

### **A desperate fight**

Lorcan flew over his horse's head with his arms waving vainly in the air like a swimmer desperate to reach shore. He tried to tuck his head and roll with the fall, but there were too many bodies lying strewn over the ground. He crashed face first into the bloody pile. He climbed shakily to his feet when as he realised he was still alive and found Darline crawling dazed and bloody back toward the Hasians.

"Not that way!" Lorcan hissed and hoisted her back to her feet.

Darline wobbled as he half dragged half marched her away from the site of her clan's defeat. Already it was obvious they had lost this battle. He needed to get her to a shaman. She was losing a lot of blood. He took a moment to rip a strip from the hem of his tunic and bind the wound. With satisfaction he watched the blood slow.

"Did we win?" Darline mumbled drunkenly.

Lorcan looked back to find Keverin fighting for his life. Even as Lorcan turned to go back, Keverin fell under a tide of legionnaires and with him his banner fell.

"No," Lorcan whispered as the tears streamed over his cheeks. "We lost."

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### *Prologue*

**J**ULIA OPENED HER EYES TO LOOK AROUND, but nothing had changed. She was lying on something that swayed and bounced as she moved. The sky above was still grey and contemplating whether to drop its contents on her or not. Why not, she thought sluggishly, she'd had worse than a little rain—much worse. Another surge of pain crackled through her and she took a ragged breath to scream, but Kerrion's magic quickly damped the agony. She couldn't grasp her own magic, but even if there had been something to heal, which there wasn't, she couldn't heal herself. Her addiction wasn't a physical ailment, but it hurt worse than any other thing she could name.

"Oh God, not again," Julia whispered as the pain hit her with greater force. "*Hnnnoooooo!*" She screamed. The pain suddenly eased as Kerrion's spell wrapped itself around her. "Oh God thank you... thank you... thank you," Julia whispered as tears leaked from her tightly closed eyes. She raised a shaking hand to wipe them away.

"How do you feel?" Kerrion asked kindly.

"Terrible," Julia croaked.

"You still have pain?"

Another cramp hit her. "*Hnnn!* Yes," she said panting.

"I can do nothing further. I'm holding the pain down with magic. If I do more you could lose feeling permanently."

"It's... it's all right... I've had... *Hnnn!* I've had worse," Julia gasped but Kerrion was sceptical. She didn't have the energy to explain. "I want Keverin. Is he near?"

"Your man?" Kerrion said and at her jerky nod, he shook his head. "I don't know where he is. He can't come onto the plain—not now at least. Do you know of a Hasian named Navarien?"

"Yes... he... *hnnn!*" Julia gritted her teeth to prevent the scream escaping. "He was the General—the leader that tried to take my home. I killed his legionnaires—his warriors. He went back to the Protectorate."

“Ah, well done! This man, this monster, is killing everyone in the north. He is a vile creature that kills his own men and laughs while he does it. He allows his men to use children for sport and—”

“No...” Julia whispered tiredly. “He is my enemy, but he’s an honourable man and a very great General for his people.”

“How can you say that?” Another voice said, one out of Julia’s sight.

“I say it because it’s true. I watch him in the mirror sometimes, I know he... he’s an honourable man.”

“Let her rest my friend. Here Julia, drink this,” Kerrion said.

Julia knew what the waterbag contained. Dilute Tancred. The thought of the vile stuff made her want to throw up, but she needed to be weaned off the drug like a babe from her milk. She took a single mouthful this time and swallowed hard trying to stop herself from spitting it out. Kerrion offered more, but she refused it.

“You must!”

“No, it’s faster this way... *Hnnn!*” The scream forced its way loose from her control. “*Hnnnoooooo!*”

“Faster is not better. Now drink!”

Kerrion forced more into her while Julia glared daggers at him. Wait until she was up and around, she’d singe his ears for that! The pain receded, or was it her receding? She was still awake, sort of, but everything was hazy and disjointed. Kerrion was walking by her side and talking to another shaman, but his voice was fading in and out. Julia stared up at him and blinked slowly at what she was seeing. The world slowed to a crawl. She watched a snowflake hover before her eyes seemingly suspended in time. She wasn’t dreaming; she was almost sure she wasn’t. Another snowflake replaced the first and slowly made its way to land upon her face. She blinked it free of her eyelashes, but another joined it. Kerrion’s hand appeared and brushed them away.

Julia blinked fuzzily up at him. “Your face... the burns... sorry about your face Kerrion...”

Kerrion shook his head in puzzlement.

Julia was floating. If she reached over there—a place in her head—she could fly. She fumbled for the thing at her centre, but it kept getting away.

*Bother it!*

The gold thing kept slipping away. Julia nearly had it a couple of times, but it squirted from her grasp like a piece of slippery soap. She gave up, and watched the snow fall.

## *Chapter One*

**L**ORD KEVERIN REACHED THE CAMORIN BORDER in a foul temper. Although a troop of brigands had intended it otherwise, his journey from the capital had been quick. The reason for Keverin's mood had nothing to do with brigands, nor yet the length of time taken to reach the border. No, what had him seething was the sight of nearly a thousand Athione guardsmen sitting encamped on the Devan side of the border.

"Calm down, Kev. Listen to Brian's explanation first."

Keverin frowned in irritation. Jihan was a good friend, and an honourable lord, but he didn't know how irritating it was to have someone half his age telling him what to do. He was calm; he was *always* calm! When hadn't he been calm? Brian should be on the trail, not loafing around on the border. He had better have a flaming good reason for his loafing, if he didn't...he just better had, that's all.

Keverin dismounted and made his way with Jihan toward the centre of attention. Brian's men were listening to a pair of mages chatting with Brian. At their feet were two mirrors glowing with magical images. Keverin couldn't see what the views were, but he would wager they showed Julia's kidnapper's location. In fact, he was wrong as he saw when he finally broke in among his men.

"The Lord—"

"Brian's a goner for sure—"

"He looks madder than a sorcerer with his beard on fire!"

Keverin tried to ignore his men's comments, but the last one had even him grinning. That would be something to see all right, something worth savouring. His temper cooled as if quenched in oil, and it was with a cool head that he questioned his Captain.

"Report Brian," he ordered, and the men quieted down. Jihan was at his left elbow studying the images in the mirrors.

"My lord, we tracked The Lady toward Anselm, but were unable to close the distance more than half a day. With Lucius and Mathius scrying ahead, we discovered

the Hasians had boarded ship—”

“One of my father’s barges,” Lord Adrik added.

Keverin didn’t show his annoyance at the interruption. He nodded politely to Adrik and indicated to Brian he should continue.

“A *barge* then,” Brian said annoyed at being corrected so blatantly. “It was obvious we would lose ground, so I ordered my men to head straight north to cut them off here where the river crosses the border. I failed.”

“Don’t be so hard on yourself, Brian,” Lucius said. “Julia would understand.”

Mathius lent his support. “That’s right. Besides, she’s safe enough for the moment. The clans won’t hurt her.”

“What’s this? I told you to report, Brian. I meant everything!”

“I was just coming to that part, my lord,” Brian said glaring at Mathius. “We had fallen more than two days behind when the barge was attacked during the night by clan warriors—”

“Not just warriors, Brian,” Mathius said. “Shamen attacked in the night with magic, my lord. It was beautiful. The warriors swam to the boat and killed the sentries and the steersman without a sound. One moment everything was quiet, the next, a warrior was diving over the side with Julia over his shoulder! None could have done it better.”

A rumble of agreement and admiration swept through the men. *Julia was safe!* It was wonderful news. Keverin pushed aside his exultation to hear the rest.

“—burning,” Brian was saying. “Every time the sorcerers put out the fires, the shamen threw fire and lit them again!” Chuckles swept through the crowd, but no one would be fooled into thinking they were amused. It was a positively evil sound; the Hasians deserved what they got and more. “The barge sank near the west bank. The last sorcerers were crushed.”

“Not exactly, Brian,” Lucius said in glee. “The shamen were very annoyed at this point, my lord. Whoever led them made a point I feel won’t be lost on Mortain. They wrung the last one like a dirty wash cloth!”

“Ooh, I bet that hurt!”

“—bastard deserved it!”

“No one does that to our Julia and gets away with it!”

Keverin nodded. He felt the same, but he would have preferred killing them himself. Still, they were dead and that was all that really mattered.

“So, why are you encamped here instead of riding to meet Julia?” Keverin said. He had no doubt she would be spitting mad and in a hurry to get back.

“My fault I’m afraid,” Lucius said. “I advised Brian to hold back.”

Keverin nodded. Brian was new in his rank of captain. He had allowed himself to be swayed by an older head. Whether Lucius was wiser as well remained to be seen.

“Why?”

“Julia is safe for the moment, as safe as she can be full of Tancred as she is—”

“Tancred!”

Lucius nodded.

Tancred was a dangerous drug for anyone, but it was more dangerous for Julia as she’d had a run in with the vile stuff before. Tancred saved her life then, but later, her

addiction nearly killed her. Thank the God she had survived. The worst effects had diminished after a tenday, but it had taken much longer to recover completely.

“It was the only way to hold her,” Lucius explained. “Demophon must have been a worried man to order the use of Tancred, but though I detested the man, I can understand why he chose it. It really was the only way to prevent her from blasting everything in sight short of killing her.”

Lucius and Mathius had killed Demophon, five other sorcerers, and destroyed an entire set of rooms in the palace as revenge for Julia’s murder. They hadn’t known at the time she was still alive. If they hadn’t killed Demophon, Keverin vowed he would have, assuming he could do that. Killing a mage was very hard to do—by surprise or with magic were the only ways to have even a remote chance.

“So you see, Julia’s all right,” Lucius went on. “The warriors are what worry me.”

“You’ve lost me, Lucius,” Keverin said. “What’s this about, Brian?”

Brian was almost bursting with his need to speak. “We have more than a few warriors watching us from concealment as we speak, my lord. Lucius found them in his mirror. If we move on, I’m thinking the King won’t like it, especially if we hand him a war in the process. Lucius wants me to wait until they visit us to talk. I prefer the reverse.”

Keverin nodded. “Bide a moment, Brian.” He turned to Adrik, “My lord, if you will follow me?”

Adrik stood from where he was studying the mirrors to follow Keverin and Jihan away from the others so they might discuss their options.

“First, I have a duty to perform,” Keverin said. “The King has confirmed you as Lord of Ascol before the Council. Your father was executed for treason and regicide... I’m sorry,” Keverin added just a little late.

Adrik’s jaw clenched, but he held the pain at bay. The young man’s eyes were haunted, but they remained dry. “Not really.”

“No, not really,” Keverin agreed.

Lord Rowton of Ascol had been Keverin’s enemy. More, he was the King’s enemy and that of Deva herself. Rowton was beheaded for his crimes as befit his station, but Keverin felt it too good for him. Rowton should have been hung as a common brigand as were those involved in Julia’s abduction.

Jihan interrupted Keverin’s reverie. “Gy won’t want a war with the clans; he’s more interested in buying their horses for the new armies.”

Keverin knew that was true, but Julia was his personal priority. Too many times he had allowed duty to come between them—most notably when the King forbade him from pursuing Julia’s kidnappers the night of her abduction. Gylaren had threatened his removal as Lord of Athione if he did not obey. That had been a tense moment. His removal would have split the kingdom wide open, and although Keverin had no doubt the King would have won in the end, he had been on a sword’s edge, teetering one way then the other in indecision. In the end, he had ordered Brian and all his guardsmen to pursue the kidnappers, while he obeyed the letter, if not the substance behind the King’s order. Gylaren had acknowledged his stance and accepted the situation with good grace; he’d had little choice unless civil war was what he wanted. Gylaren and Keverin had been friends for years. The split between

them had been sudden and shocking. He still couldn't believe it and wondered even yet if it was permanent. He had vowed that if Gylaren's actions harmed Julia, then their friendship was finished, but privately he had vowed one thing further. If she were harmed, he would challenge and kill Gylaren. Nothing was more important to him than Julia.

She was his life.

Putting grim thoughts to one side, Keverin concentrated on the current situation. These hidden watchers or scouts might be useful. He looked around but couldn't see anywhere they might be hiding. It was said clansmen could hide behind a blade of grass, but this was ridiculous! Although still on the Devan side of the border, it looked indistinguishable from the plain. He could see for leagues, but there was nothing to see, just long grass waving in the chill breeze. Winter was almost here, and he felt it likely they would end their journey back to Athione through the first falls of snow.

"War isn't what I want, nor do the clans want it," Keverin said. "They saved Julia when I was unable to, for that they have my eternal gratitude. I don't believe war is likely. They have Navarien to worry about."

Jihan shrugged. "People can be irrational, but I agree I think. If I had the General on my doorstep, I'd be worried indeed."

"Why not walk over there," Adrik said hooking a thumb over his shoulder, "and shout that you want to talk?"

Keverin's eyebrows climbed. "Why not indeed?"

Keverin wandered northward shouting that he wanted to talk. He felt a little silly, but his bubbling hilarity disappeared as if it had never been when dozens of clansmen stood from where they had lain hidden. Worse, some were between him and the safety of his men. Brian was alert to the danger, and suddenly every guardsman of Athione and Malcor had his sword in hand ready to charge to the rescue. The clansmen seemed unconcerned, though they were outnumbered a hundred to one.

"I am Anwa, warrior of the Jaralk. You may speak to me."

"I am Keverin of Athione, Lord Protector of the west—Deva's west that is."

"I know who you are," Anwa said. "What do you want, man of Deva?"

How? Maybe Julia had told him. That thought cheered Keverin no end.

"My Lady was abducted by Hasian sorcerers. I've come to bring her home."

"No," Anwa said simply and turned to leave. The other clansmen turned away silently.

Keverin stepped forward angrily and grabbed Anwa's arm. The clansman stopped, and looked at the offending grasp. Keverin reluctantly let go.

"It's not your decision, Anwa. I am a chief of my people. You are a mere warrior. I demand to speak to your chief."

Anwa thought about that for a long moment and then made a sign to one of his men. The warrior nodded and loped away. "We wait."

Keverin walked back to his men unhindered, but he was worried. Why, after saying he knew about Julia and him, would Anwa prevent him from seeing her? Were the clans playing some kind of game with him?

Days of inaction chafed upon Keverin so much he felt he must surely go insane

with worry. Yet again he considered breaking camp and moving north in pursuit of Julia, but Lucius' assurances came back to him and staid his hand. Lucius had used his mirror to assure him that Julia was well. If it hadn't been so tiring for the wizard, Keverin would have watched her all day and night. Julia was sick, but in no danger from the clans. That might change if he ordered his men north. No, he must wait for Anwa's chief to come.

Keverin watched Adrik's sword practice as the snow came down. The young Lord of Ascol badly needed Jihan's instruction. Jihan was a patient but exacting teacher. He was working to improve Adrik's speed. The boy's accuracy was fine—though he had no chance of striking Jihan of course, but his endurance was non-existent, which had the effect of slowing him too quickly. Jihan was fighting at a snail's pace on his own scale, yet Adrik's breath smoked white as he panted into the cold winter air. The snow had started just a few days ago and had settled, but there was little wind to whip it up into a blizzard thank the God.

Anwa's men remained separate but observant. The ones Keverin could see were watching Adrik's lesson with interest. Lucius had used his mirror to locate the hidden watchers, but apart from noting the numbers and location of each clansman, Keverin had decided not to acknowledge them. Secrecy was best. It seemed likely they would move if they knew of their discovery.

"No, no, *no!*" Jihan yelled and called a halt to the fight. "You are fixating on my blade, Adrik. You have to ignore such things as the distractions they are. Try to take in all of me; don't fix on any one thing."

"That's easy for you to say Lor... Jihan." Adrik said panting and stumbling over the fact that he was now a lord himself.

Well, he was in name at least. Jihan was a blademaster and a Lord Protector. Jihan denied the title of blademaster simply calling himself a swordsman. Denying it didn't make it less true though. Everyone knew Jihan was unsurpassed with a sword—with any weapon. Ignoring mages for the moment, Jihan was the most deadly fighter in the land. Lucky for Deva he was scrupulously honourable in all things. Jihan's father had been a traitor, and because of that, Jihan was the most trustworthy lord you could ever hope to meet. He shied away from anything that even remotely reminded him of his father's behaviour and dishonour.

"I mean you no insult, chief of Deva, but your son would be better suited to the weavers life—almost any other life than that of a warrior," Anwa said from behind Keverin.

Keverin hadn't heard him approach, but he didn't betray his surprise. "He is not my son. I have no sons."

"I feel for you, but daughters bring their own joy—" Anwa broke off as Keverin shook his head.

"I have no children. My title will pass to another line after me, and my ancestors will be forgotten." Keverin said truly believing for the first time it would happen.

Keverin had often contemplated adopting an heir, but circumstances had always seemed to intervene. Jihan's consort was pregnant with their first babe and it brought home to him his own lack. Julia was young yet, but he was forty-two and had never sired a child. Perhaps he couldn't.

"That is sad. The boy is a friend then?"

“He is Lord Adrik of Ascol, and recently become a friend. The other is Lord Jihan of Malcor and Lord Protector of the north—a very good friend.”

Anwa’s eyebrows lifted at all the titles. Although the clans didn’t have nobles, Anwa still understood the meaning of the word. To him a lord was a chief, so he found himself confronted with not one chief as he had assumed, but three. The clans had no use for titles, except perhaps the title of chief and shaman. Everyone else used their given name and thought of themselves as Horse Clan, or Night Wind, or any of the other clans and tribes.

“That he is a chief and still so abysmal with the long knife is shocking, but outclanner ways have ever been a puzzle. Why so many chiefs?”

Keverin ignored the insult given to Adrik, the charge was after all true, but he was always happy to talk about Julia. “My Lady is greatly loved and very special to all of us. She is a sorceress, the only one ever born that we know of. Julia saved our land from the Hasians last year, and helped save it again this last season passed. Many love her, but I most of all.”

“She is fortunate indeed,” Anwa said watching the sword practice resume.

“How fortunate is it to be kidnapped, drugged insensible, half drowned, and then finally taken north away from those who love her?” Keverin said as his anger kindled.

“Save your anger for those deserving of it,” Anwa said coldly.

“Oh? And are you not deserving of it? Are you not one of the men holding me on the border away from my Lady?”

Anwa ignored him as his interest was drawn to the north. Keverin turned to find a party of clansmen riding slowly toward him. Anwa trotted off toward his own people.

“Brian!”

“Lord?”

“Assemble the men. I don’t think we’ll be fighting, but I want everyone ready.”

“At once, my lord!”

Keverin nodded as Brian trotted away, and the men struck the camp. By the time the clansmen arrived, the men were mounted and ready for what might come. Keverin had Cavell near at hand, but remained afoot with Jihan and Adrik.

“What do you think?” Keverin said.

“I think they will refuse us,” Jihan replied. “If they do, we can beat them best with an immediate charge. That should surprise them and give us time to chop them up.”

Adrik nodded but he had a suggestion. “Don’t let them say no to you. We have Lucius and Mathius to even the odds.”

Keverin nodded, he hadn’t forgotten the mages. Both men nodded at him as he looked their way. They were more than ready. There were perhaps five hundred warriors in the approaching party. That was many more than was needed to escort a single chief to the border. It was likely they were here to run him off. If that was so, they were in for the fight of their lives—the last fight of their lives.

Anwa was talking with an older man that Keverin assumed was the chief of the Jaralk. Petya was the name of the chief, and Jaralk was the name of an offshoot tribe of Eagle Clan. Keverin knew the names of the clans well enough, but what they

meant in strength and numbers of warriors was a mystery to him. Jihan was Lord Protector of this border. If any Devan knew, it would be he.

“What do you know of the Jaralk?” Keverin said without turning. “Anything that might help?”

“Just what everyone knows about the clans—ten nomadic clans but hundreds of tribes. Fierce warriors that can hide under a blade of grass. The clans always meet at a place called Denpasser in the spring where they trade with each other and us when we want their horses. Honourable men I’ve always thought, but they don’t like intruders. To them there are two kinds of people: clan and outclan.”

Keverin grunted. Such was common knowledge. He would like to know why the clans had intervened and saved Julia. If they wanted to help her, and they obviously did, why bar his way?

Keverin waited impatiently as one of the newcomers dismounted and together with Anwa approached him. The rest of the clansmen stayed mounted and moved into a line that could charge with little fuss or warning. Keverin raised an arm and swept it to either side. Instantly Brian reformed his men into an opposing line. Neither Petya nor Anwa took any notice—none of the clansmen did.

“Arrogant,” Adrik mused.

“Not at all,” Jihan corrected. “They are simply confident—foolishly so in my opinion. We know the clans are good fighters, but they do not know us. If I led them, I would be cautious until I had the chance to take our measure.”

Keverin agreed. In this situation, caution cost nothing.

“I am Petya, chief of the Jaralk.”

“I am Keverin, Lord Protector of the west. My friend to my left is Jihan, Lord Protector of the north. My friend to the right is Adrik, Lord of Ascol.”

Petya wasn’t surprised to be addressing three chiefs. Anwa had obviously reported his findings. “Why are you here?”

Keverin gritted his teeth. The man knew why! “We both know the answer to that, Petya. My lady is currently residing in your land and I mean to bring her out. With your help or without it, that *will* happen.”

“You listen to me outclanner—” Anwa began angrily, but Keverin cut him off.

“*No you listen!*” Keverin roared. “I’ve been kept waiting here for days while my lady journeys further away each candlemark. I’ve been patient up until now, but no more. Either you escort us to Julia or we ride north to find her.”

Petya was amused. He glanced at Anwa then raised a hand in a complicated gesture. Keverin wasn’t surprised or particularly worried when more clansmen galloped to join those already at Petya’s back. Lucius had been thorough with his mirror. Keverin still had a slight advantage in numbers. He had Brian and a thousand Athione guardsmen, Adrik with a hundred from Ascol, and Jihan with two hundred from Malcor. Petya had a thousand, maybe a little less.

“What say you now, little outclanner?” Petya spat, obviously trying to provoke him into risking action.

“Petya, you are a fool. Your men will die for nothing. My friends in the colourful robes behind me are mages. You have heard of magic, I trust? I see that you have. If you want to die, fight me alone. There’s no reason to kill hundreds with your stupidity!”

“We are not afraid to die!” Anwa spat angrily.

“Where is the honour in dying for nothing?” Petya mused, neither agreeing nor disagreeing.

“But—” Anwa began, but he was silenced by a look from Petya.

“What are you proposing?” Petya asked.

“I propose that we two fight. If I win, you allow us to journey north to find Julia. If I lose... If I lose, I submit to you and hope you have honour enough to bring my lady to me.”

“Kev, are you sure?” Jihan said. “We can take this many, I’m certain of it.”

“I’m sure. If we do it your way, hundreds on our side will die.”

“Hundreds!” Petya spat in outrage. “All of you will die!”

Jihan smirked and enraged Petya even more—as intended.

“I agree!” Petya said. “But *we* will not fight,” he said indicating Keverin who had been readying himself.

“Who then?” Keverin growled, annoyed at being deprived.

“My son against this smirking simpleton!”

“No!” Anwa cried in horror.

Keverin grinned; Anwa knew how good Jihan was.

“I have said it!” Petya shouted truly angry now.

“But you—” Anwa began, but he was silenced by a chopping gesture from Petya. Anwa scowled and stomped away in silence.

Petya gestured. A tall man dismounted and loped forward to join Petya. “This is my son, Jolon.”

Keverin introduced himself and the others then waited for Petya to explain to Jolon the bargain. Jolon was grinning at the end of Petya’s explanation and full of confidence.

Keverin followed Jihan into some space. “Finish this as quickly as you can, Jihan, and please don’t play with him. Would you do that for me?”

“If you wish it, but Petya needs a lesson in humility.”

Keverin tried not to laugh in Jihan’s face; it would have been rude. His friend wasn’t exactly a model of humility himself. His pride in his skills was thoroughly deserved however.

Jihan removed his cloak and handed it to Adrik. He gestured at Jolon’s lack of armour. “I do not wish to see you permanently injured. Do you wish to borrow armour?”

All the clansmen laughed including Jolon, but Keverin noticed that Anwa wasn’t. The warrior was scowling fiercely at what he saw as mockery.

“True warriors do not need armour, but I thank you for the thought. Perhaps you would care to borrow a shield as I see that you have none.”

“I thank you, Jolon. My training negates the use of a shield. I have found them to be an encumbrance against anything but arrows.”

“I see,” Jolon said slowly with a raised brow.

Keverin was impatient for the fight to begin, but he refrained from saying anything that might distract Jihan. The two were sparring with words, which he assumed would eventually lead to the challenge. He was right.

“So, if you’re ready then?” Jihan asked.

“Let us begin,” Jolon said with a nod.

Keverin blinked and nearly missed it.

Jihan pulled his sword and struck in one motion. Jolon raised his shield barely in time and deflected the blow. Jihan was obviously surprised at Jolon’s speed; Keverin could see it in his friend’s sudden wariness. Jolon in the meantime had counter-attacked, but Jihan easily parried each time. With a sigh of relief, Keverin decided that Jihan was the better man. He scowled when he realised that he had doubted for a moment.

Jihan moved with the total assurance of a master performing his art, but although it seemed obvious that Jolon was not Jihan’s equal, he was also no slouch. Jolon was dangerous. Jihan knew it of course; he had known it the instant his first attack failed. Jihan moved forward, his sword in the classic two-handed grip. Jolon backed and circled to the left. Jihan suddenly changed to a single hand—his left, and attempted to bypass Jolon’s shield to land a blow. Jolon cursed in surprise and cast it at Jihan. It had suddenly become an encumbrance just as Jihan earlier pointed out. Jihan aborted his attack and ducked. He barely escaped Jolon’s follow up slice, and changed back to his right hand. The clansman desperately parried Jihan’s attack, but he was feeling the loss of his shield acutely. Jihan danced in the snow. All eyes were on him—Jolon seemed a nonentity in comparison, but gracefulness didn’t win battles. Luckily, Jihan was well aware of that and his skill was beyond compare. Jolon was good, none would ever deny it, but Jihan was better.

Keverin was fuming. Jihan was playing with Jolon; he hadn’t kept his promise.

Jihan thrust, but his sword was pushed to the side. Jolon tried to make use of the opening so foolishly handed to him, but then he felt a slap high on his right side. He looked down in amazement to find Jihan’s sword hard against his body with its wickedly sharp edge turned safely away.

“Hit!” Jolon called feeling sick. In a real fight, he would have been dead.

Jihan straightened from his awkward lunge and saluted his opponent with a graceful yet complex flourish of his sword then continued the movement to sheath his blade with a quiet snick.

Petya was dumbfounded, but the other clansmen were angry for the most part. Many of them had seen Jihan’s skill while he taught Adrik and felt, as did Keverin, that Jihan had played Jolon for a fool. It was a notion quickly dispelled on Keverin’s part when Jihan reacted angrily to his accusation.

“How *dare* you, Sir! I have never gone back on a promise once made, and I resent your implication that I would do so.” Jihan said coldly. “I said I would not play with him, and I did not. It will no doubt surprise you to hear that Jolon is as good with his blade as Athlone was. Not that you would know!”

Whoa! Jihan *was* angry. Keverin had only seen him like this once before. That time Jihan was readying himself to kill his father.

“I apologize Jihan—from the heart my friend.” Keverin offered a formal bow. “It was frustration talking. I should have known you would never do something like that after saying you would not.”

Jihan’s glare faded and he nodded in better humour. He was not one to stay angry for long; he had to work at it. “You *should* have known, Kev, but let us speak no more of it. Jolon was quite a surprise to me. My first attack would have ended the

fight nine times out of ten, but Jolon appears to be my tenth man.” Jihan frowned but then smiled ruefully. “I should have known better. I have mentioned Cowan to you before. He was one of my two instructors in the sword. He truly is a blademaster, and a clansman. I wonder how many like Jolon there are living among the clans.”

Keverin was pleased that Jihan was no longer angry, but he had no interest in speculating on numbers of skilled swordsmen. He wanted to know if Petya would hold to the bargain he had made. Petya was angrily arguing with his warriors. One warrior in particular was denouncing Jolon as incompetent and calling his chief a lover of outclanners. Petya’s rage was such that Keverin felt him close to a seizure.

“Bide here a moment would you?” Jihan said absently as he walked toward the confrontation.

Keverin sighed. They were getting nowhere fast. Adrik murmured that it would have been quicker to fight it out, and he agreed. Petya was close to being challenged, and he was old. If loud mouth became chief, a battle would ensue that would likely see all the clansmen dead and a good many Devans also. The merits of armour versus free movement would be mute when the Devan medium cavalry charged the clan light cavalry. Keverin absently wondered how many would survive. Few he thought, too few to continue north. Jihan had seen the likely consequences before him, and was taking steps.

“You, Sir!” Jihan pointed at loud mouth. “Do you say Jolon gave me that hit?”

“This does not concern you outclanner!” Loud mouth said.

“Ah, but it does you see. If Jolon is judged to have given me the fight, I must see it as a stain on my honour. I know you do not understand honour, Sir, nor have any, but I assure you it is important to me!”

Keverin winced.

“Now he’s done it,” Adrik whispered.

The clansmen hissed in shock. All were struck dumb. All except loud mouth who was turning purple with rage and growling.

“Are you all right?” Jihan said in concern. “Breathe man, breathe!”

“You *filthy* outclanner! I’ll kill you!”

“Is that what you call a challenge?”

“Yes! To the death!”

“Well then, I accept. Would now be all right?” Jihan said in a bored voice, but his face was anything but bored. His eyes glittered and his face was as granite.

Loud mouth’s answer was to jump down from his horse and stalk to where the snow was already packed down from the earlier fight. Jihan shrugged and followed.

Keverin watched intently and made sure not to blink this time. Jihan faced loud mouth as he had faced Jolon before him. He was not surprised when Jihan pulled his sword and struck exactly as before. It would be called foolhardy for any other man to repeat his strike, especially when his new opponent had witnessed it, but Jihan was not concerned. The blow landed. Jihan turned and walked away. Everyone stared in shock at loud mouth. He swayed and then fell dead. The clansman’s sword arm and shoulder was hanging by a mere flap of skin.

“Let that be an end to the foolishness!” Keverin said loudly. “Petya made a bargain as your chief. Honour it!”

There was a rumble of discontent, but no one interrupted as Petya gave orders

to escort the outclanners to Denpasser.

Jihan was already mounted when Keverin turned to find Cavell. Adrik and he quickly followed Jihan's example. Brian reformed the men into a column of fours and then ordered them to move out. Keverin rode at the head of the column beside Adrik on one side and Jihan on the other. The two mages were close behind talking quietly together.

"—Julia's idea... matrices—"

"Yes but... and what if—"

Keverin shook his head; it was mage talk.

"That was well done, Jihan," Adrik said.

Keverin didn't quite groan. He should have warned the boy what Jihan's silences meant. He tensed waiting for the explosion, but it didn't happen that way.

Jihan sighed and shook his head sadly. "I have tried to teach you and the others what I believe honour means, Adrik. Would you say it's honourable to force a fight knowing beyond doubt that you will win? Knowing that forcing it, you are murdering the man or as close to it that it makes no difference?"

Adrik frowned. "But you always win! You always know you're *going* to win! That means—"

"Exactly. To force a fight is dishonourable."

"But if someone challenges you?"

"To accept a challenge is honourable."

Adrik thought for a moment. "If you see something about to happen that you know is wrong, should you challenge?"

Jihan nodded.

"That's all you did here, Jihan. You saved hundreds of lives by telling the truth. Was it honourable for loud mouth to try and break Petya's bargain?"

"No."

"Then you did not dishonour yourself. You said he had no honour, which was true. He challenged you not the other way. You did right."

"He's right, Jihan," Keverin said well pleased with Adrik. Jihan was extremely vulnerable to self-criticism. He was always careful where his honour was concerned.

"Perhaps..." Jihan said thinking.

Keverin smiled. Jihan was sitting straighter and taking an interest in his surroundings again. He was no longer worrying about turning into his father.

## *Chapter Two*

**J**OLON HELD OUT HIS HAND. “MAY I?”

Jihan didn't hesitate. He offered his sword, hilt first, to the clansman and received Jolon's sword in exchange. Jihan had no interest in the clansman's lesser blade, but out of politeness he examined it. The blade was of steel, which was the last thing that was good to Jihan's way of thinking. The balance was off, not by much true, but it was enough to distract him as he brought the blade up to high guard. That wasn't a good thing for any swordsman to have to contend with. The blade was shorter than he was used to at a little under a yard in length, but it was lightly curving as his sword was. The blade was sharp on both edges and the point as sabres usually were. Jihan was used to a single edged weapon and used both the edge and the point to his advantage. The hilt of Jolon's sword was made of black lacquered wood as was his of course, but again that was where the similarity ended. His sword's hilt was long, and could be used one or two handed. It had a small circular guard that didn't interfere with his grip; the black silk wrapping was merely to aid him in that. Jolon's hilt however, was short and had a brass hand-guard that looped over the knuckles to attach to the pommel. It was therefore a single-handed weapon and reminded him of the standard Devan cavalry sabre in its overall design and measurements.

Jihan flexed the blade and nodded his approval as it sprung back into shape. At least the steel was good quality. The blade was thinner than his sword and less heavy because of that. That was both good and bad. Less tiring to wield certainly, but it would also land a lesser blow when used full force. Overall, Jihan preferred his custom made sword.

Jolon and he exchanged blades and each sheathed their weapons.

“I have never seen a long knife like it,” Jolon said.

“Neither have I,” Jihan said with a nod. “This was made especially for me by a master in Japura. He sent his apprentice all the way to my home to measure me in my armour and in my skin. He really put me through my paces I can tell you! He went away with a little book full of numbers, and a year later delivered this and a matching

dagger with it.” He pulled the dagger and gave it to Jolon.

Jolon looked the blade over, but the sword was what he was interested in. Jihan sheathed the dagger and they walked back to the campfire.

“I would give a lot for a long knife—”

“No Jolon. I am sorry, but there is nothing you could give me worth this blade.”

“You don’t know what I would offer!” Jolon said angrily.

“Please my friend, don’t be angry. You have to understand something about me. I have trained all my life with all kinds of weapons. I am expert in them all, but there is nothing more precious to a man than his family and his friend’s lives. This sword may one day be all that stands between them and death. I killed my traitorous father with this blade, and saved my lady with it. It has saved me many times. Nothing is worth more to me than life.”

Jolon nodded reluctantly. “Maybe I can seek out the man who made it.”

“Japura is far from here, Jolon. Would you truly wish to leave the plain for the sake of a nice piece of metal?”

Jolon hesitated but shook his head. “No, you are right. Family and friends are everything.” He said and tried to forget the dream of owning such a fine weapon.

Jihan left Jolon to make his way back to his people and sat next to Keverin. Lucius and Mathius were talking as they usually did about magic and its uses. Jihan tuned them out; he couldn’t understand half what was said in any case. Keverin was staring into the flames as if mesmerised.

“Tomorrow they said,” Keverin said quietly.

“Have you ever been to Denpasser?” Jihan asked.

“No,” Keverin shook his head. “You?”

“No, but I have heard the traders talk of ruins. To tell the truth, the horses were of more interest to me.”

“Hmmm. Do you think she’ll be all right?”

Jihan didn’t have to ask who Keverin meant. It had to be Julia. “Lucius said she is. Shamen are like mages; they will heal her and we can go home to Malcor for the season.”

“I hope so. Maybe you should return now, Jihan. You have Ahnao and the babe to consider.”

“I do miss her,” Jihan admitted. “But Jessica will look after her for me. I will have to go back before long Kev; I don’t want to miss the birth.”

“Of course you must,” Keverin said surprised there was any question. “I have Brian and his men for company. We’ll be fine.”

Jihan nodded looking at the clear sky overhead. At least the snow had held off. The plain was already knee deep, and in some places, it was much deeper than that. He had discovered part of the reason the clans could hide so effectively yesterday when he stepped into a hole and disappeared up to his eyes in snow. Everyone laughed, but he had been delighted with the discovery. The plain had always seemed flat, but that was an illusion created by the long grass. It was actually comprised of many hollows, which the clans used to hide their presence. These were so effective that the clan’s ability to hide behind a blade of grass had reached legendary proportions, a fact the clans did not try to disabuse people of.

Jihan was glad to have worked out the puzzle, but it really made no difference whether he knew the how of it or not. The grass hid the depressions and the clansmen within them, knowing about it wouldn't change its effectiveness. Only in winter would the clans abandon the tactic, as the snow would give them away.

Jihan watched the guardsmen going to the perimeter and exchanging places with their friends who came in and sat down for a bite to eat before bed. The candlemark was late for talking, but Keverin seemed unwilling to leave just yet.

Jihan stood quietly to find his blankets and left his friend staring into the coals.

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Keverin nodded goodnight to Jihan and watched him duck into the tent assigned him by Brian.

Tomorrow he would be with Julia again, Keverin thought, and they could go home to be married. Julia had wanted all their friends to come to the wedding, but that was before Devarr. She had admitted part of the reason for inviting the lords was for an excuse to persuade them to support Gylaren as King. Well Gy was King now; so there was no longer any need to invite so many. He would send invitations to Purcell and his family, Jihan and his; Lucius and Mathius were already here so that really left only Gylaren. Keverin felt a little ambivalent toward Gy these days, but an invitation had to be sent. He doubted Gy would attend. The Kingship was a heavy burden, one that would take all his attention for many years to come.

Who else should he ask? Ah yes, Lords Adrik, Halden, Davida and Blaise came to mind. Other than that, he could think of no one. He had more friends now than he'd ever had, but that was due to Julia's influence. Everyone loved Julia, but she had chosen him to give her love to. He still found himself grinning whenever that came home to him.

Julia chose him!

Before Julia, he had only Darius. Now Lucius, Mathius, and all the others had, not replaced him, nothing could, but they had *joined* Darius in his affections. He wished Julia could have known Darius; she would have loved the man as he did. Keverin's eyes stung just a little, it was the smoke from the campfire, must be.

"You would love my Julia, Darius. Everyone does, but she chose me!" Keverin said and grinned.

Keverin stood and walked to his tent. Before he ducked inside, he looked around at the fires and sentries on guard nearby. All was well.

The next day, Keverin was up early and ready to go. It was just passed dawn when they moved north. Petya assured him they would reach Denpasser by midday at the latest. Jihan and Adrik were close by and Brian rode in his place at the head of his men. Promoting Brian to captain had been a gamble at the time, but it had paid off handsomely. Marcus had recommended Brian for the new captaincy, and he had lived up to the position. Brian's men were new to the guardsmen's life having joined Athione just a year ago, but they were well trained if still inexperienced. Keverin was glad he had them here, but would have been happier with more experienced men. He

supposed he couldn't have everything. If Marcus were here with his men, Athione's defences would be weakened and with them Deva's.

Snow began falling again at mid-morning reducing visibility to just a few yards. Wherever Keverin looked was white. Cavell was turning white also, as the heavy flakes settled. They arrived as Petya promised at noon, not that he could tell at first. If Petya said it was dusk, Keverin would have accepted the man's word. There was nothing to see but white everywhere and then walls suddenly looming up out of the ground. The ruins were a shock coming as they did out of nothing. Athione was gigantic, and Denpasser was tiny in comparison, but as the only stone building anywhere on the plain, it was still impressive. A gaping hole in one side showed where massive doors had once been. The doorway was easily big enough for a dozen guardsmen to enter walking side by side. Athione's gates were larger, but that was to allow a strong sallying force to charge out. 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? The windows in the sides of the building seemed small in comparison.

Was it a chapel to pray to the God, or was it for something else? Petya claimed not to know. He said Denpasser had always been here, and that the clans used it as a gathering place. As the only fixed location on the plain, it really was the only good place to meet with outclanners. Petya led them passed the ruin and the first tents became visible. There were not many people abroad in this weather, but there were some. They stared at the outclanners then hurried away to tell family and friends of what they had seen. Petya eased his mount to one side letting his warriors go back to their families.

Keverin and his friends pulled out of line with Petya to talk. "Where do you suggest we set our tents?"

"Tell your men to follow mine and they will see a large empty space on the right. They can use that for now."

Keverin turned to give Brian his orders and then watched him lead his men into the snow and disappear. "Where is Julia?" He asked.

Mathius and Lucius leaned in from the side to hear what Petya would say.

"We need to arrange some things first, Keverin," Petya said.

"What things?" Keverin said trying to hold his temper. How many times would he be diverted from going to his lady?

"The chiefs are meeting to discuss the situation with the outcl—err hmmm. With the monster Navarien," Petya said stumbling over the fact that he was talking to outclanners right now.

"What has that to do with me? As soon as I see Julia, I'll be taking her home."

"Not until you speak with the chiefs and tell them what you know of Navarien."

"Conditions Petya?" Keverin said fuming. "All right! If I have to then I have to, but immediately after this council of yours, I see Julia or we will be fighting. You have my word on it!"

Petya smiled. "I'll look forward to showing you how to fight, but important business first."

Jihan and Adrik laughed at what they saw as a jest, but neither Petya nor Keverin were. They were quite serious; a fact Jihan realised when Keverin failed to see

amusement in Petya's words.

Jihan leaned in to whisper. "Be careful Kev. Jolon was taught by the best, and Petya is his father. What chance Petya was his teacher?"

"Do I look like a child Jihan?" Keverin said in exasperation.

"Of course not, it's just—"

"Then why are you treating me like one!"

Petya laughed. "It's good to have friends who care is it not?"

Keverin smiled, and then laughed. It was good. "Sorry Jihan."

Jihan waved the apology away.

The horses were taken to Brian by one of Petya's warriors, and then the chief led them between the tents on foot explaining things as he went. Every so often people would stop and stare at the outclanners, but as far as Keverin could see, there was no animosity toward them.

"—Cricket Clan, they're one of the smallest you know. And here we have Night Wind, Kadar is chief, and... you do know that tribal chiefs are subordinate to the clan chiefs?"

"I had heard that," Keverin said with a nod.

"Kadar is clan chief of Night Wind, he's a good man. I think you'll like him. That's his tent there with the white bison and the maiden on the side, see it?"

"Yes. Do the sigils mean anything?"

"Not really. The shamen always use something distinctive so we know where to find one. Lightning bolts at the top are popular for some reason, but most of us use a picture that means something to us personally. I have a wolf attacking a warrior on it. I was lucky that day I can tell you! Talking of wolves," Petya said waving a hand at his surroundings. "This is Wolf Clan. Tobiah is clan chief. A hard man, but honourable for all of that. You won't like him much I'm afraid, he doesn't like outclanners."

Keverin raised an eyebrow at that. No clansman liked outclanners. This Tobiah must be a terror if Petya made a point telling him about Tobiah's prejudice.

"Why are there two empty areas there?" Jihan said pointing to the right.

"Dragon Clan is largest, but they haven't come." Petya said. "Don't tell anyone, but I don't think we will see them until spring. They need so much food to survive it's a real chore for them to leave the herd. The other area is Horse Clan's place. They won't come for fear of what Dragon Clan will do. They have a feud going you know."

Jihan raised an eyebrow at that and glanced at Keverin. Keverin nodded that he had heard. Feuding among the clans was bad news, especially now. Navarien was north. The clans needed to work together to face him.

"This is Eagle Clan," Petya was saying. "We are about middle of the road in size. I'm chief of Jaralk tribe as you know, and my clan chief is Allard. He's a bit young, but he's a good warrior. He was chosen when his father was killed in a stampede. The warriors chose him to honour his father, but I think he'll surprise them. In any case, he's unlikely to be challenged unless he does something stupid."

"Your authority does not pass from father to son?" Adrik said.

"No," Petya laughed. "The people vote for the best warrior. If there is more than one after that, they fight for it. It has always worked well for us. The chief must be a warrior as he has to lead in battle, but he can be old or young. I've always thought

the only qualification needed is to be a warrior and still breathing, but our people are sensible when all is said.”

Keverin could hardly argue with that. The clans were already old when the Founders decided to make Deva their new home.

Petya named the rest of the ten clans and their chieftains as they walked. Keverin filed the names away but he wasn't paying too much attention. If he needed the names, he was sure he would remember them, or he could ask Mathius who was raptly listening to Petya. Julia was in one of these tents, but which one? He had to get this meeting over with so he might see her again. Would she still be in pain? The thought that she might be made him want to hurt someone, preferably a sorcerer. He forced his thoughts onto more pleasant things. As soon as they reached home, he would be married. No more waiting, he decided. Keverin smiled imagining Julia in her best dress with Purcell near with his sword bared standing in his place as sword brother. Who would stand as her father? Mathius would have to do it... unless Gylaren would come, but if he did they would have to delay the wedding! Curse it, he would have to wait for Purcell in any case, his friend would be hurt if he wasn't invited. Keverin sighed at the realisation. There was always something that seemed to get in the way. It was as if he weren't meant to marry Julia. No! He wouldn't accept that. They would be married and have lots of children and be very happy—they would!

“This is the council tent,” Petya said. “Let me do the talking. You will need to be accepted before you can do anything else, so *please* don't upset anyone.”

“Whatever it takes to see Julia again,” Keverin said impatiently.

Petya nodded and entered the tent with Keverin on his heels quickly followed by Jihan, Adrik, and the two mages. Inside was dimly lit by shielded torches; a safety precaution obviously. Men were lounging on the rugs talking amongst themselves, but sitting in a circle in the centre were ten men. Keverin remembered Petya's explanation; these ten were the clan chiefs.

Petya indicated they should wait just outside the circle. Petya singled out a man who Keverin thought must be Allard of Eagle Clan, and this was confirmed a short time later when Petya gestured Keverin forward.

“This is Allard, clan chief of Eagle Clan—” Petya began and then introduced the others one by one.

Thank the God Petya wasn't introducing the tribal chiefs as well, Keverin thought. He would never remember this many. He frantically committed their names and faces to memory admonishing himself to remember courtesy. Although they didn't have lords among the clans, he considered these men to be the equivalent.

“—and this is Kadar of the Night Wind,” Petya concluded.

Keverin and the others stepped forward in a line and bowed.

Keverin took the lead. “I am Keverin, Lord Athione and Lord Protector of the west. My friend to my right hand is Jihan Lord of Malcor and Lord Protector of the north. To my Left is Adrik Lord of Ascol. My friend in red is the puissant wizard Lucius, and my friend in blue is the puissant master mage Mathius.”

There was silence while the clansmen tried to make sense of what they thought of as Keverin's babble.

Petya coughed in amusement. “He means that he and the other two warriors at his side are chiefs of the Devan people, and the two in bright colours are shamens of

Deva.”

Oh! Why hadn't he said that then?

Keverin could almost hear the thought race through the chief's heads. He was impatient to get this over with so he might join Julia, but he refrained from telling them to hurry it up. Courtesy, he must be courteous!

“Why have you brought outclanners here Petya? You know the situation we are in man!” One chief said and the tribal chiefs rumbled agreement.

Petya waited for quiet with a small smile on his face. “I did not exactly bring them, Tobiah, rather they brought me with the thousand warriors they had along. They come to visit you Kadar.”

Keverin saw the surprise on Kadar's face. The man obviously had no clue what this was about. The other chiefs were more interested to know what Petya meant when he said he had been brought to Denpasser by a thousand outclanners.

Petya was explaining, “—killed him stone dead the fool. I could have told him, but the fool wouldn't listen. Anyway here we are.”

Kadar looked to Keverin. “I am Kadar, clan chief of Night Wind. What have you to say to me?”

“Thank you comes immediately to mind,” Keverin said. “Your warriors saved my lady when mine were unable to reach her in time. For that, you have my gratitude and undying friendship. I have come to bring her home with me.”

Kadar's eyes narrowed and his fists clenched in anger. “I did not save her. My shaman and some of my warriors led by Tomik saved her. They did so without my permission or even informing me! I would have challenged Tomik for the insult, but Julia made me promise not to,” Kadar said puzzled about that last part, as if he couldn't understand how he had ended up agreeing.

Keverin grinned; he knew how that felt.

Mathius was less politic. He burst out laughing. Kadar scowled angrily but Mathius waved an apology. “I am sorry Kadar, truly, but it is a vast relief to me to hear that Julia is unharmed and unchanged by her ordeal. She has always been one to tie men in knots.”

Kadar laughed. “That describes every woman I know!”

All the chiefs and nodded in agreement. Keverin had to agree with them. Whenever he was with Julia he found thoughts of other things suddenly less important than they had been.

“I asked Keverin to the council because he has fought the monster Navarien and won,” Petya said.

Keverin ignored Petya's white lie. He had not asked, he had demanded. “Julia won that battle with her magic, not me.”

The chiefs whispered among themselves at Keverin's words.

“We will be fighting a war with Navarien very soon. I would like to hear about your war with him,” Kadar said.

Keverin nodded and the clan chiefs moved apart to give him and his friends a place to sit. He sat cross legged with Jihan and Adrik on each side. The mages opted to sit along the tent wall where they could keep an eye on everyone.

Keverin kept his voice low, and the chiefs leaned forward to hear the tale. “Navarien led ten thousand legionnaires and fifty sorcerers through the west pass

of the Athinian Mountains two summers past. Legionnaires are warriors the like of which you have never seen. The sorcerers are like shamen, but they do not heal—they kill! The sorcerers used fire to blast the gates of my home. You have to realise how powerful these people are. The gate of the fortress is perhaps three times bigger than the gate would have been in the ruin outside.”

That caused a shock. The chiefs were murmuring and muttering in disbelief.

“I swear it’s true,” Keverin said over the noise and the chiefs quieted once more. “More than this, my gate was twice the thickness of a man and clad in bronze, or rather it was. I had a strong fortress, seven mages, and four thousand guardsmen when Navarien came. After his sorcerers were finished, I had less than two thousand guardsmen, one mage and no gate or wall to hang it on.”

Keverin let the uproar die away before continuing. “I was badly injured, near death, but Julia climbed a tower that was just one breath of wind away from falling, and blasted Navarien’s legionnaires. She was struck by an arrow, but she kept fighting until in her desperation she destroyed a road of solid rock to prevent Navarien reaching us.”

There was stunned silence before Kadar said, “What happened next?”

The chiefs laughed. Kadar had sounded like a boy asking for a story at bedtime. Kadar scowled and shoved the man next to him, only to be shoved back in turn. Finally, he laughed along with the others and the noise quieted.

“Mathius was the only mage still alive, but we had Julia and the gap in the road. My men held Navarien off with arrows and he was unable to build a bridge to cross the gap, but the sorcerers were gradually recovering from their mighty spell that destroyed my gate and wall. Julia went down that road with Mathius, the two of them alone against perhaps five or six thousand legionnaires and fifty mages. She attacked with lightning and killed all the sorcerers. After that, Navarien was unable to reach us. He was worried that Julia would kill what remained of his men, so he marched home.”

The chiefs stared and then looked at Mathius. His face was grave as he remembered that terrible time when he lost six brothers and gained a sister in exchange.

“No warrior can kill a sorcerer. It takes magic to kill them, or utter surprise—preferably both.” Keverin added into the silence. Mathius and Lucius nodded emphatically.

“That was a very nice story, outclanner,” Tobiah snarled. “But I’m not a child that you can lull to sleep with your babble. All know shamen are weak and that women are never shamen. What say you to *that*?” He said with hate in his eyes.

Keverin jumped to his feet with Jihan and Adrik at his side ready for mayhem. Lucius and Mathius moved apart to cover the suddenly hostile tribal chiefs.

“I will answer that!” Julia called a little breathlessly as she walked unsteadily and guided by an old man’s arm around her shoulders.

Julia was wearing a clan tunic and leggings almost identical to the old man’s outfit. Beads in flame patterns sparkled and jangled as she moved toward Keverin. Brian and Alvin were hovering behind Julia protectively and grinning for all they were worth. Lorcan ghosted along nearby with his eyes flicking from face to face looking for danger to Julia. Keverin was glad to see the boy unharmed and assumed

Gideon was safe also, but his eyes were all for Julia. He knew he was grinning like a fool, but he didn't care. His grin wilted when he saw the strain on her face. Julia was biting her lip against pain.

Keverin was through the crowd and at Julia's other side before Tobiah could blink. "Are you all right? By the God that was stupid of me, of course you're not! Here Julia, lean on me."

Julia was staring into his eyes and couldn't seem to say anything. The pain must be terrible, Keverin thought. Julia's helper was looking at him funny. What was the old fool grinning at?

"I—*hmm!*" Julia caught her breath and bit her lip. "I Love you Keverin of Athione," she said breathlessly.

Keverin looked into Julia's shining eyes. "I love you more than anything in this world Julia. I thought... I thought I had lost you." Julia was trembling in his arms. "Please sit down or..." Keverin was beside himself with worry. He turned to the old man. "Do something for her!"

"I am my boy, but the Tancred won't let her go that easily. Your sorcerer friend has thoroughly addicted her."

"He is my lord," Lucius said over his shoulder and clasped Julia's hand for a moment.

"He's holding a spell on her to keep the pain away," Mathius said taking Lucius's place and patting Julia's hand.

"Oh no, no Mathius! What have you done," Julia cried stroking Mathius's hair out of his eyes—his grey streaked hair.

Tears ran down Julia's cheeks when she saw the tiny wrinkles around Mathius's eyes. Mathius had aged himself to kill Demophon and his sorcerers when they all thought Julia murdered. Mathius didn't look old even yet, but he had aged at least ten years since Julia last saw him.

"I'm all right Julia, don't worry. Premature grey runs in my family, remember?" Mathius smiled and stroked her tears away.

Julia tried to smile for him, but her heart wasn't in it. Jihan glanced quickly Julia's way, then back at the chiefs. He stayed where he was protecting Keverin's back from Tobiah. Adrik also held his ground near Jihan, but no one took any notice. All eyes were on Julia... except Tobiah. Tobiah glared fit to give Jihan sunburn, but all Jihan gave Tobiah in return was a small smile and glittering eye contact.

"I'm fine Kerrion," Julia said releasing his arm and taking Keverin's instead. "We watched you arrive, but when Petya stole you away from me—*hmm!*"

Kerrion quickly took Julia's hand and the pain passed as his magic took effect. Julia nodded thanks and didn't try to reclaim her hand a second time.

"I decided to come get you," Julia finished.

"This is sickening!" Tobiah shouted angrily and glared at the other chiefs. "These people are outclanners! What right do they have in this council? None I say!"

"And of course you are the only chief present are you?" Jihan said with his head cocked to one side in contemplation.

"No he is not!" Kadar and Petya said as one. Petya stepped back giving the floor to Kadar. "I say we all sit down before Julia collapses, and talk about this calmly."

There was a rumble of agreement from the majority of the chiefs, but a few did

side with Tobiah. Keverin thought they were probably Wolf Clan tribal chiefs. He seated Julia at his side on plenty of rugs and she leaned her back against him. He leaned forward and kissed her hair. Julia raised her hand to stroke his cheek. Kerrion sat next to Julia on her other side. He was keeping contact with her so his magic could do its work. Keverin didn't like it, but he understood the necessity. Healing magic didn't work with out a mage's touch.

"You don't believe Keverin's story?" Julia asked Tobiah.

"I'm not in the habit of accepting fairy tales from outclanners!" Tobiah snarled. Keverin shifted a little but Julia was in control of the situation.

"Fairytale? Does this look like a fairytale to you?" Julia said holding up a hand with blue crackles of lightning snapping from finger to finger.

Keverin smiled as the clan chiefs reared back in shock from the first real magic they had ever seen. It was still amazing to him how quickly he had become used to the idea of Julia as a powerful mage.

"Keverin never lies," Julia said and let her display go.

Tobiah's eyes narrowed in anger, but there wasn't much he could say to dispute Julia's now obvious ability in magic.

"I think I speak for all of us when I say you are undoubtedly a shaman, Julia." Kadar said and there was a murmur of agreement from the chiefs. "What is your council shaman?"

"She is an *outclanner!*" Tobiah protested but was glared into silence by the other chiefs who were interested in what such an unusual shaman had to say.

Julia smiled at her newest enemy. "Mortain's people will begin to repopulate the northern cities soon, and you will have an enemy to your north forever more. You must destroy those cities before that happens. If you don't do that, two years from now you will have another legion to contend with, and then another the following year and on and on. Deva has had that problem for years, but our land has mountains that act as walls, and fortresses that act as gates keeping our enemies on their own side. You have nothing to stop the sorcerers from taking your land. If you fail, ten years from now you will have towns on the banks of your rivers and the plain as you know it will be gone."

Keverin nodded. "I would like to add something to that. Defeating Navarien will not be easy, but even should you be victorious that will not be enough. Julia won against Navarien two years ago, but Mortain sent another legion through your lands to attack us from the north. Julia destroyed that legion *utterly*. Ten thousand warriors dead, but still Mortain did not give up. This last summer past, he sent sorcerers to kidnap Julia and place a man of his choosing on the throne of Deva, which means a man sympathetic to him as chief of chiefs over all Deva. We stopped him, *barely*, and Kadar saved Julia when the sorcerers tried to escape back to Navarien. This should show you that Mortain will never, *never* give up his ambitions to rule your land. Think about what that means. Whatever you decide to do will affect the future of every clan forever more. Your old rivalry *must* be abandoned if you are to oppose Mortain and the Protectorate. If not, the clans are finished."

Jihan looked around at the thoughtful expressions then added his two coppers worth. "I am a Lord, a chief if you will. I say that if you do not choose a chief of chiefs from among you and unite against Navarien the clans are finished."

Lucius nodded. "I am a wizard now, but I have been a sorcerer in my time—"

That was a shock. Chiefs yelled in outrage at what appeared to be a spy in their camp. Daggers and long knives were snatched into fists. Julia's ward sprang into existence moments before Lucius's raised his. The wards clashed as they tried to coexist in the same place at the same time. The light was blinding, but the screeching was worse. The chiefs howled as the noise pierced eardrums threatening to burst them with the screeching. The effect on Julia was worse. The magic in her grasp surged and she lost her grip.

"AEiii!" Julia screamed as the magic whiplashed and hammered her flat.

Lucius reeled as his magic surged and receded unpredictably.

Kerrion was instantly pouring his healing into Julia. The chiefs backed away and didn't seem interested in coming any closer. They were staring at Julia and Lucius in shock at what had happened. Lucius dropped his ward to go to Julia's aid, but he was not needed. Julia was awake and looking dazedly around.

"What happened?" Julia said.

Keverin sighed in relief. "I don't know, you made a ward and then collapsed."

"Never do that again!" Lucius said angrily. "Two wards existing in the same place can cause burn out, you foolish girl! I know you were trying to help, but I can take care of myself. You are too weak to be using your magic."

Julia paled at the mention of burnout. Keverin felt sick. Renard had suffered burnout when Athione was attacked by Navarien's sorcerers. Renard had been mindless for many days after the attack until finally dying when Julia attempted to give him his magic back. The thought of Julia staring and drooling at nothing made Keverin's heart hurt.

Keverin leaned forward. "Please be careful. I can't live without you my heart," he whispered for Julia's ears alone.

Julia struggled to sit up and Keverin helped her. "I will."

Keverin was not much comforted. Julia always seemed to be in the thick of the action, whether it involved street toughs or sorcerers, it didn't matter. He could no longer count the number of times he had feared for her life.

Tobiah was causing more trouble Keverin saw. He was arguing fiercely with Kadar and Allard about allowing Lucius to live. Allard was of the opinion that they should hear what Lucius had to say before doing anything hasty. Kadar was more direct. He was saying the outclanners were his guests. He would not allow guests to be harmed. If Tobiah still wanted to try, he could challenge and die on his sword.

"Fools!" Kerrion shouted.

The chiefs quieted and looked at Kerrion in amazement. How had the old fool dared to call them fools? He was sure to be challenged. Keverin grinned and shook his head as those thoughts went through his head. Kerrion was a shaman; as such, he need not fear a sword or any man who wielded one.

"Fools I say!" Kerrion repeated. "Do you think the monster has this problem? Of course not. He tells his warriors what to do and they do it or die! Don't any of you understand? This constant bickering must end. If the clans do not unite, the people will vanish from the land. *I have seen it!*"

Tobiah snorted. "You're the fool, old man. Don't think I don't see what you're doing. Who is to be this chief of chiefs? Kadar I suppose!" Tobiah spat on the floor.

Kadar angrily stepped forward, but Kerrion waved the chief off. Surprisingly Kadar subsided.

“Do you all see?” Tobiah glared around at the chiefs. “The old fool leads Kadar by the nose! I will die before I accept Kadar over me as chief of chiefs!”

Tobiah stormed out and took his underlings with him. The other clan chiefs reluctantly ended the council and followed until the only chiefs still present were Allard, Petya, and Kadar.

“That was ill done, Kerrion,” Kadar said. “You should have let the challenge to go ahead. Tobiah would be dead and we could have continued the council.”

Kerrion shook his head. “Will you listen to yourself? Tobiah is *clan!* Navarien is the enemy not Tobiah, or any other among the clans for that matter. That even goes for Ingharr!”

Petya smiled at mention of Ingharr of Dragon Clan. Ingharr was universally despised for his arrogance and most said his stupidity as well. They were very careful when they said this. There were a great many Dragon warriors, and Ingharr was good with the long knife and spear.

“I take it you three agree that uniting is the only way forward?” Keverin said.

Kadar nodded along with the others. “It would seem so, but whether it will happen that way I don’t know. We are a proud people. I do not believe we could live the way your people do. If we do go ahead with this, I will push for it to be only used in time of—” he frowned. “I haven’t the word for it.”

“Invasion or emergency?” Julia offered.

“Yes,” Kadar said nodding. “Emergency would be the only time I would countenance this chief of chiefs you are proposing Kerrion.”

Kerrion clapped his chief on the shoulder. “That is all we need. We cannot keep arguing about every decision during a battle. We must find someone to lead who all chiefs can accept.”

“Who did you have in mind?” Allard said glancing at Kadar and quickly away again.

“Not you Kadar, I’m sorry,” Kerrion said. “The others would not accept it. Even Ingharr has more chance than you do now—he is the most powerful. I was thinking Mazel would do well. Horse Clan *is* second in strength to Dragon Clan.”

“I don’t know,” Allard said uncertainly. “Horse Clan isn’t here. How can you expect us to follow someone who doesn’t even see the need to talk of uniting, let alone actually doing it?”

Kerrion grudgingly agreed. “Maybe the warriors should vote.”

“That might work,” Petya put in. “But what’s to stop them from voting for their own clan chief? They will you know.”

“You should have a tournament,” Jihan said thoughtfully. “Arrange it in such a way that the winner of each round fights the winner of the others until there is just one. That way the best warrior among the chiefs will lead no matter what clan or tribe he comes from.”

Kadar frowned. “I assume you mean practice bouts, but that could mean we are led by a tribal chief.”

“Does that really matter?” Jihan asked. “The winner will be the best among you and you will need the best to win against Navarien.”

“It does matter,” Kerrion admitted. “Clan chiefs lead. It has always been that way,” he said regretfully.

Jihan threw his hands up. “If you want it that way, have the tournament restricted to clan chiefs.”

“Who is the most likely to win such a tournament as this?” Keverin said.

The three chiefs conferred for a moment. “Ingharr would win if he was here but he’s not,” Kadar said thoughtfully. “Tobiah might, but I think it more likely Cadell would win.”

“Cadell!” Kerrion said in shock.

The chiefs nodded grinning.

“What’s the problem?” Jihan said.

Kerrion sighed. “Cadell is clan chief of Cricket Clan. They’re the smallest of all.”

“So? Will the chiefs follow if he wins?”

“They might, it’s traditional for warriors to challenge for leadership if they feel a grievance against the chief. The chief is always the best man for the position partly because of that.”

“Well, if you three can persuade the others to accept the idea of a tournament, your problems should be over,” Julia said.

Keverin shook his head slightly. “They still have Navarien to deal with, my love, but at least this one area will be dealt with.”

Julia smiled at Keverin’s casual admittance of his love for her. It said more to her than a deliberate declaration.

“It’s a shame Jolon is not a clan chief,” Petya said. “I’ve never seen him fight better than when he took you on, Jihan.”

“He is good,” Jihan grinned. “But is he the best you have?”

Petya nodded. “I’m biased as he’s my son, but I truly think he is.”

Jihan nodded in satisfaction and Keverin laughed.

“What?” Jihan said indignantly.

“You’re licking your whiskers as a cat does after a good meal. Your vanity is showing Jihan!” Keverin said.

“Well, I did beat him, and he is their best—so what if I’m vain about it?”

Keverin laughed again, and lightly punched his friend’s shoulder. “Nothing Jihan. We like you just as you are—right Julia?”

“That’s right!”

“Are we agreed to try this?” Kadar asked.

“Can’t say that I’m looking forward to being beaten to a pulp by Cadell, but I can see no other way,” Allard said.

Petya clapped the young clan chief on the shoulder. “I know what you mean. I feel like that every time Jolon does it to me!”

Keverin laughed along with the others, but he was wondering how he and Julia could be alone in his tent with Kerrion holding her hand all the cursed time!

### *Chapter Three*

**N**AVARIEN WATCHED THE SNOW FALLING OUTSIDE through the window of his headquarters. The weather was transforming Calvados into an artist's dream right before his eyes. The towers and slate tiled roofs of the city were heavy with the snow that had fallen, and was continuing to fall, without cease since they had taken possession. Many of the streets were becoming impassable, and all of them were treacherous underfoot. Navarien had too few men to do anything about it. Those few legionnaires not tasked with patrols or guard duty had their hands full with the wounded.

"How bad is it?"

"More die by the candlemark, Sir. We can't stop it," Cragson said from where he stood by the fire drying his cloak. "Exhaustion and bad food has sapped their will to go on. There's nothing to be done."

"And Meran?"

"Barely holding on, Sir. Maybe he will rally," Cragson said with doubt heavy in his voice.

"I want Lewin to take Meran's place."

"Lewin?"

Navarien nodded and watched the snow cover his city. "You will inform him of the promotion when he comes back in. It's time he put up or shut up. I'm tired of his bitching."

Cragson coughed. "Yes Sir, but... *Lewin?*"

"He's capable, never doubt it. I remember Durena..."

"Who doesn't?"

Navarien smiled sadly and refocused his eyes upon his own reflection. He looked ghastly. His haunted eyes, sunk into dark pits, peered out at the world above cheeks gone gaunt from bad food and little sleep. Under the stubble he had yet to clean away, muscles bunched as he clenched his teeth. By the God, he was tired. It had been a long year, and the next one promised to be longer yet. His hand wandered to

his shoulder and he rubbed gently wincing at the pain. He had taken an arrow there late in the battle of Calvados, but it was nothing compared to others who even now lay dying. Meran was such a one.

"He was beside me all the way in Durena," Navarien said meaning Lewin. "He's capable of being more, much more."

"He shirks responsibility—"

"That will stop. That will stop or he's out of my legion... what's left of it."

Cragson stood in disapproving silence.

The fire popped and Navarien jumped as a spark leapt into the room. Cragson took one step forward and crushed it beneath a boot heel before it could do more than char his ratty carpet.

"I'll inform him."

Navarien nodded and watched a weary group of men stumble into Market Square. If he was not mistaken, they belonged to Corbin's second maniple. He counted the men as Sergeant Milos led them to barracks passed his window.

*...forty-eight, forty-nine, fifty. Half a maniple to patrol an entire city quarter.*

Navarien stared at his empty city and shook his head. "Where are all the people?"

"Sir?" Cragson said stepping up beside him. "Did you say something?"

"How is the grain situation?"

"Fine, Sir. The granaries are full and the city's reserves of meat and other provisions will see us through more than one winter if need be. The men, those uninjured at least, are greatly cheered."

"Good, good. The horses?"

"Corbin has seen to them, Sir."

"He does love them so," Navarien said with a twisted smile for some of the jokes he had heard the men tell. "The best man on four legs I've ever seen."

"That he is, Sir. He inspires his men—all of them are excellent horsemen."

"I hear a but coming, Cragson. Spit it out man."

"Cavalry are good to have, but when a man forgets how to be an infantryman, then we had better watch out. You can't guarantee he will stay mounted in the heat of battle, Sir."

"And you think Seventh Battalion needs reminding?"

"I do, Sir."

"See to it."

"Yes, Sir!" Cragson saluted hearing the order in Navarien's voice. He turned to leave.

"And Cragson," Navarien said without turning.

"Sir?"

"Find me a woman." He turned to see Cragson standing with the door open and his mouth agape. "A mature woman—one with children preferably."

Cragson snapped his mouth shut. "Yes, Sir, but..." he braced up. "Yes Sir!" He said and left.

Navarien turned back to the view. Milos was gone, but another patrol was just now leaving, this time toward the south. He had ordered patrols maintained outside the walls. It was a gesture only. He simply didn't have the men to do it properly, but

at least they would provide a warning of impending attack. Horses stamped hooves nervously and shook snow from their coats where already a thin layer was settling. Clan horses these, every one of them pure blood. Never had a legion been equipped with such fine beasts, but Navarien would trade them all for another battalion of men. It was not to be. The closest reinforcements lay south and west over the Athinian Mountains. There lay the Protectorate in all her glory oblivious to his need.

Navarien shook his head and turned away from the window. On his desk lay a well read sheaf of paper. He knew what it said, knew every word, but still he picked it up and thumbed through it.

*To: General Navarien, commanding officer Fifth Legion.*

*From: Godwinson.*

*General, know that both Mortain and I are grateful for your sacrifice for the greater glory of the Protectorate. Your actions on our behalf in the North bring your name great renown and glory...*

Navarien snorted. Glory was something he used to want, something any officer in the Protectorate wanted, but he had seen things since taking command of the fifth that had soured him on glory. These days he found himself wishing for his men's survival more than anything else. He was a General, a legionnaire... a soldier at bottom. His duty was what he lived for, but glory? No. It had no real worth, no real meaning to him any longer. Seeing his legion decimated, not once but twice in as many years, had cured him of any belief in such things.

Navarien slumped into his chair and thumbed through his orders. He found the relevant passage and read it again.

*We are aware of your current situation and acknowledge the loss of the Victory with all hands. However, we require you to press on with the campaign. A ship carrying fifty legion mages will be dispatched to reach you at Calvados in late fall. Until then, you will take all necessary actions to secure your objectives as previously ordered...*

Navarien dropped his orders back to the table and rubbed tired eyes. A ship with fifty mages to be dispatched to reach him in late fall. He glanced out the window and snorted. It was winter and no ship had been sighted. The North Sea in winter was no laughing matter. No ship's master worth the name would dream of sailing this far north in wintertime, and besides, how much good could fifty sorcerers possibly be against the entire Camorin nation?

Navarien pushed himself tiredly to his feet and fetched his cloak. It was time he made his rounds again. He clumped down the wooden stairs and into the common room of the inn. He glanced at the tables where they were pushed together for his maps, but he made no move in that direction. He had nothing with which to plan a campaign. His legion was down to three able bodied battalions and the odds 'n' sods. Out of those three thousand odd men, he could count on perhaps half being fit for a real battle. No, the Fifth was going nowhere for a while, so why plan?

"You warm enough, Aden?" Navarien asked the guard on his door.

“Yes, Sir. Thank you, Sir. Can’t say as I like the north much, Sir. Snow... who needs so much snow?”

Navarien grunted looking up at the clouds overhead. He blinked as the flakes fell upon his face and eyes. His breath puffed steam into the air and hung round him. Everything was totally still, not a breath of wind.

“Ever been to Bantay in winter?”

“Can’t say I have, Sir. I joined up straight from the farm like. The only places I been is with the Legion, Sir.”

“Hmmm. Take my advice, don’t ever go to Bantay, but especially not in winter.”

“Bad Sir?”

“Not as bad as this, but Bantay is always windy for some reason. Only Mortain—may he live forever—knows why.”

“I’ll remember that, Sir.” Aden said.

“If it gets worse, you have my permission to step inside. You can guard from in there as well as you can out here.”

“Thank you, Sir.”

Navarien stepped carefully into the square and made for the barracks. He called them the barracks, but they were really shops and houses converted to that use. Sergeant... *Captain* Turner now, had made a start on clearing the site for the fort, but apart from a little demolition work, nothing had been done. They just didn’t have the men or the energy to do more.

Navarien glanced at the piles of snow-covered rubble and found a few hardy souls picking at the mounds. Turner had them sorting through the heaps for building materials, which they stacked neatly to one side when they found a worthy stone or joist. It was back breaking work, but it had to be done. Looking at their progress, it would take all winter to see it even partway finished. Navarien could hardly make himself care. It wasn’t as if his men didn’t have shelter.

Inside the first shop turned infirmary, Navarien made his rounds. He chatted with those awake to hear him, and asked about those that were not. He was glad to hear no more had died since yesterday... in this one at least. Cragson said they *had* lost more men; they must have come from a different shop.

“How has he been?”

“Not too good last night, Sir, but he seems better today.”

“That’s good,” Navarien said checking for a clean bandage. “Look after him, and don’t forget to boil the old bandages.”

“We do ‘em all at the end of the day, Sir.”

“Good,” Navarien said with a nod. He always reminded them of the same things, and they always responded the same way. “Good.”

Navarien stepped out into the snow and crossed the square to the next infirmary. The shops were too small to house all the wounded and he would not hear of moving them further away. The square was convenient for everyone and it was easy to defend at need. Besides, the men were happiest all together. It was comforting having your mates close by at times like these. Navarien worked his way through each of the shops noting the empty beds and missing faces. He could name every one of his men that should have been smiling at him but now was gone. So many he had lost on both this

campaign and the last. So many...

"Meran?" Navarien said crouching beside the next to last bed on his rounds. "Meran, can you hear me?" He whispered close to the Captain's ear. "I want you to listen to my voice, Meran. Listen and follow it back. I need you... do you hear me? I need you, and your men need you. Lewin will have to take your place if you don't come back. You don't want that, do you? The worst legionnaire in the legions, you said. You don't want him taking charge... Meran? Can you hear me... Meran?"

There was no response, there never was. Navarien stood and stumbled slightly to lean against the wall. He watched bright colours bursting before his eyes and waited for his sight to clear.

"You all right, Sir?"

"Fine, I'm fine. Just rose too fast," Navarien said wiping his suddenly sweating face with a shaking hand. "A bit tired maybe. How's the leg now, Lenn?"

"Fine Sir. No gangrene or nothing," he said cheerfully. "I reckon I could stand watch with the others if you want."

"No need for that just yet. I'll let you know when I want you," he said pushing himself upright. "I want you to keep forcing Meran to drink, he needs it. Get some soup into him if you can."

"I'll try, Sir," Lenn said doubtfully. "I be scared of drowning him."

"A risk we have to take. The sorcerers will be here any day now. Any day now, I'm sure. We have to keep him alive long enough for them to heal him."

"Right you are, Sir."

Navarien forced himself to walk normally until he was outside. He leaned against the wall where none could see and breathed deeply of the cold air. It refreshed him somewhat, but still he was sweating. He pulled open his cloak to let in the cold and suddenly he was shivering.

"Curse it! Not now, please not now," Navarien whispered as he quickly covered up again.

Navarien crossed the square back to headquarters and pulled himself up the stairs. He had to rest. Sleep was what he needed, he was sure that was all it was. He rubbed irritably at his shoulder as he climbed. The wound was painning him again. He had checked for infection this morning... No, it had to have been yesterday. Navarien frowned as he opened the door to his room. He couldn't remember the last time he took off his armour. Was it yesterday when he checked it? Thoughts of the wound fled as he entered the room to find Cragson waiting for him with a woman in tow. What was this about? He closed the door and removed his cloak forcing his hands not to shake.

"And who is this?" Navarien said. He tossed the cloak over the back of a chair.

"You asked me for a woman, Sir. She was available."

"I did? A whore is she?"

"Oy! I'm not a—"

"No, Sir." Cragson said obviously embarrassed. "A seamstress, Sir."

"Are you?" Navarien said to her.

"Yes."

"Then why come here?" Navarien asked seating himself behind his desk.

"He asked me," she said looking meaningfully at Cragson.

"I see. Take a seat, you too Cragson."

Cragson was surprised but did as ordered. The woman trusted him, so much was obvious. She made certain to seat herself as close as she could to Cragson.

"Your name?"

"Mathild."

Navarien cocked his head at the accent. "You aren't from around here."

"No."

"Socotra?"

"How did you—"

"How did I know? Your accent told me. I know what you think I want from you, but you're wrong. I want to know where all the people went."

"The clans of course!"

"That's what I assumed. How many have left, Cragson?"

"Maybe half the city, Sir."

Mathild shook her head. "You really don't know anything, do you? Have you looked out your windows lately?"

"Why?" Navarien said.

"Seen any people? They're still leaving and have been since the battle. They won't stay here now."

"Is she right, Cragson?"

"You gave me no orders to stop them, Sir," Cragson said. "There are always a few ready to leave when we open the gates each morning. Not many, but a few."

"A few can't hurt."

"It's not a just a *few*," Mathild said scornfully. "Hundreds each day are leaving."

"I'll order the gates barred, Sir."

Navarien rubbed his blurring eyes. "No, there's no point in that. If they want to go, let them—"

*Thrap!*

"Come!"

"We have a problem, Sir," Tikva said as he entered.

"What kind of a problem?"

"There's a line of wagons heading for the west gate, Sir, and they're taking everything not nailed down with them."

"Told you so," Mathild said smugly. "I bet half the wagons are carrying food."

Tikva eyed Mathild obviously wondering who she was. "She's right, Sir. They must be planning a long journey."

"To the clans," Navarien said wearily.

"Yes Sir. That would be my guess. Orders?"

Navarien tried to think. "I'll come have a look. Get my horse ready."

"Yes, Sir," Tikva said and left on his errand.

Navarien reached for his cloak. "Let us go see this exodus."

They found the wagons long before reaching the gate. Cragson rode by his side on the right, and Tikva did the same on the left. The main route to the gate was filled with wagons rolling west.

"This is too organised," Navarien mused. "Someone is leading them out."

Tikva nodded. "At least they're not fighting us; that could be messy."

Navarien snorted. Messy did not begin to describe what would happen if this many people attacked them. There was no way he could defend against so many.

“You think they’re after joining their menfolk?” Tikva said eying the wagonloads of women and children as they rode passed.

“That’s exactly what I think.” Navarien said angrily. “Are they mad? Why leave in the middle of a flaming blizzard?”

There was no answer to that and they trotted in silence to the gate.

When Navarien reached the walls, he dismounted and climbed the steps up to the battlement for a better look. Looking over the city, he could see streets that were packed with people heading out of the city. Never had he seen so many people so solidly behind such a stupid idea. The snow was falling thickly now. It had fallen steadily almost from the time he dragged what was left of his legion through the gates. He stood above the open gate and watched people pulling handcarts with a few meagre possessions out and into a blizzard. Wagons rolled west carrying food and water barrels, it was as organised as anyone could want—almost legion like in its planning. He watched handcarts trickle out the gate filled to the brim with the owner’s possessions piled next to their children who thought they were off on a grand adventure. Navarien couldn’t believe people living in the north would be so unheeding of the weather.

“I have to stop them.”

“Don’t, Sir! We can’t fight them, not this many!” Tikva said taking his arm.

Navarien knew Tikva was right, but... “The children—they’ll die!”

Navarien spun on his heel and stomped down the stairway. His victory, if one could call it that, was becoming a hollow one indeed. More than two thirds of the population was now gone, and the exodus was not stopping this time. In Cantabria and Durena, the young warriors had left with their families, but a goodly amount of people had stayed. Those remaining were older folk mostly, but he had been pleased to note that all the crafters and artisans had stayed. Not so with Calvados it seemed. Every living soul was leaving, and they didn’t seem to care that leaving meant death.

Navarien reached the ground and hurried to stop anymore from leaving. “Wait!” He called trotting into the falling snow. “You don’t have to leave, the fighting is finished now.”

The people ignored him and continued out and away. Angrily Navarien thought to bar the gates after all, but what point? They weren’t slaves. The Protectorate frowned on slavery, and the owning of slaves was illegal in its territory except convict labour. Using convicts to repair roads and such was not slavery in any sense of the word; they were released when their sentence was complete. Slavery was from birth until death.

“Please,” Navarien said stopping a family with an upraised hand.

The young man made to push by, but then he stopped and glared. “You are the monster Navarien?”

“*General*. The title is *General* Navarien.”

“We know what you did, we know. None will live where you and your men are. Go away. Go back where you came from and the people will return.”

“I can’t do that—” Navarien grabbed the man’s arm as he moved away, but his grip was shaken off. “You fool! Think of the children!” He shouted as the man and

his family disappeared into the whiteness.

The snow was falling heavily now. Navarien could hardly see the gate and walls of the city. A vague darkness on his left was the only bearing he had in a world of white.

“We are doing this *for* the children,” another man said.

“I don’t understand you,” Navarien called after him but received no reply. He shook his head free of snow. He was cold and getting colder, but he tried again. “They’ll die for the God’s sake!”

An old man stopped and glared at Navarien. If looks could kill, Navarien would be kneeling before the God already.

“Don’t pretend to care for the little ones. We know what you did!”

“But I don’t know what you’re talking about!” Navarien cried in frustration.

“Remember Cantibria!”

Navarien was stunned. Cantibria? He remembered a whimpering girl and a glaring Bandarian, then the same Bandarian screaming as he died in agony impaled by his General’s order—punishment for rape.

“Oh God no. They think—”

Navarien turned and watched them leave and knew nothing he said would make them believe him, not when they thought he would give their children to his men. He was sick at heart seeing those smiling faces going into the snow. Perhaps if the God was kind they would survive. No, he didn’t believe it.

“Don’t go to the clans!” Navarien shouted knowing they would. “I’m heading that way soon—*very* soon! Go to Durena instead!”

Days later, Calvados was empty and the city gates were barred. Navarien’s men were quiet and subdued, still not believing it. Navarien knew they thought him to blame for the legion’s current state, and they were right. As their General, it was his place to see them safely home, but he had failed for all too many of them.

The city was utterly silent.

The houses were left as they were; Navarien would see no looting done. Instead, he sent Cragson and Turner’s maniple—the only one at full strength—to make inventory. Any coin would likely be with its owners, but there were too many other goods in the city for the refugees to carry away. Navarien vowed the families of his slain men would not be in want. As soon as the trading ships arrived in the spring, he would order certain of the things sold to provide his men’s widows with a quarterly stipend. Mortain wouldn’t like it, but damn him if he thought the General who led those men to their deaths would tolerate allowing their families to starve.

Navarien looked up passed the falling snow and into the night sky wishing he could live this last year over again. He had learned so many things on this campaign, things he would do differently had he the chance. A certain Bandarian would have disappeared overboard had he known back then what he would do in Cantibria.

Navarien made his way to the infirmary. He had his rounds to do. He wished he could go back, wished he might change the past. Only the God could turn back time and it was certain he would not. All he could do was learn from his mistakes in the hope not to repeat them.

Navarien entered the infirmary and bent to speak with the first man, but as

he did, he found himself unable to stop the motion. Everything went dark as he collapsed.

“Sir?”

“Sir!”

Navarien did not feel the cold stone floor as his head slammed down upon it.

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