

### **Kidnapped.**

“Do nothing or the priest and boy die!” Demophon yelled quickly.

Julia was drawing enough magic to obliterate this murderer and the entire street he stood upon, but Lorcan... Gideon. She might—only might—be able to shield one of them along with herself in time to stop the fireballs that would surely rain upon them. She couldn't choose! Julia did nothing as Demophon stepped toward her. Captain Kell and his men dropped their weapons and Julia thought that wise of them, until the smirking captain received a pouch of gold.

“Traitors!” Julia screamed. “Keverin will track you down and hang you all!”

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Mark E. Cooper

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Thanks lads.



### *Prologue*

**P**ERGANN STARED INTO THE FLAMES OBLIVIOUS to his surroundings. He was the last in a proud line of kings that could trace their heritage through twelve hundred years of history to the beginning of Deva and to the Founders themselves. The room in which he sat was dusty and cluttered with the remnants of meals taken alone in the dark. Food lay mouldering untended on silver plates, but not a rat could be heard. There was no longer enough food in all of Devarr to tempt a rat from hiding, for if it did, it would become dinner itself. Devarr starved, while the spring sunshine beat down, but Pergann neither knew nor cared. The drapes remained closed shutting out the day and life's cares, all except a thin sliver of sunlight spearing the darkness through a tear in the rich fabric. The door opened behind him, and a shadow clad figure slipped inside.

Pergann cared not. He did not turn. "Leave me. Take your prattle to Morfran."

The figure continued into the room and stopped behind the king's chair. "Chancellor Morfran has... *departed* shall we say. It's time for you to follow him."

"Ascol!" Pergann gasped. "What do you think you are... *Gahhh!*"

The man named Ascol pulled on the toggles of his garrotte just enough to immobilize the struggling and dying monarch.

"It is time Deva had a strong king again. Not a self pitying old man like you." Ascol said sawing on the toggles with great enjoyment. "My sorcerer wanted to kill you himself, but it's more fitting for the new king to remove the old one don't you think?" He frowned and stopped his play. "Oh, you can't answer can you? Never mind. I'll take it as said you don't agree."

Pergann struggled for just one more gulp of air. The twine was buried deep within his flesh. *My dagger, where?* Sparkles of light flashed before his eyes as his oxygen starved brain struggled to find a way to survive. He finally remembered, and fumbled at the side of his chair.

"Now, now, none of that." Ascol said in a conversational voice as he reached for the dagger. Pulling with one muscled arm on the garrotte, Ascol turned the blade with his other hand.

“Well, this is a surprise! You do have taste in some things it seems.” He turned the blade in the meagre firelight watching entranced as the light glinted on the perfectly formed steel. “Chulyum steel, or might it be Japuran I wonder...no it’s too old for Japura. I think I’ll take this for a keepsake...” He thrust the dagger into the sash around his waist. “...just to remember you by as it were.”

As Ascol leaned back, Pergann’s struggles ceased and the stench of death filled the room.

*Crunch!*

“Ah, curse it! Now look what you made me do... by the God you stink!” Ascol unwound the bloody garrotte from where it had sliced through Pergann’s neck to the bone. “Demophon isn’t going to like this. No indeed not.”

“And what precisely won’t I like my dear Ascol?” Came a voice out of the darkness behind him.

Ascol spun in a crouch drawing his sword as he turned. He straightened when he found a familiar man in a guardsman’s armour standing in the doorway. The man was no guardsman. Demophon was a Hasian sorcerer only recently come into his service. Using the sheathing of his sword for an excuse, Ascol looked away from Demophon’s eyes.

“Just a little accident.” Ascol said airily.

Demophon crouched to examine the corpse. His head snapped up and he glared angrily. “A little accident! You fool, this was supposed to look like a natural death, not murder!”

Ascol twirled the bloody garrotte through the air unconcerned with the spatters of blood flying away from it. “Well... you see... and then...” he stammered, but then more firmly, “Well curse it man, fix it with your magic!”

“Don’t ever give me orders.” Demophon said in a deadly voice. “I’ll fix your little *accident* this time, but make another and it will be the last you ever make!”

Ascol goggled at this... this *peasant* addressing him in such a fashion. “How dare you, I’m to be king! I’ll have you executed!”

Demophon cocked his head. “Oh? And just how will you do that from the grave?”

Ascol didn’t answer. He edged away from the now scowling sorcerer, until his back touched the door.

Demophon waited for a moment listening to the silence. “No glib answer? In that case you may leave. I have to arrange something to cover your incompetence.” He turned his back on Ascol declaring his contempt for the would-be king of Deva.

Ascol clamped his jaw shut and spun on his heel to storm out the door followed by the sorcerer’s quiet laughter. Making his way through the deserted corridors of the palace, he cheered himself with thoughts of Demophon and his garrotte, Demophon and hot coals, Demophon screaming in agony as Ascol put his eyes out with his new dagger. By the time he reached the alley where his men held the horses, he was positively cheerful.

The guardsmen heard their lord whistling and glanced at each other in relief. Ascol gny they did not want to see.

Godwinson bolted up out of his bed with a gasp, and the vision dissolved. He covered his face with shaking hands and rubbed sweat out of his eyes. Pergann of Deva was dead. He had *seen* it as if right there with Ascol as he did the deed.

The cataclysm was looming closer.

He swung his legs out of bed and reached for his robe. He dressed quickly and left his room in search of the others. They needed to accelerate the plan.

‡ ‡ ‡

### *Chapter One*

**T**HE COLUMN OF SOLDIERS CLIMBED THE RISE in the highroad with banners held proudly overhead. Lord Keverin of Fortress Athione reined in and pointed ahead.

“There, see it?”

Julia nodded. She could see their destination now, made small with distance. From the vantage of the high road, she could see most of the tree filled valley laid out before her. A man made clearing had been cut in the forest and the beginnings of a town had sprung up athwart the road.

“It’s lovely here. How come it was never settled before?”

“It was.” Keverin said and pointed into the distance. “Those hills were mined for coal for many years.”

That startled her. Coal mining seemed a thing of her old world, but before Julia could voice her surprise she realised that she should have known there would be such things here. She had seen Athione’s treasure, and everyone carried swords and knives. Where else did metal come from but out of the ground? Of course, there were mines, but coalmines?

“We burn wood.” Julia said trying not to betray her ignorance, but it didn’t work. Keverin eyed her and his lips twitched. “You are not going to tell me are you?”

“Tell you what, my lady?”

Julia sighed but her lips shaped themselves into a grin of their own accord. “It’s something to do with Chulym isn’t it?”

“Close. The coal was sold to the masters there. They were insatiable in Chulym’s heyday and bought it wherever they could. Smithies throughout the kingdom used Athione coal, but now they have to go elsewhere for it.”

“Oh?”

Keverin nodded. “There’s still coal down there I’m sure, but it’s too deep. We started losing men.”

“Gas?”

“Bad air.”

Julia took that to be the same thing. “You said there was a town.”

“Gone now. My grandfather shut down the mine and there was nothing to keep the men there so they moved on.”

The river gleamed with the early morning sun, Julia could see that, but the trees were too dense to see much else. She couldn't see anything resembling an abandoned town. Maybe it was near the old mine. Keverin urged Cavell to walk on and Julia nudged Ayita forward to keep pace with him. Behind her, the guardsmen escorting the wagons were chatting quietly among themselves. They descended into the valley and the trees closed in. They lost sight of the river and their destination, but the road was easy to follow even if it did need work. The verges were overgrown and many of the stones had shifted making the road uneven and in some places downright dangerous. Julia was careful and guided Ayita around the worst places.

“This needs work,” Keverin said looking around. “There was a time when this road was the most important one on my lands. Wagons full of coal used to head south on it, and others north to the fortress carrying goods paid for with the profits. Now look at it.”

“I'm surprised you let it get this bad.” Julia said and he looked at her sharply. She grinned. “It's your road, Kev.”

Keverin scowled. “My road it is, but there are others with destinations still worth visiting.”

“West Town will be eventually.”

“That's why the road needs work—like I said.”

Julia laughed. “My... you *are* testy this morning.”

Keverin flicked a glance toward his men, but they were far enough back not to hear him easily. He leaned close and whispered, “I should have married you before we left.”

Julia smiled. That was one way of saying he missed her in his bed. She wouldn't mind sharing her tent with him, but of course it wouldn't be proper. Keverin was uncomfortable with his people knowing he had slept with her, not that they did much sleeping that night. No one could keep something so scandalous a secret for long. Fancy, a Lord Protector bedding a lady without marrying her. Horror of horrors! She snorted and he looked at her again with an eyebrow raised in enquiry.

“I don't care what people say about me, Kev.”

“*I* do.” Keverin said firmly. “That night was wonderful Julia, but we can't do it again until we're wed.”

Julia nodded reluctantly. She had found people quite tolerant of her differences, but this was pushing it a little. They would never say anything of course, but they would think less of her if she allowed such goings on. She didn't want that. Despite what she had just said to Keverin, she liked her new life and the people in it. She didn't want to do anything to ruin it.

Julia brightened. “We could ask Father Tulley to marry us.” Tulley was the only priest within leagues. West Town was his parish.

“Gideon would be hurt, but we could do that.” Keverin said.

They looked at each other for a long moment then sighed in unison. “No.” They said together and laughed.

“I would marry you on the instant, Julia. I should have done it when I had the chance.”

“Something always seems to interfere. The war, Tancred poisoning, and now this. We can’t have a wedding without inviting Gy and Purcell in any case. Then there’s Jihan and Ahnao, Blaise and his father, Lucius and Lysara. I’ve never met Isolde, but I would like to. Do you think they would come all this way to see us married?”

Keverin smirked. “There’s no doubt of it my love. Purcell threatened to dump me in the horse trough if I chose Gy as sword brother.”

“And what did Gy say to that?”

“He said he would dump me in if I *didn’t* choose him!”

Julia laughed. She wouldn’t mind watching that... from a safe distance of course. “So choose Jihan. No one would dare try it with him as sword brother.”

“You’re right!” Keverin said but then he shook his head. “No, I’ve known Gy and Purcell for years. Jihan will understand.”

Jihan *would* understand, that was true, but it would solve a problem. Kev had been Jihan’s sword brother when he married Ahnao. It would be nice if he could return the favour and stand beside Kev.

“Maybe you’re right. I could always ask one of them to stand as my father.”

Keverin groaned.

“What?”

“If you do that they won’t know where to turn. Both of them want to stand with me, but when they hear you need one of them, they will both want to do that as well!”

Julia chuckled, he was right. “I thought Mathius could do it, but he’s my age. Besides, he’s my brother not my father.”

“Hmmm. What of this Best Man you spoke of? Perhaps Mathius could be that.”

“You have it backwards. A best man is for the groom—like a sword brother.”

“Oh.”

She would think of something. Mathius would like to be included. He was the last of Keverin’s mages—the last survivor from before her arrival. He would be hurt if she left him out. Maybe she should just go ahead and make him the bride’s father and damn the age thing? Julia sighed. It just didn’t feel right. She would give it more thought.

They reached the clearing around mid-morning. The trees had been felled to provide a space large enough for the folk of West Town to live and work, but most of the stumps had yet to be removed. There were tents and campfires all over with no obvious plan behind their positioning. Hundreds of men were hammering and sawing while their wives bustled about carrying things back and forth. A large group were working to prepare a community meal. Even the children were hard at work, though theirs was a different task. Father Tulley was the only teacher they had but his school was in full swing. The church had no doors, windows, or roof, but it did have walls. It was the only building anywhere near completion. Julia and Keverin’s arrival caused quite a stir. The menfolk downed tools and trotted to line the road cheering their lord and the wagons of supplies he brought. Someone called Julia’s name and the others took it up. She smiled and nodded to a face she knew here and there, but

Keverin didn't stop.

"Hurrah!"

"Hurrah for Keverin and Julia!"

"Hurrah!"

Julia smiled. Hurrah for twenty wagons of supplies too?

The new town was barely begun but Julia could see the work was progressing apace. The streets were laid out in straight lines with pegs and string. Someone was thinking ahead, she noted. The streets were wide. She was surprised to find the town square, which the church doors opened onto, already complete. The road had been widened to make a large paved square, and by the looks of the pegs, it would have buildings lining it all round. Further along there were foundations for houses lining the highroad with more following the lanes that branched from it. The lanes were little more than string and pegs as yet. Julia could see that Dergan was building for the future. The houses here in the centre of town would be three stories and by the look of those she could see, they would all have deep cellars.

"This is excellent," Keverin said looking around in pleasure. "Truly excellent."

"I agree, but why do you think so?"

"Market Square is more than big enough to accommodate a town twice the size of the old West Town, and they set it athwart the highroad."

"You expect the town to grow?"

"Not necessarily, but I prefer this to the reverse."

Julia nodded. "And it's placement?"

"More trade." He said simply.

If trade ever came, it would come via the highroad or the river. Dergan had allowed for the possibility. Another road, laid to join the centre of Market Square on one side, ran straight as an arrow to the river. There was a ramshackle jetty there. It looked old.

Keverin dismounted and lifted Julia down before turning to greet Father Tulley and Dergan. Tulley was a young priest. He hadn't lived in West Town long before the evacuation, but even so, he had settled in and was respected by the people.

"My lord," Tulley said with a bow. "My lady," he bowed again. "Welcome to Morton."

Julia gaped. "But..." How did they know?

"I told them." Keverin said with a grin.

"We wanted to honour you, m'lady." Dergan said into the hush that descended over the people. "The Lord said you have two names. Some said we should call it Julia Town, but I think Morton sounds better."

"It does... I mean thank you." Julia turned with bright eyes to scan the crowds of grinning folk. "Thank you all. My father would have been honoured to lend his name to such a wonderful place."

Dergan grinned then scowled at all the onlookers. "Back to work! Back to work if you want a roof over your heads!"

Grumbles and chuckles abounded, but they knew Dergan was right. They dispersed to go back to building their homes.

"We have plenty of room to set the tents, my lord." Tulley said and pointed toward the hundreds that were already up to house the townsfolk. "We have our

meal at—”

Julia peered around at all the busy people and grinned at the children peeking hopefully out of the church. They wanted the rest of the day off. The sun said it was still only midmorning, but what harm in having a day off from school? Julia grinned again and decided to conspire with them.

“—generous, my lord. Wendell was bemoaning the lack only yesterday.” Tulley was saying.

Wendell was the smith for Morton. Julia raised an eyebrow, and Keverin nodded at the wagons. The guardsmen were moving off to set up a camp. The wagon drivers had pulled off the road and were moving toward the piles of lumber and stone awaiting the building projects. There was a good stock of building materials, but never was there enough for an entire town. The piles of stone seemed to dwindle as she watched. Lumber wasn't a problem, there were millions of trees right nearby.

“He has his smithy built?” Keverin asked looking around.

“Not the walls, m'lord.” Dergan answered. “But we did the floor and foundations for him. We needed the forge first thing.”

Keverin nodded. “I don't see it anywhere.”

“I'll show you, m'lord. Wendell will be right pleased when he hears you brought his iron. He is helping the others square wood for the church joists, but he prefers metal to wood.”

Keverin nodded. “Julia?”

“I'll stay with the good Father. He can give me a tour.”

“Honoured, lady.” Tulley said with a bow.

“I will see you soon then,” Keverin said and turned back to Dergan. “Lead on.”

“This way, m'lord.” Dergan said and they wandered off chatting.

To Tulley's great embarrassment, Julia took his arm and walked with him into the church. She grinned again to see all the little faces back at the benches hard at work.

“My, your children seem very hard working Father. How ever do you do it?”

Tulley beamed at his students. “They are good, but I cannot take credit my lady.”

“Call me Julia won't you?”

“Oh, oh... I couldn't. You honour me lady, but I couldn't.”

Julia sighed. “*Lady* Julia then. Please? For me?”

“For you my lady... Julia,” he said with a red-faced nod.

“You were saying about the children?” Julia said to distract him from his embarrassment. She'd had a lot of practice with this kind of thing.

“I was saying that I couldn't take credit Lady Julia. They have ever been well behaved—except one or *two*.” He said with a mild glare at the offenders.

Julia chuckled as the two boys bent to their work again. She walked behind a row of girls and peered over their shoulders. She would guess their ages ranged from seven up. The oldest was more woman than girl. She frowned at the childish hand most of them used to do their work. She leaned forward and took up one of the slates.

“Are they all like this?”

Tulley reached out to see what she had found. “Ah... yes. Most of them are, but they are new at this.”

“Oh?”

“Yes indeed, lady.” Tulley said and handed the slate back to the girl. “Lord Keverin has strong views.”

Julia knew that well, but what did that have to do with a child’s handwriting?

“The Lord has always encouraged the Church to teach his people—boys and girls both, but it’s not until now that I have been allowed to do so.”

“Allowed?” Julia said in puzzlement and looked around the church. There were more girls sitting here than boys, and the girl’s ages were higher. Most of the boys were less than eight years old she would say. “Who could prevent you?”

“The Bishop, my lady.”

“*Gideon?*” Julia said in disbelief. “Why would he?”

“Not Bishop Gideon, my lady, his predecessor. Bishop Jymis and the Lord never did see eye to eye. Nobles are taught to cipher, common folk are not, but lord Keverin wished to extend the offer to all his people. Jymis refused as is his right as Bishop.”

“But then Gideon was raised?”

“Yes Lady.”

“Julia.”

Tully smiled at her correction. “That’s right, Lady Julia. Bishop Gideon sees things differently. He wrote to me and all his other priests encouraging us to seek out students for other lessons.”

“You have plenty here,” Julia said pleased with Gideon. “You teach them to read and write?”

Tulley nodded. “Ciphering, the art of the mathematic, scripture of course, history of Deva, some history of the Protectorate as well... the Protectorate is heavily linked with our past.”

“I understand. I don’t hate the Protectorate, Father, only those who would kill my people.”

Tulley’s face lightened. “There are many good people there. It’s a shame they are misled into heresy.”

“Heresy?”

“They believe that Lord Mortain is the voice of God on this Earth. They are mistaken.”

“And what is the view of the Church?”

“That heresy is the worst of crimes, but those deluded by the sorcerers are not to blame.”

“An enlightened view,” Julia murmured.

“The Holy Father would see them come to the true faith, but I do not see that happening. As long as the sorcerers hold sway *and* remain their people’s teachers, the heresy will continue.”

Julia nodded and walked along the rows noting that the lesson varied widely from student to student. Some of the older girls were practicing the alphabet and they needed it. The younger ones seemed better at it and were writing sentences already. The boys were doing math. “You don’t teach one lesson at a time?”

“No Lady, of course not. Each child learns at his own pace, as do we all.”

Julia nodded. The children weren’t pressured to learn, and that was good, but teaching this way would take longer.

“Would you like another priest to help you?”

“Why? My duties are not burdensome. I would wish the other children here, but I am happy enough with these.”

“There are others?”

“Indeed. The older boys work alongside their fathers or are apprenticed in trade. They will not come, and many of the girls are kept back by their parents.”

That annoyed her. “I will talk to Keverin about it. I’ll see if he can’t make them release the children for part of the day—the morning at least.”

“Would you Lady? That would please me greatly.”

“I can’t promise,” Julia warned. “But I will speak with him.”

“Thank you, Lady”

It was time for some conspiracy. “How about that tour?”

“The children—”

“Surely one day wouldn’t hurt?” Julia said smiling at the suddenly hopeful faces.

“I suppose... yes.” Tulley said and walked to the Alter. He clapped his hands for attention. “Lady Julia has asked for a tour of our town. You will have this day to yourselves. Thank the Lady.”

“Thank... you... Lady... Jul... i... a,” the children sing-songed together.

“You are welcome.” Julia said and smiled as they jumped to their feet.

“Walk! Don’t run!” Tulley shouted and the rush subsided a moment until they were outside. Screams of childish delight were raised and they ran off to play.

Julia and Tulley smiled as they left the church. “Full of energy,” she said.

“Too much, sometimes.” Tulley said as they crossed the square. “What would you see first, Lady?”

“Oh, I don’t mind Father. I’m here for a few days. No doubt I’ll have time to see it all. You choose.”

Tulley nodded. “Along this side we have the inn and its stables.”

“What about that one?”

“Houses, but they have yet to start on those. Too many stumps.”

Julia frowned. There were a lot of men stripped to the waist with spades and axes attacking the stubborn things. “Let us go see.” She said with a vague notion forming in her head.

“As you wish, Lady.”

They walked along the road toward the struggling men. Apart from the pegs, there was nothing to distinguish the road from the surrounding land. Stone was in short supply it seemed.

“Where does the stone come from for the roads?”

“Same place as for the foundations, Lady.” Tulley nodded toward the wagons being unloaded. “The stockpiles are all that is left from two seasons of work.”

“I meant the quarry.”

“Oh. The hills to the south have plenty of rock, Lady. There are heaps all around the old mine. It’s stone we are short of.”

“The mason?”

“Him and his apprentices are working non-stop and have been since this site was given us by the Lord, but they can’t keep pace.”

“What will you do when you run out?”

Tulley grimaced. “Use wood I suppose. That’s why we stopped using stone on anything other than foundations after finishing Market Square and River Road.”

“I’ll talk with Kev. Maybe we could reuse the old stone in West Pass.”

“Forgive my saying so Lady, but that would be more trouble than it’s worth.”

Tulley said and at her surprised look he explained. “Stone is heavy. You can’t carry much in a wagon and Athione is a long way from here. Then there is the Gap to consider. We would have to build a sturdy bridge just to cart up a few blocks at a time. The wagons would make their way here, and then have to turn around empty for the return trip and—”

“I get the picture,” Julia said ruefully. “That means I understand.” She added at his confused look.

“Get the picture? Get the picture...” he said and shook his head very much like Keverin did when she said something he didn’t understand. “I like that Lady. I have learned something this day.”

Julia smiled and stepped over the rope boundary of the road. They stopped to watch dozens of sweaty men heaving on ropes while others chopped frantically at stubborn root systems.

“Heave!” The first man on the rope shouted.

“And here she goes!” His comrades sang in response.

“Heave!”

“The God knows.”

“Heave!”

“And here she goes!”

“Heave!”

“The God knows.”

Tulley smiled and circled his heart. “He does know.”

Julia nodded her agreement. “He does, but that stump isn’t coming.”

“Redwood Lady. They are stubborn.” A sweaty man said leaning on his axe panting.

Julia pursed her lips in thought and stepped forward.

“Heave!”

“And here she... goes,” the song stuttered to a confused halt.

“Heave?” The man said one more time and stopped pulling.

“Do you mind if I have a look?” Julia asked the men as they brought their axes to the ground and leaned on them tiredly.

They were exhausted. Sweat rained from them and their shiny bodies bulged with muscle. Chopping roots and stump pulling were good ways to build strength, but she bet they would rather be putting up walls.

“What would you, Lady?” Tulley said.

“I might be able to help.”

“I don’t know... you are our Lady not a forester.”

Julia looked around uncertainly. “Am I doing wrong?”

“Not by me, Lady.” The leader on the rope said.

“Nor me...”

“... get the dang thing out of there...”

“Nothing wrong with helping folks, the God says...”

“She’s our *Lady*, not one of us...”

“Give over! She’s ours.”

Lots of nods to that last one and Julia blushed. She couldn’t help it. She always did flush easy. She needed to work on a tan to cover it! Everyone chuckled to see her, even Tulley.

“You don’t mind then?”

“Have a look *Lady*. The God knows two days wasted on the cursed... pardon *Lady*,” he said blushing himself now. “Two days wasted on a stump is two days too many!”

“Too right!”

“The dang thing has nearly crippled me!” Another voice, lost in the crowd, said.

Julia nodded and looked into the hole with her helper pointing out the trouble. There was a huge taproot gripping the soil, but there were many others with chop marks. By the looks of it the stump would be out soon without her help. The digging had already been done, and most of the roots were already severed.

“How many stumps have you done?”

“Hundreds *Lady*.”

“Mind if I do this one?”

He looked at her uncertainly, but reached for a comrade’s axe. “It’s heavy,” he warned. “I think Father Tulley is right *Lady*.”

Julia laughed as he offered her the huge axe. She doubted she could swing it let alone hit her target. She was more likely to cut her toes off than the roots.

“I’m not laughing at you,” Julia said and daringly squeezed his shoulder. He was all hard muscle, just like Kev. “I couldn’t lift that. I was going to use magic.”

“Good idea, *Lady*. These are dangerous.” He said swing the axe easily and smacking the handle into his other palm.

“So is magic.”

Julia gestured everyone back. She was sure stumps had been burned out of the ground on her old world before machines were designed to do it quicker. Her magic could easily provide that and more, but a fireball could bounce. She chose an alternate method. She grasped her magic and sent fire in a controlled stream no thicker than her arm into the hole.

The roots exploded.

Julia ducked and scuttled back releasing her magic at the same time.

“Oooh!”

“Ahhhh!”

“Magic is wonderful stuff ain’t it?”

Lots of nods and appreciative murmurs.

Julia didn’t tell them that the explosion had been unexpected. The fire was so hot it had caused the moisture in the roots to expand into steam. She would have to be more careful next time.

“Heave!”

“And here she goes!”

And she did go. Julia grinned as the rope teams fell back as the stump popped

free.

“Drag it there,” Julia pointed to a point well away from the next stump. “That one next?”

“Yes Lady, but she needs to be dug out first.” The gang leader said apologetically.

“Oh.” Julia said disappointed that she couldn’t help more.

Julia studied the stump knowing it would be stubborn like the other one had been, and an idea came to her. Back during the war, she had needed to get into a door blocked by fallen stone and timbers. She hadn’t been any good with her magic back then. She had succeeded through luck and desperation. Maybe she could do something here—just like the machines on Earth!

“I have an idea.” Julia said and grasped her magic.

She frowned in concentration and stroked the tree stump with an outstretched hand. She nodded as the feeling of the living wood came to her. She had it now, and heaved.

*Eeeeeek! Snap! Crunch!*

Julia ripped the stump out of the ground with ease. It didn’t feel heavy at all!

“By the God! Did you see *that?*”

“I am seeing it!”

Julia smiled and dropped her burden next to the other one. Her helper pointed to the next and the next and Julia ripped them out the same way. She soon got into a rhythm. Julia and her admirers wandered the clearing ripping out tree stumps and piling them in a central location for burning. It didn’t take people long to get used to the sight of a tree stump floating by.

“It’s noon, Lady. Time for a meal.” Father Tulley said.

Julia nodded and released her magic. “I’ll leave the rest for you.” She said to her new friends.

They bobbed their heads up and own and thanked her for the help. There were hundreds more to do, but it was their town. It wouldn’t be right to do it all for them.

“That was good of you,” Tulley said stiffly as they walked.

“Don’t be angry with me,” Julia said with a sigh. “I like helping people.”

“You are nobly born.”

“Not really...” she began, but his look stopped her.

“What would become of us all if the nobles left their castles to work next to their tenants?” Tulley said.

Might make for a better world, but Julia didn’t say that. “The lords would never do that.”

“You have.”

“But I’m different. I wasn’t born here.”

Tulley frowned. “We each have a place in this world. It is not good to forget that, or try to change it.”

Julia gaped. “The Church doesn’t teach that view...does it?”

“No, it’s my own.”

“It’s the wrong one.” Julia said firmly. “Gideon taught me that the God wants us to learn. What point in restricting ourselves? If we followed your way we would

never learn anything new.”

“We are reborn time and again Lady, sent back to learn. This is true, but the God sends us where he will, not where we would have him send us.”

“The point being?” Julia asked as they reached the tables.

“If He sends me back to learn what a priest knows, then I will be a priest and should not change it. If He sends me back as a lord, then he wishes me to learn what a lord knows. Do you see?”

“I see where you are heading, but you are still wrong. Does the God say I must learn one thing at a time? Of course not. As you said earlier, we all learn at a different pace. If I learn all I can in this life, does that not mean I will be by his side that much quicker?”

Tulley frowned trying to puzzle it out. He still hadn't answered when Kev sat by her side and reached for the bread.

“How is Wendell?” Julia asked him.

“Pleased to have the iron.” Keverin said and poured himself a mug of ale. “It's good, want some?”

“A half mug, then.” She said and sipped it. It was good.

“Wendell has his forge, and now he has iron to work with he can start making hinges and such.”

Julia nodded. They had brought wagonloads of iron, but that wasn't all they brought. “What did he say about the nails?”

“He nearly wept with delight!”

Julia laughed. No smith liked making nails.

“What have you done to Tulley?” Keverin whispered as he leaned forward.

“Nothing. We did a little stump pulling,” she said and at his raised eyebrow, she explained. “I used magic to rip them out, but Tulley doesn't approve of me.” Keverin's brows lowered and she hastily patted his hand. “That came out wrong. He likes me, and I like him. He doesn't like me lowering myself to help the folk here. It's this noble and peasant thing again.”

“Ah,” Kev said and his features lightened.

Julia breathed a sigh of relief. She didn't want Keverin to upset Tulley by accusing him of disrespecting her. The poor man had enough on his mind without having his lord angry with him.

“We need more stone, Kev,” she said after swallowing a piece of cheese. It had a strong flavour and she cut another piece. “Tulley says they used it on River Road and Market Square. They can't do much more without running out.”

“Wooden foundations won't last.” Keverin said scowling.

“That's what I thought.”

“We won't send the empty wagons back just yet,” Keverin mused. “I think we should have a look at the quarry and see what might be done there.”

“Maybe I can help.”

Keverin smiled. “You always do.” He said and took her hand for a chaste kiss.

Julia smiled in pleasure. “I love you.”

“And I love you my lady. *My lady Sorceress.*”

A few days later, Julia and Keverin rode into the hills with twenty empty wagons

clattering along in their wake. The trees gave way grudgingly as the hills came into sight and they were able to make better time. The forest had encroached so badly upon the road that at times Julia thought further progress was impossible. Keverin hadn't hesitated. He and his men had simply dismounted, pulled axes from a wagon, and waded into the forest as if attacking a troop of bandits.

Quarry Road was a mere lane compared with the high road, but it was adequate for their needs. The large wheels of the carts were wide and strong. They coped well with the rutted lane. The stone that once covered the road was missing in places, perhaps swallowed by the earth in some long ago storm when the ground had turned to sludge. Keverin directed his men to take to the verges to protect their horse's vulnerable legs. Julia followed suit. Although Ayita was doubtful, she settled down once on a relatively flat stretch of the verge.

"She doesn't like this." Julia said meaning the dew soaked ground.

"Her Dam never did like getting her feet wet," Keverin said with a grin. "Temperamental she was, like all women."

Julia gave him a dirty look. "Sensible if you ask me. Why walk on wet grass when you can stay dry on a nice stone road?"

"Ah yes, but we haven't got a nice stone road."

"We haven't any stone either."

"Not yet," Keverin said.

Julia nodded. That was why they were riding out here. By rights, they should be on their way back to Athione now, but a little side trip wouldn't hurt. In time they took to the road again as it passed between hills somewhat larger than the others they had passed. Keverin sent scouts out wide as the hills closed in and obscured the road ahead. They were in the heart of Keverin's lands, yet he took no chances. Reports of bandits and highway robbers did filter through to the fortress from time to time. The closer they came to the abandoned town of Dirlston, the better the road's condition, adding credence to Julia's earlier thought. The town was at a higher elevation and the ground was dryer—stonier too. Flooding hadn't submerged the road and the blocks were still in place.

"It's quiet," Julia whispered staring around at the abandoned buildings as they made their way through the town. Many had collapsed under their own weight, but most still clung to their foundations like a stubborn old man clings to a favourite chair. "It's scary."

"There's nothing to affright you here." Keverin said, but his voice was hushed also.

The creaking of harness and the clatter of iron-rimmed wheels over cobbles was the only sound. Even the guardsmen looked warily around. Conversation lapsed as the men touched sword hilts to reassure themselves of their safety. Julia whirled to the right. She thought she saw someone at a window. The shadow—if shadow there had been—was gone now. A creaking door had her grasping her magic and jerking Ayita to a startled halt, but it was only the wind. She watched the door swinging playfully in the wind waiting for her heart to slow.

God... she was shaking!

"Julia?" Keverin said reaching for her hand. "Are you well?"

"I'm well. I thought..." she shook her head. "It's nothing."

Keverin searched the empty windows and doors and stroked the hilt of his sword. He looked back to where his men fidgeted and on passed to the deserted buildings. “No birds,” he whispered. “Scouts out forward! A dozen men on all sides of my lady!”

“It’s nothing, Kev,” Julia protested over the clip clopping of hooves. “I’m fine.”

“Something feels amiss. Best be safe.” Keverin said easing his sword in its scabbard.

Julia bit her lip and said nothing more as they waited for the men to reform the column.

“At the walk, forward!” Keverin ordered and the column, this time in battle formation, moved out.

Julia kept her head swinging, constantly looking for threat to Kev, but saw nothing. More importantly, she felt nothing now. The sensation of menace had left as it came—without explanation. She kept a firm hold on her magic all the same. Market Square came and went and bird song returned.

“Maybe the noise scared them.” Keverin said doubtfully. “That might be it.”

He didn’t sound convinced, and neither was Julia. “Might it be brigands?”

Keverin nodded. “What better place to call home?”

Dirlston was a forgotten town. No one came here. Rather, no one had come here until now. With Morton being built not far away it wasn’t inconceivable for Dirlston to be repopulated. No, what point in opening a mining town without a mine?

“Who was Dirl?”

“What?” Keverin said taking his eyes reluctantly away from the empty windows.

“Dirl’s Town,” she nodded at the buildings surrounding them. “Dirlston.”

“My many times great-grandfather. He had the gift, you know.” Kev grinned. “You have seen him.”

“I have?”

“His portrait hangs in the east entry hall of the citadel.”

Julia remembered the image of a strong man with a stern expression. He was shown holding a staff barring the way into his citadel, which was rendered in the background in perfect detail.

“That’s Dirl?”

“Lord Dirl, eighth lord of Athione and Lord Protector of the West.”

“Which are you?”

“I am fourteenth lord. My line is unbroken in lordship of Athione. Few can boast such.”

Julia smiled at his quiet pride. Keverin was a noble in every sense of the word. He was tall and strong, implacable against enemies of Deva, but just. He was beautiful.

“Why does Dirl hang in the east entry and not the west?”

“He ordered it.”

“That’s it?” Julia said in surprise. “Why did he order it, and how long ago?”

“The story has it that he commissioned the portrait to thumb his nose at Deva and her king. Dirl’s father married a Hasian woman. When he died, she became regent for her son. The young Dirl was raised by her and idolised her. She was a remarkable woman by all accounts. At that time, King Roderick had plans to strengthen the

kingdom. Deva was beset almost everywhere with raiders and rebellious lords. He planned to channel their restiveness into conquest. Dirl was sympathetic with his mother's people. He stood in Roderick's way."

"Dirl barred his own king's way into the west!"

"Ironic is it not?"

Athione was built to bar the sorcerers from entering Deva. Dirl had switched things around. Talk about irony.

"If he had let them pass we might not have fought the war last year."

"Perhaps, perhaps not," Keverin said. "The sorcerers had yet to invade Hasa, but would they have stayed out of it? Roderick thought so. Dirl did not. Either way, it is certain you would not be here if not for him."

Julia went cold at the thought of losing Keverin. "I will thank him in my prayers."

"I doubt he sits by the God, Julia. He was a bit of a rogue by all accounts. He is probably running around down here somewhere and loving every moment."

Julia laughed at the image of a spotty teenager getting into mischief. "You said he had the gift?"

"Apparently so. There were more mages back then. Dirl ruled Athione four and more centuries ago."

"So long?"

Keverin nodded. "The Founding of the Black Isle was almost twelve hundred years ago. We built Athione in eighty-one AF. Eleven hundred years she has been in my family. Dirl had the gift, but there have been others."

"Perhaps our children?"

Kev took her hand. "Gift or no, our children will be special and we will love them."

Julia brought his hand up to her cheek and then kissed his palm. "Soon."

"Let it be soon."

They rode out of Dirlston and followed the road until a few candlemarks later, they found the mine. The wagons pulled off to one side near some grassy hills that didn't look quite right to Julia. She frowned at them in puzzlement.

"Slagheap."

"What?"

"Those mounds. Coal and rock mostly."

Keverin dismounted and lifted Julia down to greet Stefn and his three apprentices. Stefn had lived in West Pass all his life. The son of a mason, he had followed his father into the trade. He was in his fifties now, but still strong as the stone he cut everyday. His apprentices were made of lesser stuff. One of the apprentices, Bo, was his son, the other two were volunteers from Morton. All three were young and obviously unused to the heavy labour Stefn took for granted, but masonry was a good trade. They would learn. Stefn had more work on his hands now than ever in his life. He needed the help.

"Welcome, m'lord." Stefn said with a bow. "M'lady," he bobbed his head again then clouted his son's ear. Bo was gaping at Julia. The boy looked down and bowed quickly. "Have you come for the stone, m'lord?" He said looking passed Keverin at the wagons. "I ain't got near enough for that lot."

“We will take what you have my friend, but we came to see what might be done to speed things up. The stocks are dwindling.”

“Aye, m’lord,” Stefn said running a hand through his hair in a gesture of frustration. “I knew it would happen. I can’t do it any faster.”

“We shall see,” Keverin said. “Send your lads back to their work and show us what needs to be done.”

“You heard the lord, be off with you.” Stefn said and his apprentices trotted off.

Julia and Keverin flanked Stefn as he led them to his work. Julia looked around with interest trying to find the mineshaft. She found it easily, but it was just a hole in the ground. She was a little disappointed. She had hoped to find something worthwhile. She used her mage sight to look below the surface of reality and found what she was looking for. Below her feet, a network of interconnecting tunnels crisscrossed the entire area. They went down hundreds of yards or more. No wonder the miners had trouble with bad air. Julia followed the tunnels to the coalface. The seam of coal didn’t feel or look the same as the surrounding rock and shale. Patterns again. Coal seemed to have a grain quite unlike anything else she had seen. One thing puzzled her—the tunnels worked their way along the seam, so much was expected, but they followed a minor seam. Perhaps two hundred yards further down, there was a huge cavern excavated and a tunnel leading from it. A pocket of coal? Must have been, but why not follow the mother load? The seam they had followed was nothing compared to the one she found with ease. It didn’t make sense.

“Julia?” Keverin said.

“Hmmm?”

“I was just saying to Stefn that we could have some people up here to excavate the rock for him.”

Stefn nodded. “It would be a big help lady, no question about it, but I can’t do the work any faster. They will just have to wait.”

“They can’t wait,” Julia protested.

“Why?” Stefn said looking from her to Keverin and back.

Keverin grinned and waited for her to answer. Why couldn’t they wait? Well there was... and then... hmmm. They could wait actually, but Julia knew they wouldn’t. That was the reason. Keverin didn’t want a town made of wood. They were building for the generations.

“They could wait Stefn, but you should know your neighbours. Do you believe they will wait for your stone when there are hundreds of trees right nearby?”

Stefn scowled. “Wood? That’s no way to build anything to last lady.”

“I agree, but when a man has a wife and children waiting for him to provide a home for them, what is he to do?”

“You’re right. They won’t wait, but I can’t go faster. Not won’t—*can’t*.”

“Show us.” Julia said and Stefn led the way.

“This place is good for brick making, Lady. Plenty of shale and such was dug out of the mine, but it still takes as long as it be takes. Nothing can change that.”

Julia pursed her lips at what she found. To one side, one of the mounds had been excavated for the shale Stefn mentioned. A lot had been discarded—coal mostly—but materials seemed plentiful nonetheless. In the centre of the open space were rows

and rows of kilns connected by brick tunnels so that the heat from the preceding kiln wasn't wasted.

"Bricks..." Julia murmured to herself trying to see a way to speed it up. "What if I used my fires to speed the drying?"

"No!" Stefn cried in alarm. "Don't do that lady. Too fast and they will shatter, too slow and they won't be strong enough. It takes years of practice. We can't go faster."

"I'll have some men come up to help with the digging," Keverin sighed. "That will help at least."

"There must be more that we can do." Julia protested. "What about stone blocks?"

Stefn nodded to a small pile of rock. "I do them while the bricks are firing but they take even longer. I charge more for them of course, but it won't matter how much I charge if everyone uses wood."

"Precisely," Julia said following Stefn to another area. "You found all this here?"

"Aye," Stefn said with pride. "It's a good place this. The soil is thin here in the hills."

"How long did it take you to cut that many?" Keverin said nodding at enough rectangular sandstone blocks to half fill just one of his wagons.

"Near on a tenday, m'lord, but we have a couple of wagons full of fired brick you can take."

"Nowhere near enough."

"No m'lord, sorry m'lord." Stefn said downcast.

"Not your fault," Julia said trying to cheer the man while glaring at Keverin. He didn't have to be so blunt. "I'm sure old West Town wasn't built in a day."

"Ten years." Keverin said.

"What?"

"West Town took ten years to grow from a few houses into the town I burned to the ground."

*Ten!* "We can't wait that long. What about winter?"

"That's not a problem. I will build wooden huts for them so that they can live, and then replace them as I can with brick."

"But you know what will happen," Julia protested. "Morton will stay like that and the first fire will destroy it."

"What else can we do?"

Julia picked up one of Stefn's stone bricks. It was heavy with sharp edges and felt good in her hand—solid and strong. She wanted millions of them to build the town—the town with her name. But how?

"How do you work? Mallet and chisels?" Julia said noting the tool marks.

Stefn frowned. "What other way is there?"

"Magic made Athione they say," Julia said and Keverin looked at her sharply. "No, I don't know how they did it, but maybe I can make more of these." She said studying the block with mage sight.

"If you can do that lady, you should be the mason."

"It's in a good cause Stefn," Julia chided. "Besides, any I make you get to sell."

Stefn grumbled about tradition being upset and the like, but he watched with the same interest that Keverin showed.

The pattern of the block seemed simple enough. It was the same as the natural rock in the ground except the pattern didn't flow unending. Instead, it was hemmed in by the shape of the block and turned back on itself. She dropped the brick and grasped her magic. The cleared area was the logical place to make them so she stepped onto the shelf of rock Stefn's apprentices had cleared for him. He had cut a section near one edge and she used that as her starting point. She could see a fault line running diagonally across the shelf as clear as day with her mage sight and tried to avoid it. She was sure that crack went deep. It would ruin any bricks cut from there. Focusing her magic on the rock, Julia twisted and wrenched the pattern she found there.

*GRRrrrrrrRRRRRrrr.*

Julia staggered as the ground heaved beneath her feet. She heard the shouts of men and the squeals of horses over the rumbling beneath her feet. They were shouting of earthquakes and the like, but this was no earthquake. Julia watched as her magic forced the pattern to twist sickeningly. It seemed wrong, twisting nature. There was surely a better way. She managed to keep her feet as the ground heaved and vomited her bricks. Sweat was beading upon Julia's brow as she moved across the shelf ripping and tearing at nature. Finally, she reached the end of the rock shelf and stopped her vandalism feeling a little queasy. She knew it was necessary—they needed the stone, but twisting nature was wrong. She knew it was... she felt it was. Julia shook her head at the thought and took a shaky breath. Wherever she looked, she found loose blocks of stone shimmering with heat.

"They are hot!" Stefn said glaring with his fingers in his mouth. "Why lady?"

"I don't know," Julia said, but she did.

Magic was a kind of energy. By forcing it to change the stone into what she desired, she had transferred some of it into the stone. The only way for the blocks to release it was by radiating heat. She knew she was doing it wrong somehow. It seemed wasteful this way. She was sure there must be a better one.

"Are they all right?" Julia said worriedly. There were hundreds here. If they weren't they would be wasted.

"They seem to be lady. Wait a moment," he trotted off and came back with his hammer. "Best be sure," he said and struck the brick a hard blow.

*Clung! Clank.*

"Well I'll be—" Stefn said staring at his broken hammer. "Never seen the like of it."

"I'm sorry," Julia said.

She hadn't done it quite right. The pattern in Stefn's brick was truncated and turned back on itself, but hers was whole. She couldn't see a break or join in the flow of the pattern anywhere, and the grain seemed different than before. It no longer matched the native sandstone in pattern or appearance. If she didn't know better, she would have said her bricks had been cut elsewhere from some other kind of stone. They didn't look like any kind of sandstone she had ever seen. The pattern flowed evenly in one direction along the length of the brick.

"Don't be lady, it was an old one." Stefn said with a grin. "I let the lads use it. I never let them use my good tools."

"I'll have the men load them up," Keverin said gingerly checking for heat. "They

seem cool now. How many did you make?"

"I don't know. I just made the shelf change into bricks."

Keverin nodded. "Enough for our wagons anyway."

Julia nodded but it soon turned out differently. She had done more than she knew with her foolish twisting and wrenching. A short time after the men began loading the wagons, Keverin noted the hillside had slipped. He shrugged his shoulders and said it was the earthquake, but it wasn't.

"Lord!" Alvin cried. "Come look at this."

Keverin went to investigate Alvin's discovery, and Julia followed feeling vaguely puzzled and upset. Twisting nature wasn't what she wanted to do. She wanted to make things that were in harmony with it. There must be a better way than wrenching patterns out of shape. She needed to make her own patterns... or something.

Keverin crouched down and looked at what Alvin had found.

"I'm taking them out m'lord, but look."

Julia watched as Alvin continued removing bricks from the ground. He was knee deep, now waist deep, and still the bricks went down. She swallowed sickly. The hillside had slipped because it now consisted of bricks—all the way through. The turf was the only thing stopping the hillside from sliding in a heap of bricks down the road.

"I didn't mean to," Julia whispered.

"This is a good thing," Keverin said giving her a little shake. "A good thing, Julia. We need them."

"It's not. I wanted enough to fill the wagons, not this. I can't control what I do Kev. What would have happened if I'd tried for this many? I might have buried us all!"

"Calm down," Keverin said with another shake. "We are safe, the bricks are made, and Morton will be built properly. I have faith in you. You won't let anything bad happen."

Julia nodded jerkily. "I swear I won't."

"No need," Keverin said. He flicked a look over her shoulder. "Stefn is a little upset."

Julia turned to find the mason staring sickly at the unending stream of bricks flowing into the wagons. "Oh lord, what shall I say to him?"

"Say you'll let him keep half the profit for showing you how to do it."

"Half? He should have it all."

Keverin shook his head emphatically. "You will insult him. Pay he can accept, but not charity."

Julia nodded. Keverin had known Stefn the longer. She wandered over to the downcast mason. He was talking quietly with his apprentices and they weren't happy. Julia sighed; she had gone wrong again. Whenever she used her magic to do something other than fight, she always managed to upset people or tradition.

"...back to East Town, Da?" Bo was saying.

"I think it might be for the best," Stefn said grimly.

"Don't do that Stefn," Julia said. "Morton is your home now, or it will be."

"There is nothing here for me lady."

"Our new bricks won't build a town, Stefn. There aren't near enough of them."

“They are yours, lady.”

Julia tried to look surprised. “Why do you say that? We made them together.”

Stefn looked down. “I know no magic.”

“No, but you showed me how to do it with your bricks. I will be going back to Athione soon and you will have to continue the work we started. These new ones will help the shortage, but you know they will run out soon enough.”

Stefn looked up hopefully. “But I thought—”

“What?”

“I thought the hill...” he broke off in confusion.

Julia summoned a smile. The entire hill *was* made of bricks just as he thought, but even that many would run out before half of Morton was built.

“Don’t be silly,” Julia laughed gaily. “You know,” she said in a off-hand way. “Once you sell all these to Dergan, you’ll be able to hire some more young men to keep the kilns running. You can train Bo to do the stone ones.”

Bo looked hopeful. “Can we, Da? I know the clay already, and I never break ‘em in the kiln. Can I do the stone now?”

“Quiet boy,” Stefn said gruffly, but his face had lightened. “They are yours, Lady. I won’t hear different.”

“And I won’t take your charity, Stefn the mason.” Julia said trying not to laugh at the outrage on his face.

“My... *my* charity! I won’t take yours lady!”

“Good then. Half are yours, half are mine, but you sell them for me.”

Stefn spluttered at the notion. “You tricked me!” He said with his lips twitching. “You are a tricky one, and no mistake.”

“You have no idea. My half of the money will go to Dergan for the town.”

Stefn gaped. “But he will buy more bricks with it!”

“I know,” Julia said smugly.

Keverin came up to her and listened to the spluttering mason with a raised eyebrow. “Is all well?”

“Aye,” Stefn sighed scratching his head. “Your lady is different, lord.”

“She is special,” Keverin agreed looking down at Julia fondly and making her squirm. “We must be off to Dergan with that little lot.” He nodded at the nearly full wagons. “You will have to work hard my friend. I want a prosperous town not a trail camp of wood.”

“Perish the thought, m’lord.” Stefn said. “Stone is best.”

As they were mounting up to leave, Julia noted Keverin doing something with his saddle. “What have you there?”

“My new paperweight.” Keverin said with a grin. “A token to remember this day.”

Julia shook her head as he secured a single brick with a piece of twine and hung it from his saddle. Keverin mounted Cavell and together they trotted to the fore. The wagons pulled into line and the guardsmen moved into position with lots of prancing horses bumping each other. Julia and Keverin trotted down the road for a little way to give the wagon drivers some space before slowing to a walk. Julia breathed deeply. She shut her eyes and smiled into the sun’s warmth. It had all worked out for the best after all.

“...Stefn?” Keverin said.

“I’m sorry?”

“I asked what you did to Stefn.”

“I split the profit as you said, but told him to give my half to Dergan to buy more bricks for the town.”

Keverin guffawed. “No wonder he looked as if he’d been bashed on the head!”

Julia grinned and changed the subject. “Your mine has plenty of coal in it you know.”

“I told you it did.”

“No, I mean I saw it down there. It’s not deep Kev. The miners went the wrong way into a seam.”

Keverin raised an eyebrow. “You saw it with magic?”

Julia nodded. “There’s a large cavern almost directly below Stefn’s kilns. The tunnel continues on from there, and it goes very deep, but if they had dug westward, they would have found a huge seam much nearer the surface.”

“Why didn’t they then?”

“Maybe they didn’t know it was there?” Julia said doubtfully. “You did say the mine is old. Dirl must have been long dead when that cavern was created. Did they have a mage to point the direction?”

“I don’t know, but probably not.” Keverin said. “You know what this means?”

“I have some idea.”

“It means Morton will have trade. This is wonderful news Julia. You know I have worried about that side of things.”

Julia nodded, so had she. “Morton is too far from the mine though isn’t it? Dirlston is closer.”

“True, but you know Dirlston was always badly placed. The ground is too stony, and the only water is a single well that goes down a hundred yards or more. The farms will have to be leagues away to find good soil and water. Dirlston is safe from flooding, I grant you, but the well runs dry every other summer. And then there’s the river to consider.”

“What’s wrong with it?”

“Nothing’s wrong with it but its distance from here. Morton sits astride the high road to the south, but it also sits close to a bend in the river. It’s the perfect place. The river is like a highroad too, but it’s faster than any road.”

“But the mine is way up here,” Julia protested.

“True, but that’s good in a way. Wagoners will come and bring more trade with them. Merchants will come to buy the coal, and their money will attract others here. It will take time. Dirlston wasn’t built in a day, nor will Morton be, but it’s a good start for a new town.”

“I’m glad.”

Keverin smiled.

They entered Dirlston and Keverin sent scouts out forward. They had seen no sign of brigands but that didn’t mean they weren’t there. Keverin was unwilling to take chances. The first they knew of an attack was Ayita rearing and falling with an arrow standing out of her neck. Julia landed hard and grunted as the horse crashed to the ground squealing in pain. Her head cracked against the cobbles in an explosion

of pain. A light seemed to flash in her eyes and she saw stars for an age of time. The pain in her head was terrible, but the thought of Keverin being hurt was worse. Julia staggered to her feet only to fall again. Her head was bleeding and the world was spinning.

“Athione!” Keverin roared in rage. “Charge!”

“Athione!”

“Athione and Julia!” Keverin responded to his men’s shout as Cavell slammed into a troop of brigand three-score strong.

Julia tried to grasp her magic, but it was elusive and she was unable to hold it. She swore and raged at herself, but no matter her desperation, she could not grasp the medallion glittering in her mind’s eye. She watched the fight as the world spun about her. She was sinking into the cobbles, or were they rising up around her? There was nothing she could do but watch.

“Oh, God...” Julia groaned trying to stop her rebellious stomach from emptying itself over the cobbles.

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Keverin hewed a man out of his saddle and then another. His rage was incandescent. Keverin didn’t feel the wound the brigand dealt him, but the brigand felt his. He screamed as his arm fell to the cobbles, but only for a moment. Keverin’s sword found the man’s throat.

“Athione!” Keverin roared into the dead man’s face as he fell from his horse.

“Athione!” Alvin shouted with his voice cracking. Young he might be, but Alvin knew his duty. He cut a man down who was intent on killing his lord from behind, only then did he raise his shield and block another chop aimed to kill him. The blade careened off the top edge of his shield missing his face by mere inches. He didn’t give the brigand a second chance.

Keverin threw himself out of his saddle and dragged a man attempting to bypass him from his. The brigand was going for Julia. He was as certain of it as he was of his own name. Why didn’t matter, that he die, did. On the ground fists and feet hammered him, but Keverin shrugged them off to stab the man to the heart with his father’s dagger. The man was another Tanjuner!

*What by the God is a Tanjuner doing here?*

Back on his feet, Keverin slammed a gauntleted fist into a horse’s face. The horse went down kicking and squealing. A quick thrust ended its rider’s life. It was another swarthy-faced man. He spun around. They were too well equipped to be brigands. He didn’t know what he had here. They were too far west to be Tanjung Regulars. Purcell had fought them last year, but that was to be expected. Purcell was Lord Protector of the East, and Tanjung was in the east.

Assassins! What else could they be? Lucius had been plagued by them last year, and there had been that pair of street thieves in East Town not too long ago. The attack upon Julia had puzzled him at the time. Everyone knew who she was and that she was a sorceress. Only a fool would attack a mage, yet both men had died trying to do just that. Julia had been very upset by their deaths. She hated killing. Keverin looked hastily around for something that could explain what he had here. All around

was chaos. Men were dying, horses too, but Keverin breathed easier when he realised that his men had the upper hand. That changed when he saw Julia crawling upon the road. She was hurt!

The assassin saw her at almost the same moment.

“No!” Keverin raged and ran for the man, but he couldn’t reach him in time. “Julia!” He screamed in despair.

Alvin whipped his head around at the anguished scream and saw the lady on the ground with a brigand bearing down on her. “Yah!” He shouted and booted his horse into a desperate gallop.

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Julia fumbled at her girdled waist and presented her dagger in a shaking hand. Her vision doubled and tripled then came back to normal with the brigand much closer. Keverin was safe, was the thought that skittered through her mind as the man jumped down from his horse to kill her.

Julia swiped the knife at him, but he smacked her hand aside and raised his sword. Alvin raced toward her like a dream. He cast his shield aside as he bore down on her murderer. He thundered toward her, but Julia knew it was too late. The brigand’s sword was already on its way down. The world slowed and narrowed to that glinting blade coming for her. She watched it descend as if mesmerised.

Alvin arrived and the brigand’s head leapt free of his body. Blood fountained into the air and the body fell aside. Julia watched the wide-eyed face tumbling upward in an arc to fall moments later. The sound of it hitting the cobbles was horrible. A sort of squishy hollow sound she would never forget. Her gorge rose as the eyes rolled looking at her, but then they stilled in death. Alvin thundered by with his sword still following through. Time returned to normal and with it the screams of the wounded and dying. Julia’s senses reeled and she collapsed back to the road.

“Julia?” Keverin said. “Julia! Wake up, you have to stay awake!”

“Tired,” she protested.

“Stay awake! Your head is broken. You have to stay awake my love. Don’t leave me!”

“Never,” Julia said and forced her eyes open as Alvin rushed to do something to her head. She winced as he dabbed at the blood and pressed gently.

“Thank the God!” Alvin said in relief. “Her head is whole m’lord! She has a nasty bump the size of an egg but that’s all.”

“But she can hardly keep her eyes focused on me.” Keverin said worriedly.

Julia tried to sit up but she didn’t have the energy. She was so tired of fighting, when would they let her rest?

“She was knocked senseless I reckon m’lord.” Udall said from somewhere nearby. Julia couldn’t see him. All she saw was Keverin’s worried eyes.

“She will be all right, m’lord.”

“Don’t worry so much...” Julia said and blackness swallowed her.

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## *Chapter Two*

**S**HELIM RODE AT AN EASY PACE. IN REALITY, he lay asleep, but knowing this didn't help. He had yet to find a way of controlling his dreams. He would keep trying, he had no choice. He patted Nyx on her muscled neck and breathed deeply, but his smile turned to a frown when he smelled smoke on the breeze. He turned in the saddle looking for the source. The day was brilliant and the air clear. The sky was the colour of his mother's eyes, sapphire blue and beautiful. No sign of smoke up there, nor cloud either. He twisted around. Behind him, his trail stretched into the distance, but again there was no sign of fire. A dream... did dream smoke on the wind mean anything, and if it did, what did it portend? Shelim turned to Kerrion to ask him and gasped in horror. His mentor was shrivelled and wizened beyond belief. Kerrion was old, everyone knew it, but this was ridiculous! He must be a hundred at least! Kerrion turned to him and Shelim gasped again. Half his mentor's face was a ruin of burned and suppurating flesh, while the other was as he had always been.

Shelim recognised this Kerrion. His thoughts flashed back to his manhood ceremony, almost a year ago now. He had drunk Tancred along with the others and had dreamed so strongly he flew to Deva. There, in a huge stone tent he found Kerrion injured and attended by the outclan woman. Kerrion was injured in battle, or would be. He frowned. Shamen never fought in war.

"What happened?"

Kerrion smiled at him fondly. "Don't worry about me."

"Of course I worry!" Shelim snapped. "This is the future... is it not?" He said suddenly unsure.

"One of many."

"I don't understand."

"You will in time." Kerrion said turning to look behind him.

Shelim looked back and saw two distinct trails in the grass. "Teach me Mentor."

“The future is slippery, my boy. I told you once that I could divine with the aid of the drug. You don’t need it. Both are true, but what you must realise is that the future is not fixed. We don’t go through life following a trail laid down for us by the God.”

“But... how can we know what will happen?” Shelim said in confusion. “What then is divining?”

“Good, Shelim. You are thinking.” Kerrion said in approval. “Divining shows us what *may* happen.”

“Only what may?”

“Only that, my boy. Of course one of the many futures will happen and then it will be called the past. We can look backward much easier than forward.”

“To see what happened, and learn by the doing?”

Kerrion nodded. “By watching past mistakes, we try to void future ones.”

“There is a way to find the most likely possibility?”

“Yes indeed! By viewing each we weigh the possibilities hoping to find the one most likely to occur. Steering away from that one is the hardest of all. Try to imagine everyone in the Clan riding with us but each in his own direction. The trails left in the grass would be confusing. The possible futures are endless, many times more confusing than those trails.”

“How will I know?” Shelim said and Kerrion showed him.

“Like this.”

Shelim blinked, the plain was gone. He was riding beside an outclan woman wearing the leathers of a shaman. No woman was ever a shaman, but he looked at her without surprise. He knew her... but he had never met her. He rode on her left, while Kerrion stayed to her right.

“...are the one Julia.” Kerrion was saying.

“I know old man, you told me long ago.” Julia said coldly.

His mentor had changed, Shelim saw. He was still ancient, but the terrible burns had healed. Half his face looked as if it had melted. The hollow eye socket was a horror.

*Where... what... when was this?*

The woman was young seeming, perhaps thirty summers. Shelim wished he could look at himself in his mirror. He was afraid of what he might see—himself at his father’s age?

Kerrion blinked in confusion. “No... we haven’t met you yet.”

Shelim gaped. “Kerrion?”

“What is it my boy?”

“How can we be here if we haven’t met yet?”

Kerrion laughed and waggled his remaining eyebrow. “This is a dream Shelim. Ride it out and try to remember all you see. It’s important.”

“But—”

The outclanner interrupted. “I will decide what I will do, not you old man.” Julia said coldly.

Shelim was shocked. Kerrion was a shaman and due proper respect. Outclanner this woman might be, but that didn’t excuse her lack of common courtesy.

“The prophecy—”

“Said that the End Times are coming,” Julia finished for Kerrion. “That is done with old man. I have personal business to attend.”

“He’s dead, child.” Kerrion said kindly. “He wouldn’t thank you for killing yourself too.”

“I do this for myself, not him.”

“Do what?” Shelim said in confusion.

Julia turned toward him and Shelim gasped. Her eyes burned with rage and madness. “This,” she said and swept her arm in an arc ahead of them.

The world changed.

They were no longer on the plain. He didn’t know where they were, but cities had no place on the plain. It was burning, that city. Clouds of smoke billowed into the sky and the stink of burned flesh was heavy on the air. Dead horses and men lay carpeting the ground in all directions for as far as he could see. Hulking metal shapes he had no name for lay abandoned some half melted or buried. Men wearing metal shells lay dead next to others wearing ones made of leather. Black robed men lay in heaps where they had died fighting together, but worst of all, intermingled with them were Clan warriors and shaman. He groaned. There were many thousands dead here, many, *many* thousands.

“Why?” Shelim gasped. “Why...”

“Why did I kill them all?” Julia asked.

“Yes.”

“Because I am the One, because they understand nothing but force, because there was no one else... and because I wanted to.”

“*Wanted to...*” Shelim whispered sickly.

Julia looked around with a small smile on her face. “They thought to take my people back through the gate. They were wrong wouldn’t you say?”

Kerrion nodded sadly. “Very wrong. You warned them, but they wouldn’t listen.”

“How can you be so *calm!*?” Shelim shouted.

“Would you have me cry?” Julia sneered. “I have cried enough over this land. It is time for my enemies to weep, and they will. Oh yes, they will weep.” She chuckled madly.

Shelim glanced worriedly at Kerrion, but his mentor was dismounting and didn’t see. He jumped down to help him with whatever he had found.

“What is it, Mentor?”

Kerrion was weeping silent tears from his remaining eye. “Don’t come any closer, Shelim.”

“What... *who* is it?” Shelim said and bent to look. He had to know. On the ground was a... a *thing* that had once been a man. Its chest was a gaping hole and something writhed inside the shattered rib cage—maggots. It was Tomik.

“NOOOOO!” Shelim bolted awake with the cry building in his throat. He strangled it and staggered out of the tent.

Shelim sat cross-legged in the grass and shut his eyes trying to hold in the wail of grief that threatened to burst from him. He breathed deeply and composed himself. His father wasn’t dead... but what if? No! Tomik wouldn’t die... but his dreams were never wrong—never! Shelim rocked back and forth in agitation. He had dreamed

of Nerina falling from her horse and she did. He had dreamed of Nyx before ever laying eyes on her and knew she would be his no matter that Bardan later refused to trade. He had known beyond doubt or question and so it had come to pass. He had dreamed of riding Nyx to battle. Even knowing shamen never fought in war, he believed it still. All these things he had dreamed before his manhood ceremony made him a shaman... and now he dreamed his father's death. But wait... wait now. He hadn't dreamed that he would be a shaman had he? He hadn't dreamed that he would lose the warrior's life he loved to become a despised shaman, but did that mean anything? Kerrion... the Kerrion of his dream said the future wasn't fixed. He said a dreamer could learn what might happen and change it! What *might* happen! That meant what he saw was only one of many possibilities. Tomik might die... or he might not. His death in that battle was only one of many possibilities, just as Nerina's fall had been. That she fell meant only that she had failed to heed his warning that day. Nothing more.

"I swear by the Clan you will not die, father. I *swear* it!"

Shelim rose to his feet and ducked into the tent. He snagged his tunic and slipped quietly outside careful not to wake Kerrion. Denpasser was empty of people, but walking around in only his leggings felt wrong. He waited until he was outside to pull it on, the rattling of the beads might wake his mentor. Shelim watched the sun rise over the plains and thought back over the past few seasons. He had learned so many strange things, it felt as if his old warrior self had died and been reborn. He would never have guessed two summers ago he would become a shaman and be glad of it! A time of change was coming to the people, and if they did not change with it, they would disappear from the memory of the land. How fitting then that his manhood ceremony marked the beginning of the changes.

Winter had finally passed and Denpasser looked different. The gather had ever been an exciting event to him waiting just over the horizon. Denpasser had always looked new to his eyes, but living here for so long made him yearn for a different view. The river just ahead chuckled and splashed as it always did, and the wind blew the long grass flat as it always did, and even the ruins no longer held the same fascination they once had.

No one, not even Kerrion knew what significance Denpasser used to have, or so he said. Was the ruin a place to meet the Clans and outclan traders even thousands of years ago? Or did the ruins mean the Clans once lived inside stone as the Lost did? He couldn't believe that. Every clansman had a horror of cities, and anyway, Denpasser was the only stone tent on the plain. It was large, but never was it big enough for more than a single tribe to live in, even if they would. Shelim studied the ruin yet again trying to solve its puzzle. The hole in the wall where a door used to hang was eight yards across—easily big enough for a dozen warriors to enter walking side by side. That wasn't the half of it though. Wide the doorway might be, but the height of it was ridiculous! The thing was taller than it was wide! Why make something without reason like that? Kerrion said that the holes in the sides were called windows, but they seemed small in comparison to the door. Inside was just as much of a puzzle. There were several dish shaped depressions in the floor. None had any use he could see. Along the sides and rear walls, there were stone benches arranged in tiers that could seat an entire tribe without crowding, but had they been used for that purpose,

or something else? No one knew. Kerrion knew the history of the people better than any other, but all he would say about Denpasser was that it had been built more than ten thousand summers ago. When Shelim asked how he knew, his mentor had shooed him outside. The lesson in magic that Kerrion had given him had made him sweat so much that he forgot to ask again.

Might he be able to dream the building of it? Shelim dismissed the puzzle as unsolvable and turned to regard the tent flap. There was no movement within. Kerrion was old. He would be a while yet in waking, but food was in order, so Shelim went to examine their dwindling stores. How he was supposed to make something tasty out of bison meat that had sat here for four seasons he didn't know. It was still edible smoked as it was, but even bison meat became bland after eating it every day for this length of time. Shaking his head at the tough strip of meat, Shelim dropped it back onto its hook.

"What we need is some fresh food."

Nyx could use some exercise. Maybe he could ride out and find a stray from the herds. There were always herds of bison on the plains. Some were huge with more than one tribe following them, others were too small to support the people. With luck, he might find one of them. With a definite plan in mind, Shelim fetched his bow and was soon riding away. This was what the people were born for, he thought as the wind blew his long hair behind him and made the beads on his tunic rattle. He urged Nyx into a full gallop. In no time she was racing over the grass so fast it was as if she was trying to take to the air and fly. Shelim's full-throated shout echoed back to him from the empty plains announcing his joy to the land.

It was around mid-morning when Shelim decided to turn back empty handed. Rather than retrace his route he decided to circle around. He might yet be lucky and find a stray on the way back. If not, well there was always tomorrow and he had enjoyed the ride. He knew Kerrion would want to begin today's lesson soon, and he didn't want to keep his mentor waiting. On the way, Shelim noticed some tracks that should not have been there. He dismounted to investigate but what he found made him frown in puzzlement. The grass lay crushed as if a herd or tribe had passed this way recently, but Clan horses didn't leave prints like this. Anyway, the people weren't due back this way for tendays yet. Outclanners had passed here. He had no doubt. Clan horses were unshod, but the prints showed a telltale pattern of iron shoes. There must have been a large group of them to tear up the land to this extent, but the tracks were old. He couldn't tell how old with his usual accuracy—metal shoes left a deeper print. These were faint, but surely not faint enough to be more than a couple of tendays old.

Shelim shielded his eyes to search the horizon. He had dreamed of smoke. Could there be a connection? He found the sky like his dream, both cloudless and smokeless. He had assumed the smoke was due to the burning city, but it couldn't have been. He had smelled it before Julia appeared and showed him the burning city. He remounted Nyx and followed the tracks south until he came to the remains of a camp. He could see nothing out of the ordinary, but the absence of bison tracks and droppings nearby confirmed his thoughts. Outclanners, no question. He dismounted to investigate the remains of a camp fire, but it was old. He hesitated a moment, but decided not to follow further. Kerrion needed to hear about this. He could easily pick

up the trail later if need be.

Cantering back to Denpasser, Shelim wondered what a hundred or more outclanners were doing crossing the plains. They were running a big risk doing it in the first place, let alone doing it when the Clans were on their way to the Gathering. The people *did* welcome outclan traders to the Gather, but at any other time they were... *discouraged* from venturing far onto the plain. At the last few Gathers, Shelim had noticed many of the familiar outclan faces had stayed away. That seemed strange now he thought about it. War would keep traders off the plain, but the Clans lived in peace and had done so since before he was born. The tracks weren't heading toward Denpasser in any case, but toward the south. That meant they had crossed nearly three-quarters of the plain from the north. There was no way for them to reach so far without encountering a tribe or Clan of the people so they must have traded for free passage. Shelim couldn't think of any reason for a chief to grant an outclanner such a boon, but at least one must have.

"I'll ask Kerrion what he knows about this."

Shelim rode back into camp to find Kerrion already breaking his fast. He rubbed Nyx down and went to join his mentor.

"Did you enjoy the ride?" Kerrion said with an understanding smile.

Shelim knelt and poured two cups of the tea Kerrion liked so much. Kerrion said the tea would make him live longer, so Shelim drank it now as well. One thing he had learned about Kerrion—he was never wrong.

"Nyx needed the exercise," Shelim said defensively and Kerrion grinned. "I dreamt of The One again last night."

Kerrion's smile slipped. "Bad?"

"Couldn't have been worse, Mentor. Are you sure she's not evil?"

"Nothing is certain, my boy, but I believe she is good... I hope she is." Kerrion said with a frown. "Tell me of it."

"We two were riding alone together at first—" Shelim began and detailed his dream from the moment he went to sleep. "—you were crying. When I looked I found my father. That's when I awoke."

"You said we were not on the plain?"

"At first—"

"No, I mean the battle." Kerrion said intently.

"We are Clan, we have no cities." Shelim said by way of explanation. The plain had nothing like that burning city. It was many times bigger than Denpasser—many, many times bigger.

Kerrion looked relieved. "Good. That is good."

"Very little was good about the dream, mentor. You were old—"

Kerrion grinned in amusement as if he had a secret.

"—and you were scarred over half your face."

"Hmmm... I can't say as I look forward to that part. You have seen me injured like that before."

"Many times, but never like this. At first you looked as if you were injured moments ago, the next you were healed."

Kerrion waved that away. "That will often happen in dreams. Keeping to one time will come with practice, my boy. You dreamed two dreams. One peaceful and

one not. Both are possibilities. We must work to discover how to make the first come true.”

Shelim grimaced but Kerrion didn't notice. The first one would not be painless. Kerrion had been hurt in that one not the second, and what about the smoke?

“—a few things... are you listening?” Kerrion said.

“Sorry,” Shelim said flushing. “I was thinking about other things. On my way back I found some tracks made by outclan horses. There must have been a hundred at least.”

“What direction were they heading?”

That Kerrion had asked when the only normal heading for them was north, meant he already knew. As Kerrion's apprentice he should have been confided in—surely?

Shelim handed Kerrion his cup. “Why didn't you tell me about the outclanners?”

“I should not need to tell you outclanners are close. If you used your mirror more you would be aware of what is going on around you.”

Shelim shrugged uncomfortably. He knew Kerrion was right, but whenever he used the mirror he was tempted to view the Clan. It made him count the days to the Night Wind's arrival even more.

“I know your reasons Shelim, but it's our duty to look for dangers in the mirror. Not only for our own sakes, but also for the good of the Clan. I always check in the mornings. You should do the same.”

“I hear you, honoured Kerrion.” Shelim said with a quick bow of his head. “Will you tell me what you know of the outclanners?”

Kerrion nodded blowing across the tea to cool it a little. “The chiefs have agreed to allow them passage. The outclanners paid in gold for the privilege.”

Shelim knew by the way Kerrion spoke that he didn't agree with the decision. It was hard to see why the chiefs would want gold anyway. The stuff was heavy and awkward to carry. You couldn't make anything useful out of it, except a bit of jewellery for a wife perhaps. The people had no need for what the traders called money. If Shelim wanted something, he traded something else for it.

“Why do the chiefs want gold?”

“They don't!” Kerrion said with his eyebrows climbing, obviously wondering if his apprentice had lost his wits.

The surprise on Kerrion's face confused him. If they didn't want the gold of these outclanners, why let them onto the Clan ranges? “What other reason is there for letting them pass?” He asked and took a bite to eat.

“Fear mostly.”

Shelim choked, and let out a shocked oath. Coughing he drank more tea to wash the food down quick.

Kerrion chuckled, but it wasn't in amusement. “It might surprise you to learn that the Clans are weak compared to outclanners.”

Shock on piled on shock. “But Night Wind has more than two thousand warriors! What about all the others?”

Kerrion sighed. “We might as well make this your lesson for today. Knowledge of outclanners will be important in your future. Unlike in the past, the Clans will

have to deal with them rather than just ignore them.”

Kerrion settled himself and drank his tea while Shelim finished his food. Then, when Shelim was sitting comfortably opposite him, he began.

“If you journey north as far as you can go, you will find the sea of the Lost One’s. If you could cross the mountains in the east and west somehow, after many days ride you would reach the sea again. I don’t know why, but its called different things depending on where you are. In the south, it’s called the Sea of Despair. A good name for any sea I think, but the Clans never go there... unless one of the Lost has, but I don’t know anything about that. In the south, outclanners are called Devan’s. That’s where most of the traders come from. Their land is smaller than ours, and they live in cities.”

Shelim knew what cities were. In his dreams he had once seen the city of the Lost One’s, and last night he saw another. Many stone tents together made a city. He didn’t like cities and didn’t understand why anyone would want to live in one.

“—King. Do you understand all that Shelim?” Kerrion asked.

“No,” Shelim said in embarrassment.

Kerrion shook his head. “Listen closely this time. The Devan’s live in cities and don’t have chiefs, but they do have lords, which is the same thing. In the middle of their land is a big lake with a city on its shores. In a big stone tent called the palace lives a chief of chiefs. His name is King. *Now* do you understand?”

It seemed simple enough, but what about the tracks? “Yes Mentor, but what about the outclanners crossing our land?”

“I’m coming to them. To the east of Deva are two more lands, but we rarely see traders from there. The land to the west is very big, perhaps twice as big as the plain, and its name is Protectorate. I know it’s a strange name, but try to remember it. It’s important. The outclanners who live in the Protectorate are Hasians, and are the ones who made your tracks. They are a greedy people—they want to take the land from the Devans.”

This was all very complicated. Shelim’s people didn’t own the land, and didn’t want to. Why would they when they travelled constantly? But outclanners lived in one place all the time and it seemed they owned the little bit their stone tents stood upon. What point then for these Hasians to own all of Deva? You could only live in one tent at a time. Why be greedy for more?

Shelim put aside his cup. “I don’t understand why the Hasians want more land, but no matter. It has nothing to do with us. Why are they crossing the plain?”

“Last summer, the Hasians made war upon the Devans who fought a great battle and defeated them. Now the Devans won’t let the Hasians into their land. The Hasians can only reach Deva from the north now. That is why they have been crossing our range.”

Finally an answer to Shelim’s original question, but... *have* been crossing? How many times have they crossed? Outclan the Devans might be, but at least they weren’t trying to steal the land. The traders were always friendly, and they knew what they were looking at when trading for Clan horses. That was important to Shelim’s people. Bison were a necessity for survival, but horses were the people’s pride and joy. Their clothes, food, tents, everything came from bison and they couldn’t live without them, but horses made those lives worth living.

“Why are we helping to destroy the Devans, Mentor? They are not our enemy. Or are they?”

Kerrion shook his head. “Deva is not our enemy, that’s true, but they are not Clan either. We will not help the Devans... or the Hasians.”

“But we *are* helping the Hasians by giving them passage across the plains!”

Kerrion nodded reluctantly. “The Hasians are powerful, Shelim. By allowing them to cross the plain without hindrance, the chiefs believe they will leave us in peace. There are many shamen in Protectorate—their people call them sorcerers. Unlike us, they fight by the side of the warriors and don’t care how many they kill. A shaman called Mortain is the chief for all the lands in the west. He wants to be the chief for the rest as well. I counselled against letting the Hasians through, but the chiefs are frightened of the sorcerers. They are right to fear them.”

Shelim nodded. “You counselled against letting the Hasians pass, but you also said the chiefs are right to fear the sorcerers. What would you have them do then?”

“Nothing for now, but Deva alone will not satisfy Mortain. He will want our land as well. When that time comes we will fight as one.”

This Mortain was a fool if he thought he could just take the plains without paying with his warrior’s lives. Every Clan would unite as never before to stop him. Unless... unless Mortain didn’t care how many died. Shelim shivered at the thought.

“If you believe that, we should stop them now. The sorcerers will be stronger after they take Deva.”

“You are forgetting one thing, Shelim. Julia lives in Deva. She will not allow the Hasians to take it. We will not start a war with the sorcerers, but the Clans will fight if pushed to it.”

Shelim nodded but wondered if perhaps Kerrion wasn’t expecting too much of the One. She was not a warrior. She did have great power, but would she be able to win against such odds alone?

The days passed and the time of the Gathering hastened closer.

Shelim walked through the crowds with Darnath relishing the sights and sounds. After living for so long with only Kerrion to talk to, the crowd was a little overwhelming. The first thing he did when his Clan arrived at Denpasser was to visit his parents. His mother was as beautiful as ever, and his father was just as strong, but they had treated him like an important stranger rather than their son. He had been confused and hurt until he realised that where he saw himself as their son, they now saw a shaman in his place.

Shelim had quickly dispelled the false image when he said, “What’s for dinner?”

His father laughed and sat beside him asking questions, while his mother quickly made a meal.

“Did you miss the hunt?” Tomik said eager to hear his news.

“I thought I would, but I managed to escape from Kerrion to hunt a couple of times. The rest of the time I was practicing my magic.”

“So! The stories are true then?”

“Yes father, the stories are true, but they don’t tell half of what a shaman can do.

I can't show you because Kerrion forbade me from using my magic until he's sure I won't challenge anyone."

"I thought the old man had more sense. No boy of mine would dishonour himself so."

Those words made Shelim sit taller. He was proud that his father thought so highly of him. It also made him more determined not to let them down.

"Kerrion is worried about the outclanners, father. He has *seen* the Clans at war with them, but the chiefs are allowing them across the plain and won't see the danger. I found tracks of a hundred outclan horses heading south. Have you noticed the traders have stopped coming?"

"Of course! Fewer come to the Gathers each summer that passes. I haven't seen an outclan trader for the last two at least."

"You won't be seeing any for a long time I think. The traders come from Deva, which is the land to the south. The outclanners who live in the west want to take their land. Last summer the Devan's fought and won two big battles against them. I think we will be fighting them soon."

Tomik glanced worriedly at Selima and then back. "You are talking war."

Shelim nodded unhappily. "Yes, but it will be unlike any the people have ever fought before. All the Clans will fight as one against the outclanners, and the shamen will fight beside them."

The shock on Tomik's face stayed with Shelim over the following days. He had told his father that the chiefs weren't listening to Kerrion in the hope he would quietly inform the Night Wind warriors. Tomik had understood.

"What's it like?" Darnath said interrupting his thoughts.

"What do you mean?"

"You know, being apprenticed to the Eldest."

"I don't know what you're asking, Darnath. Surely your life with Duren is no different to mine with Kerrion."

"You even sound like a shamen now." Darnath said in accusation. "Don't you realise how much you've changed since that day in the council tent?"

"I *am* a shaman, Darnath, but I haven't changed... unless you mean I'm taller now."

Shelim knew that Darnath wasn't referring to his greater height. He truly hadn't realised how much his training had changed him until he met his parents again and saw the wary respect in their eyes rather than the more familiar smile of parent to son. Nevertheless, he had only known Darnath for short periods at the gathers. How then could Darnath say he had changed?

Darnath stopped him with a hand. "You *have* changed, Shelim. You seem more... well, like the Eldest. You look serious all the time now, and... I don't know. It's like when I'm alone in the tent and Duren walks in. I know without looking it's him."

With relief Shelim realised his friend meant he could feel his magic. "Oh that's nothing, Darnath. That's just the magic. I can feel you, or any shamen for that matter. Kerrion says I'm just sensitive to it. You must be the same."

"No, it's *not* that." Darnath said impatiently. "You know the secrets now, but Duren says I'm useless. I will never be a shaman as he is... or like you've become."

Then in a weak voice, "He said I should join the Lost."

Shelim was boiling with anger. "That's disgusting!" He almost shouted, and then guiltily looked around to see if anyone had noticed. They hadn't, or they were too polite to show their regard. "No shaman should ever say that to one of the people," he whispered angrily.

"Maybe he's right though. I was a good warrior, but when I try to be a shaman I can't do anything right!"

They walked on again.

Shelim couldn't believe how outrageous Duren had been to say that to Darnath. To push someone toward the Lost was disgusting. To push a shaman away when they were needed so desperately was enough to make Duren a renegade and criminal. Darnath was in turmoil, but what could Shelim do about it? Duren was a full shaman and Darnath's mentor. Kerrion couldn't interfere with that relationship without evidence of some crime.

"Are you going back to your tribe after the Gathering?" Shelim said with a vague notion how he might help. It was risky, but Darnath was a friend of sorts and a brother shaman.

"I suppose so," Darnath said listlessly.

Shelim stopped Darnath with an outstretched hand. Clan folk made a wide detour around them making him feel like an island in a river of the people. "Would you be willing to stay with the Night Wind if I could arrange it?" He said quietly while watching to see if anyone had overheard.

"I suppose so, but why bother... I'm useless."

"*I'll help you to learn the lessons that's why!*" Shelim hissed keeping his voice low.

Hope sprang into Darnath's eyes along with a great deal of gratitude. It made Shelim feel uncomfortable, but the responsibility also made him feel like a true shaman.

"Come on, we'll be late!" Shelim said and they rushed off toward the council tent.

"You will ask Kerrion today won't you?" Darnath said as they loped along.

"Yes."

"You won't forget will you?"

*Give me strength!*

Mastering his initial reaction to snap at the worried shaman, Shelim said that no, he wouldn't forget. As they ran, people scurried out of their way. That is they did until Shelim slammed straight into a group of young warriors. His heart sank as he recognised Dehaan. Dehaan was a Dragon Clan warrior who had made himself an enemy a few years ago when he tried to bully a much smaller warrior named Shelim.

"Well, if it isn't little Shelim." Dehaan said sneering and making his friends laugh. "Where are you off to in such a hurry little shaman?"

The warriors, all from Dragon Clan, laughed at Dehaan's words and jostled each other like children.

"I'm on my way to the council, Dehaan. Let me by please."

"*Let me by please!*" Dehaan said in a silly voice and laughing with his friends.

Shelim could see Darnath bristling and quickly signalled him to stay out of it.

Dehaan saw the hand signs and turned his attention to Darnath.

“I don’t know you,” Dehaan said after a quick assessing look. “If you want to put yourself forward, I’m willing.”

“Leave Darnath out of this.” Shelim said interposing a shoulder between them. “I have no quarrel with you Dehaan, but you seem to have one with me. I would love to challenge, but Kerrion has forbidden it.”

“How convenient! The old fool as Mentor to the young fool.”

Kerrion had made it plain he was not to challenge anyone at this Gathering... at *this* Gathering. Thinking fast, Shelim made his decision. “Are you man enough to accept a bargain Dehaan, or are you too cowardly?”

“What bargain?”

“I will accept your challenge at the next Gather. Kerrion will allow it, this I swear.”

Dehaan sneered. He was really good at it. His face seemed to lend itself easily to that kind of expression. “Fine by me little shaman, but remember this—if you try to escape like the cowardly shaman you are, I will challenge to the death.”

Shelim blinked in surprise. To the death was almost un-heard of! Dehaan’s friends backed away trying to distance themselves from their friend’s folly. He could hear them muttering about Dehaan’s lack of honour. A challenge to the death was like warfare. There were no rules. Dehaan didn’t realise it, but he had no more chance of surviving a challenge to the death against a shaman, than he did of sprouting wings and flying. Shelim couldn’t resist a taunt.

“If that is what you desire Dehaan, I accept, but I must warn you that there are reasons why challenging a shaman is considered without honour. I suggest you think hard before taking that course.”

Dehaan looked at his backing friends worriedly, but he shook off his sudden doubt and sneered. “I stand by what I said. I challenge you Shelim, and we shall fight on the first day of the next Gather. If you fail to appear, it’s to the death.”

“I accept,” Shelim said simply and pushed passed Dehaan.

Shelim and Darnath trotted toward the council tent. They were the last two to arrive at the meeting, but Kerrion hadn’t started yet. They separated to join their mentors. Shelim sat next to Kerrion, and tried to ignore the glare he received.

“Sorry Eldest. Something happened—something very important. I would appreciate your help with it.”

Kerrion’s glare disappeared. “What happened?”

“I don’t want to say in front of so many, but will you trust me and request that Duren and Darnath stay with us after the Gathering?”

Kerrion frowned at Shelim in silence and then nodded slowly. “I will do as you ask, my boy. You have a good head on your shoulders, and I *do* trust you as you know.”

“I do know, honoured Kerrion, and thank you.”

### *Chapter Three*

**I**T WAS GOOD TO BE HOME, JULIA THOUGHT. They had ridden into the fortress minus the wagons just yesterday. It was a tiring trip, but at least she wasn't seeing double anymore. Dergan had been ecstatic when he saw the bricks, but even more so when she told him of her deal with Stefn. He was almost dancing for joy when Kev told him he could keep the wagons for as long as he needed them. The money Stefn owed her would supply Dergan half as many bricks again as she had made. Dergan had gone from a man desperate for supplies to having an abundance in one stroke! It was all she could do to stop him going to his knees in gratitude. Talk about embarrassing!

"What do you think?" Jessica said.

Julia studied herself in the mirror. She certainly looked different. Jessica had promised to style her hair as soon as it grew enough to work with. It had grown passed shoulder length over the winter. What had taken her attention now though wasn't her new style. It was the streak of white over her left eye. It had appeared when her hair grew back in after the war. She quite liked it, but she wasn't sure if Keverin did. Correction, she knew he didn't, but it was the cause and not the white lock itself he didn't like. It happened when she went into Camorin to fight the Hasians. Keverin didn't like to be reminded of that time.

Julia turned this way and that studying the problem from all angles. "I don't know Jessica. Do you think Kev will like it?"

Jessica tapped a finger against her lips in thought. "I think any style you wear pleases him, but perhaps we could bring some over to your left shoulder like this."

Jessica re-arranged Julia's hair to drape over her shoulder. She had spent a long time loosely curling Julia's hair and arranging it. It seemed a shame to undo all the work, but as soon as Jessica showed her what she had in mind, Julia agreed that it was better. By moving her hair off centre, it obscured most of the white until only a hint remained.

Julia watched the transformation and smiled. "I think he will like that better

don't you?"

Jessica nodded her agreement. Jessica had been overjoyed when Keverin finally declared his love for Julia. She had wanted to set a wedding date straight away. Gideon had been delighted at the prospect, but Julia had been still recovering from the fire and the craving for Tancred. The wedding was put off. Julia's smile wilted as she remembered screaming for what seemed like a tenday. She would have died without Keverin sitting by her side and holding her as the pain shook her to the core. She was still amazed that she had come through it sane. Well, as sane as she had ever been. She shook off the bitter memory for a much more pleasant one. Keverin had declared his love almost three seasons ago, but Jessica was still in shock. After all the years of trying to get him interested in marrying, he had found love on his own. Julia wondered if Jessica saw the parallel between Keverin and his father. Probably not, she decided.

Kevlarin's mother had gone through similar pains as Jessica. She had schemed to wed her son to the daughter of a Chulym master crafter, but Kevlarin was set against it. Hoping to make Kevlarin meet the girl and fall in love with her, his mother had arranged a banquet. It backfired badly when Jessica boldly ignored Kevlarin's dark mood and asked him to dance with her. Kevlarin fell passionately in love, and his mother could say nothing to change it. It was no bad thing that Athione had remained aloof from Chulym, especially since that once prosperous city had fallen on hard times. While living in Malcor Town, Julia had learned a lot about Chulym and how the common folk lived in Deva. In her opinion, the lords had failed in their duty to protect the people and that unfortunately included Keverin. Of course Keverin didn't see it that way. His lands were prosperous and his people happy. Keverin had no authority outside of his own lands except in time of war. In theory his position as Lord Protector of the West gave him leadership of the Western Marches including the western lords, but in practice he ruled only those towns and villages within his own borders. If Keverin tried to pressure the other lords he would have to fight them all. Keverin wouldn't be the cause of civil war, and although the King was failing the country, he wouldn't try to depose him. If it were up to Julia, she would take the old man off the throne and put Gylaren in his place. Keverin would be better, but she knew he would never accept it.

Jessica made eye contact with her in the mirror. "You are quiet. What are you thinking about?"

"Is there a procedure for choosing a new King when the old line ends?"

"Pergann is an only child with no family left alive. One of the lords will have to take—" Jessica stopped what she was doing. "Oh no you don't. Keverin will *not* take the throne and you know it—or you should."

Julia shrugged. "I do know it, but someone has to take control and start trade going again. Without it, the people would continue to suffer. I was thinking more of Gylaren than Kev."

"Gylaren is a good choice. He has three boys, but don't forget there are three score lords and any number of those may not agree with you." Jessica inserted the last pearl encrusted comb into Julia's hair and stepped back. "There! I think that's better don't you?"

Julia turned her head to look at both sides. "It looks great. Thank you."

They left Jessica's bedchamber to sit in the other room chatting about their friends and how the new recruits were shaping up. They discussed the wedding plans again and finalised the invitation list.

"Have you and Kev decided on a day yet?" Jessica asked eagerly. "I just need the day and I can have the couriers deliver the invitations."

Julia grinned. "We *have* talked about it as it happens."

"And?"

"And we thought mid-summer's eve might be nice."

Jessica jumped up and hugged her. "Oh this is wonderful! It's the most romantic time of the year."

Julia hugged her friend—her future mother—and grinned. "You don't think I am rushing into this do you?"

Jessica snorted. "Tomorrow wouldn't be too soon for me, though I doubt Purcell and Gylaren would appreciate missing it."

Jessica was bubbling with excitement. She wanted to see Elise about the wedding arrangements right away. Julia shook her head and followed Jessica out into the corridor.

"Summer is a season away yet."

"I know, I know!" Jessica said. "But time goes so fast. It will be here before you know it. Gideon will be so pleased..."

Julia watched Jessica hurry away and chuckled in amusement.

There was a while to go yet before dinner. Julia decided to make her way down to the library to find Mathius. He had changed a great deal since she had first met him. Gone was the inexperienced young initiate, to be replaced by a serious yellow robed journeyman mage. Mathius had gained confidence since his promotion to the yellow robe. Consequently he was more serious about his studies now. Mathius was her friend and he was still fun to be around, but if she wanted to find him these days, she would need to drag him out of the library rather than prowl the walls hoping to find him the way she used to do.

Thinking about Mathius brought Julia's own studies to mind. She had learned so much, but there was a seemingly infinite amount to learn. She doubted she would ever be finished. There was the realm of power that allowed her to talk to a mage mind to mind. Another was the realm of healing which allowed her to see auras of people but not inanimate objects—walls and other things appeared as random energy. Was it the soul that made the difference? Of course, animate and inanimate objects *were* very different in the real world, but everything was made of energy when you looked deep enough, so why did she need a different realm to see a recognizable pattern? Another question she had no answer for, but it didn't prevent her from using it. By using her mage sight to reach the healing realm, she could then change *focus* to see inanimate things more properly. It wasn't like that really, but it was how she thought of it. Mathius used a different and much more complex way of explaining it of course, but Julia preferred her own interpretation. Mathius had no interest in her patterns. He was much too busy trying to learn proven spells to have time to make his own. Her wish to discover a new way was driven by frustration. Most of the books in the library didn't seem to work for her, though she was sure it was her own lack of understanding at fault.

When she examined someone's aura in the healing realm, she saw random swirling energy everywhere she looked, but once she changed focus, the auras disappeared and the random patterns made sense. She had spent a lot of time over the winter learning the patterns of various objects hoping to learn something new—it had passed the time. Whether it was new or not, she didn't know, but she had learned that everything had a distinct and individual pattern. Stone was easiest to see, there was plenty at Athione to study. To her mind, Stefn's bricks demonstrated the worth of her studies.

Julia entered the library and gently closed the doors shutting out the world.

*Use me, and know your duty.*

Julia paused as the silence of the library settled over her. It had never said that to her before. What was her duty? Perhaps her subconscious was telling her to do her duty regarding the common folk.

Julia found Mathius sitting in a corner frowning over a pair of leather bound books. She stood in the archway and watched for a moment. He was linked to his magic, but he didn't seem to be using it. She could tell without needing to see the telltale glow surrounding him. What was he doing? He seemed to be comparing two different entries in the books and frowning over the result.

Grasping her magic, Julia spoke mind to mind. *\*Have you found anything interesting?\**

Mathius looked up and grinned. "I think so. Did you know the fortress was built by sorcerers?"

"Brian told me when I first arrived."

That was why Keverin assembled the books on magic. He wanted to resurrect the dual role of the fortresses—magical defences backed by the martial might of his guardsmen. With that goal in mind he assembled the books over a five year period when he realised that the Hasians wouldn't be satisfied until they ruled all of Waipara. He bought them one by one from people all over Waipara. People who couldn't even read brought books to Athione and sold them to him for gold. He was generous in his payments hoping to attract other book owners. Athione's library was the result.

Julia moved to join Mathius at the table and like a gentleman he rose and helped her to a seat before seating himself opposite. Mathius rested a hand on the page he was reading to hold his place.

"In the time of the true sorcerers," Mathius began. "Buildings and other things were routinely made with magic. Back then much of what they did was common knowledge and wasn't written down. I've found errors in some of these books because people struggling to save the knowledge wrote them after the time of the true sorcerers. It seems many of the authors had an imperfect understanding of their subject."

That didn't sound good. How was she to learn anything if the books were incorrect? Julia shrugged the thought aside. Much of what she had learned so far was by trial and error. The only thing she could point to that came from the books was her first try at lighting a candle. Even then, Mathius had to help her.

"How bad is it?"

"Oh, nothing to worry about. I have marked the errors and in some cases referred to another book that is correct. The problem is, I cannot know all the errors

until I'm strong enough to try the spells."

"What are you checking today?"

"This is something I've been trying to understand for a while. When Lucius was here, he mentioned communicating with Mortain via the mirror, and it puzzled me at the time. How could something like that be possible?"

Julia remembered thinking the same thing. "Well, I thought both of them must have scried each other at the same time. That would work wouldn't it?"

Mathius was shaking his head. "That's exactly what I thought. It *would* work, but only if you used an agreed upon time. I thought it would be better if we could somehow open both mirrors for scrying at the *same* time."

"That's an outstanding idea Mathius! Have you found something that will do that?"

"Not exactly... but I have found something that might be as good. This book explains the theory of contagion." Before Julia opened her mouth, he hurried on. "And I don't mean disease!" Mathius laughed.

Julia smiled. Mathius knew her too well. Anything to do with healing was intensely interesting to her. She was always willing to learn new ways to heal people.

"According to this," Mathius went on. "When a sorcerer wanted to make an exact copy of something he used pieces of a whole to get his result. He constructed a matrix over the original he wished to copy and another identical one over the item he was making..."

Julia listened and the time flew by. This sounded important and she wanted to try it straight away. Kev would give her a big mirror if she asked him, and Mastercrafter Deneen could probably recommend someone to cut it into sections once they had worked their magic upon it.

"...and that's it. If we had a big enough mirror we could have dozens of people talking to each other." Mathius said beaming.

Julia nodded thoughtfully. If it worked, instant communication would be born without recourse to the book in the vault. The changes such a thing would bring about were staggering to contemplate.

"I'm thinking of three Mathius. You, me, and Lucius."

"That would be a good start, but a start only. I think we should have a different one for each of the four fortresses so that makes seven. Lord Keverin would like that very much. He could talk to Purcell and the others anytime he wanted!"

Whoa! Mathius was up and running with this one! "Calm down Mathius. We don't know if it works yet."

"Don't know if what works?" Keverin said as he strolled in to the library.

Mathius hastily stood and inclined his head in greeting. Julia walked over to Kev and gave him a kiss. Mathius was a little red faced, and she rebuked herself for embarrassing him. In Deva, public displays of affection were frowned upon, but she couldn't let Kev walk around kissless.

"Mathius is a genius, Kev!" Julia said taking his arm and walking with him back to the table.

Mathius blushed scarlet. "Julia! We don't know if it will work."

"Don't be modest. It doesn't matter if it works or not. It's still a brilliant idea!"

"But it does matter—"

“Could someone tell me what we are supposed to be talking about?” Keverin interrupted. “I came to find Julia for dinner. Jessica is waiting. Do you like lamb, Mathius?”

“Do I... Oh yes my lord, I do.”

“Good! You are hereby invited to dine with us. You can tell me what all the excitement is about at table.”

Julia walked on the arm of both men as they made their way to the small dining hall. She knew her way around the fortress as if born here now, but it was nice to have two handsome men escort her. Keverin towered over her as always, but she could have sworn Mathius had grown taller over the past year. He had filled out and his new confidence seemed to make him stand taller than he had when they first met. He had looked like a pimply-faced boy back then, but now the girls in town and fortress alike sought after him. Mathius had resisted any permanent relationships so far, but Julia thought one of the girls in the kitchens had caught his eye especially.

Thinking about Mathius and his string of admirers brought Julia’s thoughts to Lucius. “Have you heard anything from Purcell recently?”

Keve nodded. “I have as a matter of fact. There has been no sign of the Dark Brothers. Purcell has been looking and Lucius is very keen on stamping them out. They are still after him apparently. Purcell is recruiting more guardsmen to replace his losses. Isolde is feeling better and Lysara is still chasing Lucius around the fortress.”

Julia laughed. Lucius was a confirmed bachelor, in his own eyes at least, but Lysara was picking away at his resolve. Julia had met Lysara at Malcor while recuperating from the war and had come to know her quite well. Lysara could be determined just like her father. Lucius’ bachelor days were numbered in her opinion.

“How are the new men coming along? I meant to ask you earlier but I forgot when Mathius told me about his brilliant idea.”

“*What* idea? You still haven’t told *me* yet!”

Mathius began to explain.

“Oh no you don’t!” Julia said interrupting him. “The least you can do is feed the poor man before picking his brains!”

They laughed as they entered the dining hall.

Jessica was already seated and waiting for them. “I hope you will still be laughing when I tell Janna that you let her lamb roast go cold!”

Julia apologised and the others did the same. Janna was the head cook and took her role to feed the masses seriously. If she heard her lamb special was ruined there would be hell to pay. Julia sat next to Mathius opposite Keverin. Pia quickly set an extra plate in front of Mathius followed by a wineglass. She curtsied to Keverin and left. Keverin quickly carved the roast while Jessica poured wine for each of them. Mathius sat wide-eyed watching his lord and lady serving him.

“I do believe we have shocked young Mathius.” Julia said trying not to laugh.

“Young!” Mathius squeaked in outrage. “I’m older than you are. And I’m not shocked, just... *surprised* that’s all.”

Julia laughed along with Jessica at the outrage on his face. “I know. I’m only teasing you.”

Julia ate her dinner and left the conversation until the end. Mathius explained his idea to Keverin who was intensely interested, and said he would find Mathius a

mirror to experiment with.

Julia sipped her wine. "You didn't tell me how the new men are coming along Kev. Are they as bad as you feared they would be?"

Keverin frowned in thought and swallowed his mouthful. "Not as bad as I feared certainly, but not as good as I had hoped either. They all have armour now, and swords are not a problem. The Hasians left plenty of good steel behind. The problem is that many of the men come from towns and villages near Devarr. None have ever used a sword."

"I bet that didn't please Brian."

"No it didn't. As their captain he'll have to train them until they can be trusted not to cut off their own..."

"That will do thank you," Jessica said hastily. "I think we all know what you fear they will cut off!"

"I was only going to say fingers!" Kev said laughing.

Julia laughed at Jessica's sigh of exasperation. This was how a family should be. Mathius was closer than a brother, and Jessica was like her mother, but Keverin was... he was simply the most important thing in her life.

"Let's get married tomorrow, Kev."

Mathius choked on his wine. Keverin looked taken aback, but Jessica was grinning fit to swallow her plate.

Julia stuck her lower lip out, pouting for all it was worth. "You *do* still want to marry me don't you?" She said in a small voice trying not to laugh.

"Of course!" Keverin said jumping up and heading for the door. "I'll get Gideon right now!"

"Whoa! I was only joking!" Julia said laughing. "I want all our friends here with us. Purcell, and Gylaren, and Lysara, and..."

Keverin walked back and sat down to listen to her list for the wedding invitations. "Maybe we should invite *all* the lords." He mumbled quietly, but Julia heard him all right.

"You might be right! Do you think they would come?" Julia said. Jessica was watching her intently. She knew what her future daughter-in-law was up to all right.

"I was jesting, but you're not are you?" Keverin said finishing his wine then reaching to re-fill her glass as well as his.

"No. Seriously Kev, I would marry you right now, but I think inviting the lords would be a good idea. I told you about my premonition while under the Tancred."

"It's called divining, Julia." Mathius said.

"Thanks. I *divined* Malcor destroyed, and Athione deserted but for..." Julia broke off remembering the broken old man Keverin had become in that dark future. She concentrated on him as he was now to dispel the vision.

"Are you all right? You're trembling!" Mathius said in concern.

"I'm fine. It's just the memory of what I saw... anyway, I saw Deva conquered by the Hasians, but the common people were happy and prosperous. If we don't start helping our own people soon, they won't help defend Deva against the Hasians, and the future I saw *will* happen. I will fight to prevent it, but in the future I saw..." she broke off to whisper, "I was defeated."

Keverin reached for Julia's hand in concern. He squeezed gently. "You never told me. What else did you see? Please trust me."

Julia didn't want to tell him, but by asking her to trust him he had forced her into a corner. Without trust, there could be no love. "I saw you," she said in a quiet voice. "You were old and blind with only one hand."

There was complete silence. Julia looked up and saw horror on Jessica's face. Mathius looked worried, but Keverin was smiling. *Smiling!* What was there to smile about?

"Is that all?" Keverin breathed much comforted.

"What do you mean is that all? Isn't it enough?"

"You said I was old. That means I have thirty or more years to live at least. A lot of people would be pleased to have that long with someone they love."

*Oh God, that was why.*

"You don't understand," Julia said in a small voice, almost a whisper. "In the future that I saw I was defeated and killed years before. That means it could be tomorrow for all we know."

Kev's face changed at that. "That won't happen. I will be dead before you that I swear."

"I as well," Mathius said.

"Thank you both, but some battles I must fight for myself." Julia said catching Keverin's eyes with hers and holding them. "You understand?"

Keverin seemed ready to argue, but he reconsidered when he remembered the battles Julia had already fought. The supposed attack by brigands in Dirlston was only one of many incidents. As it turned out, they hadn't been brigands. They were assassins apparently sent to kill her by the Emperor of Tanjung. She was grateful for Keverin's concern, but pleased he recognised the truth of her words.

"You know divining the future is never accurate, Julia." Mathius said. "What you saw in the dream was only one of many possibilities. I might divine myself falling down the tower steps tomorrow, but now I know about it, I don't leave my room or I use another route, and therefore the dream becomes false. The very act of divining the future changes it. It cannot be avoided, which is one reason—the most important one—why mages leave divining to Clan shamen."

"Do shamen have better luck?"

"Not that I know of, but when they divine they are looking for different things. The possibilities are more limited for a Clan that must follow the herd to survive. Knowing for instance they will be attacked tomorrow will not make them change direction, because they cannot. In that event they would be forewarned and have their warriors ready, but the attack would still take place."

"I wonder," Julia thought aloud. "I wonder what a shaman would say about—"

*Thump!*

Keverin rose and went to see who was at the door. He spoke for a few moments then turned to look at Julia. "Couriers have arrived from Malcor and Devarr both. Pergann is dead. I'm afraid we will have to put off the wedding again."

"May the God watch over and comfort him at journey's end," Jessica said quietly.

"Who will be King now?" Julia said looking from Jessica to Keverin and back.

Keverin shrugged not knowing the answer. “The lords will be met in the palace at Devarr to decide that. Jihan is already on his way and will arrive here in a few days. We can use the time to arrange matters here before leaving.”

Julia’s thoughts were racing. This might be just what Deva needed to get back on its feet. She had to make sure Gylaren was crowned King somehow. Then perhaps rebuilding could begin. She smiled as an idea sprang to mind. That Jihan was on his way was providential. Under the circumstances she was sure he would bring them with him. He wouldn’t let her down.

The next few days were frantic ones of preparation for the journey. They had only recently arrived back from Morton and no one had expected to leave on another journey so soon. Elise had to dig deeply into Athione’s stores and was heard to complain about the level of her grain reserves. Warhorses ate a lot and the journey to Devarr was long. It took precious days to round up enough wagons for all their supplies. Keverin cursed his decision to let Dergan keep his wagons, but there was no changing the decision now.

Jihan and Ahnao arrived before Keverin was ready to move. Jessica and Julia entertained them and Jihan’s captain while Keverin and Marcus hurried to finalise their preparations. Marcus didn’t like being left behind, but someone had to guard Athione. Brian was chosen to lead the men accompanying Keverin and Julia to Devarr. Marcus took the newly minted captain aside for a long and private chat before seeing them all off at the gate some days after Jihan’s arrival.

The column moved slowly along the highroad. Two thousand guardsmen mounted on warhorses took a long time to pass. The baggage train was huge by itself. Banners flying in the stiff breeze proclaimed half the men from fortress Athione, and the other half from fortress Malcor. The armour each man wore was identical in every way except for sigils on the right of each man’s chest. Like the banners, Malcorans wore crossed war hammers over a black keep. The men from Athione sported crossed and gauntleted fists on solid green circle. Here and there, a captain could be seen wearing colourful sashes proclaiming their rank, while the sergeants proclaimed theirs with three gold chevrons below the sigils on their chest. The column was cheerful, and the colourful banners and cloaks lent a carnival air.

At the front of the column, lords Keverin and Jihan rode next to their ladies. Lady Julia and Lady Ahnao were laughing while the two men looked at one another uncomprehending over their heads. Jessica watched her son, and smiled to see his eyes returning constantly to Julia to make certain she was near. Mathius sat silently next to Jessica brooding about leaving his friend in the kitchens. Bishop Gideon rode his horse on Jessica’s other side enjoying the ride. It was a rare pleasure for a man who hadn’t left the vicinity of Athione’s walls for ten straight years.

“Sorry Kev. I’ve been ignoring you,” Julia said.

“Not at all. I was saying we are leaving my lands now.”

Julia looked around but couldn’t see any obvious difference. Keverin noticed her confusion and drew her eyes to a stone they had just passed.

“The boundary stone. There is one on each of the roads so travellers will know who holds the land.”

The stone had Keverin's banner chiselled into it and the distance to the fortress below. "Eighteen leagues already?" Julia said in surprise.

"Yes, by road." Keverin said. "It's more like twelve cross country."

That was still a lot of land. A league was roughly three miles. Thirty-six miles of land beholding to Keverin, and that was just in this direction.

"Just out of curiosity, how much land do you control?"

"Roughly five hundred square leagues."

Jihan disagreed. "Closer to six I'd say."

Julia didn't care. Either one was a lot of land. A great many people could live on that amount. She had visited East Town many times, but she hadn't seen the other towns and villages beholding to Athione, except the new town of Morton. How many people were loyal to Athione?

*A lot!*

"What is the plant with the blue flower just there?" Julia said and pointed to a field full of them.

"Flax. We use it to make linen," Jessica said.

"And oil," Keverin put in. "See those ball shapes?"

Julia nodded. The plants had spear shaped leaves at the top of the plant, and blue flowers with five petals on stems at the end of the branches. The balls looked to be seedpods.

Keverin explained. "Inside the balls are seeds we press flax oil from. The left over seed is good for animal feed, but we grow it mainly for making linen."

There was so much to learn here. Back in England, Julia had bought things and used them without needing or wanting to know where it all came from, but here life was slower and things were more interesting. Up ahead Julia noted they were approaching a broken down shack with a large corral beside it. The building had obviously been abandoned many years previously.

"What's that?"

"A way station—or it was once. You will see a lot of them on the way to Devarr."

"A way station?"

"A good idea that like so many other things has been allowed to fail," Kev said with a sigh. "Pergann's great, great grandfather used them as a way for the King's messengers to cross the kingdom quickly at need. Fresh horses and supplies were kept at each station so that a messenger could ride without stopping. They belong to the crown, but they're all like this now."

Julia craned her neck as they passed the way station. The foundations and chimney were still solid, but the walls were fallen on two sides as was the roof. The open door creaked in the slight breeze. It looked sad and abandoned. If she concentrated she could almost imagine the corral full of restive horses and see a messenger pounding in from the capital. He would jump down with his message case and quickly remount a fresh beast and gallop out again on his way to Athione—to Kevlarin's father perhaps.

They rode through that day and camped for the night. The road continued without a village or town for leagues, but even had there been one, two thousand guardsmen were too many to find room for. Julia slept alone, and envied Ahnao who

was married to her lord. The lucky thing was happily enjoying his company right now.

Julia growled in annoyance and turned over to sleep.

The next morning dawned. As usual, Julia was awake before everyone else. She used the time to wash and dress. They had only been on the road a few days and already she missed her bathtub. She chuckled at the thought of her decadence and made do with cold water drawn from the stream.

“Thank you Alvin,” she said as he handed her the bucket.

“My honour lady,” Alvin said inclining his head with respect before leaving.

Julia closed the tent flap and dropped her cloak back to the ground. She was decently dressed. Her underskirt was like a dress—in England it would be. Still, Jessica had warned her once that people held different views in Deva and Julia took the warning to heart. She was always careful not to shock anyone too badly. Julia warmed the water with her magic and performed her ablutions before hefting the bucket and casting the soapy water outside. She dressed quickly in her grey riding dress. She had worn the blue yesterday. It was safely tucked away in her trunk for another day now. She pulled on her boots and stamped to settle her feet comfortably before throwing her cloak over her shoulders with a practiced whirl of velvety material. She fastened the short chain at her throat with the brooch Kev had given her.

Julia smiled. The brooch was one of a pair that he had commissioned. She wore one and he the other. The hexagonal bronze disk sported the crossed fists of Athione on the front. Kev had decided that bronze better suited them and Athione. Gold was too soft, he said, and one thing Athione wasn't was soft. The bronze had come from the remains of the west gate—another reminder of strength, but this time it reminded her of the sorcerers who had shattered the gate and so many lives last year.

On the back was a short inscription:

*Together always*

Kev was such a romantic.

Julia stepped out of her tent to watch the sunrise. The sun wasn't quite ready to cooperate she found, so Julia wandered around the camp nodding or saying a word to the sentries to pass the time. Deva was relatively peaceful within its borders. Feuds between lords were few and rarely erupted into open violence, but that didn't mean Keverin and Jihan were willing to take chances. Dirlston had taught them an appearance of safety was different from actually being safe. It was standard practice to set sentries through the night, and it had always had been so, but they didn't expect trouble. Brigands would be foolish indeed to attack so many armed men. If the brigands knew what was good for them they would ride somewhere else in a hurry.

“I hope you won't miss Adara too much Moriz.” Julia said stopping next to two shadowy forms. She had no trouble recognizing them even in the dark. Moriz carried a monster of a sword, and Halbert was always by his side.

“Teething... I ain't going to miss teething much lady. Yells something awful she do.” Moriz said.

Julia waited for it, and wasn't disappointed.

“Takes after her grand pappy I be thinking!” Halbert said with a laugh.

“I’ll show you yelling!” Moriz spluttered.

Julia laughed quietly. The two were always using insults and sarcasm to cover their affection for each other. Conversation lapsed into silence as they watched the show. The sun lanced through the thin clouds as it raised its face above the land. Reds and oranges painted the sky, and the birds began singing to herald a new day. Julia shielded her eyes as she stood with her friends watching the stars flee. In England, she would never have time to see the sunrise, not that she would have been awake in any case, but if she had been she knew she wouldn’t have taken the time. Since coming to Waipara, she had lived each day far more intensely. It was as if she had led her old life with blinkers on. Coming here had stripped them away showing her what she was missing.

“I never want this to end,” Julia said prayerfully.

“With the God’s blessing, we will all be here for many more years lady.” Moriz said, and Halbert grunted his agreement.

Julia nodded and watched the God’s display fade until the day was truly begun. Around the camp people were awakening and campfires were being stoked back to life. A small breakfast would be eaten before the tents were struck and they moved on toward Devarr.

Keverin ducked out of his tent, but there was no sign yet of Jihan and Ahnao.

“I’ll see you later.” Julia said to her friends and went to meet Keverin.

“Good morning my lady.”

Julia sighed. Kev was still being formal. “Yes it is isn’t it?”

Keverin laughed and surrendered. Julia stood on tiptoe and Kev bent to kiss her, but it was over too soon. He hurried away to arrange the order of march.

A short while later, they were on the road again.

Julia studied her surroundings with interest. The land wasn’t cultivated but the grass was short. Used for pasture perhaps? Her suspicion was confirmed a short distance on when she saw fenced fields with sheep and cattle grazing upon the grass.

“Who is lord here?”

Keverin grimaced. “Cogan of Lomond. He doesn’t like me I’m afraid, but he’s an honourable lord when all is said. He cares for his land and people deeply.”

Jessica nudged her horse forward. “Cogan doesn’t like anyone Kev, you know that.” She turned to Julia, “Cogan is a lord of the old type.”

“Old type?”

“She means Cogan has strong feelings where peonage is concerned.” Keverin said with a grimace of distaste.

Julia frowned. “Is that slavery?”

“Not quite,” Keverin said.

“It either is, or it’s not. Which is it?”

“Peonage is mostly gone from Deva. I can’t tell you how it originated—”

“I can my lord, if you’ll permit me?” Mathius said.

“Go ahead.”

“It began not long after the Founders settled Devarr,” Mathius began in his lecturer’s voice. “Devarr was only a town then. As the population grew, so did the

need to expand. Some of the poorer folk were persuaded to work on farms as peons and their lives were greatly improved. You see Julia, most of them were unskilled, and Devarr was inundated with people having no chance of work. The Founders had a real problem persuading people to spread out. Devarr was the first city and it was over populated. No one wanted to found new towns and cities if it meant leaving the safety of the Capital. The Founders thought long and hard on the problem and came up with a solution. They decided to raise a nobility to watch over the people and protect them and their new homes. Forty lords were raised and given land to hold throughout the kingdom. They obviously needed farms and people to work them, so they attracted them away from Devarr by offering more of the yield from the farms for themselves.

“Peonage *is* a form of slavery, but where slaves have no rights, peons do. Most lords tax their people and that’s all they take. In return, they provide protection and governance. The lords are loyal to their people, and the people reciprocate. Peons on the other hand don’t own their farms as lord Keverin’s people do. Instead, they work for their lord and all they produce belongs to him. In return for their labour he returns a certain percentage of the yield from their farms and they are allowed to live there.”

Julia wasn’t as horrified as Keverin so obviously thought she would be. She was used to people working for a wage, and this sounded no different really. “So they work for a wage like our guardsmen.”

“Ah... no, not really. The percentage a traditional peon keeps is barely enough to live on.” Mathius winced at the look Julia gave him.

*Now* she was horrified. “How can you call Cogan an honourable man when he treats his people like this?”

Keverin smiled. “As I said, peonage is mostly gone. I can think of only two lords off hand still using it. Lord Lomond is one, and Lord Ascol is another. I say Lomond is an honourable lord because he allows almost half the yield from his farms to stay with the peons. That is much more than they need to live on. Look around Julia. You can see that his people prosper. I heard that upon his death all peons on Lomond land will inherit their farms. Cogan is old. I expect his people will be celebrating his death soon.”

“What of his heir?”

“I believe Lord Blaise will abolish peonage whether his father wills it or not. He and I are friends and we’re of like mind. That’s one reason Cogan doesn’t like me.”

Julia subsided somewhat mollified. Cogan’s people would be celebrating the year of his death for a long time to come. It was a strange kind of immortality, but each to his own she supposed.

They soon passed through the outskirts of Lord Lomond’s land, and turned onto a new road running southeast. The area was crown land. The king owned all unclaimed land throughout Deva. He would occasionally give a few leagues to a lord for some service performed.

Father Gideon spoke up from his place next to Mathius. “The Church also holds land such as this. The Holy Father administers it and the money is used to fund good works.”

“That’s interesting. No one lives here, but I assume Church land must have

people.” Julia said. “Who lives on it then?”

“Monks mostly my lady, but towns do grow in the most unexpected places. Poor soil is the reason no one lives here.”

“And water is scarce.” Keverin added.

Julia frowned. She used her mage sight to examine her surroundings and found that Gideon was right. Perhaps ten inches or so below the surface, she could see the tell-tale patterns in the energy field indicating rock. It seems the Athinian Mountains continued under the surface, but were folded upward here. Millions of years from now the land would erode to reveal another mountain range where she was riding.

She could tell there was plenty of water under the ground, but the rock prevented digging a well. She knew there was a way of digging wells with magic—there was Dirlston’s well for one. Mathius’ father had earned a living creating such things, but she didn’t know how. She wouldn’t try it without a good reason in any case, but this kind of thing brought home to her yet again how little she really knew about the uses of magic.

“Lady? Are you well?” Gideon asked in concern.

“I’m fine, I was just looking at the rocks below the ground.”

Gideon eyebrows arched and Julia laughed. He hadn’t expected something so strange.

“You said the soil is poor and water scarce. I thought I would have a look. There’s plenty of water down there, but the rock prevents the digging of a well.”

“Precisely,” Gideon said relieved that Julia was making sense again.

“I don’t know how to dig wells, but Mathius could do it I’m sure.”

“No need,” Keverin said. “No one lives here and I doubt any will in the near future. Land like this is abundant in Deva. Luckily, land like my own is also.”

Julia was just as happy to leave it at that. She hadn’t seriously wanted to dig the well, but it would have been interesting to make something with her magic rather than destroying things all the time.

They stopped at midday to water the horses and used the opportunity to stretch tired legs and have a bite to eat. Julia thought the trip very civilised. She had all the amenities—not baths of course but you can’t have everything. As she ate her bread and cheese on a proper plate with a wine cup at hand, she mused it was more like a camping holiday than an important mission to select a king.

“Here, have a look at these,” Jihan said proffering a leather case.

“So these are the letters Delin was talking about,” Julia said taking the case and opening it. Inside were scrolls—lots of scrolls.

“My father always kept his letters so he could refer to them at need. These will be of help to us I think.”

Julia nodded absently as she scanned the contents of the satchel. She remembered Mathius saying there were forty lords of Deva, but then Jessica had said sixty earlier.

“How many lords are there Jihan?”

Jihan slid his sword from his sash so he might sit on the ground next to her. He lay the weapon within easy reach, and leaning on one hand, he began to explain.

“There were forty to begin with, but over the centuries some lines have died out and others grown to take their places. There are over sixty now. They are equals in theory, but as always some are more equal than others. If you follow me?”

"I understand. The Lord Protectors are the strongest. Is that right?"

"That's right, but there are only four of us. The rest are weak in comparison to be sure, but banded together they represent a strong block for the voting."

"What of your father's friends here?" Julia said indicating the letters.

Jihan made a face. "Traitors the lot of them. They are not as bad as Athlone was—he instigated the thing, but they did go along with him and pledged their support as the letters show."

"Do you think the threat of making these public will be enough to bring them to our side?"

"Who can say? I do know these men were chosen by my father for specific reasons. Some are powerful, but most are not."

That was a puzzle. If Julia had been the one to choose conspirators, she would have chosen powerful men with large forces of guardsmen at their disposal. Lord Protectors were ideal, but they were all honourable men who would have challenged and killed Athlone had he tried to recruit them.

"Why choose weak allies? That doesn't make a great deal of sense Jihan."

"Some of them are powerful, while others have certain things my father thought necessary."

"Like what?"

"Strategic location for one," Jihan said off hand.

"You make it sound like a war!"

"It would have been war," Jihan agreed. "Keverin and the other Lord Protectors wouldn't have stood by and allowed my father to usurp the throne. A good many of the other lords would have fought against him as well."

"And many *for* him if these letters are anything to go by," Julia said flicking through the sheets.

"Exactly. Civil war would have resulted. I believe my father would have won in the end. He chose his allies well in my opinion. I couldn't have done better myself."

Jihan hated Athlone more than any other thing. For him to praise his father for anything said to Julia that the men who wrote these letters were strong allies of Athlone and therefore dangerous. There were many kinds of strength. Guardsmen were just the most obvious.

"May I keep these for a time? If it's all right with you I want to read through them properly and show them to Kev."

"Certainly," Jihan said waving the letters away. "After all this is over I was going to burn them in any case. I wish I could challenge each one of these men, but even I might have trouble against so many."

Julia grinned. Jihan thought a great deal of himself where his fighting skill was concerned, but that was understandable. He was the best with any weapon she could name including a good many she couldn't. Keverin was in awe of Jihan's speed and skill.

Keverin came by not long after saying it was time to move on. Julia decided to wait until they stopped for the night to show the letters to him.

They journeyed on and the day passed. There was one moment of excitement as the afternoon turned to evening when Burke's horse appeared to go lame on its right hind foot. It turned out to be a loose shoe and was fixed by Burke himself. Most

people knew a little of the farriers art—enough to get by at least. Keverin said a smith could pronounce the job sound at the next town—at Kirstal. That evening, Julia made a point of claiming Keverin early so she might show him the letters. Jihan and Ahnao were walking together around the camp and she refrained from interrupting them. So it was that she and Keverin were alone by the fire as he read one after another of the letters.

Keverin looked up from his reading. “It’s the stupidity that never fails to amaze me. How they thought they could make a treaty with Mortain I will never know.”

“Jihan said civil war would have resulted had this plan gone ahead.”

“Not much doubt of that. I would certainly have fought against this madness. I’m sure all honourable men would have done the same.”

Julia nodded, but she was wondering just how many lords could be called honourable anymore. “Who will you vote for?”

Keverin replaced the letters in the satchel. “Halden would have been my first choice. He’s well respected. Even his enemies, such as they are, acknowledge him as scrupulously honest.”

“You said you *would* have chosen him. What’s wrong with him then?”

“He’s old, Julia, over seventy I think. We need someone with energy and time to set Deva to rights, not someone likely to be in his grave five years from now.”

Julia hadn’t thought about the time aspect. Life ran at a much slower pace here. The King couldn’t pick up the phone and order somebody to do something. He needed to send messengers, which took days to travel anywhere. Deva would take years to get back onto its feet. Gylaren was older than Kev, but not as old as Halden. She wasn’t sure how old Gylaren was.

“What would you say to Gylaren as King?”

Keverin raised a brow in speculation. “I would say he’d make a very fine King, but Gy’s not young either.”

“He does have three boys. Surely they would help, and anyway, Gylaren is vigorous as a bull.”

“Gy won’t like it, but if he agrees I’ll vote for him. He *is* better than all the others and Dylan takes after him.”

“Dylan is Gy’s eldest isn’t he?”

Keverin nodded. “Niklaus will have to take Meilan, but I don’t see a problem with that.”

Julia nodded pleased at the decision. All she had to do now was persuade Gy to take the throne and Deva’s problems would be solved!

Kirstal hadn’t been anywhere near this bad, Julia thought as she rode into Hringham. Hringham was the last major town before they reached the capital, which was still days away at the plodding pace they had maintained thus far. There were children lining the road. Julia watched them silently watching her and wanted to kill someone. They were starving and obviously frightened of nobles. They stood silently watching and hoping for a scrap or two of food. Keverin was looking around in shock. Julia knew how he felt, but Keverin was having a harder time of it than she was. Television broadcasts of famine and starvation—though not at all like the real

thing—had prepared her for the sight. Keverin on the other hand had never even *conceived* that this could happen in Deva.

“Haaalt!” Keverin called to the column. “Dismount!”

“—mount!”

“Disssss-mount!”

The orders echoed into silence as Julia jumped down. Keverin quickly reached up and helped Jessica to the ground. Mathius was rummaging in his pack, and Julia belatedly did the same. She didn’t have much in her travel pack, but it would do until they could get to the baggage wagons and the food they carried.

With fists full of bread and cheese, Julia approached the children, but they backed away. “Don’t be afraid. Here, this is for you.” She said keeping her voice low and trying to coax one of them toward her.

A girl snatched a piece of bread and ate it so fast that Julia’s blink almost missed it. As soon as the others saw it, they ran forward. Julia staggered as dozens of children slammed into her. They were fighting over her cheese. She gave what she had, but they weren’t satisfied and they began hitting each other—fighting over a morsel of bread.

“No don’t... don’t do that!” Julia cried trying to fend off the fists with her arms while keeping her hold upon the girl. “There’s more in the wagons! Don’t hit her!”

Julia dragged the girl clear of the fighting. She was bleeding and seemed dazed. A hand snatched Julia’s travel pouch out of her hands. She let it go, but another fist was tangled in her hair. Enough was enough. She grasped her magic.

*Vrooosh!*

A gigantic fireball leapt straight up into the air. Julia watched worriedly as it disappeared into the clouds, but it didn’t come down anywhere near the town, thank the God. She hadn’t known what else to do. She knew so little! She couldn’t even stop children from fighting without scaring the wits out of them. They were staring at her in silent awe and fear.

“Give me your pouch, Mathius, and get the baggage opened up quick.”

Mathius nodded and handed her his food before running off. Julia pointed to a boy and he hesitantly came forward. She handed him a piece of bread. He swallowed it in one go and waited for more. She pointed to another boy and gave him the same amount trying to make the food last until Mathius returned. Some of the guardsmen started handing out their rations. A few of the children deserted her to go to them. Keverin handed his pouch over so that she could continue.

When Julia ran out of food to give them, the children ran off to find someone else. Hundreds of people were lining up to the wagons. It wasn’t just the children. The entire town was starving, but it was crazy! Thirty or forty leagues to the north there were prosperous towns and fields aplenty, yet these folk wouldn’t have survived without Keverin’s column! What if they had chosen another road? Julia shook her head preferring not to think about that.

“We need to stop here, Kev. We can’t leave them like this—we just *can’t!*”

Keverin was nodding. “This is much worse than Kirstal. Much, much worse.”

Julia nodded remembering her first sight of Kirstal...

Kirstal was a town on the highroad they had passed through. They had noticed

something wrong as soon as they rode in, but at least the people had some food to eat. Not much, but some. Kirstal was only a village really. Most of the homes were two roomed cottages with thatch roofs. The inn had the usual red tiles on its roof, but it was the only one with more than a single story. Most of the homes looked rundown and neglected. The thatch needed replacing and the walls needed replastering, but the people didn't seem to care. They were listless and uninterested in their surroundings. They weren't starving—not quite, but they were obviously poor. It didn't make sense.

Julia looked around in puzzlement. Her expression was mirrored on Keverin's face. Jihan was frowning back the way they had come. The fields were bursting with life and colour. The farms seemed prosperous, yet the village could almost be called abandoned if not for the few people hurrying away from them.

"Something's not right," Jihan said. "It's market day. Where are all the stalls and peddlers?"

"I don't know," Keverin murmured. "Let's find out."

Jihan nodded. "Disssss-mount!" He called and the order was repeated down the ranks.

Keverin jumped down and helped first Julia and then Jessica to the ground. Burke's horse was led away to find a blacksmith, and the other guardsmen milled around stretching their legs. Ahnao murmured something to Jihan as he handed her horse's reins to one of his men. He nodded and trotted off toward a house they had passed.

Julia watched as he pounded on the door. "Ahnao?"

"It belongs to the wise woman. See the sign?"

Julia frowned, but then she saw it. There was an iron bracket with a board hanging from two short chains. A mortar and pestle was painted on the side facing her. It was faded and old. "A healer?"

Ahnao nodded. "Every village has at least one."

Keverin was listening to the innkeeper. He was scowling ferociously and shaking his head. He raised a hand and the innkeeper fell silent to listen in his turn. Whatever they were discussing had made them both angry. Julia tensed, but it wasn't anger aimed at each other. It was aimed at another.

Keverin stalked off and banged on another door. She watched as this was repeated until he finally came back to her fuming in anger.

"Report!" Julia said mimicking Keverin's way of speaking to his Captains.

The men nearby guffawed, and Keverin laughed. That eased him somewhat, though the scowl wasn't completely gone. "The people here are ready to erupt. Lord Scalderon is a fool if he thinks he can get away with treating the people like this!"

"Treating them like what? You haven't told *me* yet." Julia said in annoyance.

"He's been taxing everything in sight and saying the King demanded it. I just spoke to the head man. Even he believed it was the King's order! I told him the truth, and he's going to call a town meeting. What they can do about it..." he shook his head. "I just don't know."

"Will there be a fight?"

"I don't know... I don't *think* so. Scalderon isn't a strong lord, but it wouldn't take many guardsmen to terrorise these people."

Jihan met his lady upon his return and together they went to speak with Keverin and Julia. “I think we need to visit Scalderon. I don’t know about you, but I can’t stand by and do nothing while these people are bled dry.”

Keverin nodded. “We can speak with him, but anything more will have to be decided by the King when he’s crowned.”

Jihan was shaking his head. “They haven’t got time for that. What would you say if I sent a messenger back to Malcor ordering three hundred men to occupy Kirstal?”

Keverin looked thoughtful. “I would say... Athione is closer,” he said with a crooked grin.

Jihan laughed.

Keverin sent a messenger to Marcus with precise orders stating he was to send three hundred fully equipped men to defend the people of Kirstal from *any and all* attacks—that included depredations by Scalderon’s men.

Julia shook her head. Keverin and Jihan had paid a quick visit to Scalderon but he was away visiting another lord—or so the seneschal told them. Keverin had been vexed to say the least. He had returned to Kirstal to await the men from Athione and cursed Scalderon daily for the delay.

They had moved on as soon as the fresh contingent of guardsmen arrived, secure in the knowledge that Kirstal was safe, but now they had an even worse situation on their hands. Hringham was larger than Kirstal and the people were in dire straights. They were starving and it almost had to be the local lord’s doing.

“Who is lord here?” Julia asked.

Keverin thought for a moment. “That would be... Meagan of Herstal Keep.”

Jihan nodded.

“You can’t tell me Meagan is an honourable lord.”

“He’s a weasel.” Keverin said in disgust. “He’s powerful enough to put most men in their places, but not me he’s not.”

“Nor me,” Jihan growled as he watched the people queuing for food.

“What are you going to do? You’re not going to fight him are you?” Julia said worriedly. Keverin could look after himself, but mistakes did happen. Mistakes in a sword fight led to death or maiming.

“Don’t worry. Meagan is a non-entity as a swordsman—a total dandy.”

Julia felt better hearing that, but she decided to pay special attention to Meagan. She had letters belonging to the lord of Herstal. Now that she had seen Hringham, she would be sure to use them. Meagan had thoughtfully not signed his name, but his seal was enough to give him away as an ally of Athlone and therefore a traitor to the crown.

“We’ll need more food by the looks of it.” Julia said nodding at the crowds.

“That’s what I’ve been thinking,” Keverin said in concern. “I’ll send another messenger to Marcus. The way we’re going, he won’t have any men left to command!”

Julia snorted. She walked toward the crowd on Keverin’s arm to watch the progress. It would take a good many wagons to supply a town this size. She made a mental note to ask Jihan to send a messenger to Malcor as well. Two caravans were

better than one.

“Do you think Meagan is at home?” Jihan said still watching the children.

“I don’t know,” Keverin said watching the food being gobbled by the hungry little mites.

“I could pay him a visit—a *courtesy* call you understand.”

“Hmmm... I would hate to be discourteous.”

Julia opened her mouth to argue.

“It’s settled then,” Jihan said. “We ride to Herstal to pay our... *respects*.”

“Now?”

“Now would be best,” Jihan agreed with a white knuckled grip upon his sword that mirrored Keverin.

“Now wait a damn minute!” Julia said. “If you think you’re leaving me behind—”

“Or me!” Ahnao said glaring at Jihan.

“—you have another think coming!”

Keverin and Jihan eyed each other over their lady’s heads. Julia stood with her fists on hips and glared fit to blister paint. Ahnao was more direct. She fisted Jihan’s shoulder.

“Now Ahnao...”

“Now Julia...”

A few short candlemarks later, Julia rode with Keverin and Jihan to the keep. Ahnao was conspicuously quiet. Julia didn’t know what Jihan had said to her when he guided her away for a private chat, but whatever it was had her red-faced and fuming.

“Are you all right?”

Ahnao scowled. “I be fine.”

Julia raised an eyebrow at that. Ahnao had fallen into her old way of speaking without even noticing. “Are you sure?”

Ahnao took a deep breath and let it out slowly. She nodded. “I’m fine Julia, it’s just...”

“Just what? Did Jihan say something to upset you?”

Ahnao grinned mischievously. “We can make up later.”

Julia chuckled. “So what did he say?”

“Nothing important,” she said and quickly changed the subject. “When I lived in Bri with ma... *mother*, I used to dream about living in a fine castle with lords and ladies. My dream came true when I met Jihan, but it’s different to how I thought it would be.”

“How is it different?”

Ahnao hesitated and then spoke softly. “It’s harder to pretend that I’m a lady than I thought it would be.”

“Hey!” Julia said and Kev looked back. She flicked her fingers at him and he faced front again with a smile. Julia grasped her magic and raised a ward of silence. “You’re not pretending—you’re more a noble lady than I will ever be!”

Ahnao looked quickly at Jihan.

“Don’t worry, they can’t hear us.”

“Magic?”

Julia smiled. “You’re Jihan’s consort, Ahnao. That on its own would be enough to make you a lady in most people’s minds, but he didn’t make you what you are. You did that. I told you once that anyone can act like a lady, but it’s what’s inside that really counts. Jihan saw it in you the moment he met you, and so did I.”

Ahnao smiled and took Julia hand. She squeezed once then took her reins again. “Thank you for saying that.”

“Is everything all right at Malcor? Are the others giving you a hard time?” Julia said thinking that she would pay Malcor a long visit and sort this out.

“At first they did,” Ahnao said with a shrug. “Whispers and spite. Nothing I couldn’t handle. I never told Jihan, but I had to wipe the floor with one of them in the women’s quarter.”

Julia gaped. “*Really?*”

“Yes really!” Ahnao said through her laughter. “You ought to see your face!”

Julia looked away sheepishly. “Who was it?”

“Ellyn.”

“I liked Ellyn,” Julia said disappointed in the woman who might have become a friend.

“I still do,” Ahnao said. “After you and Jessica, she’s my best friend.”

Julia blinked.

“It’s not Ellyn or Malcor that I’m worried about. It’s Devarr.”

“Devarr? What’s at Devarr for you to worry about?”

Ahnao looked at her as if she were dense. “Every Lord and Lady in the land will be there.”

Ah! Julia had to admit that she had been a little apprehensive about that as well. She knew very few of the lords. There was Jihan, Purcell, and Gylaren of course, and lord Blaise was a friend of Keverin, though she had met him only three times all together. There were sixty lords. Most, if not all, would bring their consorts to Devarr for the new king’s coronation. She knew only four of them.

“I’m in the same boat, Ahnao.” Julia said but her friend looked confused. “I mean that I feel the same way. At least you know what to expect. I’ve only been on this world a year!”

Ahnao nodded. “I hadn’t thought of that.”

“I guess we should stick together. You watch my back and I’ll watch yours.”

Ahnao and Julia looked solemnly at each other. A moment later they spoilt it with a fierce grin.