleep, but Rupert was gone. As she hurried to tell her father, her fear mounted. *If Rupert is gone, then the attack is imminent.*

She entered her parent’s room and saw by the look on her mother’s face her father had warned her of the impending threat. “Rupert is gone.”

“We have no time to waste then. What is your plan Henri?” Chasané asked, in a shaken voice. She reached behind her and twisted her long blonde hair into a braid that she pulled up onto her head.

“Tamara, you must return to the woodshed with bandages and herbs to fight his infection. Also, refill the basket with food and water. I will take everyone else to the safety of landholder Pierre’s cottage. His feelings towards the sagorons are neutral, and he won’t have become involved with men such as these mercenaries. Their plan to use our deaths to shift blame onto the sagorons needs to be enacted by morning in order for it to seem plausible. If we live through this night, we will be out of danger for now.”

“You would send Tamara out alone with these men coming?” her mother’s dislike of Henri’s plans was undisguised.

“I have to go, Ma. If the sagoron dies, his people will assume the worst about all of us and those plotting this treason will have gotten what they wanted, war. Can you get the family safely through the woods father?”

“No one knows these woods like I do. Hurry now, we must act quickly. Use as little light as necessary to get ready, and wear dark clothing.”

Tamara smiled at her father’s instructions, since she had done exactly those things in order to keep from being discovered the night before. Within moments she had the items needed, and slipped out the side door that was closest to the woods. She kept low and moved as rapidly as the need to keep quiet allowed her. Only once did she hear voices ahead and she knelt and waited for the men to pass before she resumed her hurried return to the injured sagoron. She prayed the entire way, for her own safety and for that of her family.

~

Aresifiil sat against the bowl of a large maple tree. He was too weak to pull himself up into the semi-safety of its branches, nor did he have the mental focus to use Ker’ah to get there. It felt like half the night must have passed as he waited for the human girl to return. Unable to remain awake he dozed off and on through the hours. Leaves crunched and a small twig snapped in the direction of the woodshed. Perspiration beaded on his forehead as he carefully leaned forward to peer through the bushes a few meters from the small structure.

*She’s back. Thank you, Ker’celm.* He gritted his teeth to keep from moaning as he struggled to stand and stumble to the shed. He opened the door and found Tamara looking defeated, exhausted, and sitting on the blanket with a basket beside her. Fever-ridden he stumbled inside and fell into her arms, just missed hitting his head on the pieces of wood that were stacked to one side of the shed.

“What were you doing outside?” She sounded upset and he wished he hadn’t been the cause of her distress.

“I woke to find you were gone. I would have believed you were an illusion, if it weren’t for the bandages. I worried the human soldiers would discover me in the shed, so I hid in the wood nearby in the hope you would return. I knew I hadn’t the strength to make it back to my lands.”

“Well you can’t afford to be up and moving around, your injuries alone should have killed you, and you have a fever. Lay still now and I’ll tend your wounds.”

The Ker'iaddahs raised an eyebrow, but lay still and let the human girl remove the hastily made bandages to view his wounds. Her eyebrows puckered in a frown as she stared bewildered at his wounds that were red with infection. They were already nearly closed as if days of healing had taken place instead of hours. She cleaned the remaining blood and dirt away and wrapped fresh bandages on the wounds.

*Even with these serious wounds I shouldn't be this ill. A fever and infection this quickly after the attack makes no sense.*

“At the rate you are healing, by tomorrow night you will only have scars where the arrows pierced your chest and thigh.” She stopped and gave him a long glance, “This is all a little too weird. First you didn't die from an arrow through your chest and now you are almost healed only a day later. If it wasn't for the fever and infection I would believe the bard's tales of your people's magical powers.”

Aresifiil knew he was fortunate that this sympathetic human had come to his aid but other humans had tried to kill him and had nearly succeeded. He certainly couldn't trust this stranger with the secrets of his people. *If the arrow had entered on the right side of my chest I would be dead. The arrows! What was it I was thinking before about the arrows? Poison! Yes, that must be why I have a fever and am fighting an infection.* Through his unfocused thoughts his mind finally landed on the source of his continued struggle to heal.

“Drink,” he managed to find the human word in spite of his mind's wandering. Tamara reached for her water skin and was surprised when he pushed it away. “The poison. Please, drink,” he repeated as she looked at him in frustration, and again he pushed her hand with the water skin away. His hand moved to his waist, but his flask wasn't there.

“Do you refuse my water because you believe I'd poison you?”

His chest constricted as he noticed the hurt in her voice, but he watched her search for his flask. He tried not to grab it when she held it out to him. He took a long draught, lay back, closed his eyes, and felt sleep tug at his consciousness.

“What manner of person do you think I am if you believe I'd poison you after trying so hard to save your life?”

Without opening his eyes he replied, “My water contains healing properties; the arrows were poisoned.” With a sigh, he let go of his thoughts and fell into a deep sleep.

~

Tamara stared at the sagoron, *I hope the small amount of his elixir he drank will be enough to stop the effects of the poison.* She drank some water from her own water skin and ate a piece of dingin fruit and bread. She looked at his flask and wondered, *What could be in his water that helped heal him so quickly?*

She bit her lip and opened his flask again and sniffed. It only smelled like water. Her curiosity overcame her and she took a sip. *Well, it only tastes like water too.*

She picked up a small blanket she brought back with her, folded it and tucked it under his head. Then she lay down close to the sagoron and pulled her cape over them both. Her last thought before she fell asleep was, *I am too tired to keep watch God. Please protect us.*

As the early morning light slipped through cracks in the walls of the woodshed, Tamara felt him stir before she opened her eyes and saw him watching her. She blushed with discomfort as she sat up. "How do you feel this morning?"

"Thirsty and hungry. May I have some of your water and something from your basket to eat?" Aresifiil asked.

Tamara reached over and felt his forehead, "You still have a fever, but it is a good sign that you are hungry." She offered him first her water skin and then she brought out some dingin fruit, bread, and chicken.

Aresifiil drank deeply for a moment then stopped. "We probably should ration our supplies."

She handed him a piece of dingin along with some chicken between two pieces of bread. He stared a moment at the chicken but then bit into the food hungrily. He finished all she gave him in mere moments. He took another swallow of water and lay back. As he closed his eyes again he offered, "Thank you."

"You're welcome." Tamara murmured to the already sleeping sagoron. She took food out for herself and ate and drank before she curled up again to sleep.

~

It was late afternoon when he woke. She was asleep, but soon moved and opened her eyes. He felt an instant surge of curiosity.

"You have the most unusual eyes; like all the colors of the forest. No sagoron has such coloring."

He knew he sounded foolish, but just at this moment he didn't care. Even if she was human, she was lovely, and she had risked her life to save him. He was certain she was unaware of his parentage and completely aware of his species. *So why did you save my life, and how do I quit staring at you like an idiot.*

Tamara's face felt hot with a blush for the second time that day. "My grandmother had eyes like mine. It is your eyes that are stunning, so deep a green like the ocean."

"I've never seen the ocean, but I believe it cannot be more enchanting than you. What is your name?" Aresifiil unexpectedly wanted to know all about her.

"Tamara."

"Tamara, it's so different from sagoron names, exotic and lovely. I'm Aresifiil, and I can't help wondering why you saved me when so many of your people were determined to kill me."

"Not all of our people want the sagorons dead, just those who are motivated by greed and have a warped sense of superiority. Some of our people are full of prejudice, but most believe we should leave each other's species to live in peace. When I overheard the soldiers' plans to attack you and your friend I knew I had to do what I could to help you. Also I needed to get proof that the humans are instigating war, not the sagorons."

"What will you do with this proof?"

“Give it to the Lady Alterra, whom I serve as a handmaiden. It is her father and uncle who we feel are behind these attacks. We hope to find a way to inform the duke so he can take action and stop them before they bring war between our people.”

“Your lady would take this action against her own father?”

Tamara bristled, “Her father cares nothing for her, his own child, or for anything but power and wealth! He abuses his vassals, desires war between the species, and is uncaring of the lives that will be spent. She will do what is right by her conscience, not by her birthright. Money means nothing to her. I have never been treated as a servant by her, only as a trusted friend and ally in the effort to stop the men who stir up the locals to commit treason.”

“I meant no insult, Tamara. I was merely surprised that a human would stand against her own flesh and blood to defend our species. These are the very things I came to find out – who is behind the violations of the treaty, and whether all humans are in agreement with their actions. You have helped me fulfill my mission in coming here. Thank you.” He was exhausted again and Tamara reached over to lay a soft hand on his forehead.

“You still have a fever. Do you think you will be able to fight the infection off and clear your system of the poison?”

Her genuine concern moved him and he found himself staring at her again. “I’m unsure, but I’m grateful for all your efforts to keep me alive.” He touched her hand before he closed his eyes to rest.

~

As she watched the sleeping sagoron, Tamara took a deep breath. He really is charming and so brave to come here with his friend to seek the truth. Why aren’t the human men I know so noble? She found herself suddenly full of questions. It’s odd, but I could swear I felt his interest in me and at the same time an overwhelming need to know more about him.

~

Night had fallen and Tamara had dozed off again, but the temperature dropped and she shivered in her sleep. Aresifiil, already awake for some time, moved closer to her to provide her with heat from his body. He slid an arm over her and meant to lay back to wait for dawn when she stirred in his arms. Unsure of his own motives, he lowered his lips to hers and was surprised when she didn’t pull away. The kiss deepened and he suddenly felt hunger for something besides food. She turned in his arms and slipped her own around his neck, and he forgot about waiting for the dawn.

~

**LaPhere Duchy, Mandolin Province**  
**Lord Cecil Alterra Holding**  
**Late in the Month of Mystere ~ Year 1002AA**

Tamara stared at the mirror in horror nearly four months after she watched Aresifiil enter the sagoron oaks to return to his people. *It can’t be! It was only once, and I don’t even understand why it happened, but I can’t be carrying his child! It is ridiculous. We are two different species. It simply is impossible!*

Tears welled up in her hazel eyes as she felt the babe move within her again. For a few weeks now she had felt a strange fluttering off and on, but she had passed that off as some odd illness, she had not wanted to believe what the evidence showed. Yesterday the fluttering feeling was gone, and in its place she now felt kicks, and pushes. She wasn't naïve enough to not understand that she was pregnant. She was the oldest and remembered everything about her siblings' time in her mother's womb. None of them had kicked until the six month, and she wasn't quite four months along.

*And these feelings! I keep having these overwhelming urges to laugh at nothing in particular. Mother never expressed feeling like that. Actually, she would burst into tears at the drop of a hat. But worse, is the reaction that now flows over me like a wave whenever I'm around Lord Alterra. I have never felt comfortable around him, yet, now when I am near him a flood of feelings from disgust to fear nearly paralyzes me.*

*What am I going to do? Father is off serving the duke with many of the vassals of Marquis Desmarais, or should I now refer to them as vassals of Marquis Dionte Alterra? If rumors are true Natalie's uncle will soon be legitimized as the new Marquis. I don't know if I should be glad that father is gone, or wish that he was here so I could talk with him.*

*I'm going to have to speak to Natalie, at least she already knows all about my saving the sagoron Ker'iaddahs. Aresifil! How will I get word to him about this? How will he react?*

The tears that had been pooling in her eyes finally fell, slid down her cheeks, and crashed to the floor in front of the mirror unheeded. The babe stirred and pushed at her ribs until a sharp pain caused her to gasp. Immediately the pushing stopped as if the child somehow knew it had caused her pain.

*I could swear I feel his concern! And why am I so certain the babe is going to be a boy? Closing her eyes, Tamara took a ragged breath and decided to tell Natalie the truth immediately and ask for her help to return home, at least until the babe's birth. I will have to leave him with mother if I return to serve here as Natalie's handmaiden. The sudden ache at that thought brought further tears.*

*Rock a bye baby, in the treetop  
When the wind blows, the cradle will rock  
Up in the oak tree, safe you will be  
The golden boughs will hold you, my sweetest baby.*

# CHAPTER X

## LaPhere Duchy, Sagoron Territory Fourth of La Porte ~ Year 1002AA

*Who is this that stands before me?  
Neither sagoron nor human  
A graftling.  
A youth for this breath in time  
You have changed since I sent you away.  
Only a few days ago I held you in my arms  
A few moments in the trees  
And my baby boy is a man.  
Tamara*

Tobin worked his way deeper into the foliage of the ancient *pah'mirsekuz* as he checked that no one saw him. He knew he could not escape the consequences of violating ancient sagoron laws, but he hoped that if he hid here for a while it would give his father, Aresifil, time to calm down before Tobin was brought before the *Ker'agartet*. Then he might have the chance to explain that he hadn't intended to do what the guardians had assumed.

He settled into the crook formed by two branches and leaned back on the larger, more vertical one. The smell of the venerable *pah'mirsekuz* wafted over him like a familiar and favored perfume. He closed his eyes and felt the tree's ambiance surround him.

The guardians would be angrier for having to wait for him. Before the *Ker'iaddahs* Orehifil delivered Tobin to their father, the young graftling's half-brother was sure to take the opportunity to rebuke his sibling for the delay. Tobin adjusted his position a bit in the tree branches and realized his discomfort was more from thinking about his half-brother than a physical need to move. His thoughts were somber with regret for having stepped out of Orehifil's favor. These last several years they had grown close, but the memory of longing to win his sibling's approval lurked in his heart. He shook his head and let his mind wander to the start of his predicament...

***Sixteen years prior sagoron time/  
Five weeks prior human time  
Sixth day of Réjouir ~ Year 1002AA***

Hours before breakfast, Tobin snuck out of the *pah'mirsekuz*. He noticed the royal staff already up and busy preparing the morning meal and decided to forgo grabbing supplies, *Too risky, someone might discover my plans and stop me.*

While he would be gone only a few hours into the human lands, months would pass in the sagoron realm. However, he hadn't seen his human birth mother since just after his birth, fifteen years in the past, and the desire to get acquainted with her became an obsession for him.

*It might be crazy but I need to know her. Well, I need to ask her some questions at least. Right now the only information I have is that she lives and works as a handmaiden for Lord Alterra's daughter, Natalie, and that the lord's manor is near a town to the east of the *pah'mirsekuz*. Which means my sagoron clothing will draw attention. I will need to find some human attire so I don't stand out.*



At the edge of the border he watched the guardians for an opportunity to sneak past them. *I wonder how father and Oreh managed it so long ago.* He shuddered. That foray into the human realm had cost Oreh his life.

Difficult as it was, it was not impossible to leave the sagoron realm. In fact it was much easier than he expected since the guardians spent their time watching the opposite direction in order to keep the humans out. He was pretty sure someone noticed him before he got all the way past, but they probably were glad to see him go. Most of the sagorons never openly mistreated him but he was certain they would not miss him.

When he passed a cottage with clothes hanging out on the line, he took a tunic and vest and left a silver piece in return. The silver was a large overpayment, but since he took the clothes without asking, he felt his loss left them equal. A pair of trousers hung on the line as well but when he tried them on their large size made him look ridiculous. He felt sure they would draw more attention than his own.

It was late evening when he arrived at the edge of Alterra Township, just in time to see the few shops in the small town close. He stopped a rotund balding merchant who was locking the door to his bakery and asked, "Can you tell me where the lord's home is sir?"

"It's up to the east, on that hill," the baker responded, pointing the way. "If you are looking for work it would be best that you waited until morning. Lord Alterra holds his weekly court tomorrow after the morning meal, and he personally hires all that work for him. You look a bit small for the mines. You should try for work here, in town, at the livery or tavern," the man said as he studied Tobin with pursed lips and narrowed eyes.

"Thank you, I might check on those opportunities but I think I will go on to the manor right now." Tobin briskly walked off toward the lord's household.

As the baker rubbed his chubby hands down the front of his flour covered apron, he frowned and watched Tobin for a long while.

Midway up the hill was a six-meter high, stone, gated wall which enclosed the entire top of the hillside. The guard at the gate was busy berating two drunken younger guards, and waved Tobin on towards the main house after only a minimal search. Lord Alterra's house was larger than any human dwelling Tobin had seen yet. At the thought of approaching its gleaming front door he felt his nerve give out. As he knocked three times on it, he recognized it was sagoron oak. From time to time the humans got brave enough, or stupid enough, to try to harvest from the edges of the *pah'mirsekuz*.

The treaty between the species commanded there be no harvesting of the sagoron oak. Yet, the sagorons felt it wasn't worth restarting the four hundred years of wars over a tree taken from the outer rim of the forest here and there by these humans. However, they firmly repulsed any real harvesting, and never allowed anyone any deeper than a hundred meters. When humans tried to remove more than a small number of the outer trees they found their equipment broken or vanished and even a few serious accidents had occurred.

The humans had long since given up on any earnest cutting, and even the rare times a tree was taken it was only after a ceremony was completed. Devised by some ignorant human, to ward off evil and hopefully bring the sagorons' blessings, this ceremony provided vast amusement to the sagorons, and some silver, which they gladly accepted. After all, the oak trees were in their territory.

The sagoron oak door was opened by a staid-looking, wispy, whited haired butler. Of course Tobin did not know yet what a butler was, but he realized the man was a servant of some sort. Behind him a young woman entered the foyer.

“May I see the lady Tamara?” Tobin asked.

The butler sneered and replied with condescension, “The servants’ entrance is at the south side of the manor.”

As the butler moved to shut the door in his face, an entreating young voice stopped him. “What manner of hospitality is this, Jèbel? Do we refuse a visitor common courtesy after he has journeyed to find our holding?” The voice belonged to a young lady, who at that moment gave Tobin an inviting smile. “I am Natalie, Lord Alterra’s daughter.”

The tall lean butler swallowed his pique at being dressed down in front of the stranger. He opened the door to the oddly spoken traveler, and murmured an apology before he excused himself to go find the girl’s handmaiden.

“You’re from far away aren’t you?” She asked. Without waiting for a reply she added, “Your accent is unfamiliar.”

The Lady Natalie’s hair seemed to have a life of its own. Although the dark tresses were pulled back from her face with a red ribbon, many had escaped to twist this way and that in a frame about her face. She was pale, but not with the paleness of illness. Hers was a creamy smooth skin that shone with a healthy glow.

“To some it would be an impossible journey to undertake,” Tobin replied vaguely. He hoped she would not press him about the oddness in his speech. He did not want to lie to this exquisite creature. His breathing refused to come normally and he was certain she heard his heart pounding. He understood now how his father had fallen in love with a human woman. Suddenly, he realized she’d asked him a question that he’d missed and he flushed with embarrassment. “I’m sorry. My mind seems to have wandered. You asked me something?”

A most delightful dimple appeared in her left cheek as she smiled but Lord Alterra’s daughter just shook her head. Her winter-sky gray eyes sparkled as she picked up a lamp from a stand near the front door and solicitously said, “Never mind my babbling. Here I stand beleaguering you with questions of your travels when you must be exhausted and hungry. It is past the evening meal but I will have the cook make you something and bring it to the small salon. Please come, you can wait for Tamara in here.”

She led him down a hall to a small sitting room with a few chairs and a long couch set close to a fireplace which had a pile of wood resting within, ready to be lit. “I’ll have a servant come light the fire for you; it is a bit cold this evening.” Natalie offered, as she sat the lamp down on the end table by the long couch.

“I believe I could manage to start the fire. I don’t want you to go to such a bother for me.” He spoke as he moved closer to the fireplace.

“Hospitality is always the duty of a lord’s household, but in this case it is also a pleasure. You have a bit of her looks, are you kin of Tamara?” Natalie inquired.

Before he came to see his mother, Tobin understood he could not let anyone else know he was her son. So he planned on telling people, if he was asked, he was her cousin. Now though, the words stuck in his throat like a hard biscuit.

“Jèbel said there is someone here to see me.” A young woman a few years older than Lady Natalie stood in the doorway. Her hair was the color of sand and her eyes seemed to be all the shades of the forest leaves in fall. She looked from Natalie to the young man standing by the fireplace.

Tamara’s eyebrows rose as she gazed upon her son unknowingly. “I’m sorry, although you look familiar, I don’t know you. Was Jèbel mistaken of whom you are here to see?”

Now, as he stood in front of her, he didn’t know how to begin to introduce himself. He knew he must not speak of his sagoron heritage here in front of Natalie. However, she gracefully excused herself to go procure the promised meal. His mother stood patiently as the silence grew awkward.

*I think I made a horrible mistake coming here.*

He took a deep breath and started, “I believe you know my father, the *Ker’agartet* of the sagorons. You would most likely call him, King Aresifil.”

~

Tamara stepped back startled. Yes, she now recognized the resemblance in the color of those beautiful eyes but he was taller than his father, even taller than Tamara herself. *How can he be sagoron? His light brown hair isn’t the usual sagoron dark gold, and the pupils of his eyes aren’t the sagorons’ star shape. Why would Aresifil send his older son here? Wait, he never mentioned having a son. Oh! The babe, something has happened to our child!*

Without thinking she blurted, “The baby, something is wrong? Did Aresifil send you to convey me to the Great Oak Forest?”

Tamara felt confused and afraid. *None of Lord Alterra’s household, except Natalie, know about the baby. If Lord Alterra finds out he will send me away, or worse. I wouldn’t care except I wouldn’t want to leave Nat alone with him! Natalie of course will never tell him about the baby, but if I need to leave now for my child’s sake, or if Prince... oh, Aresifil said his title is Ker’iaddahs... but if he has changed his mind about raising our half-sagoron child, then Natalie’s father will surely find out.*

Tobin closed his eyes for a moment then opened them and let out his breath slowly before he replied, “No, nothing ill has befallen your son, and father did not send me. My name is Tobin. I am the second son of *Ker’agartet* Aresifil.”

Confused, she frowned and spoke slowly, “Aresifil never told me of any son. In truth, he said nothing at all of having a wife and children. I’m sure he said he had never married.” Tamara paused, she thought of the honest and honorable sagoron ‘prince’ and then remembered other things Aresifil had shared.

Slowly her thoughts turned into words, “He did tell me that time passes differently in your realm. The few days I hid him from the soldiers while his injuries healed were a couple years in his kingdom.” Suddenly the implication of her words, and his, caught hold, and Tamara grasped the back of a chair to keep upright.

“No-o-o!” She whispered, as tears pooled in her lovely eyes.

“I’m sorry mother, I shouldn’t have come. It’s just that I wanted to see you, to know if you had ever wanted me. Father and my stepmother, Kyla, show me equal attention to my older half-brother, but the others... I always feel apart, like I don’t fit in. You’re very beautiful, mother.” Tobin stumbled through words he had not meant to say. He looked around and shook his head. “I’ll go, I shouldn’t have come.”

She stepped forward to block his way, and reached out to touch him. Her cool fingers caressed his face and tears slipped down her cheeks. “Stay for awhile. I may be in shock but I know what you say is the truth. So many years of your life already passed.” She said in a wistful whisper. Then with strength and determination she demanded, “I want to hear everything.”

She pulled him over to the couch to sit beside her. “Starting with why your eye pupils are shaped like mine now when at birth they were the usual sagoron form, stars.

“You... aren’t upset that I came to see you?” Tobin asked hesitantly. As Tamara shook her head he lowered his voice and answered her question, “I am a very young sagoron, and changing my appearance with *Ker’ah* is difficult, but my eyes would have made it impossible to move about in your realm.”

Tamara blinked in a moment of shock at this ability she had not understood before that the sagorons possessed. He noticed her composure changed and again offered, “I really should go; I have upset you.”

She laid a hand on his, and struggled to speak calmly. “I will tell you everything you want to know. When I found out I was pregnant, your father had already returned to your realm months before. Neither of us meant to have an intimate relationship, much less have a child together. Yet, I would have kept you if I could have but humans would have shunned you and persecuted you much more than your father’s people would. He was the sagoron *Ker’iaddahs* after all and if he accepted you the other sagorons would have to. I’m sorry you’ve been lonely.

When I found your father injured he was delirious and close to death. The hired mercenaries who attacked your father and Oreh near the forest were carrying poison tipped arrows. After I removed the arrows from your father, I hid him while I nursed him well. However, if he hadn’t been carrying your sagoron elixir, *Jes’mir*, none of my care would have helped.” Tamara hesitated before continuing. It was obvious the years of ignorance of his past, and how she had come to be with Aresifiil, had been hard for her son.

He waited patiently as she gathered her thoughts.

“You deserve the truth from me.” Tamara finally said. “Your father healed within a few days, but while he was still delirious he kissed me. I fell in love with him at that moment and when he pulled me to him I did not resist. Later he tried to assure me that it wasn’t my fault. It was sagoron ‘magic’ that caused me to fall in love with him. Truly, I knew he was just trying to ease my guilty feelings. Sagoron magic is a foolish old maid’s tale.

I don’t understand my reaction though, even now, because I cared about him then, but didn’t really have deep love for him and I had never even kissed a man before that moment. After your father returned to your people I was left confused by what happened but I can’t blame him for my actions. He didn’t know who I was when he was so delirious, only that I was kind and caring.

I suppose he was smitten with me in his vulnerable state of mind. At the time, I had been home visiting my family at their cottage near the forest. When he was well enough to return to your people, he told me

he was the *Ker'iaddahs* or for us the 'heir prince' of the sagorons and asked me if I would marry him and return to live in his land."

She noticed a look of surprise cross her son's face and halted her explanation to let him absorb these new facts of his father's past.

"What I don't understand is why you chose to conceive me."

Frowning in consternation, Tamara struggled to answer her son. "Tobin, I explained before, your father returned to your realm before I knew I was pregnant."

Now Tobin frowned, "Are you saying human females do not choose when to conceive?"

As she raised an eyebrow, Tamara shook her head, "How could we choose when to have a child? We can't control our fertility in that manner." She saw her son raise his own eyebrows and she asked, "Do the sagoron females have the ability to control when they conceive?"

"Yes, always. When a couple decides they are ready for a child they hold a great celebration feast and announce their plans to conceive. All the sagorons rejoice with them and offer blessings and return home to create gifts for the new child. When each child is born our entire society takes time to worship the Creator for giving us such a precious gift."

Tamara closed her eyes and swallowed hard, "Then your father must have been shocked and felt betrayed when Natalie delivered you to your people. He probably was angry that I would choose to conceive you and then send you to him to look after."

"Neither he nor Kyla, my step-mother, have ever spoken of it but I suppose you are right."

"Oh Tobin, I am sorry. If only I had married him when he asked, you would have been spared all these years of questions over your birth. I only refused because I was afraid the sagorons wouldn't want a human 'queen', and that it would cause great trouble between our species if I suddenly disappeared. I knew he must return to your realm, so I told him that I couldn't bear to leave mine. He was upset but accepted my choice. I know it was a matter of honor to him, to not leave me after we were together, even under those strange circumstances.

I returned here to the lord's holding until I realized at four months along I was pregnant. Natalie and I traveled back to my parents' home and at a little over four months you were born. Human babies need nine months in the womb. Tobin, you were born in less than half that time. I would have worried when I saw how small you were but sagorons are two-thirds human size and otherwise you seemed fine. Of course, even for a female, I am a short human. My mother is small too. She used to tease that we had sagoron blood in our ancestry and maybe that was closer to truth than she knew.

You are taller than your father is though, so your human half had some effect. You are even taller than I am! I know the other sagoron children probably treated you badly for it, as human children always teased me for being so small for a human." Tamara stammered to a stop and bit her lower lip. So much had come out in a rush and now she waited to see if sharing her whole story had been the right thing.

"My stepmother, Kyla, never treated me badly. Father had become our *Ker'agartet* by the time he asked her to marry him, nineteen years after I was conceived here. She and father conceived Orehifiil, my older half-brother, nearly five years later, but he was born more than forty years before me. Sagorons know of

the time difference between our realms but this situation is very complex. Now that I realize the way the time twisted, and I understand human conception, I see that everyone involved has suffered, and that father was never unfaithful to my stepmother. If I can explain this to her maybe she will forgive him, and me, and find peace.”

Tobin’s deep green eyes darkened as he stared into the cold unlit fireplace. When he spoke again it was with undisguised self-consciousness. “For you, all of this has taken place in less than a year. I know you are my birth mother but we are so close in years now and Kyla has been the only mother I’ve known. Maybe you wouldn’t mind if I called you Tamara?”

Smiling gently, Tamara responded, “You are more like a little brother rather than a son. I can’t get back the years we’ve missed but I would love you to come visit me when you can. Perhaps you should consider me a cousin, that is something that we could tell anyone who inquires.” Tamara squeezed his arm lightly.

“Yes, that is something I also thought about before I came here.” Tobin found he still had many unanswered questions. “How did Natalie return me to my father if I was born here? I know the humans who despise us keep watch over the perimeter of our lands.”

“It wasn’t easy. She is the only one who knows I gave birth to a baby boy less than a month ago. When we returned to my home, since you were so small, she placed you in a basket and carried you off into the woods as if she was planning a picnic.” Tamara paused and said thoughtfully, “I think we shouldn’t tell her you are that child, she has been drug into this situation deep enough.”

“You shouldn’t tell me *what?*” Natalie stood in the doorway with a guarded look on her face. At her side, his back waist high, was a bushy haired creature unlike anything Tobin had seen in his life. Most of its hair was snow white, but as it turned its head, he saw the back of its ears were a bright sky blue, matching the ice blue of its eyes.

~

After he caught himself staring at the girl and beast, he politely looked away. The cook entered with a tray of food, her short, dull, maspar-brown hair swayed forward as she set the tray down on a long table at the right side of the room.

“You may leave us. Thank you for the late meal, Marie. I won’t need you again tonight.” Natalie smiled as the cook ambled off. “So, we shouldn’t tell Natalie *what?*” She repeated as she led her beast to sit at her feet by a chair opposite the couch Tobin and Tamara were sharing.

Mother and son looked at each other uncomfortably. “Tobin is hungry and tired Natalie. I’ll serve him and then we can talk.” She turned to her son and asked, “Are you staying the night?”

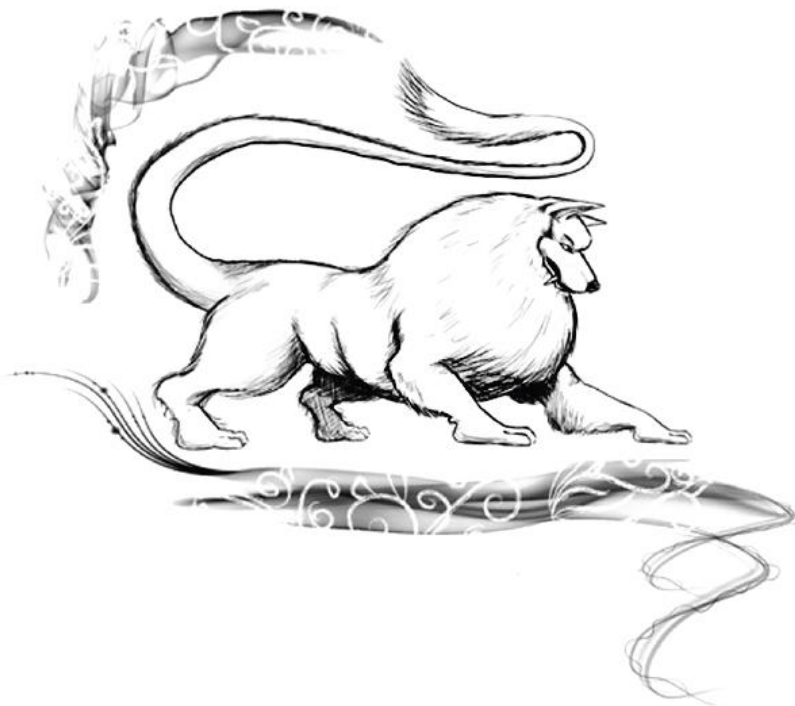
“Um, I don’t want to be any bother.” He realized he was staring at Natalie’s creature again and looked up as he spoke, then blushed when he saw them watching him.

“Nonsense! I already told you it is the lord holder’s responsibility to provide hospitality. You must eat now, and then you will tell me what you are both avoiding discussing in front of me.” Natalie responded assuredly. Then with an amused grin she patted her animal and asked, “Have you never seen a puga before?”

He shook his head as he allowed himself another curious glance. “Where does such a creature come from?” he asked.

“They are found in the cold mountain regions where my mother’s family lives. They are elusive creatures mostly. Therefore, they are much sought after for their hides as well as their meat. However, if one is attained at only a few days old, it can be tamed and trained to protect its owner. They are very loyal animals, which form a life-long bond with their owner, and will fight ferociously to the point of death in their master’s defense. Sadly, few are found at that early age and so the price is prohibitive.

Usually only the wealthiest families have these guard animals but my uncle Joshua found a litter a few years ago, just after my mother died, and gave one to me for comfort. He said he was giving up a small fortune, but since he always adored his older sister, he wanted to do something for me, her only daughter. A puga’s ears are dyed the color of the lord’s household, not because any owners would mistake which puga was theirs, but for the people who might be frightened thinking it’s a wild creature. Most townspeople in larger populations recognize the pugas with dyed ears as protectors.”



He eyed the puga and felt certain it was watching him with an equal level of intelligent assessment. It bared its fangs, in what could have been taken as a grin, while it lifted a large claw-tipped paw towards him just before it fully extended and retracted those natural weapons. Its fur-covered tail, at nearly two meters, flicked once before it draped itself over Natalie’s shoulders from behind.

Tamara filled a plate for Tobin as Natalie educated him on pugas. Soon she handed him the plate laden with sweet potatoes and carrots, pork roast, gatten-meat pie, and fresh bread. For dessert the cook had provided a large bowl of fresh pearlberries which swam in a heavy sweet cream. Since the pearlberries were snow-white the cook had dyed the cream light green.

Unused to human cuisine, he nevertheless was ravenous from not eating since the evening meal the night before. He paused for only a moment and then decided his hunger was such that he could even eat meat at this point. To his surprise he did enjoy most of the food and would have preferred only to have it less salted. Lord Alterra apparently enjoyed his food well-seasoned. The two young women smiled at his obvious contentment when he finally pushed the plate away and insisted he could not eat another bite. He eyed the bowl of pearlberries ruefully and hoped he could make room for them after they finished talking, as pearlberries were his favorite fruit.

Tamara picked his plate up and returned it to the tray. "I know you are curious as to my guest's identity and what we were discussing before you came in the salon. I ask you to bear with me as the explanation might seem inconceivable."

Natalie nodded her head and looked at him.

"You remember that important package you delivered to some, err... friends of mine last month, when we were visiting my parents for a few days and I was too ill to deliver the package myself?" She tried to speak of the events without coming right out and mentioning the baby as she worried someone might come in and overhear just as Natalie had when she brought the food.

Natalie raised her eyebrows for a moment, and then nodded. "Is this young man one of those friends? I had thought he was related to you, he has your family looks."

Tobin cleared his throat but didn't speak.

His mother *felt* his discomfort and realized her son was a bit enamored with the lord's daughter. *Oh, dear! This could be a problem.* Although Tobin was a 'prince', as *Ker'agartet* Aresifiil's son, Tamara knew that Lord Alterra would be furious if his daughter became involved with a sagoron.

She realized her hesitation was making them both nervous, so she continued, "I told you to explain that the package did not belong here, in our realm, but should be given to those who could take responsibility for it. Uhm...you know they don't measure time as we do."

While she talked, Tamara walked over to the open doorway of the salon to be sure of their privacy. "Natalie, that package has aged fifteen years since you saw it and Tobin is here to let me have a look at the results of the care they have given to my most valued possession."

~

Natalie opened her mouth, however, she quickly closed it as she was sure whatever she said would sound rude. She simply couldn't believe what her handmaiden had said.

*If this were true, then this young man was an infant less than a month ago! I carried that baby into the forest myself. He had his father's startling eyes but otherwise his features were passable for human, as long as no one got a look at the talons on his feet. Of course there were even greater reasons for giving him to the sagorons.*

*Among humans his skills would have been like a herald from King Marix. Everyone would have stopped and taken notice of a baby that could move small objects by telekinesis. Humans would not have been kind to the baby. In fact, they might have killed him. I was happy to help Tamara when she told me how*



*she had rescued the sagoron prince. I know of the rumors and myths that sagoron time is different than human time. In spite of that, how am I to believe that Tobin is that same child? Impossible!*

Natalie stood up, shook her head, and said, “This is utter nonsense Tamara. I did deliver that *small* package and you yourself are not yet fully recovered from your *illness*.” She stopped speaking as Tobin rose from the couch. She bit her lip in distress, for she really had liked this young man and loathed her own rudeness.

“I am sorry to trouble you, Lady Natalie. Perhaps it is better if I do not stay. Tamara, maybe I could visit you when you are again spending some time at your family’s cottage?” he turned a hopeful face to his mother.

“That won’t be until summer, several months from now, and many years for you.” she replied sadly.

Natalie walked over to Tobin, and touched his cheek for a moment, and then embarrassed, quickly dropped her hand. “You must certainly stay the night and rest. I’ll have some food brought to Tamara’s room for the morning meal where you can share it in private. I hope you will forgive my bad manners. It is not every day I meet... err, royalty, and I am afraid my mother would be ashamed of how I have responded to you. Perhaps the next time we meet I will have adjusted to this disturbing reality. My father knows how I love to travel to the countryside with Tamara. I shall try to convince him to let us take a few days next month. Oh, dear! This is difficult. While possibly a month will pass here, you will live as much as nineteen years without seeing your mother. When I see you again you will be as old as my uncle, Lord Dionte.”

~

The following morning Tobin returned to the *pah’mirsekuz* forest with mixed feelings. He knew his parents would have worried about him, even if many sagorons might have been relieved at his departure. His half-brother was one who would probably not be eager to see Tobin again. As the graftling neared the perimeter he felt the tension sap his energy and wished he could find a way to pass the guardians unseen. He knew they would have noted his approach days prior, due to the time lag between the realms, and therefore a guardian reception would be waiting when he crossed into their time.

Walking beneath the large *pah’mirsekuz* he began to relax a little. *More than just Orehifil will probably condemn me, but even if father is angry as well as worried, he will also be relieved to find his younger son safely home.* Half-way through the woods to Oakhaven, Tobin hesitated. By now someone should have approached him. Perhaps he had been wrong and no one cared enough to confront him. At that sad thought, his melancholy mood drained the rest of his energy. He sat down against the bole of a *pah’mirsekuz* older than his father was. Resting his head back, he wondered what his future would be. *Will I be cast out from the sagorons and live among the humans? No, even if father is angry he will never go that far.* He closed his eyes and tried not to think about the lovely Natalie and the way she made his heart pound. *If I was cast out I could see mother and Natalie often.*

His thoughts shifted between anxiety over the sagorons’ reaction, and wondering if he would ever be allowed to leave their realm again. He drifted off and was startled awake, when he heard a high-pitched whistle. After he returned the whistle, the young graftling stood to wait for the guardians’ arrival.

It was Orehifil who dropped down from a nearby *pah’mirsekuz* moments later. *I should have recognized that whistle,* Tobin silently chastised himself and stiffened at what he expected to be an insufferable confrontation. *Well, I did bring all of this on myself.*

“Well met brother,” Orehifiil shocked him with his lopsided grin and the cordial sagoron greeting.

“Well met,” Tobin managed to stammer out. *Wait a minute! He actually called me brother! He has never called me brother.* “I, uhm... thought you would be in a mood to pound some sense into me,” he said, confusion and doubt played across his face.

“Yes, well, perhaps I would have been but father held a conclave and I was invited to sit in. He can be very persuasive, especially when mother was there glaring out at the gathering as if to dare anyone to show dissention.” Orehifiil sighed and gave another lopsided grin.

“Mother and father are right, as always. I believe their exact words were, ‘We have treated Tobin as an outsider, especially you, Orehifiil, his own brother. It is time everyone changed this bad behavior.’ So, here I stand remonstrated.” He stood there with his right hand held out palm up, where a small glow had grown into an orb of light, and offered the customary sagoron sign of peace and friendship.

Tobin’s world tilted for a moment. All his life he had ached for even a token-show of affection from his brother. Now, here his sibling stood, breaking down the once insurmountable wall that had divided them since Tobin’s arrival in the *pah’mirsekuz*.

Hesitantly, at first, and then with a flood of feelings pouring through, as if from behind a breached dam, he stretched his left hand above the orb in Orehifiil’s upturned palm. The orb pulsed and the light spread so that they seemed to absorb it and shine from within. Tears sprang from Tobin’s eyes and he used the back of his right hand to wipe them away. His brother grasped him close for a moment.

“I told the others to wait. If you’re ready we can return to father and mother with the good news that you have returned.” Orehifiil spoke huskily. He was not given to emotion and looked uncomfortable for a moment. Then he grinned again and shook his head. “I had better not keep you here. Mother has been beside herself with worry.”

Tobin felt the guilt return and nodded in agreement, as he followed his brother to join the guardians who waited nearby at the guardian watchtower.

# CHAPTER XI

**LaPhere Duchy, Sagoron Territory  
Fourth day of La Porte, Year 1002AA**

*“Prodigious birth of love is to me,  
That I must love a loathed enemy.”*

*William Shakespeare*

A whistle from a nearby *pah'mirsekuz* caught Tobin's attention and dragged his thoughts back to the present from that moment sixteen years prior, when he'd returned from his first visit with Tamara. He sighed and returned the high note, acknowledging that he would join Orehifiil.

*Now is as good a time as later to face father.* He dropped down out of the *pah'mirsekuz* to where the *Ker'iaddahs* stood waiting with arms crossed over his chest.

However, one look at Tobin's crestfallen face had Orehifiil relenting. “Is she as sweet in personality as she appears?”

Tobin raised his eyebrows in surprise. “Actually she reminds me a good deal of mother. Our mother I mean.” He added the last in a rush, not wanting to be misunderstood.

Orehifiil waved a hand dismissing his anxiety. “After you returned from meeting Tamara sixteen years ago, mother told me how you felt Tamara was more like an older sister. Our mother is the only one you will give the honor of that title. Our parents' relationship has warmed since you first returned from searching for your birth mother. I also learned something back then.

When you were brought here as a babe, I was so angry because I thought it hurt mother. Then; when you disappeared at fifteen, all I thought about was how mother would feel rejected. I failed to see the hypocrisy in my own attitudes and actions. I hope you already know how much I regret those first wasted years and can someday find it possible to forgive me for being such a *taktron* back then.”

His brother's serious demeanor helped Tobin make a final leap of trust, and it wiped away all the pain of those childhood memories. “Your friendship and approval is all I ever wanted. If I didn't forgive you, I would be the hypocrite,” he replied, with a lighter heart.

“If you haven't been sure of my feelings before, I haven't tried hard enough to overcome those early years.” Orehifiil took the blame to himself with genuine concern, but then he folded his arms across his chest again. “So, what got into you to bring the human girl here without *first* getting father's permission?”

“I only planned to bring her to the edge of our realm to remain at a watchtower with the guardians while I came ahead to ask for father's approval. You and the guardians didn't wait for an explanation before frightening her.” He tried not to sound too condemning.

“Sorry. We overdid it, I guess. So what will you do now?”

“I took her back to the meadow, and she and Tamara will wait there together while I talk to father. If he approves I'll go back and bring her to meet them.”

Another sagoron arrived and gave them both a relieved smile. “Tobin, well met,” he held out his hand palm up.

“Well met, Tarkan. Well met.” he replied, and placed his own hand over the guardian’s outstretched one. “Let’s get this over with then.”

Tobin wanted to hurry now, to see his father and stepmother. As he followed the others to their home at the heart of the *pah’mirsekuz*, his mind slipped back to earlier that day in the meadow.

~

### ***Earlier that morning***

Natalie was sitting on a blanket eating a ripe dingin, looking more beautiful than a sunset over the Velvet Mountains. Her puga basked nearby in the warm afternoon sun. She smiled at Tamara mischievously. “We have been coming here for a picnic every day for three days, and Tobin has yet to meet us. Do you suppose he has changed his mind about coming to see you again?” She asked her handmaiden with only a hint of anxiety in her voice.

“Me? I am quite certain it is your fair face he is hoping to see again. Who am I but his younger mother? What was the age difference? I believe we can expect my bouncing two-month-old baby boy to be around thirty-one years old! Since sagorons stop aging and retain a youthful look all their years, Tobin should only look my equal.”

“On the contrary, *mother*, you look much better than I.” The women looked up to see Tobin nearby. He felt his face flush. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to eavesdrop on your conversation.”

“Oh, Tobin, we had almost given up on you!” Tamara greeted her son with a quick hug.

Natalie offered him a drink, which he accepted while eyeing the puga a bit hesitantly.

“What has happened in your life for the past sixteen years?” Tamara asked.

Tobin was accustomed to Kyla’s attention and graciously allowed the women to fuss over him. *I guess that is something all females have in common.*

“I’m sorry for the delay, although we did set a week of possible dates to meet, I would rather have come at the earliest opportunity, but I was assigned guardian duty and wasn’t free to return until now. None of the sagorons are too comfortable meeting humans, especially in this area where father was attacked, or I would have asked someone to let you know I was delayed. As for what I have been occupied with for the last sixteen years, that explanation will have to wait until later.”

“Have there been more conflicts recently, since Tamara helped your father escape from the men who had attacked and wounded him?”

“Most humans avoid the inner forest, but a few seem persistent in their efforts to find our realm, while some others just want to harvest the trees.” Tobin warmed to his subject as he sought to answer Natalie. “Obviously, we don’t stop them from taking a few of the trees at the outer rim of the forest, but these humans are greedy. They would cut down all the *pah’mirsekuz*, what you call the Great Oak Forest, and leave nothing for the future generations.

It is not only the sagorons that would suffer if that happened. The changes to the environment would hurt all life. Our species understands the need to replant for new growth. Few humans seem to grasp this idea.

Honestly, we could be strict about the treaty and demand no cutting at all, but letting them take a few trees is better than returning to war.”

“When I am mistress of this land, I will make sure the local villages are diligent in replanting the oak forest,” Natalie vowed. Then, a bit subdued, “Do you think there will ever come a day when our two kingdoms can live in harmony?”

“I would wish so, but the sagorons are apprehensive about opening friendly relations between our realm and yours. Some humans have always hunted my people, even with the old covenant, The Treaty of the Kings. If the Ren War had not happened, our species might have ended up warring again anyway. The belief that your king will stand by The Treaty of the Species is all that keeps the sagorons from an outright battle with the humans who continue to threaten the pah'mirsekuz.”

Tobin paused and weighed what more he should say. “We recently have had increasing incidences between humans and sagorons on the southwestern side of our forest. However, these humans are not local to that region. The rugged southern hills and cliffs of the Wilderness Mountains Range are the border to the East Fork River on its western banks. Since the last treaty, that area has been home of the nerrs. It is a mystery to father why humans are there. Father is also concerned with rumors that the nerrs and humans might end these thirty human years of peace and initiate a new war soon.”

Natalie and Tamara exchanged an uncomfortable glance.

“My father is one of the men the sagorons should be keeping watch over. He doesn't hide his contempt for your people. Yet, I would have heard if King Marix was gathering men to prepare for war. Father would have been shouting the rafters down with his complaints at having to send his able bodied vassals off to serve His Majesty when they could be toiling for him instead, even if he'd be glad for this particular reason.”

Tobin frowned and Natalie hurried to clarify herself, “I'm sure the rumors are founded in something. Not all of King Marix's subjects are obedient to his laws. Many of the lords, like my father, and even some marquises, might break the treaty if they thought King Marix incapable of enforcing it. Perhaps someone feels the king is too distant to bother coming over fights between humans and nerrs or sagorons.

Many people do not understand the king's passion for peace amongst the species. My grandfather did. He used to tell me stories of the Ren War, how he fought in the personal guard of His Majesty and of King Marix's quest to bring the species to a lasting peace. Badly wounded while defending our king, my grandfather never completely recovered after the war. However, I think his disappointment in my father was what really sped him to his grave.”

“Ah Natalie, your paternal grandfather had you and your mother to comfort him. She was dearer than a blood daughter to him,” Tamara smiled.

“You don't seem to share your father's attitudes. How is it that your father is a cold, contemptuous egoist, but you are so...?” He stopped himself, aghast at his audacity. *She holds her father in disdain due to his shameful behavior, but I didn't have to let my mouth run off like that.* “I... I'm sorry. I had no right to be so rude. If I have offended you, I regret it.”

Natalie raised her left eyebrow delicately and her lips turned up in an impish grin. “You have said nothing more than the truth and my grandfather would have respected you for your honesty, as do I.”

“You will come to understand Natalie is her own woman. Her mother was a remarkable lady, and all that knew her, adored her. Natalie is no less esteemed, for she is never snobbish or oppressive with anyone she meets. She detests her father’s corrupt behavior.”

“I am beginning to understand that. Still, I frequently irritate others with my brash honesty. My parents are always after me to be more diplomatic. You are kind to not hold it against me. Tamara, uhm...you work for Lord Alterra even though you dislike him?”

“In the human realm, Tobin, we do not always get to choose for whom we will work. My parents are minor landowners, as you know, and they had too many children to provide each of us a dowry. My older sister was married to a neighbor’s eldest son, but it will be years before father would have had enough money to provide a dowry for me. However, my work will afford a nice dowry for my two younger sisters, who would also have been unable to find suitable marriages otherwise.”

Tobin felt bewildered. “You mean a woman must pay a man to marry her or work for a tyrant to support herself?” He felt indignant. *Father’s domain contrasts greatly to my birth mother’s world. How can I hope to understand her and humankind? My kind too, just as much as the sagorons are, I have to admit. Seeing myself as human, as well as sagoron, is still strange, but Natalie is human and that’s definitely not a bad thing!*

Natalie laughed, “What happened to all that regret for being so brash and honest?” Tobin grinned and shook his head in chagrin. Teasing further, Natalie continued, “How are mates chosen in the sagoron realm? Do the females cast a love spell on the object of their desire?”

“All sagorons possess the mental abilities we call *Ker’ah*, which means God-given, because we know our power comes from our belief and trust in Him. Males are thoroughly trained in the use of these gifts. Females, however, receive only a partial training as their ability to mentally leverage wanes greatly after childbirth. We believe the Creator has fashioned this difference in order that their energy can be given more fully to child rearing which is by far of greater importance.

Humans equate our mental ability to move things as magic, but we do not cast spells. Besides, we males have such great natural charm that love spells are unnecessary.” Tobin returned her banter. *I’m enjoying talking with her as I never have with any sagoron female.*

“Look what your father’s charm got him into!” Tamara warned with a smile of delight that took the sting out of her words.

“I think the results turned out wonderfully,” Natalie said, and then changed the subject. “How long are you able to visit? Do your parents know you have returned here?”

Relieved at the change in the conversation, Tobin answered, “Yes, my parents are aware of my visit with you, and my step-mother even approves. She says to tell you, Tamara, that she holds no ill feelings towards you. In fact, after I returned from meeting you sixteen years ago, she and I have grown much closer, and I think she and father have rekindled their deep love that was renowned before I was brought to Oakhaven.”

Suddenly aware of his words, he stopped, *She and father were together only a few months ago for her, hearing about my parent’s love might be hurtful. I have been thoughtless.*

Tamara gave him a gentle smile of encouragement, and he continued, "Because you shared honestly with me about how you and father ended up being intimate, it was the medicine that their relationship needed. As to how long I can stay, well, that depends on how soon you tire of me." He smiled towards his mother but averted his eyes when he accidentally made eye contact with Natalie.

"I cannot imagine anyone thinking that you are tiresome. Possibly you will be irritated at having to spend a long boring day with two human women who know nothing of, uhm... *Ker'ah*, or even regular physical fighting," Tamara replied.

"I find your differences fascinating, and I'm eager to learn anything you wish to share with me of your people and their customs." He paused, frowning, "Sorry, I know they are also my people, but we have no common upbringing, and I sometimes find myself still thinking of humans as them and sagorons as us. Maybe when I broaden my knowledge of your people, I will find we have more in common than I believe."

~

A cool breeze had crept up on the three companions before they realized that they had been talking for several hours. Tamara took a walk to stretch her legs. After she left, Natalie smiled, a bit embarrassed as she suspected Tamara purposely gave them time alone.

Of course, no one would consider Natalie truly alone while her puga protectively watched over her. She was finding Tobin's mixture of honesty and sensitivity to others very refreshing and more than a little appealing.

"The sagorons have always fascinated me," Natalie rubbed her puga between its ears, as it settled its head on her lap contentedly. "Even when I was small I remember begging mother to tell me stories again and again about the 'magic' land of the sagorons. May I ask why you call it Oakhaven, if that is the human name for your city? And is it as beautiful as mother described in those childhood bedtime stories?"

"Well..." Tobin hesitated, "Our people don't consider our dwelling place a city in the same sense that humans do. Where we live, to us, is simply the *pah'mirsekuz*, but humans call it Oakhaven, so for the sake of communication between our people we refer to what is left of our land as Oakhaven.

Our homes and places of crafts-work are formed by using telekinesis on the *pah'mirsekuz* to shape them for the specific need. Literally our homes are living trees instead of dead wood or stone. I don't know all of what the humans believe about us, but my father says our *city* is radiant in comparison to his knowledge of your kingdom.

What little I saw of your town and lands was so different from how we live. I can't imagine living inside stone and wood walls on the ground. Each morning, when I wake up, the light kisses my face through the golden leaves outside my window, and the birds sing to me enchanting melodies from early morning to evening." Tobin shook his head as though brushing the vivid images away.

Natalie sat listening to him with rapt attention, and when he didn't continue she gently cleared her throat, "All of that is certainly worth fighting for. Mother once said it is better to try to live peacefully, but that there are times to fight."

Tobin frowned and replied, "Fighting is a human trait. We are basically a good-natured people, and only train in the warrior craft because other species will not leave us to our peaceful existence."

*Now I am the one who has offended.* She hurried to explain her comments, “Yes, I know. Mother fretted about father’s obsession with the sagorons and the great oaks. I explained before that my father dislikes sagorons but it is much more than that. Father is one of those humans who would like to see all sagorons eliminated and not just so he could take possession of the oak wood for his own profit. He would like to never hear of what he calls ‘the vermin’ again.

While she was alive, mother seemed to have kept him from realizing that desire, but since her death, I fear he has been plotting a way to gain a foothold into your forest. He would have to overcome the superstitions of the local inhabitants around the forest’s eastern border, but he is stubborn enough to try to force them to enter in spite of their paralyzing fears.”

She stopped to gather her thoughts, “Tobin, I now think that perhaps father might also be involved with whoever is causing problems on your western borders. He has had many visitors these last few years that meet him in secret instead of in the open court he holds weekly. When they first started coming, I felt darkness come with them. Ever since then I’ve had dreams of a dark presence that waits just beyond my vision and when I am awake, sometimes I have a foreboding of danger and a despair that I can’t shake.”

Her words seemed to rob him of a response. Slowly he repeated back what she had told him. “So you believe it is possible they are planning this breach of the treaty together in order to take possession of the oaks and abolish the sagorons?”

“Yes.” She managed to whisper. Her distress at her summation of her father’s actions was evident in her face. Her puga lifted its head, making a low growl as it sensed she was upset. *I am not mad Tobin, but Roara doesn’t know that.* She rubbed his head and he calmed a bit.

Tobin shook his head, his eyes wide, “I believe you, but how can such a wonderful person as you come from such evil? And how am I going to make my parents understand the danger we are facing?”

She swallowed slowly and found her voice, “Well, we aren’t going to just sit back and let my father, and whoever he is conspiring with, get away with destroying your *pah’mirsekuz* or your people.” She lifted her chin defiantly and pulled her hands into fists in her lap. Roara stood and shook himself, looked around for the source of her anxiety, and then continued to growl. Natalie reached out to run her hand down his soft hairy side.

“I’m glad he doesn’t assume I am the problem.”

“He can sense who I trust and who frightens me.”

“Natalie, my people will be able to defend themselves and the *pah’mirsekuz*. We have many skills besides *Ker’ah*. Our weapons, the *ker’nortt*, bows and arrows, small darts, spheres, and swords, are formed of the superior barcothium metal that only our forgers can manipulate through *Ker’ah*. We have numerous guardian sentry teams, and each team has an area of the *pah’mirsekuz* perimeter they are responsible for watching. However, I am not sure if we can sustain a long resistance to protect the entire forest. Humans are so numerous that we could, eventually, be overcome.”

Tobin’s words had the ring of conviction and therefore desperation, as well. “You cannot become involved in this war Natalie, and be sure of one thing, it will be a war. You are perhaps even now placing yourself in danger. From what you both have said, if your father knows you have been eating a picnic lunch with a ‘graftling’ he is sure to be furious.”



“I don’t care whether my father approves of my friends, as I certainly don’t approve of his. Perhaps you don’t understand me yet, if you think I will stand by while an entire species is destroyed when I could have done something to stop it.” Natalie knew she was being harsh and stopped before she said something worse.

Her puga gave off a low growl as she absentmindedly dug her fingers into his side. Looking contrite at the beast, Natalie relaxed her hand and he settled back.

~

Tobin felt like a tree had disappeared from under him. He was surprised at his strong reaction to her displeasure. Many years of torment at the hands of the sagoron youth had hardened him, and he was usually able to remain indifferent when someone talked to him disparagingly. However, something inside him twisted in agony at the thought of losing the empathy he had felt she showed him. Rubbing his face unconsciously as he mulled over how to retrieve their former closeness, Tobin perceived the best course was to be honest.

“I’m sorry,” he took a breath as he sought for words. “You are both brave and passionate, and on behalf my people, I am grateful for any help you can give. My reaction before was out of desire to protect you, partially because you have done the same for Tamara and me. I would feel responsible for anything that happened to you. Uhm... I just mean to say I respect you, and... the thought of anything happening to you is upsetting.” Tobin was embarrassed at his expressiveness. A slightly wavy lock of light brown hair fell forward onto his forehead as he leaned his forearms across his knees, feeling his breath tighten in his chest.

Her next words showed only a little of her earlier irritation, “I will fight against whatever plans my father is involved with, even if I wasn't there when you were born only a few months ago. I care about you also, Tobin, and that’s why I can’t go home and watch my father destroy everything that is dear to you. I’ll be careful.

He only thinks of me as a pretty piece of property and would be shocked to find out I am educated far better than most lord’s sons. Mother insisted I learn to read, write, and ride, and she took me to the moneylender in town who secretly taught me numbers and how to keep books. She was worried that since they never had a son father would marry me to someone who’d be like him, greedy and tyrannical.

Also she believed if need arose I could govern our holding myself and hoped I would be able to carry on the good work she did unbeknownst to father. He really would never believe I could organize a rebellion against him, so it shouldn’t be a problem.”

“Well, with Tamara you wouldn’t be alone,” Tobin said with relief. With a glance at the puga he added, “Of course there is always your personal guard here to defend you. Though, perhaps I should come frequently to verify you’re safe.” *What am I saying? With all that she just shared that is a bad idea!*

“How would your family react to your deeper involvement with humans?” She asked, but then continued, not waiting for his answer. “I wish I could see your living tree-home and meet your parents. I would like to assure them that not all humans are oath-breakers.”

“It is against sagoron law for me to take you into the *pah’mirsekuz* without father’s permission.” Tobin was surprised at how much regret he felt at his words.

“Oh. So I could go? It’s just that your father has to grant permission?”

“Right...” *Where is she heading with this?* “In my thirty-one years I have never seen a human in the heart of the *pah’mirsekuz*. I know that, at times, messengers from your king come to the meeting meadow at the outer area of the southern perimeter. Our guardians meet them and take the message to father. If negotiations are necessary, father might come to the meadow himself, but only once the guardians verify it is safe for him to get so close to the human realm. Otherwise, he sends the runner back with a reply to be returned to King Marix.

We ourselves rarely enter your lands. The last time sagorons did cross over was when my father scouted with Oreh. That was many years ago for our people. When, and if, a delegation must go to your king’s court, it would probably be led by my older brother Orehifiil, with an elder advisor and a few guardians. Perhaps, with what you have told me, father will send someone to your king to discuss the treaty being broken.”

“My father has been planning to send me to court for my coming out. He doubtless would have done so already, except he has been busy with his obsession of your people and the great oaks. Maybe when I go, I can find some way to tell King Marix about my suspicions.”

“That could be dangerous, but it would help to corroborate our worries about the treaty. Father will be impressed with your boldness. Perhaps I can convince him to meet you.”

“Tobin, what if you took me into the forest, and then we stopped at this guardian border you spoke of? I could wait there while you pass on ahead into your realm to get permission. Once you have your father’s consent, you can return to get me, and that won’t take more than a few minutes. I may never again have the opportunity to visit your people and see your home.”

Her eagerness endeared her more to him. “Alright. I know my father will enjoy getting acquainted with you almost as much as I have.” He hesitated, embarrassed after such a bold declaration, “We should share our plan with Tamara, since she will be here alone for a few hours.”

They rose quickly and looked around for Tamara. Tobin felt doubtful all of a sudden. *After all, she is my birth-mother, and I’m going to ask her to stay while I take Natalie with me to a place she will never see. Yet, I know there are too many reasons I must take Natalie, and other reasons why I can’t take Tamara. How do I avoid hurting her?*

When they found her, he took a moment before asking her, “Tamara, I want to take Natalie to meet father, but it is nearly time for the evening meal. Do you feel you will be safe here in the meadow for the evening?”

“You wouldn’t be gone that long would you? I mean, with the time difference, Natalie could visit your family for a week or two and be gone only a few hours, right?”

“Yes, but I just want to be sure you will feel safe here with the puga while we are gone.”

Tamara’s laugh was a delicate sweet sound as she assured him she would be fine. Relieved, he led Natalie into the *pah’mirsekuz*.

As they left, Tamara sank to sit on the blanket. The puga turned its head to stare into her eyes and made a soft trilling noise she found comforting. Pulling the puga to her, she buried her face in its fur. She let her tears fall into the soft pelt as the memory of the last time Natalie walked off with her son into sagoron territory, when he was only a few hours old, flooded her. The puga never growled as she gripped his fur fiercely in her effort to regain control of her emotions. One thing she knew was certain, this would not be the last time she would ache over the choice she made to give her son to his father to raise.

## CHAPTER XII

Tobin returned with a jolt to the present. Orehifiil and Tarkan had returned him to the heart of the *pah'mirsekuz*, but he had been reflecting on his morning so much that he didn't remember the time he had just spent in the passage. He hadn't even noticed Orehifiil had gone on ahead, and now Tarkan brought him to the central meadow.

Bowing before his father, he nervously faced the *Ker'agartet* of the sagorons. *Orehifiil may have it right, that many of the sagorons feel ashamed for their years of offhanded treatment to me, but father still may have to discipline me for bringing Natalie into the pah'mirsekuz without sanction.*

As Aresifiil arose, his son hurried to explain, "Father, I never meant to bring Natalie into the *pah'mirsekuz* without your permission. Our plan was for her to wait with guardians in a watchtower at the time change boundary. After getting your consent, I would have gone back to bring her here. The guardians stopped us before we reached that point.

They frightened her so much that I returned her to the meadow where Tamara waited for us. The women have agreed to remain there for awhile, to see if sanction will be granted for her to enter." He didn't mention the fact that his brother had been amongst the ones who threatened them.

"Slow down a moment and let's get the whole story," Aresifiil suggested. "Your brother and the other guardians reported that you were in the company of a young lady. May I assume the lady is this Natalie you speak of? I would like to know more about her and why you wish her to meet your mother and I. Orehifiil also mentioned she is enchanting and he regrets his rash actions that frightened her."

Tobin realized his father was well aware of his brother's bad behavior, but he hesitated looking around at the sagorons surrounding them. "Natalie is the daughter of Lord Alterra. Tamara is her handmaiden. Before Natalie's mother died, her mother was instrumental in keeping Lord Alterra from an open war on our people and land. She shares her late mother's views and is concerned that her father seems to be conspiring with those who trouble our western borders.

Lord Alterra will soon be sending her to the king's court for her coming out. He hopes to marry her to someone who can give him greater influence and power. Although she doesn't wish to marry any of the men her father has his eye on, she realizes in going to court she may have an opportunity to add her confirmation for King Marix to our reports that her father and his fellow conspirators are breaking the treaty."

The *Ker'agartet* raised his hand to interrupt his son's explanation. "Although for us it has been a little over one hundred years since I last saw Tamara, in their realm it was just over six months ago. I remember she spoke fondly of Lady Natalie, and warned me of Lord Alterra. While we must consider that he might have sent his daughter to spy on us, I can see that you believe in her character. From what I know of Tamara, if she trusts her, then we should be able to also. It is our decision that she may visit our realm, but she must be bound at the eyes to be brought here."

"I'll go with you to escort her here," Orehifiil offered. "It will give me a chance to apologize for alarming her. Tarkan can go with us as well."

*Ker'agarteti* Kyla, smiled in support, while Tobin let his breath out slowly. "We will plan a welcoming feast in eight days, but if you're delayed, send Tarkan ahead to let us know, so we can adjust our time for the preparations," She slipped her arm through her younger son's, "Before you leave, come eat something

and rest. If you keep time changing so quickly you are going to get the interval distress that the guardians often suffer.”

~

While she fed him, Kyla pestered him for details about Natalie. *I need to know what he sees in this human woman, I think he admires her for more than just her desire to help us. Hopefully, it is not some youthful infatuation motivating him.*

By the time he had rested, and was ready to join the others to leave for the eastern border, she had satisfied herself that Natalie should be welcomed inside the *pah'mirsekuz*.

*Now I have two weeks to make sure every sagoron understands and accepts this unprecedented event.* She never considered, even for a moment, that anyone would dare defy her mandate to welcome her son's friend.

~

The three sagorons traveled quickly back through the familiar terrain, reaching the meadow in just under an hour. While they moved through the oaks, Tobin smiled as he remembered his conversation with his stepmother. She had shared with Tobin that when Orehifil had returned eight days prior, sagoron time, he had admitted to his parents he and the other guardians had handled the situation badly. However, on hearing their report, many of the sagorons had been unsettled at Tobin's proposal to bring a human female into the *pah'mirsekuz*.

Kyla further explained how she and Aresifil had brought the conclave together, for the second time in Tobin's life, to deal with these attitudes, and to establish once and for all his place here. *One thing is certain, what they decreed is being obeyed. I'm not sure how I feel about that.*

Looking back over the last fifteen years, he realized his brother had shown a genuine change of heart after Kyla had talked to him. Understanding this was like having a cool rain blow across a drought-starved land. *The sagorons as a whole, however, only treat me better because they were commanded to. It is easier to bear than the hostility I felt when I was younger, but their lack of insult now in comparison is so obvious it makes me feel suspicious.*

*Most of them, with time, will pretty much accept me, but Natalie is a far different matter. For now, I'm thrilled to at least have brotherly companionship with Orehifil. It's a relief that he is determined to welcome her as seriously as he disdained her earlier.*

~

The women were walking together with the puga at the far end of the meadow when the sagorons arrived. Their surprise was evident in both their faces as they hesitated to meet Tobin with his companions.

Tamara recovered quickly, and smiled, “Tobin, I hope this is your welcoming delegation!”

“Tamara, this is my brother Orehifil and a friend, Tarkan,” He waved to the two sagorons who had lingered a few steps behind him. Finishing the introduction, he held his hand out toward Tamara, “This is my birth mother, Tamara.”

The two sagorons looked incredulous, even though guardians usually had a better understanding of how the time difference could affect aging. Although the mother and son looked close in age, the hard thing to face was that the son was now older than his mother by nearly a decade.

Orehifiil was the one to respond first, "Well met, Tamara." He held his hand palm up in the customary sagoron greeting as he gave her a long look.

Tamara gave him an equally wondering look, but gently placed her hand palm down on his. "Well met, Orehifiil." Glancing past the brothers, she gave Tarkan a smile. "Well met also, Tarkan." He murmured an unintelligible response and looked quickly at his feet.

*I hope Natalie hasn't changed her mind about coming. She seems reticent.* Tobin held out his hand toward her in invitation. Natalie joined them, with her puga by her side, who remained quiet yet tense.

Orehifiil didn't waste time letting the discomfort grow deeper between them. Giving a half bow at the waist, he said, "I need to apologize for my earlier behavior, Natalie. My rude and threatening demeanor was reproachable. Please forgive me and accept an invitation to our kingdom on behalf of all the sagorons."

"Of course you are forgiven," Natalie responded. "I welcome the opportunity to not only see the *pah'mirsekuz*, but also to befriend the sagorons. My mother wished relations between our two kingdoms to be neighborly. I hope this can be the first step to that purpose."

Tobin admired her graciousness and noticed how beautiful she looked in the early evening sunrays. Her long dark curls were pulled back from her face with a bright green hair ribbon. Some shorter tendrils had escaped and framed her face in a sweet halo. Her pale skin looked like cream against the dark green of her dress. *Has any creature born ever been more beautiful?*

"When that day happens, it will be greatly to your credit," Orehifiil's chagrin was plain in his face. "But I'm afraid our two lands have a difficult journey ahead to reach a place where we can truly live peacefully. Our borders are frequently attacked, even with the treaty signed by our rulers."

"Well then, it will be up to us to change the hearts and minds of our generation and those to follow," came her unwavering reply.

Tobin felt his heart leap in pride at Natalie's strength of character, and then twist into an all too familiar feeling of jealousy. This time his resentment for his brother was double-fold.

*A human is a better match for me; half my life I felt like an outcast with the sagorons and for the first time I am comfortable around a girl. Besides, Orehifiil has always received attention from females, no matter what their age. The little girls and old women adore him, while the available younger sagoron women openly vie for his hand in marriage. Orehifiil doesn't need to win Natalie's heart too.*

His older brother's admiration for her was also evident and further distressed Tobin. His jaw clinched, *Orehifiil and Natalie are going to have a lot more time to get to know each other in the future than she and I. Father will surely send the Ker'iaddahs as the representative from our kingdom to the court of King Marix. She will soon be in their court, and Orehifiil will be right there, available to develop a deeper relationship. I most likely won't even get to see her after this visit she makes to our realm.*

He was irritated about his brother being near her at court, but suddenly the reason she was being sent there fully hit him. A sense of hopelessness settled over Tobin. *Her father not only plans to marry her to someone as amoral and self-serving as himself, but even if he were willing to let her marry someone of her choosing, he will certainly never allow it to be a graftling. My jealousy is a waste of energy, neither of us can ever consider marriage to her.* Unfortunately, he still felt envious.

“We should be on our way back to the *pah’mirsekuz* so that Tamara is not left waiting here after dark,” He spoke more gruffly than he’d intended as he stepped halfway between Natalie and his half-brother. With a softened tone and feeling very uncomfortable, he added, “I’m sorry, Natalie, but father requests that once we get near the boundary, we blindfold you as a precaution,

“Of course, that is only sensible, but it will be your responsibility to guide me and keep me from stumbling through the underbrush as we travel,” Natalie smiled as she slipped one arm in his.

Turning to her *puga* she placed her other hand on its head and ran her fingers through the thick fur. “Tamara will be safe with you, Roara.”

The *puga* padded over to stand beside her handmaiden, and the four briskly walked off into the forest. Tamara waved goodbye as she settled down on the picnic blanket for the second time that day with only the *puga* to guard her.

~

The *sagorons* didn’t immediately tie the blindfold over Natalie’s eyes. Instead they traveled for nearly half an hour in the growing dark on the human side of the boundary. While they made their way, *Orehifil* asked her about the *puga*, and they spent the short journey in enjoyable conversation. Tobin was noticeably quiet, and she wondered if he still felt uncomfortable with his half-brother.

When it came time for her to be blindfolded, Natalie, with a small nervous smile, asked, “Tobin, will you hold my hand?”

He took her hand and squeezed it, “Don’t worry, I won’t let go.”

They were still a little distance from the guardian watchtower just inside the boundary where Tobin had planned earlier to leave Natalie. Their pace now slowed considerably as he carefully guided her, with *Tarkan* ahead and *Orehifil* behind. Once at the boundary, she was startled for a moment when Tobin spoke in *sagoron*, and they all lifted above the forest floor. Again he squeezed her hand reassuring her, “I’ve got you. We’ll be there in a few minutes this way.”

When they removed her blindfold, it took a moment for her eyes to adjust to the change from dark to light. She stood, stunned, facing the brilliance of the light from the golden sky with the shimmering streaks of color which shone through thousands of golden oak leaves. She was still holding hands with Tobin and looked up at him, realizing he was no less affected by the sight. Deep in her heart she thrilled at the thought that a male could care so deeply.

*Father would be ogling the trees with the riches he could make from cutting them down in his heart and mind.* Gazing at the view before them, she remembered Tobin’s words in the meadow. *He said his home was radiant. How can he bear to leave it for even a few hours?* Sighing in unison, they grinned at one another and let go of each other’s hands.

Orehifiil led the way into the central meadow. Nearly one and a half kilometers across and three kilometers long, the oval shaped meadow was higher at the northern end and sloped gently down from the east and west sides as well. Its shape made it a natural spot for people to gather.

“This is where my father holds court,” he said as he motioned toward the throne formed out of an ancient living oak standing at the elevated north end of the meadow.

They walked north, through the soft, sweet, aqua grass. Throughout the meadow, what looked on first glance to be random natural wildflowers, were in fact well-cultivated borders surrounding larger sections of the sweet grass that tantalized Natalie with the temptation to remove her shoes and run in her bare feet. Of course she didn't. *I hope I'll eventually get the chance.*

As they neared the oak throne, the *Ker'agartet* and *Ker'agarteti* entered close by. Natalie had no trouble in recognizing them as Orehifiil's parents. The *Ker'iaddahs's* features were exactly like his father's, apart from inheriting his mother's turquoise-colored eyes. All sagorons were slight of build with golden-hued skin and hair the shade of dark golden oak leaves. Aresifiil and Orehifiil could have been twins though, as sagorons stopped aging at maturity, and the only difference she saw between the *Ker'agartet* and his eldest son were those startling eyes. Orehifiil's unusual turquoise eyes gave him a hauntingly beautiful appearance, but as yet, they lacked the depths she found when looking into his father's eyes, as he held out his palm in welcome to her.

“Well met, Natalie,” Aresifiil greeted her. His voice was surprisingly deep but gentle. She placed her left hand onto his upturned palm and felt all of her nervousness disappear. The *Ker'agartet's* eyes, identical to Tobin's, were such a deep green they reminded her of the lake near her mother's home in the mountains.

*I'm glad Tobin used Ker'ah to return his pupils to their natural star form. Neither of the princes though have this velvet steel look that his majesty is holding me with at this moment. Will Tobin's eyes someday gather you into his soul?* She wondered, as she glanced from father to son. Tobin's looks were now even more obviously human with his light brown hair and his head above everyone other than Natalie.

“Well met, your majesties,” Natalie replied removing her hand, and giving a small curtsy. She had seen her own king only one time in her life and had never been required to hold a conversation with him or any of the royal family. *I hope I am not offending them. Perhaps they don't have the same customs between the royalty and the commoners as we humans.*

The sagoron royal couple was simply dressed. They wore long, emerald-hued, open robes over matching outfits of mud-brown breeches and copper-colored tunics, which hung mid-thigh length. Their knee-high, soft-leathered boots were open-toed and had straps that crossed, binding them from the arch up to the knees.

Kyla also held her palm out for her and warmly gave her the sagoron greeting, and when Natalie placed her hand a bit shyly onto her palm, the *Ker'agarteti* reached over with her other hand and patted it tenderly.

She then pulled her gently away from the men. “You may have her for introductions later Aresifiil, but for now I am taking Natalie to get refreshed and acclimated to Oakhaven. I'll not have any of you overwhelming her with demands for her time.” To Natalie she expressed, “I hope you can stay a few weeks in the *pah'mirsekuz* as it should be only a few hours lost in your realm. We have so much to learn from each other, and Tobin has scarcely told us anything other than how much he admires you.”



Natalie noticed Tobin give his mother an irritated frown, but Kyla ignored him and swept her off to taste her first sagoron meal.

Aresifiil merely looked on with amused affection at his son's discomfort. "Let's all enjoy the morning meal with your mother." He turned to join his wife and their guest. Orehifiil shrugged at Tobin and the two fell in behind their father.

Tarkan, who was delighted to not be included in this family time, scooted off before the *Ker'agartet* remembered he was there and felt the need to be generous.

~

Seated cross-legged on cushions on the floor around low tables, which grew from the base of the room, they waited to begin eating until the servants had finished serving. Natalie was surprised to see them all bow their heads so the *Ker'agartet* could lead them in a reverent prayer for the meal.

"*Ker* of all that is known and unknown, we ask a blessing of you now for this food we will eat and drink. We thank you for your daily guidance and provision and offer our praise to the one Most High. May all that we are and do, be for your glory. *Yah'ah!*"

"I do not want to offend you, but what is *Yah'ah*?"

Kyla waved her hand, "You may ask anything, we will not take offense. Of course you must be curious of the differences in our cultures. *Yah' ah* means 'we trust the Creator to provide.' Do your people believe in and worship the one true God?"

Quick to cover her surprise at being asked such a personal question after showing her own interest, Natalie answered, "My mother was born in the foothills of the Blue Ice Mountains. Her family worships the God they believe to have made everything in the universe. As a young child, mother taught me to pray only to Him, but when father found out he was angry and forbade it. He said prayer was for the uneducated or the uncivilized.

After that mother warned me, given that I believed in the Creator God, if I wanted to pray, I should do it silently whenever I needed God's comfort or wished to thank Him for all He does for me. Since she died, He has been my greatest comfort." Natalie felt her face flush with the discomfort of sharing this personal relationship with God she had been forced to keep secret most of her life.

Kyla reached over and patted her hand gently. "Many times I have felt that same comfort. There was a time when all our people worshiped Him, but we do not force anyone to choose faith in *Ker*. Most in our realm still openly worship Him. You are welcome to join our times of group worship while you are here if you desire." Her turquoise star-shaped pupils shone with a deep kindness.

Overcome with emotion, Natalie nodded her head humbly. She fervently wished that she would never need to leave this haven of peace. This wish she knew, was impractical, as Tamara was sitting out in the meadow near the forest waiting for her to return.

*If I remained here, Tamara and her family will be in danger. Father would hold them responsible for my disappearance, and would use the incident as an excuse to attack the sagorons.*

Firmly pushing this impossible dream from her mind, she looked up to see Tobin watching her. He smiled at her in a confident way she had never seen in him before. Feeling herself blush again, she quickly picked up her spoon and began eating with great interest. The interest was unfeigned, as she was delighted to try sagoron cuisine. For the morning meal, they served a variety of fruits and sweet breads along with three cheeses, milk, juice, and the largest eggs she had ever seen.

“What creature lays these delicious eggs?”

“Our karakiils. They are a domesticated fowl that lives in the *pah'mirsekuz*.” Kyla responded.

“You will have the opportunity to see the karakiils when we take a tour later today,” Tobin promised. “They come up to our waists and have long legs and a thin tall neck that holds up their round heads. Their eyes are enormous egg shaped bulges, and they are really more fluff than substance, as you will see.”

“Actually, the karakiil is more than just an egg layer. We use their fluffy down to make clothing for our people,” Kyla interjected.

Aresifiil was quiet, letting his wife share bits of sagoron history throughout the meal. Kyla was such a gracious hostess that Natalie soon forgot her earlier discomfort. She found herself readily sharing stories of her home life and the world outside the *pah'mirsekuz*.

Realizing Tobin had rarely spoken, she pondered, *He is so quiet like his father, while his brother seems to share his mother's outgoing personality. Orehifiil's warm demeanor now is completely opposite of our first encounter earlier this morning. Oh! I don't know why I am so surprised each time I remember what has been only a few hours to me, was a few weeks for them. I simply must adjust my mind to the fact that time is different here.*

Her thoughts swung back to Tobin's brother, *Orehifiil will someday make an excellent Ker'agartet. He is good at relaxing his guests and has kept the conversation from slipping into a lull without effort, drawing in each person around the table.*

Sitting under a window to the right of his mother, Orehifiil's head was surrounded with a halo from the morning sun shining through golden leaves as they danced in the breeze.

*His mother is obviously fond of him. She often turns towards him to smile, or give that small, sweet, melodic laugh. I can understand how painful growing up as the graftling brother of this charismatic future Ker'agartet must have been for Tobin. I'm glad they have reconciled their past and seem comfortable together now. I hope our two species can someday be that relaxed with each other. I know they want this first meal to be casual, but I would feel better if they knew exactly what my feelings are from the beginning of our relationship.*

“Your Majesty,” Natalie addressed the *Ker'agartet*. “I would like to take a few moments to express why I felt it was so important for me to come here in person to speak with you, if I may?”

Aresifiil gave his wife a quick glance before nodding his head encouragingly, “I am very interested in what you came to share, Natalie, and you can be at ease that Tobin has spoken with us already in order to prepare the way for you.”

She gave a grateful smile to Tobin before continuing, "As Tobin probably told you, my father is the lord of the lands to the southeast of the Great Oak Forest. Unfortunately, that is not a good circumstance for the sagorons."

She quickly explained about her knowledge of her father and uncle's plans and desires and her own opposition to them. Before she was through, everyone at the table had stopped eating, their appetites waned by the strength of her convictions over the action needed in order to stop the destruction of their world.

"*Thank you for your honesty,*" Aresifiil replied warmly, but he did not give away his thoughts on what he might do about all that she had shared.

~

After the meal, Kyla graciously suggested Natalie might like to take a hot bath and rest for a few hours. Since her body had put in nearly a full day, including the two treks through the forest, she agreed this would be nice before joining her hosts for a tour of their kingdom and introductions to their people.

A female sagoron, Sontilya, showed her to a bathing chamber. She never looked directly into Natalie's eyes, but brought her pails of hot water to add to the cold water that ran through wooden pipes from some unseen source into the tub. She showed her how to work the lever that released the water and brought her some fragrant oil for her bath. Then she gave her fresh drying cloths and a long light blue robe, made of a soft spun material Natalie had never seen before.

Caressing the robe she asked, "From what creature's hair do you make this delicate weave?"

Timidly, but encouraged by Natalie's friendly manner, Sontilya finally looked at their guest and answered, "The karakiil. It is the same bird that produces the large eggs you were served at morning meal." Seeing Natalie's questioning look, she giggled and explained, "I know I wasn't there, but the Ker'agarteti most certainly served you karakiil eggs, as their flavor is distinctly different from the humans' chicken eggs. She would have delighted to offer you such a delicacy."

"Yes, they were delicious. Tobin says he'll be taking me on a tour where I will see them later."

Sontilya nodded, "You'll see they have a soft down underbelly that grows about three inches, and around every three months, it sheds and we gather the down to weave it into a light, luxurious, yet enduring, cloth. Most often the cloth is used for bed robes or special occasion outer robes."

"If your people traded this with humans you could make a fortune. The wealthy women of court would pay dearly to own a night shift made of this downy sea-silk-like material!" Natalie exclaimed, enraptured.

"Why would we wish to trade with the humans? They have nothing we desire," Sontilya paused, her rude words left to hang in the air.

Star eyes wide, she apologized, "I'm sorry, that was bad-mannered and you have only been sweet. What I meant to say, is that we have only the supply of the cloth that serves the need of our people. Trading it would mean some sagorons would not be able to obtain the clothing they require, and as the karakiil cloth is without compare, nothing could be traded to compensate for those who remained without. We live in equality here, even our royalty have few belongings more than the people they serve."

Surprised, Natalie replied, “Things *are* very different in our realms. Human merchants would use the short supply to raise the price, and our society suffers from the disparity of class between the commoners and the royalty.”

“Our *Ker’agartet* views his place not as a ruling dictator but as a benevolent and protective shepherd. Although he has a crown, it is seldom worn. It would seem like a minor trinket in comparison to the jewel-studded gold crown your king wears.

I know your present king is a kind and judicious leader. However, frequently throughout the millenniums, we have watched humans, some who were selfish cruel men, drain the human realm of its riches, leaving the common folk to live in poverty.

Aresifiil comes from a lineage of *Ker’agartets* who have lived to serve those they govern, rather than to be served. We have no memory of disharmony amongst our people. For this reason, sagorons are resistant to increased contact between our species.”

Sontilya paused before adding, “Tobin suffered greatly because of this distrust we have of human kind. I’m glad things will be better for him now and that he has found friends among the humans as well. Yet, many see peril ahead for our people if we take the risk of open contact between the realms.”

“Yes, I can understand your people’s fears. My own father would greedily steal not only the karakiils but the great oaks as well. Someday I hope to help change the attitude of my people and make it possible for our two kingdoms to have an open friendship.” Natalie gave the gentle sagoron a quick hug to express no offense was felt from Sontilya’s words.

“I’m relieved to not have insulted you. Kyla wouldn’t be happy if I snubbed the only human guest who has visited the heart of the sagoron kingdom in more than six hundred human years. I’ll leave now so you can bathe, but I’ll be close by should you need anything more.”

Feeling the grit of the day’s journey reach an unbearable level, Natalie eagerly disposed of her dirty dress and underclothes and slipped into the warm bath. The oil, Sontilya explained, had a dual purpose. While its fragrance left you smelling like the fresh morning dew, the oil also served as a gentle soap. Natalie dipped her hair into the water and ran her fingers through it to loosen the many knots that easily formed in her incessant curls. Scrubbing her limbs vigorously she was delighted as the dirt-covered skin was replaced with a healthy pink hue.

All too soon the water turned tepid and dirty. Rather than bother Sontilya to freshen the bath, she climbed out and dried herself with the soft absorbent drying cloths. She donned the blue robe that beckoned her from the stool where it was draped, and its soft smoothness enveloped her. Yawning, she left the chamber. Sontilya was waiting down the hall on a small bench set where a window looked out onto a beautiful garden.

“There is so much to see and do here. I hate to waste precious moments sleeping.” Natalie expressed longingly, as she peeked out at the delightful and strange foliage before them.

“Oh, Tobin said you could stay here a few weeks. You are welcome to visit our gardens and enjoy them as often as you like, but perhaps you would like to take a walk through this garden before resting?”

“It is very tempting. Yet, after that warm bath, I really do feel the need for a nap. Will you be busy later or might I impose upon you in a few hours to go for a walk?” *I can’t assume she is my personal servant, especially since this kingdom’s people, whether noble birth or not, work as equals.*

“Actually, the *Ker’agartet* is my uncle. He asked that I be excused from my usual duties to be available to keep you company. I would be honored to provide you companionship,” Sontilya assured her, but then added uncertainly, “If you would prefer another’s company, Uncle Aresifiil can arrange it.”

“I hope we will be able to spend a lot of time getting to know one another and sharing counsel together. In the human realm we are not all equal, and it is sometimes lonely for me. Girls of my social standing live quite a distance apart and we only see each other occasionally.

In truth my dearest friend is my handmaiden, Tobin’s birth mother. However, if my father suspected our friendship, he would replace her. He is solely interested in increasing our family status, and an intimate relationship with a commoner would be unacceptable. You, of course, would be acceptable company as a niece to the king.”

Seeing Sontilya’s face, Natalie added, with an impish grin that denied any agreement with her father, “That is, if you weren’t sagoron. Even the lowest human would be preferred to a sagoron.” A fierce frown replaced the grin as she finished her explanation.

Sontilya showed her to a sleeping chamber. “I’ll return in a few hours to take you on that walk.”

Natalie looked around the spacious yet sparsely filled room. Three pieces of furniture were the sole occupants of her sleeping chamber. To her right a narrow short bed grew from the oak floor, as did a matching small, upright, clothing chest. These were opposite a washstand that held a pitcher and bowl beneath an opening that formed a window on the left ‘wall’. Dappled golden light entered through loosely bound, short, white curtains. She crossed the room to draw them closed.

Glancing out, she saw Tobin and his mother walking in the garden below. Their arms were linked, and Kyla showed her younger son the same attentive care as she had given his brother during the meal. Whatever they were discussing had him enthusiastically sharing his feelings in an unselfconscious manner he had never revealed when talking to Natalie.

Feeling as though she were spying, she quickly closed the curtains. In the dimmed light she climbed onto the bed and pulled a soft *karakiiil* blanket over herself. She was asleep before she had time to figure out why it bothered her that Tobin was less comfortable being open with her when they talked.

~

Sontilya wasn’t sure what to think of all Natalie had shared. *It was hard to hide my shock at how cold Lord Alterra seems to be. I expect most human lords would be angry if their daughter mixed company with sagorons, but he shows so little compassion for her needs. Ha! I guess from now on I’ll be more appreciative of my life here in the *pah’mirsekuz*. Pausing at the window they had recently looked out she continued her inner thoughts, I will also do everything in my power to give this strange girl as warm a reception as possible.*

## CHAPTER XIII

*“Blessed is the man who does not walk in the council  
of the wicked or stand in the way of sinners  
or sit in the seat of mockers.”*

*Psalms 1:1*

Tobin had watched Sontilya take Natalie away to refresh and rest herself with regret. *I wish I could be the one with her as she experiences each new discovery during her stay here. Of course that won't be possible. She is my guest, not my wife, or even my promised. I will be forced to hear about her reactions to my world after the fact. Yet, she is grateful for the opportunity to visit Oakhaven, so maybe somehow in the future that can lead us to a deeper friendship.*

His mother slipped her arm in his. “Let's walk.”

He gave her a weak smile, but then nodded his head, “I'd love time with you mother, you always help me think positively.”

She squeezed his arm and chatted about how well her garden had turned out this season. His mood lightened, and he breathed in the fresh morning air. *I should tell mother about the idea that has been forming in the back of my mind before speaking my mind to father. It might make things easier when I approach him.*

“Mother, what would you think of my going out into Mardeaux for a while?”

Kyla responded cautiously, “For a longer visit with Tamara?”

“No, not really. I would see her if I had the opportunity, but I'm thinking it might be wise for us to find out more about the plans of these humans who are preparing to conquer our people. From what Natalie says, they might also be planning to overthrow their king, and any information I could gather to add to what will be reported to King Marix will benefit us as well. If they do manage to dispose of King Marix, a war between our realms is guaranteed.”

“So this wouldn't have anything to do with gaining further opportunities to see our sleeping guest?” Kyla asked derisively, as her turquoise eyes danced with amusement. “Sorry, I shouldn't tease. Nothing can come of this, but I like her very much, and I think you do too.”

“I think Natalie is the most strong-willed woman I have ever known, next to you. Like you, she is honorable and kind. I can't deny that I am attracted to her, but she is still young and each year of her life I will age more than a human life span. When I met her a month ago, I was younger than she was by two years, and now I am over twelve years older than she is. Besides, what kind of life could I offer her here, in the *pah'mirsekuz*, where she would always be 'the human' from outside?”

Raising an eyebrow as she turned to look directly into her son's face, “I've been wrong,” she shook her head and spoke adamantly, “When two people are meant to be life mates there is nothing that can't be worked out. You could choose to live in her realm for her lifetime, or ask permission for her to join you here. Aresifil is a father as well as a ruler. He loves you enough to press the matter with the council leaders. If they give their approval, none of the people will dare to reject her.”

“Not openly, but I know how painful it is to be accepted only because it has been commanded. How could I ask that of her? Besides, her father will certainly never condone our marriage, so living in her realm would be impossible,” Tobin sighed, looking at, but not seeing the beautiful flowers that spread out all around them in the heart of Kyla’s personal garden.

“Is not *Ker* able to provide a miracle? If you believe Natalie is meant to be your life-mate, pray about it and leave it in His hands,” Kyla urged him, her eyes a deeper turquoise as she spoke with conviction from her heart.

Averting his eyes Tobin asked, “Do you think He has time to worry about my love life? I think with all the trouble in the human kingdom, *Ker* probably has bigger priorities right now. Besides, we have barely spent any time together, and my admiration for her doesn’t mean I have any idea if I should consider bonding with her.”

“You think *Ker* loves you less because you are a graftling,” Kyla stated. “I understand you sometimes better than you do yourself. No matter what Natalie’s people call Him, He is the same *Ker* for all creatures and all that He has created. He hasn’t forgotten you. He planned you and your origins from the beginning.

He knew you would be a graftling, so He knew He would need to provide for you a special woman, one strong enough to face the future as your wife. If Natalie is that woman, you can trust that He designed the way you would meet and has prepared her heart too. As far as how long you have known each other, well, I agree. You will have to wait to see what comes of the relationship over time.”

Tobin looked fondly at his mother. *I wish I could be as strong in my faith as she is in hers. All my life she has turned to Ker whenever she has faced trouble. She has loved me in spite of the fact that she didn’t know if father had been unfaithful to her. When I’m with her it is easy to believe miracles can happen. The hard part is keeping the flames of faith burning when I can’t see where the future is leading.*

*‘Leave it in His hands.’ For mother it is that simple. A person believes in Him, and therefore trusts Him to make it all come out according to His will. But what if His will is for me to remain a bachelor all my life? How can I know what the will of Ker is for me?*

“I’ll pray mother, but I can’t promise to patiently wait around here. Please talk to father about my going outside. Right now, that is something I can focus on and perhaps do something for the good of both our kingdoms.”

“Alright, I’ll speak to him. Perhaps your intuition should be trusted. How do we know this desire is not from *Ker*?” Her words were gentle and sincere.

Standing, he leaned over and kissed her on the cheek. “I think I might also grab a quick nap while Natalie rests. I should be fresh to give her a tour of Oakhaven when she wakes up.”

Kyla watched her son make his way out of the garden, and sighed to herself. *I think I’ll pray before I approach Aresifiil with Tobin’s request.*

~

While Kyla prayed and the young people slept, Aresifiil met with the council. Three weeks prior Tobin had shared with his father about Lord Alterra’s plans against their people. The *Ker’agartet* had immediately

informed the council. Now, after meeting Natalie, and hearing of the battle between the duke and the Marquis of Darkwood, he was ready to send a delegation straightaway to King Marix.

*Who to send in the delegation other than Orehifiil, is best left up to the council to decide.*

Many years in the past, while watching his grandfather rule, Aresifiil had learned that the wise ruler leads his people best by letting them have a say in where and how they were being led. Knowing when to suggest a direction or set the foundation of a plan of action was a more important characteristic than whether a leader could rule by domination. Any dictator could control through intimidation. He took pride in the fact that he had succeeded in ruling his people in much the same style as his father and grandfather before him.

The members of the council varied greatly in age, but none were younger than three thousand years old. Sagorons did not live eternally, yet it probably seemed so to humans. In fact sagorons lived over one hundred thousand years, which would be around five hundred years in the human lands.

Humans averaged around two hundred year life spans that would equal more than forty thousand in the sagoron kingdom. If a human lived in the sagoron oaks they would die in two hundred years anyway, and because of the time difference, only one year would have passed for their families back in their realm. However, if they drank the water at the base of the life trees they would live longer as well.

*If these humans plotting against us ever understand this, they will stop at nothing to find the source of our 'eternal youth'. Aresifiil remembered stories of the human-sagoron wars from his great-grandfather's time of rule. What the average commoner humans don't understand, or perhaps are unwilling to believe, is that the pah'mirsekuz used to stretch from the eastern shore to the western shore of the land they call the kingdom of Mardeaux. Although the oaks had not grown in the colder northern regions or along the southern shores, our sagoron realm had spread across the continent.*

*Yet it isn't due to the loss of so much of the pah'mirsekuz that has us living in separate times. As far as we can tell, the time shift, which now happens, is due to the humans cutting down the life trees. It is too bad that it took us nearly four hundred human years of living with them to realize that the humans lived in a different time phase before coming to Mardeaux.*

*Thank Ker the constant battles ended between our species. Although communication for the most part is still minimal, we sagorons are now able to understand that humans always lived shorter life spans. Now, with our realms existing in two different times, the difference in our life spans is emphasized even more. I can empathize with them for wanting to achieve something great in the few short years they live, but my empathy doesn't equate to tolerance for the destruction their greed demands.*

Some of the younger sagorons were now sitting together talking animatedly. Falcon, the most outspoken of the unpracticed new council members, looked up as Ker'agartet Aresifiil took his seat at the center of the first tier.

The council meeting chamber, formed from four of the oak trees, was shaped like an oval, with three sets of tiered seats grown out of the chamber floor. Starting at the top of the room was the third tier, which had seven seats. Below it was the second tier with eleven seats. The largest tier had fifteen seats and filled half the room. Its chairs sat on the floor and were grown inverted to face the other two tiers. Ker'agartet Aresifiil's seat was set in the middle of the fifteen-seat semi-circle.



All the council members who sat with *him* on the first tier were known for their wisdom and noble characters. To be chosen as one of the fourteen first-tier members was an honor. Yet, the privilege came with a price. A first-tier member was required to serve many of their younger years of life, resigning only after they reached at least forty thousand years of age. Rarely did anyone offered the honor turn it down, but the second tier was for those who either wished to serve temporarily, or for those who hadn't shown the same qualities as those chosen for the first tier.

The third tier was for the newest and youngest members of the council. While the other council members listened to their opinions with equal diligence, they were not a deciding majority, it was simply a position used as a training period.

Although third tier members rarely were brought directly into the first tier, it had been known to happen. Falcon was obvious about his desire to be moved directly to the first tier. However, Aresifiil and the other council members realized Falcon's ambition was not all about the good of the sagorons he was here representing but rather a desire to leave his mark on history. He spoke with the impetuosity of youth about the need to prepare for war against the humans.

*In the nearly thirty human years since Falcon's birth, there has been no war between the species on our continent, only frequent minor skirmishes until this recent difficulty along the eastern border. However, these incidents have the upcoming generation itching to take action. Had they been alive over six hundred human years ago to see the devastation brought on by the nearly four hundred years of war between our people and mankind, they would not be so eager now to pick up arms.*

Living thousands of years to couple hundred that the humans lived had not been a great enough advantage for the sagorons. Ignorant humans had destroyed one after another of the life trees, forcing the sagorons into a steady retreat that had ended at 'Oakhaven' in the LaPhere duchy.

The council members were nearly all in their seats, and Aresifiil pulled himself away from his musing. Nodding his head to the facilitator, he glanced again towards Falcon and the other six at the third tier. He was certain they would turn the discussion towards plans for armament if given the chance. *The problem is I myself will be the one who will open the way for that opportunity.*

Kale, the facilitator, stepped off the first tier to the left and grabbed a metal stick with a round ball on the end. It hung next to a frame that held a large, thin barcothium disk. He struck the *trok* with the stick twice and brought the meeting to order.

The few members not already seated hurriedly found their places. *Ker'agartet* Aresifiil stood, but waited for Kale to take his seat in the last chair on the first tier. Kale was nearing forty thousand this year. Therefore, as the next council member to retire, he served as the facilitator.

Aresifiil enjoyed when Kale leisurely took his place, and made a show of getting comfortable, as if he was nearing eighty thousand, and not forty. *Every member here is aware that Kale is as physically fit and mentally sharp as the first day he joined the council.*

Clearing his throat, Aresifiil turned back to the waiting assembly. "I won't bother to bore you with repeating the news Tobin brought back with him three weeks ago. Yet I am sure all in the *pah'mirsekuz* are curious about what I have learned from my visit with our human guest.

It is my judgment that Natalie, although painfully young, is as Tobin claimed, a woman of good and noble character. I have therefore, asked you here because we need to choose the delegates who will represent us

in the court of King Marix. Orehifiil will go in my place, but I would look to your decision as to who from the council will go as his advisor.” With that said, he returned to his seat.

A movement from the third tier drew all eyes to the middle of the seven seats. Aresifiil had expected Falcon to speak out today on the views of him and his peers, but the sagoron who stood up was Theron.

“Fellow councilmen, if I might have your ear?” Theron asked the traditional rhetorical question upon taking the floor. “Thank you. I too, do not wish to bother you by repeating the opinions of many here on the need we feel for changes in sagoron policies in regards to the problems facing our kingdom. So I will pass over discussion and offer my nomination of Falcon to attend Orehifiil as his counsel advisor.”

He paused to allow the room to settle from the outcry of surprise at his announcement. Before any formal objection could be launched he continued, “Many of you will no doubt see this as a rash and bold choice, since he is still numbered among the third tier. He has advantages, however, that we believe make him the best choice.

Some may see his youth as a disadvantage, thinking he would lack wisdom, or maybe in his eagerness to prove himself worthy, act foolish. We see his youth as a positive. King Marix himself became leader of his people while little more than an adolescent, yet, his inexperience in politics and governing was not weakness, but strength.

He was not hindered by the need to please and placate members of his ruling class. His very innocent idealism brought about the treaty of peace between the species that most have been grateful to live with since the closing of the Ren War. King Marix will no doubt see in Orehifiil and Falcon that same idealism and be open to hearing and, therefore, acting on the news of his people’s seditious actions.”

Theron hesitated looking around the room to gauge the reaction to his nomination. “I welcome your comments,” he offered and then sat down.

Several heads leaned together in conversation throughout the room. Then, the second district representative stood up at the first tier. In the expedience of time, members who were countering, or seconding a previous council member’s proposal, were not required to open with the traditional rhetorical question.

“While there is much I see of value in sending a younger, more enthusiastic member of the council to persuade the human king, the very reason we send an advisor is to provide the insight and wisdom that only years of council service can guarantee.” The council member promptly sat down, only to show a bit of surprise when a second tier member stood and continued the deliberation.

“I agree that a first tier member should be sent as advisor, but I am in favor of sending a second advisor from amongst the younger generation.” Minya suggested. She was one of the few members who had been chosen to move to the first tier but had declined the honor. She enjoyed her service as much as the other members, but she also liked spending time as a guardian and wanted to return to that duty while still in her prime years.

She continued, “My caution to both advisors would be that they give council in such a manner that will not appear to King Marix as though our kingdom is in disharmony. Thank you.” She smiled at the appreciative nods from those members who noted she had remembered etiquette better than the first tier member who spoke before her, and her idea was a solution that should satisfy everyone.

Kale stood and spoke, "That idea has merit, council woman. I second Minya's proposal and further second Theron's nomination of Falcon. Thank you."

As Kale took his seat, *Ker'agartet* Aresifiil raised his left hand for quiet. "We have a nomination for Falcon and a proposal for a second advisor. I think, before we take a vote, I will say something. As Kale is comfortable with the idea of two advisors, and specifically with one of those advisors coming from the third tier, we might consider that when choosing the first tier advisor. Minya's caution is prudent and our choice might reflect that wisdom. Do we have a nomination for the first tier advisor?" Aresifiil asked, looking around the room.

The sixth district council member stood up at the first tier. "If I might have your ear fellow council members," she began. Then, with a sly smile at the facilitator, she continued, "I nominate Kale. Thank you."

Before she had taken her seat, under a baleful look from Kale, another first tier council member stood and seconded her nomination. Aresifiil again raised his left hand and waited a moment for the murmuring room to quiet.

"As Kale has been nominated, I will act as facilitator in his place for the pending vote. We now have two nominations and the proposal to send a second advisor. Do we have any other nominations?"

No one submitted any further nominations and so Aresifiil moved on to the vote. First they voted on Minya's proposal, and after it was approved, with only the second district representative abstaining, they moved on to unanimously vote for Kale. Again when the vote for Falcon was taken only the one council member rejected him.

The *Ker'agartet* rose and walked to the *trok*. Picking up the stick he announced the three decisions, rapping the *trok* once after each declaration. He then asked the delegates to join him in an hour for lunch to discuss their travel plans.

~

Natalie woke feeling refreshed and impatient to explore her unique surroundings. She slipped out of bed and opened the door to see if Sontilya might be waiting nearby. Her hostess wasn't outside as she had hoped, and she turned back to await her return. As she did, her eyes fell on the oak chest.

*This robe is deliciously comfortable but not at all proper for touring. I wonder if I might find some clothing more appropriate to wear in there.*

Opening it she found three tunics and some breeches similar to those that Kyla had worn. There were also socks, undergarments, leather leggings and boots. Everything fit her nearly perfectly, and she was sure Sontilya had provided them for her and just forgot to inform her.

She chose a bright blue tunic to wear over a pair of slim black breeches that had a tie string sewn into the waist. Then, finding a golden belt formed with moveable linked sections shaped like leaves, she fastened it around the loose fitting tunic. She decided against tying the leather leggings over her pants since she wasn't sure if they would be riding anywhere. The open toed boots felt strange, but she knew they would be better suited for walking in the *pah'mirsekuz* than her human footwear.

Feeling restless with the desire to get outside, she wandered over to the window. Natalie sighed in rapture, as she again enjoyed the view. Down below in the garden she saw a couple of females spreading a large cloth out on a patch of grass between the flowers. Her stomach gave a low growl in remembrance of her sumptuous morning meal just as she heard a soft knock at the door.

Hastily Natalie opened the heavy old door and welcomed the sagoron with a smile.

“The *Ker’agarteti* has asked me to invite you to a picnic lunch in her garden with a few of her lady friends and family.” Sontilya said, with a smile in return.

“I would love to come, although I don’t know how much I can eat after stuffing myself earlier! Were those the ladies I just saw laying out a table cover on the grass in the garden?”

“Yes, and don’t worry, the lunch is more to set a casual mood for you to relax while getting to know more of our people.” Sontilya assured her. “My aunt has been most insistent that we not overwhelm you with our curiosity.”

Natalie gave a light laugh and replied, “I shall have to take that warning to heart myself, for I believe my own curiosity is the worst! I am looking forward to the tour you and Tobin have promised me.”

“The *Ker’agarteti* has set that for after lunch, if you don’t feel too overwhelmed by then,” Sontilya’s mischievous giggle was infectious, and Natalie laughed along in delight.

~

Orehifiil found Tobin lingering over a tankard of aged dingin juice, looking now and then out the dining hall window overlooking the garden. Curious, the *Ker’iaddahs* also looked out at the scene below. Then, shaking his head in understanding with a wry grin, he slapped his brother lightly across the shoulder.

“You have two weeks to spend showing her around the *pah’mirsekuz*, cheer up.”

Embarrassed that his feelings had been so obvious, Tobin shrugged and turned his back to the window. “Aren’t you supposed to be planning the delegation’s journey to the capital of Mardeaux?” he asked, with only a flavor of grumpiness lacing his words.

Orehifiil took his brother’s attitude good-naturedly and suggested they fill their plates from the buffet set out for those his father had asked to join him. “Father told me to make sure you were at the planning meeting. We’ll just take these plates out to the balcony where he reserved the space for us.”

Falcon poked his head in the door, and seeing the two brothers alone with a repast enough for an army, generously offered to help them keep the food from going to waste.

As the young sagorons sat eating and discussing their thoughts on the near future events, Kale and Aresifiil, with Minya and Tarkan, filed out onto the balcony with burgeoning plates. Tobin looked up curiously, wondering why council member Minya would be attending this discussion for the delegation.

“Well, I see you’re interested looks gentlemen, and I will put those questions to rest.” Minya stated. “I have taken a temporary leave from my duties as council woman to join the delegation as a guardian. Tarkan will be coming along as a guardian, and...” looking directly at Tobin she finished, “...your services

as a guardian will also be required, because your father agrees that each of the delegates must have a guardian at all times.”

Tobin’s heart leapt. His father had never included him in anything political before. Of course, no one of his inexperienced age should have been included, and this gave Tobin pause. Orehifiil, as the eldest son, was going to represent their father, even though he too was less than a century old. Tobin now squirmed uncomfortably as he looked from Falcon to Tarkan and then back to Minya.

*As if the rest of the sagorons aren’t upset with me enough already, they’ll certainly all resent father for favoring me when, in the past, guardians chosen to attend delegations to the human king have always been at least several thousand years old. Come to think of it, Falcon is a bit young to be going as advisor also.*

Aresifiil could see Tobin was surprised, and a little uncomfortable, with the idea of being chosen as a guardian to the delegation. *Well, he and everyone else will come to accept it. I want Tobin exposed to as much of the political exchanges between the two kingdoms as possible. I naturally would have preferred him to have more time to come to maturity, to be a while longer without such responsibilities. However, Tobin was the one to suggest this through Kyla, and he is not only one of our princes, but he is half-human.*

*With the changing atmosphere of increased hostility outside the pah’mirsekuz, Tobin will have to grow quickly into his role. One thing I’m sure of is having him was no accident of fate as the humans often refer to. Ker planned his birth as surely as he planned creation. Exactly what Tobin is destined for I can’t yet see, but he has already changed the sagoron way of life by just being born and even further by bringing Natalie here.*

Aresifiil was sure of another thing also, Natalie would not be the last human to come to the pah’mirsekuz. He accepted this change with only a small amount of misgiving. *The young are right; there is no possibility of further retreat. Maybe the time has come to remove some of the barriers that stand between humans and sagorons and find a way that both species can truly live together.*

The rest of the group sat down to eat and he began the meeting. “You three who are to be guardians, are to always keep your eyes out for danger that may be directed toward any member of the delegation, but you will each be assigned someone to guard specifically. Tobin will guard Kale, Tarkan will guard Falcon, and Minya will guard Orehifiil.”

What he didn’t say out loud, was that he had given an equally serious command a few minutes prior to Minya, Tarkan and Kale to guard his youngest son. It may have been over thirty thousand years since Kale served as guardian, but he was still physically fit enough to pass the exacting tests that those who served faced yearly. Aresifiil was taking no chances with both his sons’ lives at stake. He noticed Tobin relaxed when no one objected to his placement as a guardian in the delegation.

They finished lunch and lingered over warm cups of aged dingin while they discussed details of the journey to the human king’s palace. At first Aresifiil had planned to have them only wait the two weeks while Natalie was visiting in the pah’mirsekuz, and after they returned her to Tamara in the meadow, they were to depart for King Marix’s castle. Yet, with the time differences, he realized Natalie would not be at court for many sagoron years and decided it was better for both parties to approach together the king with the accusations. Their travel plans, therefore, were set to coincide with her probable arrival date at the human court, Winter’s End.

## CHAPTER XIV

Natalie was surprised at how hungry she felt once she was sitting in front of Kyla's sumptuous picnic, spread out on the large cloth she had seen the women lay over the grass. It was fun trying new foods, but before she had tasted a few bites of even half the dishes, she knew she should stop if she wanted to feel up to the tour with Sontilya and Tobin later.

The ladies were of varying ages, from a few hundred years to over twenty thousand. After Natalie adjusted her mind to this, she found that they were much the same as the women from her mother's home province. Some of the older ones tended to be motherly towards her, and all opened their hearts to show genuine kindness to ease her through any awkward moments. Several enjoyed sharing moments from Tobin's early years with a teasing glint in their eyes at the knowledge that he was not there to defend himself. Natalie realized these women held Tobin dear in their hearts, and she wondered if he understood this.

All too soon the meal was finished, and Natalie regretted her earlier impatience to begin touring. As the women slowly scattered like flower petals caught in a gentle breeze, Sontilya assured her there would be more picnics before she returned home.

~

Tobin chaffed at the need for Sontilya to escort them as he shared his homeland with Natalie. There were so many things he wanted to tell her as they wandered leisurely through Oakhaven, but he was reluctant to speak out about his cherished memories with his cousin listening. He wondered if he would ever overcome his discomfort, that feeling of being an outsider, when around other sagorons. Thankfully, however, Natalie's easygoing demeanor and conversation skills smoothed the awkward moments.

He grinned as he watched her laugh when she stood in the middle of the cacophony of numerous excited karakiils. The birds resembled the humans' chickens only in their size and eating habits. Otherwise the karakiils were comically different in looks and actions. They chased each other around in the enclosed aviary, maintained to keep the birds from running all over the *pah'mirsekuz* and causing disorder, and then frequently just stopped in the midst of running to turn their long skinny necks and tuck their heads under their wispy wings. Or at least the ones being chased did, while the chasers then collided with the now stationary runners.

They were affectionate creatures but lacked the intelligence that could make them worthwhile pets. He gave her a small bag of seed and watched her amusement as they preened for her in order to win another handful of the seeds. One friendly and perhaps greedy little fellow suddenly charged Natalie. As she backed away, she collided with Sontilya and they crashed to the ground. The next moment, an irate karakiil squawked at her as it stood on her stomach, its long bare legs ending in strong feet that kneaded at her stomach as it sought to keep its perch.



Laughing, Natalie shook a bit of seed to the ground beside her to get him off, and struggled off of Sontilya. Tobin came over and helped Natalie pull the few feathers out that were stuck in her clothing. He failed to notice Sontilya was not only covered in feathers, but also smudged with more than just dirt.

His cousin looked at the small creature that had caused so much havoc. “You little beast! I should have the chef cook you for my dinner! You are only saved from the pot because I’m a vegetarian. Ugh! Don’t you dare stand there laughing Tobin! Come brush off my back before I push you into the compost heap.” Sontilya mocked anger, but the corners of her mouth kept threatening to burst into a grin.

When they had regained their composure, Natalie said wistfully, “I regret that we cannot glean the down from our egg layers, and wish even more that karakiil lived outside the *pah’mirsekuz*. Are all the karakiils kept here in this aviary?”

“Actually, we have several aviary pens for the karakiils throughout the *pah’mirsekuz*. However, there are some which live naturally wild,” he informed her. “We have an aviary for falcons as well. Perhaps tomorrow when we visit the guardian training fields I can take you to the falcon aviary which is not far from there. I hope to also treat you to lunch with the guardians.”

“Thank you, I look forward to all of those experiences. Where are we going from here?” She threw her last handful of seed to the swaying karakiil nearby.

“Why don’t we take her to the weavers?” Sontilya suggested. “That way she can enjoy seeing the process of turning the down into thread and the thread into cloth.”

“Oh! Yes, please!” Natalie gave a delighted smile.

Tobin found he could refuse her nothing when she smiled. “It’s a good thing I brought Sontilya along, because I wouldn’t have thought of the weavers shop as entertaining, and you would have missed out in favor of the council chamber that I planned to take you to.”

“But I would like very much to see the council chamber also. Will there be time for both?”

He ran his fingers through his hair to push the persistent lock off his brow before answering, “We can always go to the council chamber another day. Why don’t we see the weavers shop, and then take a walk down to the waterfall where the children gather to swim in the afternoons?”

“That sounds perfect. It does feel a bit warm this afternoon. Can we wade in or will we be intruding?”

“Only wade in? On such a lovely day as this, I’m for a full swim!” Sontilya said enthusiastically, while she looked down at her mussed clothing disdainfully.

“The weavers shop is a good way off, so we should head over there if you want that swim before dinner,” Tobin warned. “Would you like to go and change, Sontilya, or can it wait until we get back?”

“Do I stink that bad? We’ve gotten a lot dirtier on occasions in the past, Tobin. Besides, I can always pick up a clean tunic to change into at the weavers.”

~

A nice hour walk took them past private tree homes and large gardens tended by males as well as females. Some of those homes had eigan tied up at their base; a creature which stood on two strong hind legs, was slightly taller than Natalie, and its two front appendages were arms with clawed hands. Tobin explained that eigans were the standard sagoron mount.

The three were greeted frequently with a smile and, from time to time, more curious and outgoing sagorons would come forward to offer their palm in greeting. However, not everyone was excited, or even accepting, of her presence. Tobin and Sontilya apologized for the ill manners of the ruder sagorons.

Natalie brushed away their concerns, “I didn’t expect half as warm a reception as I have received, and as much as you feel they should be more receptive of me, I believe I should understand their feelings also.”

By the time they reached the shop, Natalie found she was thirsty. Sontilya left to get them all something cool to drink, and Tobin introduced her to the shop steward.

The proud steward, Davidel, seemed delighted that she would desire to see how they produced the cloth that felt like an angel’s kiss against her skin. As they wandered through the rooms, she realized a good many hands were involved in the creation of that special cloth.

Sontilya returned with the drinks that everyone quickly consumed. While they refreshed themselves, the beaming steward took a moment to ask Natalie what color cloth she preferred.

Looking at the rainbow of hues and colors, she laughed and asked, “Only one? They are all so lovely. I suppose these two greens combined, if I had to narrow it down, are most pleasing. See how the pale shimmering of this one is offset so beautifully laid against the deep forest green of this other one?”

“Lady Natalie, you have an eye for fashion.” He paused to shake his head and continued, “Many can weave but not all can see which color is best with another. I am grieved that you are not sagoron and shall be returning to your realm. I could use someone with your talent. Our sales would at least double with you to advise my clientele.”

“Thank you. I would love to remain here in your realm, but there are pressing matters that I must share with King Marix.”



“Ah, yes. We appreciate that one so young is willing to put herself in danger for the benefit of our species.”

“I did not know that my decision to go to the king was shared with anyone outside the council members,” Natalie said a little concerned. She was not used to such openness amongst humans. *The difference in our two species, especially in how political affairs are handled, is disconcerting. Then of course, I was the one who just mentioned about speaking to the king.*

Tobin quickly reassured her the community was always apprised of all discussions and decisions made during council gatherings. Seeing the steward’s look of distress, that he might have offended her, Natalie forced herself to relax. She slipped her arm into his, “Are we going to the sales room next? I would love to purchase some cloth.”

“You must take a length of the two greens that you are fond of as my gift,” the steward insisted. Natalie would have refused, but Tobin agreed, and asked the steward if the cloth could be wrapped and delivered to his home.

“I will deliver them myself this very evening after we close the shop.”

“Thank you. It is a most generous and beautiful gift.” Natalie expressed.

They said their farewells and soon were walking down the path to the waterfall.

~

Children’s laughter could be heard even before the sound of the tumbling water. Natalie was eager to slip off her breeches and wade into the pool at the base of the small waterfall. She was relieved that her tunic was knee length because wading in breeches wouldn’t have been at all comfortable.

When she noticed Tobin sitting up on some rocks at a distance, she called out, “Don’t you want to join us?”

“I’ll just sit here in comfort. It’s far enough from the water to be safe from any *accidental* splashes. Thanks for the invite though.”

When several of the children stopped cavorting long enough to stare at the human who had invaded their domain, Sontilya gave them a sharp look before she joined Natalie. Soon the children forgot their curiosity and, when the two women joined in their game of water tag, no one showed discomfort as Natalie took her turn at chasing them.

An hour later, and nearly out of breath, they came out of the water laughing. As they realized they would have to drip dry, they put their breeches back on, moaning at the dampness.

“Tobin, you missed all the fun,” Natalie said, once she had caught her breath again.

“I enjoyed myself quite well from my nice dry rock.”

Grey eyes dancing with mischief, she stepped closer to him and quickly slipped her arms around him in a hug that transferred much of her dampness to him.

Sontilya giggled and said, "I think you have the right idea Natalie." She laughed harder as Natalie let go of him, and Sontilya tried to grab hold of her cousin to share a watery hug too. Tobin slipped away, skipped a few feet backwards, and then tripped, landing on his butt.

Holding his hand out to warn Sontilya off, he kept an eye on her while he regained his feet. He grimaced at his now dirt smudged damp clothing, "This is my repayment for a long day escorting you two ladies about Oakhaven!" He protested in mock horror, but at the hesitant look on Natalie's face, his own broke into a grin, and he moved in on the two threateningly. "Maybe I should give you both an opportunity to enjoy the water a second time."

Shrieking in playful terror, Sontilya darted past him to clamber onto the rock outcropping he had recently vacated. Natalie glanced behind herself as she stepped away from her advancing opponent, and decided pleading was her only chance.

"Now Tobin, it was just a hug," she tried convincing him.

"Uh-huh." As he progressed towards her, the teasing glint in his eye changed to a wary one. Circling to her right, he edged her back toward the water.

Her sudden calm should have been a warning to him. Just as her heels were being lapped by the water's edge, she darted left, and Sontilya gave Tobin a firm shove from behind and crowed in triumph. He barely had time to hold his breath before his face was under water. Sputtering, as he cleared the water, he turned to them with a malevolent glare. The effect of his baleful look, however, was reduced by the boyish grin that fixed itself firmly on his face.

As he climbed out of the water, he brushed it from his face, "You are trapped taktron for sure!" Tobin tried to sound furious but failed miserably to strike fear in their hearts when he laughed with them at their conquest. "Well at least I can tell mother I've already had my bath this month."

"So that was the smell that followed us all day," Sontilya snorted as she waved her hand in front of her nose.

"Oh, I thought that smell was from one of you ladies stepping in karakiil dung," he returned just as smartly.

"I don't relish walking several miles home in wet coverings. Why don't you dry us, Tobin?" Sontilya begged.

He frowned at her, and Natalie suppressed a surprised and curious look. Shaking his head, he nevertheless said something in sagoron, and moved his hand down the front of his clothing. He was instantly clean and dry. Looking over at his guest, he raised an eyebrow and then smiling, turned, and started walking towards his home.

"Tobin, you wouldn't leave us to walk dripping all the way back!" Sontilya demanded.

"Oh, wouldn't I now?" Tobin threw back over his shoulder as he continued to walk.

"I would not have expected this of you, after the hospitality I offered you in my father's home," Natalie said. She was playing dirty, she knew, as he had already repaid her kindness tenfold.

He stopped, turned and waited for the two women to catch up to him. “You are right Natalie, yours is a debt I can never repay.” His face withdrawn, he repeated his words and then raised his hands in front of her. She was dry and clean, still standing there with her mouth open, when he turned to his cousin and grumbled, “You can dry yourself off perfectly well.” Giving him a pouting look, she repeated his actions, and in a moment was dry also.

Natalie realized he didn’t take her teasing very well, and she hoped for a moment alone with him to apologize. She also wanted to know the answer to something that puzzled her, “Hey! If you could dry us, why did you insist Tobin do it?”

“Oh, well, uncle Aresifiil commanded that, while you’re here, we minimize our use of what you call ‘magic’. He said you might feel uncomfortable if we were obvious about our abilities. I figured it was better to have Tobin bend his father’s rule than me.” She grinned unashamedly. More quietly she added, “Tobin is so touchy just now. I can’t imagine why.” Her eyes, rounded in innocent wonder, were betrayed by the smirk she couldn’t quite keep from turning up the corners of her mouth.

Natalie felt a blush creep across her face and pretended to see nothing out of the ordinary. Watching Tobin’s back as he led the way through the tree homes, she wished she thought more often before she spoke. She really had meant it only as a joke, but he took matters of honor so seriously. Now, her easy-going way of teasing her friends had ruined the good humor she had reveled in all afternoon.

Passing by what Natalie took to be a rather large tree-home, Tobin stopped and asked, “Would you like to see our jeweler’s bazaar? The steward’s workshop is already closed for the day, but the exchange is open for a bit longer. Frequently, clients stop off on their way home in the evening to pick up a piece they commissioned for a gift.”

“If you don’t think we will be late for the evening meal, and offend your parents, I would love to.” Natalie said delighted. *I hope this means that he isn’t too upset over my teasing.*

“I’ll just stay down here and rest my older bones, while you children look at the pretties.” Sontilya said, making a shooing motion towards the stairs leading up to the jewelers.

Inside, Natalie was awed by the variety of stones and settings on display. One room exhibited only rings, and another exclusively necklaces, while others had bracelets, earrings, pins, and objects of unknown use which were dazzling to look at.

In a small glass case resting on a pedestal beneath a window was an exquisite, dark-golden, leaf-shaped, pendant necklace. At the center of the leaf was a large, thin-cut, violet-blue jewel that, even now as it lay in this case, refracted the evening sunlight and changed its color from violet to blue. Scattered across the leaf were other gemstones, a diamond, a sparkling light-green stone, and a jewel in the shape of a seven pointed star that seemed to burn like fire. She couldn’t help but stand enraptured by its beauty.

Enchanted, and hardly daring to breathe, she whispered, “I’ve never seen anything this beautiful.”

“That is the covenant pendant, gifted to our people around six hundred of your human years ago by King Randall Marix, at the time of The Treaty of the Kings. The jewels each represent an important member of that treaty. The center gem represents King Randall, the diamond is for Duke Timothy Arison de LaPhere, the smaller green stone represents the nerrs, and this star-shaped fire stone stands for the sagorons.”

“I see the sense of the diamond for the duke, it is his family jewel, and the fire stone definitely resembles your people. I can’t say I know enough of the nerrs to understand the choice for their stone, but I am wondering why the king is represented by this violet-blue one instead of an emerald which is his family gem.”

“I don’t know the reasons for that change in choice of your king’s jewel. Beyond the explanation I’ve given I actually know only our own historical use of the pendant. Each of our *Ker’agartets* gives it as a bonding gift to their bride. Mother wore it for the bonding ceremonies with my father, and from time to time she wears it for special occasions, but it usually rests here so all can enjoy its splendor.”

“Understandable, it would make each occasion it is worn truly special because it is worn so infrequently, and even if I was queen, I would be terrified I might lose or damage such a precious gift.”

The time passed all too quickly. Tobin suggested they return another day to view the steward’s workshop, and Natalie enthusiastically agreed. They rejoined Sontilya.

“We had better take a shortcut to ensure we make it back in time for the evening meal,” he said as he directed them to turn into a grove of trees that grew close to a hill. There was a rocky outcropping nearly touching the branches of the oak trees overhead.

As they followed the path that curved around the base of the hill, Natalie could hear water cascading into a small pool before it could be seen. The path led out into a curve that hugged the edge of the oaks as they formed a semi-circle around a small clearing beside a dark pool. In passing, she noticed a black tree growing on a small shelf that extended out from the rocks into the pool. The tree was different than any other she had seen before, and wholly undesirable in contrast to the lovely golden leaved *pah’mirsekuz*. She wondered why the sagorons didn’t cut it down to enhance the beauty of this small niche, but decided it would sound critical and rude to question them about it.

Passing out the opposite side, she recognized Tobin’s tree home. Relieved, she realized they had saved about an hour by taking the short-cut. *Why didn’t we take this path earlier? Oh! I need to be careful, if I start talking out loud to myself I might offend the sagorons before leaving here.*

## CHAPTER XV

Dining al fresco on a large balcony facing the setting sun, Natalie delighted again in the foreign cuisine. A flutist played a light airy tune, people chatted at small tables scattered randomly about, and nearly invisible servants vigilantly maintained a constant flow of food and drink. She noticed that Aresifiil and his family, along with herself, were paid no more diligent attention than any other diners at this open-air restaurant.

The visible contrast between the *Ker'agartet* and any human nobleman had Natalie deep in thought. *Father would have been obvious about his position when entertaining guests. I hate how he puts such emphasis on appearances. I know it is wrong to be jealous of others, but I do feel a deep envy of a family life where the father is a loving, generous, and adoring protector.*

“If you are homesick and would prefer to return to your realm earlier, Natalie, we would all understand. Being here with no humans other than yourself is probably very hard for you. It would be for anyone,” Kyla said kindly.

Surprised, and feeling a little guilty for letting her mind wander, Natalie hurried to reassure her hostess that she was enjoying her visit and wasn't looking forward to going home at all. “Your atmosphere is so relaxed and peaceful here. I find myself constantly comparing it to the pressure and tension I feel in my everyday life. I was just thinking how nice your family is and wishing I could be as close with my father as Orehifiil and Tobin clearly are with your husband,” Natalie shared.

Kyla reached over and squeezed her hand. “While you have been here only one day, I find my fondness for you has been gaining steadily as when a seedling grows into a tree. I believe our friendship will become as solid as an ancient oak. I look forward to spending more time with you than just this visit to our people.”

Natalie was still trying to blink back tears when, moments later, the first tier council member who represented the second district, came up to Aresifiil's side. “May I join you for a moment?”

“Certainly Beila, we'll make room for you here beside me,” the *Ker'agartet* said agreeably, as he motioned for a waiter to bring another chair to his left.

Beila barely waited to be seated before beginning, “Your Majesty, a matter of great importance has come to my attention.”

At a look of annoyance from the *Ker'agartet*, he set his jaw stubbornly and plowed ahead, blind to the increasing thunderous look that came over Aresifiil's face, as well as those of all the sagorons seated at the table.

“I see that you are enjoying dinner, but this situation must be remedied immediately. I have been informed that Tobin took the human to the life tree. Now, when I felt the council was in bad judgment to send the young as delegates, I bowed to the majority vote. This action, however, proves my belief that the youth haven't the wisdom necessary when dealing with these humans. I insist the council meet first thing in the morning to discuss how we should handle this breach of trust and to recount the vote on whom the delegates should be.”

“My father is the *Ker'agartet*, Beila, and his generosity in forming a council and listening to their advice is simply by his choice. He doesn't ask *your* permission, nor need *your* approval for his decisions. As for a breach of trust, if you meant that my brother has failed to protect our people through an act of negligence,

you will find that the term of a first tier member can be a great deal shorter than your prime life.” Orehifiil’s words were spoken softly for only the ears of those at their table, but Natalie was surprised at the menacing tone which left no doubt that the heir to the throne was threatening more than Beila’s council membership.

Aresifiil raised his hand, before Beila could be fool enough to object. “The delegation remains as decided. I would suggest, Beila, whatever small-minded thoughts you have about my son, and our guest, you keep to yourself. We live in a vastly different world than our ancestors. I suggest you think on whom has shown the poor judgment today; isn’t it you who sits here and speaks of sagoron secrets?”

I believe Natalie was taken *past* the tree in a few moments to save the young people time in returning for this meal, which was rather enjoyable until you interrupted. You have turned a harmless mistake in judgment into a certain crisis, as I must now figure out exactly how to explain what you have been ranting about in front of our guest.”

The *Ker’agartet’s* impatience should have been warning enough, yet the council member rashly tried to defend himself. “I will not be held responsible for your graftling’s violation...”

The sagoron council member suddenly faltered as he realized his words had shown his prejudice. Aresifiil, now quiet with fury, stood to motion to two guards who seemed to have appeared from nowhere. The council member shook off the guards as they reached to direct him out of the restaurant.

“I can see myself out.” He spat angrily. The guards, looked to their *Ker’agartet* who waved them away, and they turned with shrugs to return to their invisible stance.

As Aresifiil took his seat, Tobin, looked chagrined, and tried to apologize. “Father, he was right, I was foolish. I know we can trust Natalie, but there will be many sagorons that feel the way he does. The need to avoid disrupting the harmony of our people should have been enough to make me think before I did something so serious and violated their trust. As for Beila’s behavior, perhaps he had one too many cups of coffee after dinner tonight.”

“While I agree that a little more thought might have been given to whether or not you took our guest into the glen, that idiot is not right and his bias is obvious, and I don’t care if it was the coffee that got him worked up.” Aresifiil firmly stood by his prior statements. Pausing and shaking his head, he sighed before turning to Natalie. “Well my dear, it appears we will be sharing our greatest secret with a human whether we think it is best to or not.”

“No, Your Majesty, that isn’t necessary. I admit to curiosity about the conversation I just landed in, however, I think it is better I forget about what I heard. That way your people can keep some peace knowing I would rather not have knowledge of your secrets. My people are full of prejudices and suspicions too,” she paused and gave a quick sad smile that raised the corner of her mouth but did not reach her eyes. “I guess our species are more alike than we understood.”

“You are so very young, but still wiser than some of our elders.” Aresifiil said, looking appreciatively at his young human guest. “What is done cannot be undone, so let’s not end our meal on such a sour note.”

With that the *Ker’agartet* motioned for after dinner coffee to be served and to the flutist, who came over and played a soft, haunting melody that brought back tears to Natalie’s eyes.

“That was beautiful. I have never heard such clear pure notes played by any human flutist.”

Orehifiil grinned and thanking the musician, winked at him and said, "Oh, it is all in the instrument. We use magic in our metal-works shop when crafting our instruments. Anyone could play just as well." He quickly dodged a lighthearted punch to the shoulder from the flutist, who laughed good-naturedly.

"Let's just hear you give it a try then, *Ker'iaddahs*." The flutist offered, as he held out his precious instrument a little warily.

"I'd best not. You'd only pout for days that I had in some way damaged your delicate loved one." Orehifiil responded, waving his hand toward the flute.

"Not that I believe the myth of your magic, but how much does an instrument like that cost?" Natalie asked with a wishful look.

"We usually trade goods or services, rather than pay with coin as humans are accustomed to do," the friendly musician explained. "I paid dearly in both my time serving in the metal-works shop, and a trade of these performances to the restaurant owner who in turn provides free meals to the owner of the metal-works shop."

"Oh, I see. Thank you for your lovely performance. I shall cherish the memory for life."

"You are very welcome, Lady Natalie." The beaming flutist bowed again and departed to play for another table.

"Is it not proper to give a token of appreciation to a performer?"

"Sometimes yes, it depends on the reason for the performance. This young flutist is repaying his obligation in trade and it is inappropriate for him to accept compensation as the owner here has already paid him by trading meals with the flute maker," Kyla explained.

"If someone from say the jewelers shop wanted to trade for an instrument like his, how many jewels would the flute maker require in trade?" Natalie pursued.

"I'm not sure," her hostess replied. "Aresifiil?"

"Oh, well, I haven't any musical talent, so I have never inquired myself."

"A few small diamonds I'd think." Orehifiil mused.

"Would they accept a diamond ring?" Natalie asked, as she fingered her diamond and ruby ring that had been her mother's before she died. It would bother Natalie to give it up but, now captivated by the sweet music from the sagoron flute, she longed to own one. *Surely in King Marix's palace I can find a master musician to train me, although, I doubt I will ever play so exquisitely.*

"That is a very lovely ring, but are you sure you want to part with it?" The *Ker'agarteti* asked. Natalie bit her lip, but then nodded her head affirmatively. "Then I will ask the metal works steward for you."

Natalie slipped the ring off her finger and resolutely placed it into Kyla's palm. It had, after all, not been her mother's favorite ring. Her favorite one was a large emerald surrounded by diamonds, and Natalie kept her mother's cherished object in a locked chest with other jewels she had inherited.

“Perhaps, if it is not enough, I could give one of my other pieces of jewelry to Tobin when next he comes to see Tamara.” Natalie suggested.

Smiling broadly, Orehifiil inquired, “Oh, he goes to your realm to visit Tamara?”

“Orehifiil, watch your manners. You have embarrassed our guest,” his mother instructed her eldest, as a blush crept up Natalie’s face. At the same moment, Orehifiil winced from an unnoticed kick to his shins by his brother.

Unabashed, Orehifiil smiled as he stood up, “If you will excuse me then? I have some things to attend to before bed.” Not waiting for an answer, he added before leaving, “I hope you will forgive me Natalie, if I’ve offended you again?”

“Nothing to forgive, *Ker’iaddahs*,” Natalie shrugged with a good natured smile on her face.

As he slipped out of the restaurant, his parents shook their heads in fond exasperation. Deciding it best to move on to other topics, Aresifiil asked Tobin, “What’s tomorrow’s itinerary for our guest?”

“We plan to visit the training fields and take the midday meal with Rotan and Vero. After that, we’ll tour the falcon aviary.” Tobin reported.

“Take care at the aviary. The falcons aren’t as domesticated as our karakiils.” The *Ker’agartet* warned. This brought a laugh to Natalie’s lips, as she remembered their earlier visit to the karakiils.

“We had a bit of excitement touring the karakiil aviary this afternoon,” Tobin explained. “One very curious and overtly friendly fellow charged at Natalie and startled her. She jumped back in surprise and collided with Sontilya, and they both ended up in a heap on the ground, with the curious fellow standing on Natalie’s stomach, screeching away as if she had somehow been the antagonist!” Tobin finished relating the episode between chuckles.

“Poor Sontilya landed in the dirt and worse, while I came away with only a few karakiil feathers stuck to me. I really felt awful, but it *was* very funny thinking back on it now,” Natalie admitted.

Wanting to ease any worry that she might be harmed if she were to visit the falcons, she quickly added, “My father has three falcons. Mother had me trained early to handle them, and I know how to protect myself. She always said ‘the best way to keep from harm is to keep your wits about you.’ Please don’t worry your majesty, we will be cautious.”

Reassured, the sagoron rulers soon departed, insisting the young people stay to enjoy the flutist’s entertainment. Tobin ordered more aged dingin drink and they settled back, enjoying the evening of entertainment under the stars. He whispered anecdotes about the various guests seated around the balcony.

*He is less self-conscious and actually very amusing now that his family has left.*

She admired him for his apparent good will towards his fellow sagorons, since she knew, in the past, they had frequently snubbed him when they could get away with it. All too soon it was time to leave and she sighed in resignation. *There will be all too few nights like this in my life.*



~

Hearing her sad sigh, Tobin ached. *Her future is weighing heavily on her heart. I hope for just these few weeks that I can fill it with happy memories.* Determined to do exactly that, he took her hand as he led her down the winding staircase that swirled around the base of one of the five trees from which the restaurant was formed. When they reached the bottom, he knew he should let go of her hand, but found himself unable.

Natalie walked with him, in companionable silence, back across the meadow to his tree home. As they first walked out from under the *pah'mirsekuz* to cross the meadow, she slowed to a stop, gazing up at the star-filled sky.

"Tobin, I am right in thinking that the stars we are looking at aren't the same ones as those I would see from the meadow Tamara is sitting in. The positions of the constellations are all wrong, and the colors of your light effects are a bit different as well."

"Yes, the best way I can explain it, is that our two realms are on the same planet, but we move through time at a different rate, therefore, our realities are changed. The time and stars are evidence of that altered reality."

As her gaze came down from the stars, it settled on his face. The swirling lights in the night sky, reflected in her winter gray eyes, left him unable to remember whatever else he'd intended to say. With his blood pounding through his veins, he thought surely she would hear the cadence of his heart, as it beat several times faster than usual.

"I wish, with all my heart, that prayer could make this the only reality, and I could stay here in your realm," she said softly. He reached up to brush away a tear that slid down her warm soft cheek.

"I wish I could use *Ker'ah* to stop the time-reality change," he despaired. "Since the humans came, the space of our reality has been shrinking. Where we now live has held stable for six hundred of your human years, but what we have lost we have no way to regain. I know humans believe this to be 'magic', yet, we cast no 'spells'. We have no power over time, only *Ker* does."

"You said, 'since the time the humans came'. What do you mean?"

"Your people were not always here, Natalie. One thousand years of your time has passed since humans first started walking in the *pah'mirsekuz*. At that time, the oaks were across all this land. Don't the humans keep history records of that time?" He was so surprised that she wouldn't know her own history he failed to keep from speaking rudely to her.

"All we have are stories of the first man and woman. We keep lineage records in each holding, and the king and dukes have complete records of all the lord holders. But I have never heard that we came from somewhere else, or about the land being covered with your oaks," she frowned. "You are sure that this is an accurate accounting of history and not just a babe's tale?"

Irritated that she would believe him to tell her a childhood story as if it were true history, he pulled away from her, and brushed his hand through his hair. "Natalie, more than 207,000 years of our time have passed since humans came here. Our time difference is not a babe's tale, the power of our prayers is also real, and our history records are just as true.

For millenniums, my people lived here in peace, until humans came here and taught us to kill. Never, in all our history has one sagoron kill another. Humans brought war and destruction to our world, and four hundred human years of it left us with what you now know as the Great Oak Forest.” His words came out harsh and bitter, and he regretted saying them, as he saw she believed him and was crushed with the knowledge.

She took a ragged breath. Tears streamed down her face and her hands fisted at her sides in impotent anger for what had been lost. “My father and his allies would finish what my ancestors began,” she said huskily. “Oh Tobin, we must stop them, no matter what the cost to my people!”

Contrite for the pain his rash words brought her, he reached out and pulled her into his arms. Not understanding the fear that rushed over him, as he held her close, he closed his eyes and prayed to *Ker* that He would keep her safe.

“It is not your fault. You are good and kind, more like my people than the sagorons would believe. Shhh! Hush, *Ker* has a purpose in everything, even if we cannot see it.” He felt her shaking sobs subside, and he pulled back to release her, the smell of her still lingering in his nostrils. He regained her hand and smiled ruefully, “Come on. It’s getting late. You don’t want to fall asleep during Rotan’s discourse on battle tactics tomorrow.”

Giving him a less than cheerful smile, she groaned playfully, “He isn’t going to expect me to understand all that is he?”

“Of course! There will be a test after lunch to see what you remember,” he joked back. He tightened his hold on her hand and said reassuringly, “I promise I won’t let him have you tossed into the river if you fail the test.”

“Does he really toss his trainees into the river if they don’t pass his tests?”

Chuckling, he launched into a few anecdotes about his own training sessions and, before they would have wanted it, they soon arrived at his tree home. Sontilya was waiting on the stairs to show Natalie to her room for the night. Sontilya raised an eyebrow, and a grin lifted the sides of her mouth when she noticed they were holding hands. Tobin felt a blush creep up his face but didn’t rush to let go of Natalie.

“So... how was the meal at Salor’s?” Sontilya asked, refraining from teasing them.

“Wonderful!” Natalie exclaimed happily.

Tobin gave her hand a gentle squeeze and, saying goodnight, left Natalie to his cousin’s good care.

~

Sontilya waited until they were inside Natalie’s room before asking the questions burning inside her. “Rumor is, Beila caused a scene and stormed off rather than have the *Ker’agartet* forcibly remove him. Did he say something offensive to you?”

Natalie hesitated. She was fond of Sontilya, but had never liked idle gossip. Carefully, she replied, “I do not understand everything of the ways of the sagorons, especially of your court and politics. Perhaps Tobin could answer whether Beila meant to offend me. I truly had a lovely evening.”

Sontilya didn't appear upset at her question being put off. Instead, she turned her questions to what was served and how she enjoyed the dinner.

"Everything was delicious! I especially enjoyed the pearlberry cheesecake; it was prepared in a way I have never heard of before. However, the after dinner coffee was a bit weaker than we drink it, but not so much so as to bother over."

Sontilya grinned, "We drink it weaker because it stimulates us to a greater degree than the humans. Too much coffee and arguments start breaking out. Our storytellers say that when humans first traded coffee with us, we were unaware of its effect. You can imagine the surprise when our people couldn't sleep for days and began vehemently arguing over the littlest things."

"Sagorons haven't always had coffee?"

"No. What I understand is that it is grown in the far south and the southern humans trade it with merchants who then trade it with the other species. Actually, our people thought it was an attempt to destroy us when it was first traded. It took a wise old human trader to come drink immeasurable amounts, while our traders watched, for the sagorons to understand it doesn't affect humans in the way it does our people."

"Oh! Well, that explains some of what was said tonight." Natalie didn't elaborate further and Sontilya let it go.

~

The week sped by as Natalie not only visited the training fields and falcon aviary, but also the council chamber, the metal-works shop, a baker's shop, and took a second lingering visit to the jeweler's market and shop. On her third day in the *pah'mirsekuz*, the sagorons held a grand feast with jugglers, acrobats, dancers, storytellers, and musicians of various instruments, many of which she had never seen before. By the end of that day, Natalie felt her mind was as stuffed as her stomach.

She enjoyed those close family meals more than the feast as she experienced firsthand being surrounded with love. *Kyla reminds me so much of mother. I think when I leave here it will hurt nearly as much as when mother died.*

The metal-works shop agreed to take Natalie's diamond and ruby ring in trade for a flute, and although she was suspicious that it was worth more than her ring, the *Ker'agarteti* assured her the steward would not be forgotten for his generosity. They explained, however, that it would not be available in time for her to take home the next week. Kyla promised to send it with Orehifil when the delegation left for the court of King Marix.

At the end of that first week, Natalie, hoping to get a few moments alone with the *Ker'agartet*, inquired of Kyla if that was acceptable. "I know your people are more casual between the royalty and the common sagorons. I just don't want to offend, or worry anyone if I am alone with Aresifiil."

Gracious as always, Kyla replied, "It is no one's business but yours and Aresifiil's if you two have a private chat. As for someone worrying about you being alone with my husband, I will admit that there are a few ignorant sagorons who still haven't seen the value of our two species becoming friends. However, they will not determine the choices Aresifiil makes. I'll arrange some time for you two to have a nice walk in the gardens after dinner. Will that provide enough privacy?"

“Oh, yes. Thank you.”

~

That evening, as they walked through Kyla’s beautiful flowers, Natalie found herself suddenly tongue-tied. *How do I ask him these questions that will bring up a past that is so personal for him and Tamara? Thank You, Lord, that Aresifiil is patient and allowing me to gather my thoughts.*

“Your Majesty, I have some questions that, I guess, might seem offensive, but I can’t help wanting to know the answers. It has been so many years for you since you returned from being attacked in our realm, but for Tamara and me it has been only a little over half a year.”

“Ask whatever you want of me, Natalie. If I can, I will answer. If not, I know you will respect my refusal to do so.”

Taking a deep breath, she asked, “Why, in all this time since you returned, have the sagorons not retaliated for Oreh’s death and your attempted murder?”

Aresifiil raised an eyebrow at the question, but chuckled as he answered, “I expected questions about my feelings for Tamara. You are a deep well, Natalie. I wish we had more time to spend together.

Well, when I was missing for over two years of our time, there were many debates in the council of how to react. Father was struggling with his own grief and my mother’s, who became quite ill and kept to herself, refusing any comfort. When the younger sagorons, especially the guardians, demanded action, at first father insisted it had only been two days in your realm.

However, after I failed to return for nearly the second year, he agreed with the younger sagorons and formed an army. Yet, I think he was still somewhat paralyzed with the decision he faced and before the action was taken, I came home. Even so, after my return, my parents never fully recovered. They were thrilled I was safe, but drew more reclusive, and father passed much of the responsibilities of the kingdom onto me long before they died.

Our society, as a whole, stayed somewhat in shock from the unprovoked violence, but the death of Oreh polarized our people. The young continued to discuss taking action, while the older sagorons decided to increase the guardians at our borders and stop all trade with the human realm.

Actually, it was your bringing Tobin to us, that brought some sense back to many. By the time he arrived, I was the *Ker’agartet*, bonded with Kyla, and Orehifiil had been born. While the shock of Tobin’s birth stirred things up, the end result was that the sagorons realized we have a lot in common with humans. That led to less talk of revenge, and opened up discussion on possibly approaching King Marix about the treaty violations.”

“Thank you for talking about these difficult memories. After his first visit to my home to see Tamara, she and I spent several afternoons conjecturing why we never heard of any response by the sagorons to the events that led up to his birth. In fact, even before I brought him to you, we had wondered about the lack of any revengeful action from your people. It is one of the reasons we felt he would have a chance of a decent life with you.”

“Kyla and I tried to give him a normal upbringing. Those first fifteen years were very hard for him. He seems to be more content now. I know it must have been terribly painful for Tamara to give him to me.”

“Yes, but she knew he would never be safe living amongst humans. The real pain actually came when he stood before her, at nearly the same age as her, only a month after his birth. It was so shocking! She has adjusted to it though, and is very pleased with the man, err, sagoron he has become.”

They continued to talk for a while, but Natalie had the answers to the most important questions. His words confirmed she had made the right choice to come and seek action from the sagorons. They would not rashly break the treaty, and the delegation to King Marix would likely help bring swift response from the king.

~

Her second week in Oakhaven was filled with more lunches and dinners at various homes throughout the *pah'mirsekuz*. Sontilya's mother, Runa, was a seamstress. She designed and sewed a full-length gown out of the shimmering green material and a cape of the same length, to cover it, from the dark green cloth. With what was left over from the darker cloth, she made a pull string handbag and a vest. She also made a short night robe from the excess of the lighter luminous fabric.

“This is so lovely, thank you! I must insist that you accept something in return. I can send Tobin back later with a strand of pearls.”

Not many pearls were available in the *pah'mirsekuz*, as the sagorons had never been sea-dwellers, even when they had spread across the continent a thousand years prior.

Runa smiled, “I am tempted because I would love to have such an exquisite gift, but it is far too precious a gift in exchange for my simple sewing.”

“I see where Sontilya gets her humble character. It is a very long strand that would hang low even when triple encircled around your neck. Perhaps you can take the pearls to the jewelers and have him break the necklace down. He could make earrings, a bracelet, a ring, and a shorter necklace out of it. Then, I can bless Sontilya with the ring as a thank you for her kindness and friendship.”

“No gift for friendship is needed, and kindness is what Ker expects of us, but Sontilya would be delighted to receive the ring. I will agree, if you allow me to also give the bracelet to Kyla for you.”

“Oh, yes! That is a wonderful idea.” With that worked out, Natalie lovingly ran her hands down the soft gown, delighted to see how trading left everyone happy.

~

The last day came all too soon. Kyla grasped Natalie close, “You will always be welcome in the *pah'mirsekuz*, dear Natalie.”

*Ker'agartet* Aresifil held out his right palm and Natalie placed her left hand on his.

“Your Majesty, I will never forget my time here. You have all been so kind. I promise to use whatever influence I have to get as many humans as possible to honor the treaty.”

“May the one true *Ker* watch over you until you are well met again,” he said warmly, as he let go of her hand and stepped back to put his arm around his tearful wife.

Tobin, Tarkan and Orehifil, after apologizing again for the blindfold, guided her out of the *pah'mirsekuz*.



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