

**THE BAHAWRE
LEGEND**



CHRIS L. MEYERS

The Bahawre Legend

Chris L. Meyers

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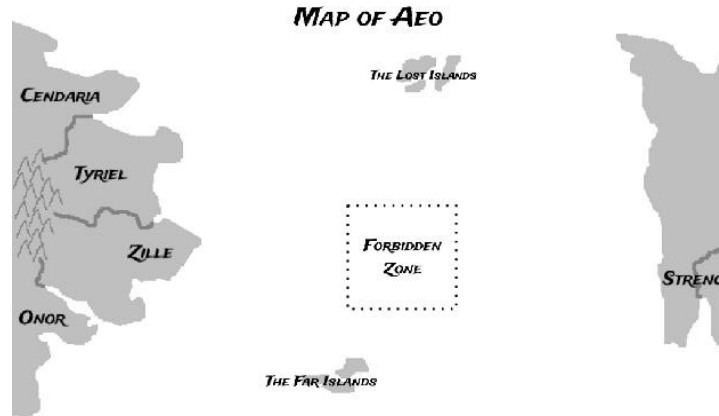
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PRONUNCIATION

Aeo – **ee** oh

Bahawre – ba **ha** ree

Boman – **bo** man (like a bowman)

Eyric – **eye** rick

Onor – **oh** nor

Tyriel – **tee** ree el

Zille – zeel (like zeal)

PROLOGUE

Unknown Island, 600 years ago

Caedmon hated the jungle.

It was not the first time he had seen a jungle, nor was it the first time he hated one, but he hated this particular jungle more than any other.

The suffocating heat and humidity made him feel trapped in his own skin. His stomach growled and he groaned yet again. This was ridiculous. He shouldn't be here.

The plants were wrong. The colors seemed backwards, like the plant he was currently hacking his way through whose large, peach-colored leaves grew in clumps like tall grasses with wide blades. Some grasses bore spherical, semi-transparent fruit about the size of his fist, while others just stood proudly in his way. The other plants he had seen thus far followed in a similar vein; wrong and in his way.

Caedmon stopped to look around, nearly losing his balance for what seemed like the hundredth time. Something was wrong with the ground. Somewhere on the spongy side of solid, it provided much needed comfort to his feet, but it made him wonder about his sobriety. Did he lose some blood?

Squish. He looked down to see a greenish yellow puddle nearly the size of his boot. Probably used to be a beetle. A huge one.

Something squawked. He turned his head to see a green crow-sized bird that sat several paces beyond the reach of his machete. Its wings seemed far too small for flight, though he had seen one fly earlier. It peered at him with its front facing eyes in a way that made him wonder if it was planning its next meal.

He sighed. He really shouldn't even be in this situation. He should have been sailing aboard the Bahawre with his portion of the treasure on his way home to spend it. On his way to prove to his father that he hadn't run off on a fool's errand.

That dream sailed away when his infamous captain decided to brave uncharted waters in an attempt to get home in a hurry. He remembered the wee hours of the morning when the ship slammed into the rocks after being forced to turn away from unnatural forces. He shuddered as he remembered what appeared to be sentient waterspouts.

"Infamously stupid," Caedmon cursed his captain as he hacked at another plant clump he couldn't identify.

"What's that?" came the familiar voice of Barbad, who was just off to his right, hacking at plants in a much calmer, more methodical way.

“Oh, I’m just mad we’re here. Why couldn’t the captain sail the normal route? Why are we hacking our way up this hill to make the same stupid attempt to light a fire with the same plants that won’t catch fire on the beach?”

“Because he’s infamously stupid.”

“Ha. Ha. I’m laughing.”

Barbad didn’t laugh either. Instead, he smirked. “If you waste all your energy being mad, you’ll have nothing left for whatever is at the top of the hill.” Then he nodded toward Caedmon’s left. “Besides, you don’t want to be like him do you?”

Caedmon followed Barbad’s gaze to where Rolf stood, haphazardly hacking at foliage. He had started whining again. “When’s the last time someone sharpened this thing? It won’t cut anything!” This was followed by an arcing swing that barely nicked its intended target and nearly knocked Rolf over.

Caedmon laughed. Rolf was a strange character. While Barbad’s wizened old face and leathery appearance exuded a sense of all-knowing, been-there-done-that patience in any circumstance, Rolf was the flip side of that coin. Always reactionary and rarely satisfied, Caedmon could always count on him to complain in nearly any circumstance – even when things went his way.

After listening to Rolf’s latest rant, Caedmon teased. “You’re not too hot, are you?” He took a few more whacks at the plants in his way.

Rolf replied expectedly. “What do you think? Look where we are. I hate this place!”

“At least we’re not on cargo duty,” Barbad pointed out as he turned to look down the hill at the beach.

Caedmon and Rolf stopped swinging their machetes long enough to turn and look down the hill at the miserable souls who were stuck unloading cargo from the heavily damaged ship.

As Caedmon watched the endless stream of sailors going in and out of the ship to deposit their treasure in piles on the beach, he shook his head in disapproval. Of course Milo thought saving the cargo was more important than lighting a fire. What would anyone do with treasure here? Maybe shove it down Milo’s throat.

Sitting uselessly in ever-growing piles on the beach, the mass of gleaming jewels and gold forced him to squint a bit. This cargo would be of legendary value back home. Home. Rescue. He sighed as he pondered returning to his task.

Then he caught sight of the bodies lined up along the far end of the beach; just a portion of the dead, really. The others were at the bottom of the sea or in some

creature's belly.

His gaze turned next to the injured sailors who had been gathered under a makeshift tent made from the sails. Bandages and splints now adorned the gashes and broken limbs caused by the early morning catastrophe. Yeah, it could be worse.

The infamously stupid Milo sat among the wounded barking orders and making a general nuisance of himself. A loathsome, sad excuse for a man, the crew only tolerated him because of his wicked skill with a sword and his immense wealth and connections. Injured today, he was clearly in too much pain to do any of the work.

Caedmon knew all too well how much louder and crankier the captain would be as a result. Even from his distance up the hill, he could hear him barking obvious or redundant orders at the crew who usually replied with some form of "I'm already doing it!"

He shook his head. At least he had managed to avoid that mess. Time to get a fire going. Without a fire, there was no hope of rescue, and even with a fire, hope would be slim at best. It had already been several hours since the wreck. If they could get a fire going, then maybe the other ships might still be close enough to see it. If the waterspouts didn't get them too. If they weren't too afraid to turn back and help.

He couldn't help but look around as he resumed his work. Even though this island was nowhere near where he wanted to be, it was easily the most beautiful place he had ever seen. Facing away from the shipwreck and the growing pile of cargo on the beach awaited a scene of stunning beauty. Lush, multi-colored vegetation as far as the eye could see coupled with a warm, moist breeze in a nearly cloudless sky comprised all the elements of paradise.

The scene was a surreal blend of colors compared to the other lands he had visited. Not all the plants had green leaves. In fact, over half of them ranged somewhere between dark red and orange. Many of them produced flowers and fruit of so many varying colors and shapes he could have spent hours just taking in all the new and unique sights.

One particularly common plant on the island had wide, man-sized, peach-colored leaves. Each of them was tipped with a dainty, thin-petaled flower which varied from variegated blue/orange to bright yellow. He bent over to smell one and wrinkled his nose. Some things don't smell as beautiful as they look.

Just beyond it was an example of the most common tree on the island. It was the size and shape of a palm tree, but with large, dark-red leaves and yellow fruit

about the size of a coconut. Its light green, bark-less trunk grew to about the diameter of the ship's main mast.

But this only reminded him of the task at hand, and that the most common tree on the island presented a serious problem. Caedmon hadn't found many dead ones, and cutting down the live ones had rendered non-combustible branches.

He scowled. In his mind, he had attributed the feeble efforts from the early morning to simple exhaustion from the shipwreck. But now his expectation of encountering the same plants at the top of the hill was beginning to weigh on him. He didn't expect his luck to improve much.

Choosing to ignore his own predictions for now, Caedmon decided to focus on his orders and resumed hacking a path up the hill. Regardless what he thought, they had to at least try.

Suddenly, from the top of the hill, the trees and brush moved. It was a quick, subtle movement, and although he could see tiny glimpses of dark blue within the foliage, he couldn't make out who or what was there. He glanced at Barbad and Rolf, who also wore surprised expressions, peering ahead into the thick foliage.

But there wasn't enough time for conversation, for only a few seconds after he saw movement, a burst of flame came surging down the slope, burning up everything in its path and stopping a scant few paces in front of Caedmon, who was the farthest up the hill.

His mind and body were suddenly out of sync. His body fled in terror. His mind tried to explain to him the futility of his action, since it was not until the flame had ceased that he had actually started fleeing. But by the time he had worked this all out, he was already down the hill, as were Barbad and Rolf.

Last to arrive at the bottom of the hill, Caedmon ducked behind a group of large boulders near the base of the slope and joined the other two. As they attempted to catch their breath, several of the other crew members ran to meet them. All of them were silent for an uncomfortably long moment before someone finally asked the obvious in an appropriately exclamatory manner. "What was that?!"

Silence followed yet again as breathing took time to slow to a normal rate before the crew began debating what had just happened.

"They've got a fire-breathing apparatus!" shouted one of the stranger crew members.

"Yes, a fire weapon!" corrected another.

"It's the One punishing us for our greed!" claimed the religious one. Caedmon

was unable to suppress a half-smile while a few crew members laughed. He knew firsthand this was not the most savory crew, nor had they acquired their cargo as legitimately as they usually claimed. Not piracy, as such; just coercion and unfair deals.

“It’s a dragon!” claimed yet another, who was smacked by at least three of the men closest to him.

Not long into their debate, Caedmon noticed the result of the flame and started back toward the hill. “Look,” he said, pointing at the burnt chunk of jungle. “Whoever it was, they helped us out.” Hesitantly continuing toward the hill, he spoke again. “See?” He pointed to the spot where they had been. “It stopped just before it got to us. We only have a few whacks left and we can reach the top.”

The others seemed skeptical. “Are you crazy?” Several voices rang out in near unison.

Caedmon shook his head. “The flame stopped before it got to where we were. If they were trying to kill us, they would have. I think whoever is up there is helping us. I’m not sure why they’re helping us, but it sure seems to me they are.”

He looked around at the incredulous looks on their faces. “It’s this or stay on the beach for the rest of our lives. With the kind of weapon they have, we don’t stand a chance against them anyway. Besides, we need someone to start a fire for us. We’ve had no luck.”

Not waiting to hear further argument, he turned and started back up the slope.

“Hold up,” came Barbad’s voice from within the now murmuring crowd. He stepped away from the others and moved quickly after Caedmon. “I’m coming with you.”

Caedmon paused.

Once Barbad had come closer, he winked as he said in a low voice, “I swear, I’m getting too old for this, but I’ll lose my reputation if I let you do something crazier than me!”

Caedmon laughed. “Yeah, I guess they all think we’re a bit crazy anyway. Why disappoint them?” He glanced back at the others, knowing they fully expected another burst of flame to finish the job.

“What do you suppose that was?” Caedmon asked as they started up the remaining stretch toward the top of the hill, now wondering if the others might be right.

“I have plenty of ideas,” Barbad replied mysteriously, “but I don’t like guessing. Let’s just find out and get it over with.”

Instinctively, Caedmon adjusted his grip on his machete as he imagined what he might encounter.

But Barbad's voice interrupted his preparations. "Put your machete away, son. It won't do you any good against the natives up there, and it might make you look hostile."

Caedmon hesitated, taking a hard look at his one remaining piece of protection. Wouldn't he need a weapon? But he reluctantly sheathed it after seeing Barbad do the same thing.

"Okay," he said, then peeked through the burnt edges of the remaining foliage. Nothing sinister seemed in their way, and just as he was considering taking the next step, he felt Barbad's strong hand on his back.

Barbad's firm shove forced him through the remnants of jungle into the charred remains. "We don't have all day."

Cautiously, he took a few steps into the blackened and still-steaming hill, followed directly by Barbad. He felt a little relief as he realized it would be a much easier climb with most of the vegetation burnt up.

Neither of them spoke as they navigated the black, unsteady ground. In fact, this was the quietest they had been thus far, every sight and sound bringing a questioning glance or a raised brow. They paused a few times, and when they were finally about to take those last few steps to the top, they stopped and looked at each other again.

It's funny how the simplest of things can take an eternity, but sometimes a little hesitation occurs when one is about to risk his life on a guess.

Caedmon was sweating even more than previously as he anticipated his next steps. He nodded at Barbad, who nodded back. After a deep breath, Caedmon watched Barbad step through the vegetation near the top of the hill.

He followed, and before he had a chance to see for himself, he saw Barbad's stance relax. Instead of a hilltop, he found himself in a small, flat clearing with yet another hilltop beyond. Feeling both relief and disappointment, he shook his head.

Having expected his next step to be the moment of truth, experiencing the opposite was all at once disappointing, relieving and maddening. He took a few deep breaths and looked at Barbad expectantly.

Barbad mirrored Caedmon. They had one of those silent conversations, mentor and protégé, each of them known for pushing limits, each deciding there was no other choice. Still, Caedmon wondered if this would be the time they pushed too far.

Shrugging in unison, they started up the new hill. Even though this stretch hadn't burned, it was fairly easy terrain with only sparse vegetation. As they neared the top, Caedmon could see it was completely exposed. He frowned. He didn't like being exposed. Of course, the natives were probably already watching, so what was the point of worrying? And since Barbad didn't seem to be slowing down, he pressed on without a word.

As they reached the top

Nothing.

Well, something, but no dangerous or hostile natives. Only a rocky hilltop almost completely exposed to the elements except for a large cluster of dense palm-ish trees near the top of the opposite slope.

After a moment spent carefully scanning the area, Barbad shrugged. Caedmon shrugged back, then set about gathering anything woody he could find along with kindling. Might as well do something. It was anyone's guess when the fire-wielding inhabitants of the island would return, and their only chance of rescue was to get the attention of any lingering ships nearby.

As was the case earlier, there was naught but green wood, and the only dry kindling he came across appeared to be the same sort of plants he had found on the beach. He and Barbad stacked the wood and kindling anyway, finding a few sticks that might be appropriate for sparking a flame.

Although he had never failed to light a fire before (sometimes, he tended to light them when he shouldn't), the plant life on the island was different in many ways. Not only was it difficult to find woody pieces, the kindling didn't want to kindle, which made the term a bit of a contradiction.

"You start on that side and I'll try over here," Barbad instructed. "Hopefully one of us can get a flame going and we can use it to light the rest."

Caedmon nodded and began trying to light the two driest looking sticks.

Apparently, someone found this situation quite amusing, as a low-pitched chuckle emanated from within the cluster of trees. It was the deep, airy laughter one would expect from a very large man.

Instinctively, Caedmon dove behind the pile of sticks he had been trying to light. He felt cowardly until he noticed Barbad had done the same.

"Who's there?" Barbad finally asked after an awkward pause, bringing yet another chuckle from the voice within the trees.

Caedmon looked to Barbad for direction, who glanced at his machete, which made Caedmon do the same. But both machetes remained sheathed after the obvious futility set in. Barbad gave Caedmon a shushing gesture and mouthed

the word, "Wait". Caedmon started to speak, stopped the words in his throat as the mysterious voice finally replied.

"Friend or foe. Whichever you prefer," the deep, airy voice offered. "I am the master of this island and you are trespassing. I see you are apparently shipwrecked pirates, and your captain seems to be the greediest one I've seen. From whence do you come?"

Caedmon and Barbad exchanged glances. Not only was the native's voice heavily accented, similar to the accent of the Far Islands, but there also seemed to be a bit of a speech impediment. The "s" and "f" sounds seemed to consume more air than they should, as if his teeth were too far apart. Not to mention, he used the archaic word "whence".

Both men hesitated.

"Speak now or we will be forced to destroy you." The voice did not give them time to contemplate anything.

"We're not pirates," Caedmon blurted out. "We're merchants from Zille."

"Ah, merchants," the voice replied as Barbad shot Caedmon a rebuking glance. "Same thing as far as I'm concerned. And now I suppose you want to light a fire to catch the attention of the other ships and be rescued?"

Caedmon kept his thoughts to himself this time, not wanting another rebuke from Barbad, so it was the latter who replied. "That was our intention, yes. But this wood refuses to light."

Yet another chuckle came from the voice within the trees. "Yes, I noticed. And you shall be needing a fire tonight, but not for the reasons you think. No ship will be coming within any reasonable distance to see your fire. All that try will meet the same fate as you. Indeed, two of your other ships sank in their attempt to find you. The others have already given up the search."

This came as quite a blow. Their whole purpose in climbing the hill was to light a beacon in the hope of rescue. Caedmon's mind was now racing for any possible hope, though finding it difficult not to focus on the mysterious voice.

"How do you know this? And who are you?" Barbad asked, then added quickly, "Although I've only heard one voice so far. Are you one or many?"

Suddenly the trees began rustling all around them as the voice spoke yet again, "I have more with me than you are capable of dealing with, sir. I would suggest you find a way to appeal to my pity rather than my anger. We are the native inhabitants of this island and we keep it safe from foreigners and pirates such as yourselves."

"Sir," Caedmon took his turn to speak, "we mean you no harm nor insult. We

are merely trying to get ourselves rescued. Please do not harm us. Tell us what we need to do and we will do it.”

Barbad frowned, but gave no indication of a rebuke.

“Rescue is out of the question,” their deep-voiced host replied. “At least the kind of rescue you’re seeking.” This did not sound like a threat, surprisingly, but more a general statement of fact. “None can come close because of the currents, whirlpools and fog banks. And none have ever set foot on this island besides you. But enough talk. You have enough to think about already. I suggest you inform the rest of your crew that unless they come up to higher ground they will die. And do not try to bring the treasure. It is of no use here and will only be a hindrance.”

“Why did you help us?” Caedmon couldn’t restrain himself from asking.

“Watching you was getting exhausting,” replied the voice. “We simply do not have all day to wait on you.”

Caedmon looked offended and Barbad chuckled.

The voice continued. “In the meantime, we’ll help you with your fire if you would be so kind as to step away from the wood pile.”

The “pirates” glanced at each other, and although the words had not yet struck fertile soil in Caedmon’s mind, he saw the alarm on Barbad’s face, who had already scrambled to his feet. Caedmon did the same, and they both managed to bumble a safe distance away from the pile of wood.

“And no more questions,” the voice added. “We will speak again tomorrow.”

The trees rustled again, then a strange hissing sound preceded a burst of flame that lit the pile of wood, turning it into a large, warm fire that quickly settled to a hot glow and then a sort of invisible heat. Certainly, it made a terrible beacon, and the warmth it provided was stifling in the late afternoon heat, though the voice promised they would be wanting it by nightfall.

As Caedmon and Barbad started back down the hill, they exchanged a knowing glance. Their story was not going to sit well with everyone else, especially not the captain. And Caedmon was hoping Barbad would volunteer to be spokesman.

“How are we going to tell the others about this?” he finally asked the obvious. “I don’t see them believing us and I don’t see Milo taking kindly to anyone else giving orders.”

Barbad chuckled and shook his head. “Oh, he’s going to be very put out, to say the least. But I won’t let that stop me. I’m going to do what these ...” He paused and glanced back up the hill. “... people told us to do. Until we know

what this weapon of theirs is, we have no choice.”

As they reached the bottom of the hill and came to where the others had been hiding, they were immediately bombarded with questions. “Where’s the fire? Who was up there? What was up there?”

Most of these questions were posed by their tyrannical captain, who had finally managed to limp over to the large boulders everyone else was hiding behind. He would not be satisfied with anything less than every detail. Barbad calmly answered all of Milo’s questions, adding detail where it was demanded.

However, Milo eventually turned his attention to Caedmon and asked, “Well, what happened next? Let’s hear from the lad now.” Of course, this was nearly the end, which left the most interesting news for a reluctant Caedmon to tell. He just shook his head and looked carefully at the expectant faces of the others before turning to the captain. “They have a rather interesting demand.”

The results were amazingly predictable.

“They demand!?” Milo was incredulous, shaking his head and nearly foaming at the mouth. “Just because they have some sort of flaming weapon doesn’t mean they can start making demands. I only saw one flame. That may work against three men when they’re surprised, but not against the whole crew. They can’t demand anything.”

“And how many of them do you suppose there are?” Barbad cut in.

“Not enough to take us,” Milo seemed to have anticipated the question.

“How could you possibly know?” Barbad was also ready with a response. “And how do you know they didn’t have something to do with the waterspouts that drove us here? You don’t.”

“Well we’re not giving up this treasure and we’re not giving up getting ourselves rescued.” Milo limped toward Barbad. “Are you suggesting we allow ourselves to be imprisoned by these ... these ...”

“People?” Caedmon suggested helpfully.

The captain glowered at him, but spoke to Barbad. “We fight or we die. We don’t cave to island natives without a fight.”

“I’d rather live to fight another day,” Barbad replied. “We know nothing about this place or what we’ve gotten ourselves into with our haste.”

Caedmon smirked, as did several of the other crew members. Some of the chucklers immediately tried to hide behind other crew members.

The infamous Captain Milo turned his infamous shade of red and the crew began to back away in anticipation of his temper.

However, Milo took a few deep breaths and looked around at his crew for a

moment. “Fine,” he said. “We don’t have time to stand here arguing. We can resolve this tomorrow. The real crew of the Bahawre will stay on the beach tonight. We will finish removing our cargo from the ship and we will begin discussing how to get out of this hell hole.”

Focusing his attention on Barbad and Caedmon, his eyes narrowed. “Everyone else can follow these two pansies to the top of the hill to cower before the greatness of the island natives. All who follow this path will be considered deserters. No, worse. You will be considered mutineers.”

That got everyone’s attention. Caedmon could tell immediately who was staying and who was going. Those who had decided to stay wore accusing scowls as they looked around for anyone who might be defying the captain’s wishes. Those who wanted to hike up the hill were already on their way to stand behind Barbad and Caedmon.

Barbad glanced at a small group of people still sitting on the beach near the infirmary. “What about the passengers?”

Milo seemed briefly surprised by the question, but shook his head dismissively. “They’re not part of the crew. They’re of no use to me here. If we find passage off this cursed place, they’re welcome to come along if there’s room. Just no mutineers.”

Exchanging a nod with Barbad, Caedmon made his way over to the passengers to explain the situation.

“Now begone with you!” Milo scowled one last time at Barbad, then turned toward the remaining crew members. “We’ve got work to do and less hands to do it.”

A barrage of shouts followed from those staying on the beach. Things like “Just trying to get out of doing the work!” and “Pansies!” and Caedmon’s favorite “You forfeit your part of the treasure!”

In the end, a third of the crew decided to go with Caedmon and Barbad, though a few actually turned back at the mention of forfeiting their portion of the treasure. It was a short time before Caedmon managed to help the passengers gather whatever possessions remained and lead them over to the base of the hill to join the “mutineers”.

Meanwhile, Barbad countered the crew’s insults in his calm and steadfast manner, something Caedmon had always admired about him. “Pay no heed, people. You made the right choice. Only a fool feels compelled to hurl insults at decisions he doesn’t understand.”

Finally, the time came and the final call was made for any who might want to

climb the hill. Barbad went to the front of the group and Caedmon to the rear.

Milo sneered and called out to the defectors, "If you come back tomorrow, I may show mercy and let you back into the crew. But only after Barbad and Caedmon are hanged for their mutiny."

"If you are still alive in the morning," Barbad called back, "we will plead your case to the natives of this island."

Caedmon chuckled, knowing full well what Milo's response would be even before he said it.

"You'll plead my case? Who do you think you are?" Milo fumed. "I should have you hanged now!"

"I wasn't talking to you," Barbad replied. "I was talking to the rest of the crew."

Turning to the group who decided to follow him, Barbad simply said, "Come on."

Ignoring Milo's ensuing tirade, Barbad led the people up the hill, never turning around to acknowledge the captain's threats.

Caedmon, however, paid closer attention and kept his hand on his machete as he stayed toward the back of the group to help the passengers and slower members of the group. Some of them were wounded. He knew they would have a difficult time with the terrain.

It was a long day. Waiting, wondering if Milo would attack, wondering if the crew on the beach would really die. The suspense took its toll on Caedmon and the rest of the people at the top of the hill. At Barbad's direction, he tried to keep them busy gathering wood and collecting some of the edible-looking fruit.

As dusk approached, Caedmon nestled between a few trees and watched the people in Milo's camp finish their work and gather near the makeshift infirmary for the evening. Once he was satisfied they were settling in for the night, he returned to the fire where Barbad had gathered the others.

He found a comfortable enough spot propped against a tree and watched the people. They diverted themselves with small talk, trying to guess what sort of plant this or that was, wondering how the wood could produce heat with barely a glow.

A few others gathered farther away from the "fire" looking for familiar constellations in the darkening sky. Some of their conversation grabbed his attention.

"Something is wrong with the constellations here," a short, thin man said as he pointed. "See? The Bear ought to be nearly straight up by this time."

“And where is the Platypus?” wondered a woman with a long brown braid. She pointed to the western sky. “It should be right there.”

As several others also murmured their surprise at constellations they could not see, Caedmon and Barbad exchanged glances. Maybe this would keep the people distracted from whatever might be happening on the beach.

As the sun set fully and the first moon rose, it became rather cold, not as in winter where one might freeze to death, but cold enough to be uncomfortable without some cover. Caedmon was glad he was near the fire, and based on the facial expressions he could see, so was everyone else. As the fire provided warmth and a dim glow, it raised some concern for those still on the beach.

“They made their choice,” Barbad said. “We can’t force them to make the right one.”

“He’s right,” Caedmon nodded. “Nobody will freeze to death tonight. I just hope the natives don’t decide to attack them.”

With a stern warning from their host not to venture near the beach and no sign of where their mysterious host might be hiding, the hilltop mutineers had little choice but to agree with Caedmon and Barbad.

The crashing of the waves grew louder as the first moon rose to twice its height from the northern horizon and the second moon began to peek over the eastern horizon.

“I’ve never heard waves so loud!” The round-faced baker’s eyes were nearly as round as his face. Caedmon remembered talking to him about his bakery and the exotic grains he was seeking across the sea. He wondered if this man had ever heard waves on an island in the middle of the sea.

But as others voiced their agreement about the waves, Caedmon’s internal rationalizations faded and he had to admit the waves were definitely louder than they should be.

“Maybe we ought to check on the others,” someone said. Caedmon could not tell who. But nobody made a move to go look.

Getting a nervous look from Barbad, Caedmon knew they needed to find a way to change the conversation and get people thinking about something else. The last thing their camp needed was for a few stupid fools to wander off and give the natives cause to attack them. Waves and moons. A strange island. Surely something else could grab their attention the way the constellations had.

“Ouch!” He squirmed and plucked a small plant from the ground. “I’ve never seen any of these plants before. I don’t know which ones have thorns and which ones don’t until it’s too late.”

His “ouch” was certainly overstated, but it drew the attention he intended as several heads turned his way. He held out the thorny white flower toward the man to his left, who took it and smiled. “This is no strange specimen. It’s just firethorn. But what’s it doing on a tropical island?”

A plump, blonde woman several feet away perked up. She groaned with the effort of standing, then waddled over to look at the plant. Caedmon recognized her from earlier in their voyage as a planter, one with certifications from the best academy in Zille, and watched with interest as she examined the plant.

“That’s firethorn alright,” she said, shaking her head. She looked at the other plants near Caedmon and shook her head again. “And it’s growing right next to ... is that a fern? I’ve never seen anything like that.”

Suddenly, Caedmon felt a little uncomfortable as several of the others turned to look at the plants near him. He noticed Barbad chuckling, which made his face redden a little. He quickly turned his head toward the plants to avoid Barbad’s teasing.

Within minutes, nearly everyone had gathered into clusters to look at and discuss the plants near them. This naturally led to discussions about the unusually large insects feasting on the plants.

A group formed around the planter as she explained one of the plants near Caedmon. “This is certainly a tropical specimen, though I’ve never seen it before. You see how succulent the leaves are?” She shook her head. “I don’t understand why they’re orange, though. They ought to be green.”

Across the fire, one of the crew members held a large blue-green beetle between his forefinger and thumb. It was half as big as his hand, frantically trying to scurry away.

Next to him, another passenger pointed up at a tree, marveling about the fruit it bore. “Are they supposed to be blue? Do you suppose they’re ripe now?” The man and woman next to him both shook their heads.

A satisfied smile formed on Caedmon’s face as he found his way over to Barbad and plopped down beside him. The elder man shook his head and chuckled. “Awfully proud of yourself, aren’t you?”

Caedmon nodded. “Yes, actually. I am.”

They laughed, but not too loudly. No point distracting the people from their distractions. Caedmon wiggled into a more reclined position against a tree while Barbad leaned forward and watched the people.

Most of the investigations and discussions continued well into the night. Eventually, the conversation died down and exhaustion from the previous day’s

events took its toll. The volume of the waves made conversation difficult anyway. Most of the mutineers fell asleep by the time the first moon reached its apex and the second moon had covered half the distance to meet the first.

Caedmon awoke as the sun peeked over the horizon to present a spectacular array of pastels in the sky, varying in shades over wispy clouds and mist. It was the best sunrise he had ever seen. He must have slept a little, because he couldn't remember anything since he saw the two moons coming together sometime in the middle of the night.

Voices caught his attention, and he reluctantly pulled his gaze from the sunrise to the three men gathered around the remnants of the fire. Spotting Barbad, Caedmon stood up and straightened his clothes. He was anxious to talk to him about going down to the beach.

Barbad saw Caedmon coming and already knew what his protégé wanted before he arrived. "There won't be anything good to see down there," he preempted Caedmon's question.

"Well, I don't see any harm in it," Caedmon replied as he arrived beside Barbad. "The waves sound normal again and the sun is up. Our ... host is nowhere to be found, and besides, the warning was specifically for last night. Not today. We can't just sit here and wonder."

"You sound like a school boy looking for a loophole," sighed Barbad, who frowned pensively before standing up with a light groan. "We cannot assume leniency from a captor we know nothing about." He paused briefly, but not long enough for Caedmon to interject. "You're killing this old man, you know, but you're right about one thing. We can't sit here and hope something eventually happens. If the captain's stand on the beach against the natives has been successful, you know we'll be the first to be executed as mutineers."

Caedmon chuckled as he turned to go, having only heard "you're right" out of all Barbad had said. "Exactly. And if we've got a fight coming or if somebody is going to do something horrible to us, I'd rather see it coming and have a chance to defend myself. But we might be in luck. Who knows? Maybe the rest of the crew mutinied later on. Milo was unusually cranky yesterday."

The conversation continued in a rather derogatory vein about the captain as they started down the hill toward the landing where they could gain a view of the beach. This caught the notice of several others, who seemed curious, but not brave enough to follow.

Caedmon's mind had just returned to wondering what they might find on the beach when they cleared the edge of the trees at the bottom of the hill. He was

about to curse Milo's stubbornness yet again, and was preparing his arguments to the inevitable accusations when the beach came into view.

He nearly ran into Barbad who had stopped abruptly, staring agape toward the beach. Caedmon followed his gaze and also stared in disbelief. Nothing was left. No ship. No cargo. No crew. Just a beach littered with shells, seaweed and a collection of stranded sea creatures.

After the initial shock subsided, Barbad smacked his forehead. "The tide! I've never heard waves that loud!" He pointed to a spot about halfway down the hill. "See? It came all the way up to there!"

Caedmon slowly shook his head, struggling to process the terrible sight before him. All of the smaller plants from halfway up the hill had been ripped out by the tide. Only the trees and stronger shrubs remained.

"The moons!" Remembering how they almost appeared to be one moon in the middle of the night. "Have you ever seen the moons like that?"

Barbad shook his head. They stood gawking for a few minutes before Caedmon finally gathered his wits and called to the rest of the camp. "Everybody! You need to come see this!"

Within a short while, the group of survivors stood looking over what had been their camp the day before. Not only had the supplies and ship gone missing, but their crew mates and friends as well.

Among the gasps and wide eyes came the obvious question. "Is there anybody left?"

"Probably not," said Barbad. "That tide came and went hours ago." He looked around the hill, then nodded to the tide mark. "If anyone's alive, they're probably unconscious and about that far up the hill."

Barbad instructed some of the crew to search the hill for any survivors. Others were instructed to return to camp and begin searching for food. Although his voice felt numb at first, it gained confidence as he instructed anyone still standing to return to camp.

Caedmon already knew the answer to his question. Nobody was coming to rescue the crew of the Bahawre. Not that day. Not ever. No doubt about it. According to their new host, the other ships had already turned back, and there was no signal they could send. He turned to look at Barbad, whose expression was now one of determination.

"We have to find the natives," Barbad said matter-of-factly.

Caedmon nodded and followed him up the hill toward camp.

"This is gonna be a long day."

BOMAN'S QUEST

Great Library of Zille, Present Day

Boman sat at an aged, oak table in the eerie bowels of the great library of Zille pouring over a thick, leather-bound tome just as aged as the table on which it sat. Even Boman appeared as old as everything around him, though in a more regal way. The lines and wrinkles on his face evinced a sense of order and purpose. Even his gray hair seemed as perfectly trimmed as hair could be with remnants of dark-brown evenly distributed.

But what made him most resemble his environment was how stationary he had become. So engrossed was he in the words on the page that he hadn't moved for hours. The dust and cobwebs in the room were probably thinking about expanding their territory, although his tidy presence would probably not allow such an unruly event.

He had no regard for his surroundings. He seemed not to notice the musty aroma of one of the oldest collections in the library. Nor was he concerned about the stack of books teetering precariously close to his head. Nothing could steal his attention away from the book lying open in front of him. The tale within had become an obsession of sorts, as it had for countless others over the years.

It described the strange tale of the Bahawre, one of only three ships Zille's shipping industry had ever lost. A five-ship mission of questionable legality encountered trouble on the return trip to Zille nearly six hundred years ago. Two of the ships sank under mysterious circumstances. But one of the ships, the Bahawre, simply disappeared – one of several elements of this story that had piqued his interest and kept it for years.

It was the first time in over twelve hundred years of sailing that the kingdom of Zille had lost a ship. To lose three on the same day was not only noteworthy, but bizarre.

Much mystery surrounded the event because nobody could say precisely where the ships were lost. Only a general area could be determined. This event, combined with the reportedly legendary value of the cargo, resulted in a string of rescue attempts.

But the rescue efforts either returned empty-handed or never returned at all. Eventually, the shipping industry was so convinced something evil inhabited the area that all shipping routes were altered so as to completely avoid it.

Finally, Boman had a personal interest in the story. His quest began when he grew interested in genealogy and traced his family line back to the Bahawre, revealing he was a direct descendant of the first mate.

For all of these reasons, the truth of what existed out there and the fate of the Bahawre and its crew had become Boman's quest. Over the course of several years, whenever he stole a few moments away from his duties as prime minister of Zille, he collected all sorts of information – facts, legends, dates, names, testimonies and various other bits and pieces.

However, in recent months, it had become a frustrating quest. Every new lead resulted in a dead end or a rabbit trail. The last useful piece of information he had received was from a crazy-haired mentalist named Zeek whose certifications in natural world studies were too numerous to name.

In a long discourse littered with mentalist jargon, Zeek explained how it might be possible in really weird circumstances for whirlpools to exist in open sea. Boman passed most of the interview trying to divine whether or not the man's feet were actually big enough to fill such ridiculously large shoes. Because of all the unfamiliar words, Boman could only remember bits and pieces of the conversation.

At one point when Boman was about to fall asleep, Zeek converted to common language briefly with "... and that would require nearby land." Boman had perked up at this, only to be lulled back to near sleep with technical speak. Again, near the end of the conversation, Zeek finished describing underwater structures and concluded, "So you see, regardless which mechanism is causing the whirlpool, it would require nearby land. Without it, the conditions couldn't exist, and without the conditions, no whirlpools. Either the maps are wrong and land exists out there, or the reports of whirlpools are false. I'm inclined to believe the latter."

Boman was inclined to believe the former, though he kept it to himself. True, sailors were prone to exaggerate and even invent their travel stories, but the details were too consistent in this case. In the end, Boman confirmed the common belief that whirlpools and waterspouts should be part of a system of flowing water, not open sea.

Since all the surviving sailors agreed on the main facts – whirlpools, waterspouts and loss of ships – Boman had come to the conclusion that something truly remarkable happened that location. His great interest in the story was not unfounded.

This new piece of the puzzle was proof – in Boman's opinion – of his latest theory on the fate of the lost ships. Sure, some of the sailors claimed they may have seen some land in this whole ordeal, but it was just a passing hint, more of an inability to rule out land than actual sighting of land. Now Boman was

reading the account of a sailor who spoke more of land than sea creatures. For the moment, he was willing to tolerate these “facts” acquired through clairvoyance.

“We’d made many attempts to rescue the ships, but the waterspouts wouldn’t let us pass. So we left. Thought we could bring back help. But when we got away from the waterspouts, we weren’t where we thought we were. Somethin’s strange out there. Anyway, halfway home is when I saw ‘em. I see things, you understand, like visions. They were trapped on an island. Not dead and not able to ‘scape. On the way there I saw things too, but nobody would listen. I tole ‘em not to go that way. Saw waterspouts, fire. Did they listen? No. Of course not. Who listens to the crazy man? Not that stubborn cap’n of ours. Well, now they wish they had, I reckon. Wrecked on an isle, biggest tide I ever seen comin’ in. They ain’t ready for it. They’re doomed, I tell you!”

Apparently, the man had refused to speak further, citing the fact that nobody believed him anyway, but Boman’s latest theory was better supported by the clairvoyant than the mentalist.

He lifted his hand, and feeling the stiffness, flexed it a few times before gingerly reaching to turn the page. He skimmed the next page in an attempt to find any additional comments by the sailor, or perhaps someone to second his opinion. Nothing yet.

He carefully turned another page, showing respect and caution for the age of the book. Then he made one of his signature scholarly scowls as he began scanning the text slowly with his index finger, careful not to miss anything important.

A form tugged at his peripheral vision. Something moved. Boman dismissed it and continued reading.

A throat cleared. A female throat, he thought. At least, it seemed feminine to him. Or maybe in the back of his mind he was expecting a female voice.

“My lord?” It *was* a woman’s voice. Familiar.

His visions of open seas and undiscovered lands faded as he looked up to discover the librarian standing to his left. How long had she been standing there? Had she already asked him a question? Had he really been that out of it?

“Jon is at the door, sir. Shall I show him in? He says it’s urgent.”

The crick in Boman’s neck prevented him turning his head as much as he intended, which he was sure failed to convey his attempted nod. Finally, regaining his composure, he managed a response. “Yes, thank you. Please show him in, please.” He winced as he realized his over-use of the word “please”.

“Yes, my lord,” the librarian replied, stifling a chuckle as she stepped aside from the door. Jon, who had been the stable master and Boman’s right hand man for several years, thanked the librarian on his way into the room. He was not quite as tall as Boman, but had a similar build. With brown eyes and dark-brown hair, it was no wonder some people referred to Jon as “Boman Junior”.

Boman sighed and cast a brief, longing glance at the ancient book before standing up with a light groan. With his mind finally in the present, he noticed Jon’s grave expression. A brief, awkward moment passed as Jon glanced between Boman and the librarian, apparently bearing a message that was not for everyone’s ears.

“Pardon me, sirs,” the librarian broke the silence after noting the expression on Jon’s face. “I’ll be at the end of the hall if you need anything.” Not waiting for a response, she made her exit, closing the door behind her.

As Boman’s attention returned to Jon, his concern grew. “What’s the matter, Jon?”

Jon’s expression grew even sadder. “I am loathe to be the bearer of such news, sir.”

From previous discussions, Boman expected bad news, but Jon’s dramatic pause pushed him near the end of his patience.

Just before Boman felt compelled to nudge him, Jon sighed and solemnly announced, “The king is dead.”

FUNERAL COMPOSURE

Seldom had any day weighed so heavily on Gurtie's mind. Since the king's death, she had successfully avoided thinking about anything but the planning. She had busied herself with preparations and graciously accepted the condolences of others. Before the public announcement of her husband's passing, she had personally seen to the list of those who needed to be informed. Although Gurtie had charged Emma, General Emery's wife, with all of the details of the funeral ceremony, she had remained very involved in the process.

Now that the day had arrived, the queen mother had nothing left to do. She could only think of her late husband and the hole left in her life. Finally, after days of preparation, the reality of it all was sinking in and she wasn't prepared to deal with it. "Why can't the funeral be the same day as the death?" Gurtie muttered to herself as she paced in front of her balcony door. She needed to do something. She couldn't be seen crying uncontrollably at the funeral.

She looked around the room. The bed dominated the alcove to the left of the balcony door. Headboard against the wall and covered with several quilts, it was meticulously arranged. Two night tables flanked the bed, pink and dainty and devoid of clutter. On the wall opposite the balcony stood a wide, eight-drawer dresser, also pink and clutter-less. Even the small, round table and four chairs in front of the balcony door were tidy and neatly arranged.

She sighed. Nothing to do. No menial task to occupy her thoughts. For once, her maid's efficiency disappointed her. Then another idea brought a glimmer of hope. There was no wiser or better friend in the kingdom than Boman. If anyone could help her get her emotions under control, even for just a little longer, it was him. Surely he was still in his room. It wasn't quite time to assemble. Without another thought, she turned toward her door and opened it.

Beth, her maid, looked surprised as she stood from her stool. "Aren't you a bit early, my lady?"

Gurtie shook her head and continued at a quick pace down the hall toward Boman's room. Beth scurried to follow. Gurtie couldn't speak. She needed the brisk walk and the deep breaths to help her keep control. Beth had been with her for many years and would understand. In fact, she had probably already guessed where they were heading. Passing a few doors, then making a left turn, she came to a stop in front of Boman's room.

As usual, the door was open, but Boman was not in sight. Beth stepped forward and knocked on the open door. After a quick response from Boman, she announced, "The queen is here to see you." Gurtie was still the queen until the

new king was sworn in, and then she would be the queen mother. Silly business, she thought. She was perfectly capable of ruling in her husband's place.

Squelching these thoughts, Gurtie nodded to Beth, then stepped through the doorway. The room felt different, though at first she could detect no change since the last time she visited. The bed was up against the wall just to the left. On the opposite wall was the small round table with three chairs, behind which was the door leading to the balcony. Ah, there it was. The large table just to the right of the balcony door that served as Boman's desk looked a mess. It was usually so tidy.

Ignoring the state of the desk, Gurtie turned toward the middle of the room where Boman stood expectantly. Gurtie attempted a smile. "How are you holding up, dear?" She called everyone around her "dear", though she couldn't say exactly why. It had been pointed out to her on several occasions, but she couldn't bring herself to stop. Probably just a side effect of motherhood. Besides, everyone around her was dear to her, so why not?

"What can I say?" Boman replied, breaking her train of thought. "It hurts. I know it will pass with time, but it hurts. How about you?"

Fighting back the tears, she shook her head. "It's all finally sinking in today of all days. The timing is terrible. I simply cannot fall to pieces at the funeral."

Boman nodded. It was clear he understood. "Yes, I know. Why can't the funeral be on the same day as the passing? It would be so much easier."

"Yes. I was just thinking the same thing."

"Restless?"

"Yes."

"Me too." Boman sighed, then shrugged. "I guess it's just part of the whole mess."

His face formed the ponderous frown Gurtie had grown accustomed to over the years. She often wondered if he couldn't help it or if he deliberately used it to buy time. Before she could say anything, he apparently landed on an idea as the frown disappeared.

"I think it helps to focus on the bits and pieces. Come have a look." Boman gestured toward the balcony.

She knew he would think of something. Following him to the balcony Gurtie looked out over the courtyard and promenade, packed full of people gathered to witness the most important funeral in memory. Even nature seemed to cooperate with a cloudless, azure sky and a light breeze. Rightfully so, for this most beloved of kings had reigned for nearly sixty years. All those years, except the

first few, represented the greatest prosperity and prominence the kingdom had ever known.

Looking toward the harbor, the largest ships of the fleet were cleaned and anchored. The official banners of Zille hung vertically from the masts and sides of each ship. Each was gold with a red border and the figure of a red, pouncing panther in the center. Occasionally, the fluttering of the banners made the panthers appear to come alive.

The long, wide promenade, paved with white stone, connected the palace with the harbor. Traditionally used for important occasions, it was lined with people from this kingdom and several others, all dressed in their best attire and wearing solemn expressions.

Boman waved his hand across the growing crowd. "How often do you see so many uniforms?" Then he turned with a half smile. "And all of them cleaned and pressed."

She almost laughed, but did her best to refrain. How bad would that look for the people to see their queen and prime minister laughing on the balcony on the day of the king's funeral? She turned quickly and retreated to Boman's room. As he followed, she shook her head and couldn't help chuckling. "You almost had me laughing in front of all those people."

Boman's hands shot up in defense. "I was only trying to help."

"Hmm. Some help." Gurtie shook her head condescendingly, then smiled. "Okay, it helped. Everything looks absolutely beautiful. Emma did a wonderful job. You'll have to remind me to thank her later."

"Of course," Boman nodded. "How about a cup of tea while we go over the preparations? One last once-over to make sure everything is in order?"

Yes, that should help. Keep her mind on the details, not the meaning behind them. She would get through this ceremony after all. She could fall apart later. "Not a bad idea," she said as she took the seat he offered beside a small table near the balcony door. It looked as if he had already planned tea. A teapot steamed in the center, flanked by two cups and saucers. She wondered if he knew she would be coming. He seemed to anticipate everything.

And now he seemed to read her thoughts as he seated himself and said, "I thought you might stop by. If you feel anything like I do, you need a distraction."

How did he always do that? Derek used to mention it from time to time. "Yes," she replied. "I think I feel very much the same. So ... walk me through the preparations."

Boman smiled and poured the tea, filling the area with the scent of

chamomile.

She picked up her cup and squinted in anticipation of the heat. She took a sip. Of course. The tea was the perfect drinking temperature. Not only did he know she was coming, but he had perfectly timed the tea.

Boman picked up his cup only after she did, as was customary, and took a sip before starting into the details. “We have that violinist from Cendaria in the orchestra today.”

“Persinig?”

“Yes, him.”

“Oh, he’s quite good, isn’t he?”

“I think so. So does the conductor.”

“Must be, then.”

Boman chuckled and shifted slightly to gesture toward the docks. “And we have expanded the seating at the docks and along the promenade to accommodate all the foreign visitors. Emma’s idea.”

He turned to point in the direction of the courtyard, but was interrupted by a knock on the door.

“Pardon me, my lady,” Beth poked her head inside the room. “It’s time we were on our way, don’t you think? Don’t want to get lost in the crowds do we?”

“She’s the only reason I’m ever on time,” Gurtie whispered to Boman as they both rose from their seats. “Of course, Beth. I’m coming.” She smiled and nodded her thanks to Boman, who bowed in response. “We’ll talk again soon.” She patted his shoulder, then turned toward her anxiously awaiting maid. “Okay. I’m as ready as I’ll ever be.”

After seeing the queen out, Boman turned away from the door. Now if only he could follow his own advice and steel himself for the day's events. He noticed the mess on his desk and winced as he realized Gurtie had seen it that way. Several pages lay spread out on the large oak surface where he had spent the morning pouring over the testimonies of sailors from long ago. Rather than the quest of a few days earlier, it served as a mere distraction from the king's funeral.

Boman sighed and pushed the desk out of his mind. He could deal with it later. Instead, he stepped out onto the balcony to observe the crowd. For a few moments, he stood in his dress uniform, the medals and decorations tinkling lightly each time the breeze picked up. A gold, interlacing pattern was embroidered up the sleeves in a thin band to meet a gold collar of the same pattern clasped in front with an elegantly small buckle.

Boman could see the traditional red uniform of the Zillean army everywhere. No self-respecting veteran would be caught without it on such an important event. Scattered throughout the crowd, nearly as many wore them as not – a testament to how many soldiers were required to protect their kingdom.

Very few of the uniforms bore as many decorations as his. Attached to the front of his coat was a vast array of medals, pins and gold paw prints declaring his rank and achievements. He had served for so long and seen so much action that both sides of his chest were covered. His face, too, was evidence of his long years of service, the many creases demonstrating that these symbols of achievement were earned, not merely bestowed. On the outside, Boman was a hard-cut, impressive looking man.

Thus, it was fitting for him to be standing on this particular balcony where he had advised the king on nearly every topic of government for the last half century. Today, however, his friend and king lay dead and this grandest of prime ministers felt anything but grand as he stood staring out over a mourning populace.

Instead of despair, a hollowness began to take over as if his soul would detach itself to watch from a distance. He had succeeded in steeling himself, though not with details. Instead, the uniforms reminded him of the wars, and the wars merged King Derek into a mass of fallen heroes. His sense of duty kicked in as he realized the threat of an attack this day. The time for mourning his friend would have to wait.

Boman watched the crowd move and reshape itself as people continued to arrive. From the height of the balcony, they seemed no more than figurines to

him. Perhaps he seemed no more than a permanent part of the balcony to them, just a statue that belonged there.

But he saw more than just people. He saw *his* people. Searching through the crowd for anything unusual, his gaze traveled meticulously from the open area in front of the harbor to the front doors of the palace. He sighed with relief as he found nothing amiss. This palace had hosted too many ceremonies of this type and he would not allow this one to generate others.

His attention drifted from the people to the artistry of the architecture. The grand entryway consisted of a large gate and a promenade with spacious wings on either side to accommodate crowds. The lattice-covered promenade connected to the large, ornate gate. Boman allowed himself a smile as he saw the excited faces of a few children entering the gate. Part of a foreign delegation, their parents quickly subdued their enthusiasm lest it cause offense on this solemn occasion.

Thick, round pillars lined the promenade and held up the roof. Made of the same white stone as the floor, they each held three carvings. A water buffalo formed the base of each pillar, a symbol of slow, deliberate strength. Halfway up was a ring of flying eagles, each one chasing the other's tail. And the top was capped with the upturned head of an open-mouthed panther consuming the piece of the roof it supported.

The lattice roof hosted a vine whose fragrant flowers bloomed year round. The five-petaled flowers faded from yellow on the outside to a deep orange in the middle. Besides the palace itself, the first thing most people noticed was the wonderfully sweet fragrance of the flowers on the promenade roof.

Although he was sure it indicated a character flaw of some sort, Boman swelled with pride as he admired the beauty and grandeur of Zille's palace. He rested his hand appreciatively on the stone balcony railing as he would a beloved animal.

"Your horse is ready, my lord," came a soft, familiar voice from the doorway. He turned to see the stable master, Jon, whose somber expression was quite contrary to his usual demeanor. Even so, the natural upward curve at each corner of his mouth made it nearly impossible for him to look completely sad. He was dressed in the same uniform as Boman, though without the medals and marks of high rank. "And I left off the decorative pieces, as you requested," he added with a hint of disappointment.

"Thank you, Jon." Boman stepped in from the balcony. "I will not be caught off guard. Not again." A brief and angry fire flared in his eyes, though he

recovered his stony facade quickly. “We can never be too careful.”

“Yes, my lord. I understand.” Jon nodded respectfully. He seemed unusually formal today, but it was probably the funeral with all of its pomp and circumstance. Jon’s gaze turned to the crowd below and the expectant looks on their faces, sorrow and compassion shadowing his face. After a silent moment, he sighed. “I can’t imagine trying to fill those shoes.”

“Indeed.” Boman’s thoughts turned to the new king. King Derek’s son. An apple most would agree fell far from the tree. He wondered why the One would allow someone like Geoffrey to inherit the crown. The kingdom would be better left in Gurtie’s hands. But he certainly didn’t need to encourage Jon to think such things. “He’ll find his way.”

Jon sighed and nodded. “With your leave, it looks like they’re ready to start. I should be taking my place.”

A nod of acknowledgment from the prime minister was enough for the younger man who turned and left the room. His footsteps echoed in the otherwise silent hall. As they faded, Boman returned to the balcony for one more perusal of the crowd. He took a slow, deep breath and scrutinized each section of the crowd as he slowly let it out. After a moment, he nodded his approval. Everything was in its place – for now.

When he saw Jon emerge from a door downstairs and disappear down the alley that led to the royal stables, he knew it was time. He sighed and focused his mind on his duties before turning toward the door.

“Time to get this over with.”

INTERRUPTION

On his way to the stables, Jon marveled at the amount of activity behind the great white doors that separated the seaward foyer from the promenade. Wide and tall enough for two carriages, they required the efforts of four men to open. A leafy pattern covered them to each edge as if stray vines from the lattice roof had turned to white oak and become doors.

While the crowd gathered in the promenade, final preparations for King Derek's last march produced a bustle throughout the foyer. The remaining members of the orchestra had taken their seats, the royal family mulled around behind the casket and the master of ceremonies stood beside the conductor near the orchestra reviewing the sequence of events.

At the head of the procession stood the casket. As was fitting the late king's style and temperament, his oak casket was unstained and adorned with a pair of bronze leaves at each corner. Six bronze, leaf-shaped handles awaited an equal number of pall bearers who stood nearby, dressed in the same uniform as many in the crowd.

Jon allowed himself a moment to admire the perfectly arranged scene. He nodded as if stamping it with his seal of approval. Today would not be his first state funeral, but it was the most important, and certainly the most personal. King Derek was not only a great king, but a king of the people. Jon imagined everyone in the kingdom felt the loss as if it were a family member. They would expect an appropriately grand funeral.

A brief look was all he could afford. Duties awaited him, so he turned away and hurried down the short corridor to the royal stables. Although part of him wanted to stay and watch, he relaxed as he approached the stables. He felt more at home where straw and dirt replaced stone and marble.

"Hey there, boy." Jon greeted Boman's horse, Rain. After a few strokes of his neck and a quick apple wedge for a snack, Jon adjusted the bridle and checked all of the important straps and attachments. Out of habit, he glanced occasionally down the short, wide hall that led to the foyer lest anyone sneak up on him. One of the first lessons Boman had taught him was to keep a sharp eye, particularly on special occasions.

As he reached to move the reins out of his way, his hand brushed across the royal medallion on Rain's breastplate, reminding him of the first time he had seen it. His eyes widened as he realized it was fifteen years ago to the day that he had met Boman. He would never forget it, every detail still engraved in his mind. As he finished adjusting the saddle and began brushing the horse's coat, he

allowed himself a moment to relive it.

Graduation day had nearly arrived and Jon was justifiably excited. Of the thirty-two members of his graduating class, he had finished first. He found the posted results moments ago and was skipping down the hall, nearly running, as he pondered how to reveal such excellent news to his parents.

Deciding the side exit would be the quickest route, he barely slowed down as he pushed the door open and rushed out into the street – directly into the path of a large horse. The red medallion in the middle of the horse’s breastplate caught him in the side of the face as he turned to avoid it. Falling to the ground from the impact, he remembered thinking how his parents would never hear the great news because that medallion would be the last thing he ever saw.

Fortunately for Jon, the alert rider managed to turn the horse without trampling him. As he looked up, he recognized the prime minister of Zille and his heart sank. No matter how high his rank in school, it certainly would look bad to blunder into the street directly into the horse of one of the highest ranking officials anywhere.

The prime minister frowned down at him. “Are you hurt?”

“No, my lord. Just startled.”

“Well, don’t lie there on the ground. You’re likely to be trampled.”

“Yes sir,” Jon replied then scrambled to his feet.

The prime minister glanced at the building from which Jon had emerged. “I believe introductions are in order.”

Jon bowed as formally as he knew how. “Yes, I know who you are, Lord Boman. My name is Jon.”

“Hmm. Pleasure meeting you, Jon. Allow me to present my horse. Rain, Jon. Jon, Rain.” The prime minister gestured to each in turn, as if he were introducing two people.

“A pleasure meeting you, my lord.” Jon hesitated, then turned his attention to the horse. “And you as well, Rain.” Rather than bowing, he cautiously stepped forward and stroked Rain’s neck.

A slight hint of surprise showed on the prime minister’s face as he watched the interaction between Rain and Jon. “Are you among this year’s graduates?”

“Yes, my lord,” Jon replied, still stroking Rain’s neck.

“And how did you do?”

Jon blushed a little and hesitated briefly before replying. “First in my class, my lord.”

“Excellent,” Boman replied. “Have you been placed yet?”

“I won’t find out until next week, sir.” Because of this encounter, he was concerned he may miss out on one of the best jobs. “Sir, I apologize for running out into the street so recklessly. I just found out about my class placement and was rushing to tell my parents.” He immediately regretted trying to excuse his behavior.

But Boman seemed not to notice. “I see. Attached, are you? Engaged?”

“Um. No, my lord.”

“How would you feel about taking care of Rain for me?” The prime minister shifted in his saddle, then added, “First in your class is great, but more important to me is you’re the first person he’s allowed to touch him in years.”

Jon’s jaw slowly dropped as he began to realize what was happening.

Boman seemed to expect his surprise and waited patiently for a response.

“That’s ... that would be ... a dream job. Really?”

“Dream job? You may not think so once you start. You will need to live at the palace and you will be on call at all times – with rare exception. You’ll be a servant to both a man and a horse. Does it still sound like a dream job?”

Jon pondered these words. Yes, it still seemed to be exactly what he wanted. Even if didn’t work out in the long run, he could never acquire better experience. He would be able to find work anywhere if he did even passably well at this job.

Before he could respond, the prime minister spoke again. “Go home and discuss it with your parents. Come and see me tomorrow morning after breakfast. Give your name to the guard at the gate. You’ll be expected.”

Yes, my lord,” Jon said and bowed once more. Then he stood to one side and watched as one of the idols of his youth rode toward the palace. His parents would be so pleased. He couldn’t wait to see their faces when he told them.

Two long, deep tones sounded in unison from five horns, startling Jon out of his daydream. Like a ram’s horn, only an octave lower, the call to arms was unmistakable. He heard the gasps and shrieks from the people in the foyer, then winced and shook his head as he heard the ensuing chaos. Shouts, wails and the clattering of various items on the ground echoed down the hall.

He took a moment to remember his protocol, then after making sure Rain was ready to go, turned his attention to the remaining horses. The highest ranking soldiers in the kingdom could be rushing to the stables any minute and would be expecting their horses to be ready. Despite the circumstance, he couldn’t help a half smile as he remembered Boman’s orders to leave off the fancy decorations. One less thing in his way. Boman was always right.

GOOD KING GEOFFREY?

Although he had expected it, the abrupt sounding of the horns gave Boman a start as he entered the courtyard. Seeing the looks of surprise and panic around him, he felt somewhat guilty for planning the funeral in the first place. He suspected Tyriel would attack. They had done it before, and tensions between the two kingdoms had been high of late. To plan a funeral he knew would be interrupted was perhaps a little mean. But it had to be done. He had to force Tyriel's hand at a time when he could see it coming.

As he pondered his decision, he changed course, walking briskly around the northwest corner of the palace to a side door so he could avoid the confusion of the crowd. "I really had no other choice," he murmured as he climbed a few flights of stairs to a landing with a small, unpainted door. Key ring already in hand, he almost unconsciously unlocked the door as he reached it.

Down a short hallway and around a corner to the left, he found the large entryway to the war room where he was pleased to discover he was the first to arrive. It always gave him a sense of ownership, a slight hint of being more prepared than the others — one of the many qualities King Derek had instilled in him over the years.

He found it exactly as he had left it the other day. A large map of Zille and the surrounding kingdoms covered most of the wall to the left, while the other walls remained bare stone. Continuing the spartan feel, a tall oak table in the middle of the room served as the sole piece of furniture. It stood a little more than waist high with no accompanying chairs. Although one would assume the room's name indicated its use for battle preparations, it was actually more descriptive of the "discussions" that frequently occurred within.

Boman took his place at the far side of the table and laid out a map with all sorts of military markings. Once satisfied with his preparations, he stood facing the door wearing his favorite serious expression, ready to greet the next arrival. "The idiots," he murmured as he heard three sets of footsteps coming down the hall. While Emery was new and seemed competent, the other two clearly did not deserve their positions. He had never discovered why the king would tolerate such fools, but Derek had made it clear the topic was out of bounds. Boman had always suspected blackmail. Perhaps Geoffrey would not be bound to the same situation that kept the generals in place.

Emery was the first to arrive, followed by Salmon and Lief. Dressed in the same uniform as Boman, though with fewer medals, they filed in and took their places around the table. Salmon and Lief seemed disappointed to find the prime

minister had arrived first.

“Welcome, gentlemen,” Boman smiled politely as he greeted the three.

His words were met with serious expressions and an out-of-sync, “Greetings, Lord Boman.”

“Is everything in place?” the new king asked as he walked briskly into the room, nearly knocking Lief over as he approached the table. Clearly quite sober and quite unsurprised by the surprise attack, his playboy self seemed to have vanished. Although Boman had advised the king earlier, he marveled at the contrast between the perpetual teenager he had chastised two weeks ago and the shrewd king who now planned a battle.

“Yes, my lord,” several voices uttered nearly in unison. As the new king began examining the battle plans on the table, Boman took note of the surprised expressions on the generals’ faces. No doubt they expected the old Geoffrey.

“Nobody has noticed the rear guard, then?” King Geoffrey asked, his gaze shifting to Boman. Clearly sober, the king’s expression was stern and determined. His curly, light brown hair, angular jaw and high, pronounced cheek bones clearly marked him as his mother’s son. As tall as Boman, but heavier built, he physically dominated the room.

“No, my lord,” Boman reported. “I believe they have gone completely unnoticed, and at the last report, were in position and ready to go.” His expression was the only one of all the officers showing not a hint of surprise. While the king’s carriage and demeanor were regal and serious, the playful spark in Geoffrey’s eye told Boman the man hadn’t experienced a change of heart, but a change of arena. Geoffrey was simply applying his shrewdness and trickery to a more noble purpose – instead of wooing young ladies or cheating at games, he was saving his kingdom.

Geoffrey smiled at Boman’s report, then looked at each of the generals in turn. “If our alertness remains a surprise to Tyriel, we shall give them more than they bargained for. Gentlemen, prepare your troops for battle. Lord Boman will show you your places in the command room.” Then he glanced at Boman, stood straight and crossed his right fist over his chest. After a short pause, he declared, “For King Derek and Zille!”

Boman and the others were taken by surprise. Traditionally, this wartime declaration was made by the prime minister using the name of the current king. Perhaps Geoffrey acknowledged he had not yet been sworn in. Perhaps he was role-playing to inspire the others. Or maybe the new king had a change of heart after all.

Despite their initial surprise, Boman and the generals echoed the king's declaration, standing with their fists over their chests. Boman noticed the inspired looks on the generals' faces. Sincere or otherwise, the king's actions made an impression. Whether Geoffrey was truly becoming a leader or merely playing a role, the effect on his officers was profound and Boman couldn't suppress a little smile as he followed them out of the room.

SECRET MEETING

After he finished preparing the last horse Jon stepped out of the stall and stood back to admire his work. He smiled with satisfaction. All of the horses in his charge wore battle gear, were saddled and ready to go at a moment's notice. Boman would be pleased.

Turning his head to leave, something caught his eye. Something sticking out of the horseshoe? Something wrong with the hoof? He shook his head and clucked his tongue. That wouldn't do. He stepped back into the stall and knelt to get a closer look. After giving the horse's leg a gentle pat, he lifted the foot up to examine it. A clump of mud clung to the shoe and trapped a flat piece of wood.

"Yes, Your Majesty," he heard someone say from near the main entrance. An unfamiliar voice — unpleasant and weaselly. "I have no doubt Boman will try to sabotage your reign."

Jon stiffened and changed his mind about standing up to greet the unknown visitor. Although he may have to explain himself later, he didn't want to interrupt this discussion. Who would accuse Boman of such things? He quickly and quietly pried the mud and stick off the horse's shoe, then maneuvered himself into a better position to get a glimpse of the accuser.

"And how do you know this?" Geoffrey demanded, a hint of anger in his voice.

Through the boards of the stall, Jon tried to get a decent look at the situation. After a few seconds, a pudgy, sparsely bearded man came into view. Shorter than the king by half a head and probably somewhere in his thirties, his dark-brown hair was thin and concentrated around the sides and back of his head, leaving the top bare. His ever-shifting gaze threatened to reveal Jon's hiding spot, but Jon didn't move.

The pudgy man's eyes widened at the king's reaction and took a step back. "I heard Emery talking to his wife. He said someone is planning a rebellion, you know, because of ... well ... your past." He hunched over a bit, as if expecting to be struck.

"I see," the king replied slowly. "And what would Emery know of Boman's motives and intentions? He's the newest general and barely knows him. I thought you said you had real information."

"I do. I do. I've also overheard two of the generals' aides mention upcoming, secret meetings to discuss the state of the kingdom. And I heard Boman mention a contingency plan to your mother."

Jon wished he could see the king's expression. Did he really believe the man's

stories? On second thought, he doubted he would be able to reliably read the king. Geoffrey was notoriously difficult to read. At least this informant would have the same problem.

“I don’t need rumors and old wives’ tales, Thom.” Geoffrey’s voice became threatening. “Either you know something or you don’t. You bring me proof or you keep your mouth shut. If you’re right, you’ll be rewarded. If you’re wasting my time and casting doubt on the loyalty of one of this kingdom’s highest officials – and potentially my mother – your punishment will be severe.”

“Yes, Your Highness. I will find proof. I just need to be in the right place at the right time. I can arrange that. The missus has had dreams, and her dreams are never wrong.”

“I don’t care about the dreams of some mystic tart. Prove it or shut up. I’ve got a war to fight.” The king turned and departed briskly, leaving Thom in mid-attempt at a reply.

As Thom’s expression gradually changed from fearful informant to shrewd profiteer, Jon frowned. The man even rubbed his hands together as he waited, looking periodically in the direction the king had gone. Thom waited another full minute, then slinked off in the same direction as the king.

“Sneaky little bugger,” Jon grumbled as he stood from his hiding place. He quickly brushed straw off his trousers, then silently started in the same direction.

“Whoa! What’s this?” Boman suddenly appeared from around the corner as Jon reached the end of the corridor. The two nearly collided.

“Oh, sir!” Jon’s heart was beating double time. “You took me by surprise. I was ... well, we need to talk.”

“What’s happened?” Boman clearly discerned the gravity of Jon’s tone.

“Did you see a man pass by as you came in?”

“Yes. Almost stopped him. He seemed to be up to no good.”

“Well, he certainly *is* up to no good. He’s accusing you of treason. Looking for a way to prove it.”

“Treason?! That’s ridiculous!”

“I know. But he was talking to the king. I was finishing with Emery’s horse when they arrived. I overheard the whole thing.”

Boman sighed. “And I just stopped you from following him.”

Jon nodded. “His name is Thom. Shouldn’t be very many Thom’s around here. Not a very common name.”

“Right. I take it the horses are ready?”

Jon nodded again.

“Good. See what you can find out about this Thom. But don’t be away for too long. We may need you.” Boman paused with a thoughtful frown on his face, then shook his head as if dismissing a thought. “Unfortunately, I can’t help. I have to get to the command room and babysit the generals before things get out of hand.”

Jon suppressed a chuckle and shook his head. “Not to worry, sir. I can handle it. I’ll report as soon as I learn anything.”

NEW ARRANGEMENTS

Boman slipped into the command room so he could gauge the climate before revealing his presence. Situated at the top of the western tower of the palace, the command room provided a spectacular view of the surrounding area, most ideal for military endeavors. Maps covered the walls of the circular room, except for the large windows facing east and west. Four oak tables were distributed evenly, each surrounded with matching chairs. The tables were large and sturdy with nooks and slots for pens, paper, pins and many other bits and pieces generals found useful for managing a war. However, the lack of order throughout the space disturbed Boman.

Several men from the spy network were busy packaging their equipment, having been ordered to move to another room somewhere. The reported reasoning for this relocation was so the army, navy and aerial generals would not be interrupted by the activities of the spy network.

But Boman wasn't convinced.

The new king wanted exclusive control of the spy network. Their new location was anyone's guess, and being true to form, the spies weren't revealing anything — even to the generals. Their secrecy, of course, was a source of great annoyance to the army and navy generals, whose brief moments on the same side of any argument seemed to happen only when the topic of the spy network was raised.

Today, however, was an exception to even that sacred rule. The spy network's absence left the coveted northwest table vacant, and the army and navy generals — Lief and Salmon respectively — argued over whose obviously more superior branch of the armed forces deserved the spot.

“This is a ground attack,” Lief pointed out to Salmon. “It is an army matter and should be handled from the proper vantage point.”

Boman shook his head and groaned in disgust. Moments before, they had left the king's presence with proud, inspired expressions on their faces. How quickly they had degraded to arguing and shirking their duties. “And I thought I was joking when I said ‘babysit’ earlier,” he grumbled to himself. Stepping from the shadows, he started toward the generals, projecting as angry a demeanor as possible.

“Ah, Lord Boman,” Lief interrupted Salmon, who apparently missed the annoyance on the prime minister's face. Both generals turned to face Boman, as Lief spoke again, “We were just discussing the new arrangements here. I thought, of course, that”

“You’re a military general and we’re at war.” Boman cut off Lief. He had no patience for their childish political maneuvers. “Perhaps you should consider behaving as such. Try to remember ...” He pointed out the window. “... the enemy is out there.” His glare flickered in Salmon’s direction as well. “Both of you.”

Boman looked around at the mess and sighed more for show than anything else. “They could already be at our gates and you’re standing here arguing over a table. Get this mess in order and give me an update on our situation immediately.” Pointing to the northwestern table, then the eastern table, he ordered, “Army there. Navy there. And ...” Looking up precisely as Emery walked through the door, he pointed to the southwestern table. “Better late than never. Aerial there. Move, men!”

Boman caught the smug expression on Lief’s face as he picked up his things and headed off to his desired table. Boman sighed. He couldn’t address it now. Time would not allow for the ensuing arguments and explanations. On this occasion, the army was the most important piece of the military. The gate needed to be fortified first and foremost. Salmon would have to go on feeling insulted – for now.

At least the rookie Emery was new enough not to be entrenched in the other generals’ politics. His expression was a mixture of confusion and annoyance as he took up his assigned position, looking from face to face as if he had missed the joke.

Ignoring Emery’s confusion, Boman got straight to task. “Are the catapults and archers in place?”

“Should be, sir,” Emery replied. “I’ve just come from giving them their initial orders.”

Boman nodded, pleased to find at least one of the generals had spent his time usefully. Not only pleased, he was impressed. Emery might be an actual general rather than a political waste of space.

“And don’t think you’re off the hook because you’re moving,” Boman called to the last remaining member of the spy network – an average-sized, brown-haired, disturbingly normal looking fellow. The spy network uniforms gave no indication of rank, and if not for his extensive experience dealing with them, Boman might have entirely missed the man’s presence. “Unless the king has ordered differently, I want a runner every half hour with any news you dig up.”

The man, who Boman recognized as Frederick, turned and made a half bow. “As you wish, Lord Boman.” Without waiting for further instructions, he picked

up the box he had finished packing and left the room.

Boman was not pleased, especially in light of Jon's news. Why was the spy network moving? How was he to run a battle effectively without their information? The king must want to keep something to himself – but what?

Had he missed something from early that morning? As was customary on important days, he met alone with the king at dawn. The discussion revealed a secret ally would be coming to their aid, but not who. Apart from standard tactics and tentative battle preparations, nothing stood out. What else was Geoffrey hiding? Boman's brow wrinkled in concern, but he shook his head. He would have to think about it later. The battle was beginning and would require all his attention.

UNEXPECTED COMPANY

The reluctant faces of the guards did not deter Gurtie from insisting on going to the western tower of the palace. They had arrived at her door shortly after the horns sounded and insisted on taking her somewhere safe. Immediately. Always in such a hurry, these guards. It was bad enough she had to collect what things she could think of in such a hurry, but to be carted off to a tunnel to sit and wonder what might be happening outside wouldn't fly. She would take no argument from them.

"If we're to be overrun, I want to see it coming," she said.

"But your highness," the taller one protested. "The tunnels would be far safer, and we have orders to take you there."

"Well, Geoffrey may be your king, but he's my son. I outrank him when it comes to my own safety. I'll be going to the tower. You may follow if you feel it's necessary."

Their moans gave away their chagrin as she pushed past both of them and headed down the hall. They followed her into the large, circular second floor of the tower. Abuzz with people hurrying this way and that, they waded their way to the long staircase that corkscrewed up against the tower wall. After a long climb, they arrived at the third level – one floor below the command room.

The third floor had no divisions, just a landing that interrupted the staircase. The rest was one big, circular room. When they arrived, guards took their positions on the landing as Gurtie stepped into the room. Although she had no need for the guards, she didn't bother trying to convince them to leave. It would only get them in trouble with the king.

With windows facing east and west, the room offered two lovely views. To the west lay the palace grounds and the border forest. Gurtie realized how strange it was they had never given the forest a proper name. True, it did provide a border with both Tyriel and Onor, but it seemed wrong to give such a boring and obvious name to something so beautiful. With the widest variety of trees in any forest she knew – various evergreens, poplars, oaks, walnuts – it was green year-round. Perhaps they should rename it Evergreen Forest.

Gurtie dismissed the thought and looked through the east window. The partial view of the harbor revealed the Tyriellan navy, and just beyond it, the Zillean navy. She nodded. Even though the view was partially obscured by the eastern tower, she could see the Zillean navy had things well in hand.

Turning her attention to the room itself, Gurtie admired Emma's choice in decoration. This room was to be one of the main reception rooms after the

funeral. Full of neatly-arranged tables and chairs, it would accommodate half the attendees. Each table wore a white tablecloth and had a centerpiece of evergreen stems with pine cones and bright, red berries – symbols of eternal life, rebirth and happiness.

Gurtie sighed and looked toward the western side of the room. She waded her way through the tables and chairs and chose a smaller table near the window. Flanked by two comfortable-looking chairs with firm cushions, it was set for tea rather than a meal. It would suit her intent to watch events unfold outside.

“Could one of you bring some tea, please?”

After a quick, indiscernible discussion, the shorter one disappeared down the stairs. The remaining guard stepped forward a few paces. “Is there anything else you require, your highness?”

“I think the tea will do fine, thank you.”

He nodded, then returned to his post at the top of the stairs.

Alone except for the one guard, Gurtie selected one of the chairs and eased into it. From here, she would easily see the battle for Zille as it developed. Being surrounded by water on every side except the west, she had no doubt the attack would come from that direction.

“What’s this?” the remaining guard asked. Gurtie turned in her chair.

“It’s not my fault,” Gurtie heard the beginnings of an argument from the stairway.

“She asked for tea, not company.”

“Well she followed me anyway. I told her not to.”

A familiar voice came from the stairs. “I’m not about to be pushed into a tunnel. You’re up here. Why can’t I be?”

“We’re guarding the queen,” said the shorter of the two. The taller one grunted his agreement.

“Then give me your uniform. I’ll guard the queen. You can go hide in the tunnel.”

Gurtie laughed. “Gentlemen, I think you’d better let her in before she disrobes you and sends you back to the king with more to explain than just my location.”

Gurtie stood, stepped toward the staircase and smiled as she heard Emma giggle. Another step and she could see her blond curly locks between the two men blocking her way. Being slight and wiry didn’t stop Emma from pushing by the guards with surprising strength. This daughter of a farmer who recently married into the upper crust of society had a feisty country spirit about her Gurtie couldn’t help but like. Not only could Emma be a political ally, but

probably a good friend as well. This would be an opportunity to get to know her. Gurtie hadn't spoken to her about anything but the funeral since Emma arrived at the palace.

"Your highness," sighed the tall guard after Emma brushed by. "You really should be going to the tunnel."

Gurtie shook her head and sighed. They would never stop suggesting what they were instructed. But now that Emma had come, she was even less interested in going to their silly tunnel. "Nevermind your tunnel. If she'd rather watch than hide, I'd prefer the company of someone who won't pester me about my choices."

"Yes, ma'am," the guard complied.

Emma strode quickly toward Gurtie as if she had been held up all week. "I'm sorry, your highness." She curtsied. "I thought maybe I could see what's happening from up here."

"That's exactly why I'm in the tower. And please call me Gurtie. No need for ceremony at a time like this."

"Thank you, Gurtie." Emma cast a quick glance at the guards. "It's not like I'm putting the kingdom at risk by coming here instead of the tunnel. What's wrong with them?"

Gurtie smiled. "Don't be too put off by the guards. They have their orders. We're the ones going astray." She returned to her chair, while at the same time gesturing to the other chair. "Please, have a seat."

Emma smiled and took the offered chair. "Thank you. I suppose you're right. How do things look?"

"Well, they have blockaded us"

Emma giggled. Tyriel had a famously pathetic navy.

One of the guards arrived with a tea set.

"Thank you," Gurtie nodded her appreciation. "Set it on the table, please. We can serve ourselves."

After the man left, Gurtie looked out the window again. "But the drums are getting louder. I do hope we don't have to get on a ship. I get so seasick."

Emma frowned. "Certainly it won't come to that, will it?"

"Listen."

Gurtie watched as Emma faced west for a moment. Her eyes widened as she turned back to Gurtie. "I've never heard so many!"

"Me neither. If those drums are any indication of how many troops are coming, the battle will be difficult."

Emma sighed nervously, then stood up and walked to the window. “Why do they have to be so awful?”

Gurtie sighed as well. “I think it comes down to leadership. And perhaps a little brainwashing. For many years, they’ve been ruled by ambitious and overzealous men. Men who believe they serve the One by destroying those who don’t believe the same way they do. When self-righteous and ambitious men like King Dagle come to power, it results in war. But don’t despair. We will stand strong. Come and sit. It will be awhile yet.”

Emma nodded and returned to her chair. “I hope Emery is up to the task. He speaks confidently for my benefit, but I don’t think he feels like he’s up to par with Lief and Salmon.”

“Those two idiots?” Gurtie snorted. “I’ve heard my husband and Boman speak of Emery, dear. Don’t you worry about his capabilities. Besides, Boman will be overseeing everything and assisting when necessary. The prime minister will have much more trouble with the other two than Emery.”

Gurtie could see Emma brighten a little. She smiled and turned her attention to the small table between them. “Looks like the tea is ready. Would you like some?”

“Oh, let me,” Emma said, then stood and began pouring a cup for each of them.

“Thank you,” Gurtie smiled. “I’m glad you came. And not just to pour the tea.”

Emma smiled.

“You see,” the queen continued, “I couldn’t expect Beth to follow me everywhere in such circumstances. Not when she’s got a family of her own to care for. But it’s a terrible thing to watch a battle all by yourself.”

“I would think so,” Emma agreed as she reseated herself.

“So you see, I’m glad you came.” Gurtie lifted her cup and daintily took a sip of tea. As was appropriate, Emma waited for the queen before sipping her own cup. Good. She had apparently learned manners in her short stay at the palace. From the country or not, she would adapt to palace life. Gurtie was sure of it. And Emma seemed perfectly comfortable with a bit of silence, which Gurtie saw as another good sign.

Before either of them could speak again, the volume and cadence of the drums increased. Gurtie looked out the window to see a horde of yellow spilling out from the trees and forming ranks a short distance from the outer wall.

“And so it begins,” she sighed. “Would you mind giving me a hand, dear?”

“Of course not,” Emma set her teacup down and stood to extend her arm.

“Thank you,” Gurtie replied as she took the offered arm and pulled on it to stand. “Not as spry as I used to be.”

Emma smiled. “I think you’re doing fine, your ... I mean, Gurtie.”

Once they reached the window, Gurtie saw the Zillean troops arranged in organized ranks behind the outer wall. On the top of the wall, the aerial troops prepared their bows and catapults. Everything appeared to be ready.

“Oh my!” Emma gasped. “I don’t see an end!”

Gurtie’s eyes widened. Emma was right. The field was already full of yellow-uniformed Tyrielans and Gurtie could see patches of yellow through the tree line as if someone had painted a yellow backdrop behind the trees. For the first time in many years, she felt nervous. Could they hold off such an army? Would they lose their city? No. She couldn’t believe that. Her son was quite confident earlier today. He may be rebellious and devious, but not stupid. But had he expected so many enemy soldiers? Doubt maintained its foothold in her mind, but she did her best to keep it at bay. “Let’s sit down again, dear. What good will it do either way if the tea gets cold?”

Emma nodded and helped Gurtie back to her chair. As they sipped their tea, Gurtie turned her attention away from the battle. The crease in Emma’s forehead had become pronounced and the queen could almost read her worried thoughts. “They’ll have to shout at each other first, but only after they have everything set. We can stand up again when they’re done. Why don’t you tell me about Emery? How did you two meet?”

BANTER

The drums ceased, the chanting died and Boman watched a Tyrielan soldier saunter forward several paces. His yellow uniform was almost too bright to look at, even with the large green shield he carried blocking half of it. The long brown feather protruding from his helmet signified his high rank. Probably one of the generals. He surveyed the wall for a moment, then shouted for all to hear.

“Men of Zille. We have brought more troops than you can withstand. If you surrender now, I can assure you nobody will die. You will cede your lands to Tyriel, pay us a modest tribute and provide some of your young men for our army. It’s a fair offer my king makes.”

A voice came from the wall. “Or we could defeat you here on this field and leave your bodies to the birds.” Boman smiled as he saw the king had emerged just off center to the south. “Why do you invade our land unprovoked?”

“We do not invade.” The Tyrielan general cocked his head in an arrogant pose. “We merely claim what is rightfully ours. King Dagle, in his prayer closet, was gifted this land by a vision from the One. You are but dogs, and cannot understand such holy things. Nevertheless, we are prepared to treat you kindly – if you surrender.”

“Are your men ready?” Boman queried Emery.

“Yes, sir.”

King Geoffrey laughed. “Tell your king to stop combining opium use with political decisions. We will defend our land. If you are expecting dogs, you will be gravely disappointed.”

The Tyrielan sniffed in disdain. “How dare you insult our king in such a way! He is the great King Dagle, Keeper of the Holy Light, Lord of the West and ...”

“Yes, yes. I know who he claims to be. And where is he?” King Geoffrey swept his hand across the Tyrielan ranks. “Not here? How sad it must be for you to serve a king who lacks the courage to lead you into battle himself.”

Boman smirked. That probably hit a little deeper than the average pre-battle taunting.

The Tyrielan general’s face turned crimson, and his spear hand trembled, but he continued what Boman suspected was a practiced response. “His greatness cannot be put at risk in battle. Why send a king to fight dogs?”

Unmoved by the general’s words, King Geoffrey laughed again. “Apparently, that is all your king believes you are good for. If he sees us as dogs, then he must see you as a kennel keeper rather than a general. Calculate carefully. Win or lose, your losses will be great.”

Nearly frothing with indignity, the man spat out, “He need not calculate the cost. The One has spoken to him. You must surrender.”

“You mean the drugs have been speaking to him.”

The man was nearly in a frenzy. He literally spat the words this time. “I shall cut out your tongue myself!”

Boman smiled.

“I tire of this,” Geoffrey replied, nonchalantly. He nodded to the man next to him who, in one fluid action, raised his bow and let an arrow fly. Before anyone could react, it pierced the Tyrielan’s head.

Boman gasped. It was the last thing he had expected, and his gasp was accompanied by many others on both sides of the wall. What was Geoffrey thinking with such a dishonorable move? It was ... well, it was dishonorably shrewd. With their top general dead, they would undoubtedly be a less effective army. Geoffrey had bought some time. He sighed, then turned his attention to the rest of the tower to see the other men gaping in disbelief. Even with no written rule, everyone in the room clearly saw the act as dishonorable.

“Well, that’s one less general to deal with,” Boman commented casually, bringing a few nervous chuckles from the generals. He needed to get their minds on the right track. “Think about it later, gentlemen. We have a war to fight. Emery, you’re up. Lief, prepare to reinforce the gate and the walls. Are the rest of the ships on their way, Salmon?”

As he waited on their replies, he turned to look at the wall again, but Geoffrey had disappeared. The Tyrielans nearest the incident scurried around the fallen general, shouting and gesturing as murmurs of what happened spread through the ranks. A moment later, another feathered soldier rushed to where the first had fallen, shouting as he ran, “You’ll pay for this! We will be merciless today!”

“Arrows ready, sir.” Emery interrupted his thoughts, then turned to give instructions to one of his men.

Boman saw Lief conversing briefly with one of his men, who subsequently exited the tower.

Salmon consulted with one of his men, then reported. “Yes, sir. Their blockade will not escape ours.”

The prime minister smiled at the thought. A blockaded blockade. Then his mind turned back to the western field. “Gentlemen, the battle will be difficult.” He turned to face them, waiting until at least the three generals had turned to listen. “It looks like they’ve brought most of their army. Their intent is not simply to win. They mean to slaughter us. But we will win the day.” It was time

to reveal his one piece of secret – yet incomplete – information. “The king has found an ally. Our task is to hold out long enough for them to arrive.”

“An ally? Who?” Lief’s voice rose in pitch and his mouth hung open. Most of the men stopped what they were doing.

“I don’t know,” Boman admitted. He had racked his brain for any hint of who it might be since Geoffrey privately informed him. The only possibilities he could imagine ranged from bad to unthinkable. But it didn’t matter in this moment. His men needed hope. “He has been very tight lipped about it. But he was as confident about our success today as I’ve seen him about anything.”

He looked from face to face, seeing some nods, but mostly expressions of acceptance, as if they believed it, but didn’t expect the result to be entirely satisfactory. They would win the day, but it would be soured somehow.

But tentative hope was better than despair.

“Suffice it to say your king has ordered you to plan accordingly. We simply need to hold out long enough. So no charging out attempting to punch holes in their line until we have exhausted our other measures first. We should not be pressed into a last resort.”

“Yes, sir.” Lief nearly moaned his response. The others turned back to their duties amid indistinguishable murmurs.

Boman couldn’t fault any of them for not trusting the new king. He wasn’t sure he trusted him either. As a young prince, Geoffrey had been the most difficult pupil he had ever tutored. Boman was not sure he was up to the task of serving the man as king. What principles would he be forced to violate in doing so?

In the meantime, the confusion had settled, the outrage run its course and a new general stepped up to command the Tyrielan troops. The horn sounded and the sea of yellow surged toward the wall amidst a roar of shouts. The battle had begun.

Boman turned to see Emery issuing the order to fire, then looked at Lief, who still appeared a bit dumbfounded. “The wall, general!”

Lief nearly jumped out of his boots as he moved into position. He began issuing signals to his troops on the wall.

Salmon, in an obvious attempt to avoid being rebuked next, turned and put his telescope to his eye and looked in the direction of the Zillean ships entering the harbor.

Boman was about to scold him anyway when Frederick appeared at the top of the stairs. The spy network captain strode purposefully toward him. It never

ceased to amaze Boman how ordinary he looked. If not for his years of experience, Boman would not have recognized him.

Boman turned and took a step to meet him. "What news?"

"They are on the way," he replied quietly. "If you can keep Tyriel outside the wall, we will easily win."

Boman scoffed. "A rather big if." Then he lowered his voice. "I don't suppose you can share any information on whom we're expecting?"

"No, my lord."

"I didn't think so. Anything else?"

"No, my lord." The man winced.

"Fine. Let me know when you have something to share." Boman could see a twinge of guilt in the man's eyes, but no further information would be offered.

Frederick nodded, then turned and left.

"Gentlemen," Boman announced, "I have been informed our reinforcements are on the way. Our task is unchanged. Keep Tyriel outside the wall until help arrives. And since the identity of these reinforcements has been kept secret, I would suggest you prepare to be unhappy about it."

He barely heard the others' acknowledgement as he looked back at the field of battle. Deep down, he knew who was coming. The king risked assassination by such an alliance. But he would bury his thoughts for another time. The battle would require all his attention.

PALACE ALLIES

“Oh no! He didn’t!” Gurtie sank back into her chair. “How could he behave so dishonorably?”

Emma and the two guards suddenly held their ears, a custom that indicated they officially did not hear someone speaking ill of the king.

“Oh, I’m sorry.” Gurtie blushed at her indiscretion and waved her hand. “I’m not speaking against our king. I’m scolding my son.”

Emma smiled and reached over to pat her hand. “I imagine the two must be difficult to separate.”

“He’s making it easier than you might think,” the queen mother sighed. “But I should hold my tongue. Old as I am, I should know better by now.” She turned her attention to Emma. “Let’s not speak of my son’s behavior until there’s something good to say. How about your husband? This battle will probably be a milestone in his career. If he’s even remotely intelligent and can follow Boman’s orders, he’ll easily distinguish himself from those other two fools.” She raised her voice to make sure the guards could hear. “I can criticize the generals whenever I see fit and nobody need cover their ears over it.”

Emma giggled, although her eyes betrayed a bit of worry. She shook her head. “I can’t say I’ve heard anything nice about Lief or Salmon since I arrived here.”

“Then you’ve not been lied to, dear.”

Emma shook her head. “Are they really that bad?”

“Derek owed their fathers a favor. Not many know about it. Only I know why. Fortunately, the favor doesn’t extend into Geoffrey’s reign.”

Emma’s eyes widened. “How did we ever win wars with them as generals?”

“In the last fifty years, we’ve never been without Boman.”

Gurtie smiled as she saw Emma’s expression change. She was catching on to the political mess.

“And that’s why you’ve taken a particular interest in Emery,” Emma said quietly, as if informing herself. “And that’s why” She turned to look at Gurtie, doubt written on her face.

Gurtie laughed. “Oh, I pay attention to politics, but it doesn’t affect my loyalties. When I like someone, it’s not for political reasons. It doesn’t mean I don’t understand the political implications of things. I just don’t let them control my path.” She smiled, then winked. “And sometimes, I take advantage of them.”

“So I’m not merely a tool you’re using?”

“Absolutely not! I don’t use people I like.”

Emma smiled and shrugged. “I’m sorry. I really don’t know politics at all.”

Gurtie shook her head. “Of course you do, dear. Do you have a quilt circle in your home town?”

“Yes.”

“Same game, different arena.” Gurtie smiled as she watched the young woman ponder the idea.

Emma bit her lower lip, hesitated, then nodded slowly. “I see. So it’s a bunch of self-important ladies gossiping about everyone else?”

“I knew you’d understand.”

Emma smiled. “I suppose people are people no matter where you find them.”

“Exactly. Different clothes and different things at stake, but you’ll find the basic concept remains the same. Massage the right egos and avoid getting in the wrong people’s way. I’m sure you saw a bit of that where you’re from.”

“Yes. The baker was called Grumpy Joh. He would refuse to give people bread if they weren’t polite when they came in. Big guy, too.”

Gurtie smile. “We have a few like him.”

“But if you offended him, you had to go sweet-talk his wife. Then she would sweet-talk him and if you were lucky, you could buy your bread by lunchtime.”

Gurtie smirked as she remembered some incidents with her husband. “I’m sure a few people said the same thing about King Derek and I.”

Their laughter was interrupted by a Tyrielan horn. Most Zilleans recognized it simply because they had heard it too many times. Emma stood and assisted Gurtie to her feet, then walked with her to the window to watch the battle begin.

A LOSING BATTLE

Unaccustomed to having a skilled general on his staff, Boman found himself staring at Emery. The man's uniform was in order, his table was organized and his men attended him as if they knew what they were doing. Boman's hesitation was primarily due to his confusion at not having to urge and correct the new general. It was a pleasure to watch him work.

"Release!" Emery called to his archers. A barrage of arrows flew into the front ranks of the Tyrielan soldiers, half of them finding their target. The first row of Zilleans on the wall knelt, allowing the row behind them a clear view of the field.

"Release!" Emery called again. Another flight of arrows cut into the charging Tyrielans, dropping as many as the first round.

Before Boman could suggest it, Emery pointed at a soldier posted near the catapults who turned and gestured to the other soldiers with him. Within seconds, the six catapults hurled melon-sized stones into the Tyrielan ranks.

But with each flight of arrows and each volley of stones came another rank of yellow-clad soldiers. Boman's brow furrowed as he saw how much yellow still filled the tree line. The field was nearly full of enemy soldiers surging toward the wall. As many or more awaited in the forest. Even with reinforcements coming, Boman began to doubt the battle's outcome.

Giving credence to his doubt, Tyriel's archers fired back, dropping nearly every third Zillean soldier from the wall. Frowning, Emery ran to the window. "Shields! Pay attention!" The front row of archers set down their bows and held up shields, leaving only small gaps through which the men behind could shoot their arrows.

Boman still wasn't sure how to react to a general doing his job, but it only reminded him he had two other generals. He turned his attention to the rest of the room and immediately wished he hadn't. Salmon had returned to gazing over his fleet uselessly, while Lief paced back and forth, leaving his men with no instructions.

Boman shook his head. "Are the men ready to hold the gate?"

Lief's eyes widened, then he blinked a few times. "Yes, uh, Lord Boman. Yes. They are prepared."

Boman groaned angrily. "Then get them to the wall." King Derek had never divulged the debt he owed that kept Lief and Salmon in their positions, but Boman had never liked it. They were worthless men. At least he had one good general now.

He returned his attention to the field. A contingent of Tyrielans marched up the middle of the field with their battering ram — a large wooden beam with an iron cap on one end and handles along its length. The men on either side wore bright green helmet shields that strapped onto their shoulders and backs and fit on top of their heads.

Along the wall, large ladders wheeled by clusters of enemy soldiers approached. Through Emery's efforts, several ladders lay broken and useless in the field, but more followed. In a few moments, the enemy soldiers would begin climbing.

"Lief! Your men are blocking the archers!" Despite his junior status, Emery couldn't contain his frustration.

"I know! I know!" Lief gestured wildly at his captains, who promptly ordered their men back a few steps, allowing the archers to reach their positions.

As the enemy drew near, those in between the large ladders brought out ropes and grappling hooks to begin scaling the wall. At first, their attempts were met with an immediate barrage of arrows. But the Tyrielan archers began slowly picking off the Zilleans.

"Fall back!" Emery called as the first Tyrielan soldiers successfully scaled the wall. The archers fell back several steps to make way for the army.

Meanwhile, Lief pointed forward, signaling his troops to resume their positions and engage the enemy. The clang of steel on steel echoed as swords and shields clashed.

In short order, the first wave of Tyrielans to scale the wall were repelled, but more came. The repeated thudding of the battering ram against the gate sounded like a death knell as it became obvious Zille's defenses wouldn't hold much longer.

The fighting turned sloppy as casualties from both sides piled up on the wall and at its base. But the Tyrielan soldiers efficiently carted bodies away from the wall to make room for new climbers.

Boman could see no end to the mass of yellow. Tyriel would not run out of soldiers. The Zillean army, although they fought well, would not be able to win the battle. Boman was certain. When would those reinforcements arrive?

A loud crack sounded from the gate in the outer wall.

Emery turned to the nearest group of archers. "You there! Pick them off as they come through the gate."

Boman turned to see Lief frozen in panic. "Lief! Your troops! What are you doing?"

White as a sheet, Lief managed to gather himself. “To the gate!”

The call was echoed by two more voices, although Boman noted one of Lief’s captains sent a contingent to the wall several seconds before the order. Now a host of Zillean soldiers flooded the space between the palace and the outer wall just in time to meet the first group of Tyrielans breaking through the gate.

At nearly the same time, another group of Tyrielans successfully scaled the wall and began to overcome the Zillean troops.

Where were those reinforcements?

A new horn sounded from within the forest and Boman froze. He felt as much as heard its low, guttural sound. Without turning to look, he knew who had arrived. “Onor!” Located to the southwest of Zille, Onor was hated and feared by most of the civilized world.

“We can’t fight Tyriel and Onor at once!” Lief shrieked. Salmon slumped against the table while Emery stared wide-eyed at Boman. Everyone in the command room stopped and gaped at the forest.

Outside, the battle all but stopped as Zilleans and Tyrielans alike turned confused faces toward the forest. Who was Onor here to fight? Tyriel? Zille? Both of them at once? The cries of pain and fear emanating from the forest indicated they came to fight Tyriel at least. What about Zille?

“Lief!” Boman commanded. “Lead your men. You still have Tyriel to fight.”

Emery didn’t wait for a rebuke. Instead, he turned to the window and called to his captain. “Send a flight midway! Quickly, while they’re distracted!”

“Our navy still holds the blockade,” Salmon offered uselessly.

Boman acknowledged Salmon with a nod, then turned to see the results of the last flight of arrows. The Tyrielans must have been facing west, because nearly every arrow found its mark. A line of fallen soldiers partially clogged Tyriel’s path to the forest. “Nice work, Emery.”

Frederick appeared at the top of the steps and turned toward Boman. “Your reinforcements have arrived, Lord Boman.” Boman didn’t have to guess the man’s opinion of these reinforcements, as his mouth twisted in disgust. The announcement was loud enough for everyone in the room to hear, bringing the room’s activity to a shocked halt.

“Thank you,” Boman replied, then turned toward the western window, facing away from the others in the room. How could Geoffrey make an alliance with Onor? What were the terms of this alliance? It couldn’t be good. What would the people think? How long before someone attempted to assassinate the king? How long before someone succeeded?

“Lief,” he turned to make sure the man was actually conscious. “Don’t let your troops stop at the wall. Send them out. We will need to be equally as responsible for the victory as Onor. More, if possible.”

Visibly shaking, Lief called out the order. Boman took note again of the young officer on the wall who seemed to anticipate everything Lief ought to be doing. Every time Lief finally got around to calling out an order, the man was already prepared to carry it out. Maybe it wouldn’t be so bad if Lief passed out.

Boman turned his attention back to the chaotic field of battle. Perhaps Geoffrey had out-thought himself this time. Boman remembered the Onorian War of thirty years ago. He remembered the atrocities and the unsavory behavior of the soldiers. An alliance between these two kingdoms was a disaster waiting to happen.

AN ODIIOUS ALLIANCE

The horn of Onor shook Gurtie, causing her to lean on the window sill for support. Only bad things followed that sound.

Emma gasped and her face paled in terror. "Onor, too? What will we do?"

Gurtie tried to reassure her. "It looks like they're attacking Tyriel."

"Maybe that's only because Tyriel's in the way."

Gurtie pondered the idea, but dismissed it quickly. "I know my son. For better or worse, it is his doing. He chose this course to save the city." Her voice betrayed her disappointment in the king's decision.

Emma nodded, but said nothing. She appeared to be carefully forming her response. Perhaps she was learning the discretion she would need to live in the kingdom's capital. After a moment, Emma frowned. "How is it going to work?"

"You mean an alliance may not work because they sacrifice their children to gods that don't exist? Or because they drink the blood of their enemies after they defeat them and hang their preserved heads on their walls?" Although her words were the antithesis of discretion, she wanted the opportunity to teach.

Emma seemed perplexed. "All of those, I suppose. I know I still have a lot to learn, but I don't think I could stomach a feast with the Onorians."

Gurtie glanced at the guards, who seemed busy with their own conversation. "I don't think that will happen. It won't work. We're too different. I'm not sure what the king plans to do once the dust settles, but I can't imagine it involves any socializing."

Emma nodded and sighed.

Gurtie resumed watching the battle. As the gates opened and the Zillean soldiers tentatively chased the enemy from their wall, the Onorians broke through the trees. Tyriel had nowhere to go. While most of the Tyrielan soldiers rushed to form ranks against the approaching Onorians, some dropped their weapons and surrendered to Zille.

Gurtie stared wide-eyed as the hopeless situation for Zille became heartbreaking for Tyriel. Trapped between the Onorian and Zillean armies, the Tyrielans who chose to fight stood no chance.

The Onorians differed significantly from the other soldiers on the field. Standing half a head taller and wearing only loincloths, their bronze skin stood out against the pale faces and brightly colored uniforms of Zille and Tyriel. Their braided hair ranged in color from light-brown to blond. Each soldier carried a single staff with three jagged blades on each end.

With a twisting and turning fighting style, they slashed, jabbed and dodged

with a speed the Tyrielans could not handle. Wearing no armor, the Onorian soldiers could be dropped with a single arrow or thrust of the sword. But the speed gained from this lack of armor made them more difficult to hit.

In the end, speed beat power. The battle lasted mere minutes. Although several dozen Onorians lay dead or wounded on the field, the vast majority of the casualties wore yellow. Tyriel's once threatening horde had become a red-stained, yellow shroud covering the field.

The few Tyrielans who managed to surrender had done so as soon as Onor arrived. Weaponless, they cowered behind the Zillean line. When the fighting ended, Zillean and Onorian soldiers stood face to face, wide-eyed at the strange circumstance.

The Onorians began looking around and pointing at one another. One of them would occasionally raise his fist and shout something.

"What are they doing?" Emma's brow furrowed as she watched the scene below.

"They're determining the winner."

"The winner of what?"

"If you follow which ones raise their fists, you'll see it's only the ones covered in blood. When they've narrowed it down, their king will determine which one is the winner. The bloodiest. That soldier will sit in the place of honor at their victory feast when they get home."

Emma groaned as she watched. "We're allied with them?"

"We don't have to participate in their awful traditions." Gurtie patted Emma's shoulder. Although she felt soiled simply contemplating the alliance, she could not help feeling a bit relieved the city was still intact.

An eerie silence settled as Chokwe, the Onorian king, came forward. After a careful examination of the four soldiers chosen by the others, he gave an exuberant man-hug to the apparent winner. The soldier raised both fists in the air amidst a roar of applause from the Onorian army. Then he and the other three cleared a path toward a mound near the wall, kicking bodies out of the way.

"I still can't believe they're so feared when they don't wear any armor at all. They don't even clothe themselves, unless the loincloth counts as such."

Emma made an excellent point Gurtie had never considered. She remembered how surprised she was the first time she saw the Onorians go to war all but naked. She could not remember thinking much about their attire – only the fear they instilled in her. Gurtie half smiled, half grimaced. "Yes, they are a bit difficult to look at."

Once the path was clear, King Chokwe strode to the mound and scanned the length of the wall. Clad in a loincloth like the others, a head dress of feathers and bone distinguished him as king.

“People of Zille,” he called out in a thick accent. “Have not we both seen enough of war?” He gestured around the field. “See? We have helped you. Perhaps one day you will help us too. Perhaps we can be friends.”

King Geoffrey appeared on the wall. He smiled and bowed his acknowledgement of Chokwe’s words. “Thank you for your aid. Many Zillean lives were saved this day. I do not know if we would have survived the battle, but I know it would have been costly. Clearly friends are better than enemies.”

Chokwe smiled and bowed. “You speak true. I would like to invite you to the palace in Onor to discuss the terms of our alliance. Will you come in two weeks?”

“A kind offer,” Geoffrey replied. “I will attend. Will you stay to feast with us today?”

Chokwe’s low, bellowing laugh echoed off the walls. For the first time, Gurtie noticed the surrounding silence.

“A kind offer as well, but I do not think our people are ready for such ... interaction.” Then he looked down at his blood-stained body and gestured to his soldiers. “And we are not fit for feasting at this time. Perhaps we will find a ... more ... a better occasion after we make our alliance.”

Geoffrey nodded. “As you wish. Thank you for your aid today.” He raised his fist with a shout. “Three cheers for Zille and for Onor!”

Only about half the army responded, probably by rote, with their fists in the air. “Hey! Hey! Hey!”

Chokwe smiled and gestured to his men, who copied the Zillean cheer more loudly. “I will see you in Onor in two weeks, yes?”

Geoffrey nodded. “Yes. I will be there.”

One of Chokwe’s soldiers pointed at the first Tyriellan general’s body, but Chokwe shook his head and pointed at Geoffrey. After a little more searching, the second general was found. Chokwe smiled and nodded.

Gurtie looked at Emma who was staring at the scene. “Don’t watch this. I’d like to go back to my chair, if you don’t mind.”

“Of course.” Emma’s voice was quiet. “I think I’d like to sit, too.”

As they settled themselves, Gurtie smiled. “Try to remember they saved our lives. There’s no point watching them do things that appall us.”

Emma nodded.

Gurtie looked at the guards. “Leave us, please. As you can see, the danger has passed.”

The taller one bowed. “Yes, your majesty.” After the two men disappeared down the stairs, Gurtie took Emma’s hand. “The people will not like an alliance with Onor. Some powerful people will oppose it, and may be driven to action. Whether or not I agree with the alliance, I must support the king, but I fear we will be in the minority. I will need your help.”

Emma’s expression turned grave as she sat up straight and stared at Gurtie. “Surely, you know I wouldn’t side against the king.”

“Of course, dear.”

Emma frowned. “A coup? It won’t come to that, will it?”

Gurtie nodded. “It is inevitable.”

CONSPIRACY

Gathered in the command room at the top of the tower were Lief, Salmon and a dozen of their usual cohorts – a secret meeting Jon had been commissioned to find. He slipped silently down the large, winding stairs to the second floor, then nodded to the guards as he entered the foyer. He scanned the room for prying eyes before slipping halfway down the stairs to join the young lad he had paid to spy for him. A mop of curly brown hair halfway covered the lad's eyes and his ill-fitting clothes were probably hand-me-downs of hand-me-downs. He held out his hand expectantly.

The boy's eyes widened in surprise as Jon handed him a silver coin. "Oh, thank you, sir."

"Not a word to anyone," Jon cautioned him quietly. "It could be as dangerous for you and your family as for me."

"Never saw a thing, sir," the boy whispered. "I've no idea where this coin came from."

Jon nodded toward the stairs. The lad grinned from ear to ear, then scampered away. Jon smiled. On the few occasions that necessitated the use of someone underage, Jon always insisted on anonymity. Just an extra precaution in case of a slip of the tongue or discovery. If a name is not known, it cannot be accidentally spoken or needled out.

Once the boy's footsteps faded down the stairs, Jon turned his attention back to the generals and their secret meeting. He silently climbed the stairs to the reception room, then hesitated. The command room consumed the entire space on the next level. He would be caught. Instead, he found a spot under the stairs where he could hear the conversation without discovery. The lookout would surely peek down the stairs any moment.

"I don't care if we're not quite ready." Jon recognized Lief's stern voice. "We must take advantage of the king being out of town. While he's selling us to the Onorians, we need to be putting someone worthy in charge. He's an apple that fell too far from the tree."

"I am in total agreement with you on our reasons, Lief." Salmon's voice, though earnest, was much calmer than Lief's. "But we've barely recruited anyone, and we have no idea where Emery stands, though I suspect he's loyal to the king. Which is why we haven't risked talking to him yet. He could ruin everything."

Jon's anger was roused. How could they even consider such treason? It was unconscionable. But a wry smile formed as he realized something. Here were

arguably the worst generals in Zille's history complaining about the incompetency of their king.

Having more than enough to satisfy Boman, he slipped down the stairs to find him. The prime minister was awaiting word from him so he could disrupt their secret meeting.

Jon didn't have to look far. He found Boman waiting near the gate. Jon shook his head and chuckled. "You knew this would be it, didn't you?"

Boman nodded, smiled and raised his eyebrows expectantly.

"In the command room, sir."

Acknowledging with another nod, Boman started up the stairs. Jon knew it was probably a bad trait, but he expected to enjoy the confrontation and only halfway suppressed a smile as he followed his mentor.

The voice of Salmon's second in command could be heard as they approached. "And if he thinks we're just going to sit back and allow such an alliance to go forward, he's got"

Boman didn't even pause at the door to listen. "What is this madness?" His voice reverberated throughout the room. The lookout stared in shock, the lieutenant's mouth froze in mid speech and the others stared wide-eyed at the prime minister.

Boman looked at each of them in turn. "Are you conspiring to overthrow your king? Will you disgrace your kingdom and start a civil war right on the heels of the battle we just finished? A war that's probably not over?"

Looking around the room, Jon suspected none of them had considered these questions.

Boman didn't leave space for a response. "And what will Tyriel do when they see us fighting each other? And when they realize you no longer have Onor as an ally? And who will lead this rabble? Have you decided yet, or will you have your own miniature civil war over that issue?"

Lief attempted a reply, but no words resulted. After a few seconds, during which his face contorted into several pained expressions, he sighed and remained silent. None of the others spoke. Jon couldn't help enjoying the situation. Nobody ever knew how to respond when Boman poked holes in their plans.

Boman held the room captive with his glare, an ability Jon had always admired. Never in Zille's history had one individual commanded such fear and respect without actually being king. In fact, Jon thought, few kings commanded as much fear and respect as Boman.

When the silence had lasted long enough to be uncomfortable, Salmon's

lieutenant shifted slightly and raised a brow. “Were you ... thinking of leading us yourself?”

Jon turned around to avoid showing his surprise. Was the man really so stupid? As he faced the doorway, he noticed a figure quickly disappear down the stairs. He stepped out of the room to look, but all he caught was a vanishing leg and the sound of footsteps descending the stairs. He darted down the stairs, but he wasn't fast enough. Jon considered following, but thought better of it. Whoever it was would disappear into the crowded streets.

“Guards!” Boman's voice echoed out of the doorway, apparently his response to the last question. Jon hurried back up the stairs and re-entered the room ahead of the approaching guards.

“You will be tried for treason,” Boman announced to the group. “Your fate is in the hands of the king you do not trust.”

As the guards arrived, Boman looked hard at the two generals. Then he pointed at the rest of the men in the room. “These men have been caught conspiring against the king. Lock them up. Leave the generals alone.”

As the guards nodded their assent and began escorting the men out of the room, Boman turned his glare back to the generals, whose wide eyes and gaping jaws betrayed their surprise. He raised his voice so everyone could hear. “Thank you for your assistance in bringing this heinous conspiracy to light.”

Salmon opened his mouth to speak, but the prime minister cut him off with a wave of his hand. Once the other conspirators were out the door, he lowered his voice. “I will hear nothing from either of you. Nobody in Zille will trust you after today. Your careers are finished.”

The generals hung their heads in defeat as Boman walked out the door. Jon followed without making eye contact with the generals. No point enduring the scornful looks he would have received in return. They would have to unleash their venom on someone else.

At the bottom of the stairs, Boman stopped and spoke quietly to Jon. “It appears we have a loose end to tie off.”

“How could you have seen him?”

“I didn't. You chased someone down the stairs. I assume someone fled the scene.”

Jon nodded. “Thom. It must have been him.”

“Hmm. No doubt, he'll head for Onor. Follow him, please. If you wouldn't mind.”

“Of course, sir.” Jon bowed. As he strode out the gate, he chuckled. Boman

always asked so politely, even though it was clearly an order.

A SECRET ERRAND

Boman was awakened by hoofbeats in the courtyard outside his window. His old man's moan turned into a groggy yawn followed by a long stretch. He slowly sat up and plopped his feet down onto the cold stone floor. He had always marveled at how the stone could be so cold even with the warm breeze coming in the window.

He heard the downstairs door open and shut as he yawned again. Feeling his age, he decided to wait for incentive to get up. Instead, he put his robe over his shoulders and slid his feet into the slippers beside his bed. Recognizing Jon's quick, skipping footsteps on the stairs, he relaxed. No need to get up yet. "Come," he croaked in response to the knock at his door.

"Pardon me for waking you." Jon bustled into the room. "But you wanted to know as soon as I had news, and I've got some."

"I'm listening."

"You'll probably want to pack while I explain."

Boman sat up straighter. "How long will we be gone?"

"Couple days."

Boman found his incentive to stand up. He reached under the bed and grabbed his leather satchel, then started toward the dresser. "What did you find out?"

"The man who sneaked out of the meeting with the generals was indeed Thom. I followed him to an inn on the road to Onor and overheard him tell someone he was about to prove the highest official in Zille was a traitor."

Boman stopped packing and looked at Jon with a raised brow.

"He's certainly broadcasting his secret mission for the king. But we can't do anything about that. It would just turn into a game of conflicting opinions. I think we need to prove it."

Boman sighed. Jon was right. He resumed packing.

"Your horse is prepared and provisioned. Mine is watered and resting. You only need a few changes of clothes."

"Thank you, Jon." But Boman stopped packing. "Won't it look suspicious for me to leave town at the same time the king is being informed I'm a traitor?"

"Normally it would."

Boman raised a brow. Jon loved to make a production of his findings. "What do you know?"

Jon smiled. "The lad I hired to do some digging for me turned out to be a real jewel. He overheard them talking about a man named Turney who was tasked with acquiring some mercenaries. He's in Gaeld."

“So that’s how they planned to man their rebellion.” Boman frowned as he resumed packing. “Gaed. We can’t both go. You’ll have to stay here.”

Jon returned the frown. He wasn’t comfortable staying. Boman always sent him out. “Perhaps it would be best if you stayed.”

“Both of the men we need to arrest outrank you. I have to be the one to do that. And one of us needs to stay here to keep an eye on things.”

After a quick moment of thought, Jon sighed and nodded. “You’re right. I don’t like it, but you’re right.”

Boman nodded. “So this Turney fellow. How will I know him?”

Jon smiled.

Boman chuckled and shook his head. His pupil could never hide the fact he was proud of his accomplishment. “You know, you need to learn to be proud of yourself on the inside and much more reserved on the outside.”

“I know,” Jon replied, still smiling. “But nobody else is here to see my unmasked pride. Besides, I’ve managed to make your job easy. I have plenty to be proud of.”

Boman laughed. “Fine. What do you have for me?”

“A gift,” Jon beamed proudly. “Lief and Salmon have made their move. They sent their top aides to Gaeld last night. I suspect if you find them, you’ll find Turney.”

Boman smiled, too. “And if I catch them, it will be my word against two aides.”

“Exactly.”

“Nice work, Jon. I can prove my own innocence and the generals’ guilt at the same time.”

Jon nodded. “I sent some un-uniformed soldiers to Gaeld. They’ll be waiting for you.”

Boman nodded and finished packing. As he began dressing, a new thought struck him. “I was relieved not to find Emery at the meeting. He’s a good man, don’t you think?”

“I do, although except for some pleasantries, I haven’t spoken with him.”

“Maybe he’ll make a suitable replacement. I was pondering what course the king would take in relieving the other two of their commands. I wonder who else he’s got his eye on. Their treasonous meeting may be all the king needs now. But I need to clear my name either way – and hopefully provide King Geoffrey with better proof of the generals’ plot.”

He finished packing and started dressing. A white linen shirt, black trousers

and his official, red prime minister's coat. "Emery was the only competent general in the command room during the battle."

Jon nodded. "I imagine so. It would be difficult to find less capable men than Lief and Salmon."

Boman chuckled. "That it would. One of Lief's captains on the wall looked promising. And I didn't see him with the conspirators."

Jon nodded. "Laury. Yes, I think he's a good man, too."

Boman sighed, then threw his satchel over his shoulder and turned to present himself to Jon. "Do I look official or more like I just fell out of bed?"

Jon laughed. "Official enough, sir."

Boman smiled. "It will have to do." He started for the door, then paused and put a hand on Jon's shoulder. "If you find the opportunity, it might be useful to know where Emery and Laury stand on the Onor issue."

"Of course. I'll try to arrange some chance meetings."

Boman smiled. "Good man. I'll see you in a few days."

FATE STRIKES

After a long day's ride, Boman could finally see the welcoming lights of Gaeld in the distance. He had not made such a journey alone in over a dozen years, and his backside ached for something softer than a saddle.

As he crested the hill, the Valley of Gaeld came into view and reminded him why it was considered the most beautiful spot in the kingdom. With a little light left on the horizon, he could still see the flowering zael trees growing along the side of the road. Red, large-petaled flowers with white centers were nearly as abundant as leaves on the trees. Standing twenty feet tall, they were one of the most common specimen trees in Zille and the country's namesake.

A narrow stream meandered from the hills in the north to the southern coast, producing a pleasant trickling sound. A well-traveled, dirt path cut a slight curve through the valley, transitioning to stone bridges in several places where it crossed the twisty stream.

Because Gaeld's mild climate accommodated a variety of plant species, clusters of pots containing flowers from all over the kingdom were distributed intermittently along the path. The valley was otherwise covered in green, ankle-tall grass. With wood-surfaced, iron tables and chairs placed thoughtfully along the road in natural alcoves, the valley was a favorite spot of most of the inhabitants.

But not tonight. It was the first night of the Zael Blossom Festival, and the whole town attended the opening ceremony. People came from all across Zille for the festival, and some from far-off lands.

Boman couldn't help thinking back to his first time at the festival. As much as he resented the orphanage and all it stood for, his only fond memory was the annual trip to the festival in Gaeld.

Through the generosity of an anonymous benefactor, the entire orphanage was treated to a day at the festival, complete with food and treats. It was his favorite day of the year. He chuckled to himself as he imagined how much the orphanage staff must have feared that day.

How amazed he was the first time he experienced the festival. The buildings were covered with so many flowers, they looked like architectural bouquets. The streets were packed with people. Not the crabby, bustling kind of people, but the happy, festive kind. Or at least that's how it seemed to a young lad of 10 years.

But what he remembered most was the food. All of the merchants of Gaeld moved their wares to the streets during the festival and were joined by merchants from every part of the kingdom. The resulting plethora of food gave off a

constantly shifting array of aromas.

He must have looked like an idiot as he rode along smiling, remembering all the good food and desserts the festival offered in his youth.

“Excuse me, good sir.” A voice from the side of the path startled him out of his memories.

Four men emerged from behind the bushes and stepped into his path. Bringing his horse to a halt, he focused his attention on the one in front. “Good evening,” he said as pleasantly as he could.

“I wonder if you might be able to help a poor soul who’s had a bit of bad luck lately.” The man bowed politely.

Boman glanced at the other three men, then looked at the speaker again. He wore fine clothes, though they were well-worn and several years out of fashion. This man wasn’t low on luck. He was low on morals. Boman tried reasoning anyway. “I only brought enough money for a few nights’ stay and a few meals.”

“We’ll take it.”

Boman had an idea. “Perhaps I can offer you a job instead. It pays well.”

The man shook his head. “The longer the conversation, the less likely we are to get anything. Besides, work isn’t really for me. Hand it over and we’ll let you go on your way.”

Boman knew he should hand over his wallet and be done with it, but he was tired and grumpy. “Do you have any idea who you’re dealing with?”

“Do you know how many times I’ve heard that?” The man was smug and apparently not ready to believe any story, no matter how true.

“I’m on a secret mission for the king.” Boman tried to look impressive.

“So am I. I’ve been tasked with teaching lessons to self-important fools.”

Before Boman could respond, he heard footsteps behind him and the swoosh of what was probably a large stick.

Nausea. Swaying. Groaning. Was that his groan? If it wasn't, he was about to make one. He was in a fog, and his nausea increased with each sway and creak. He could tell it was daytime even with his eyes closed, but he resisted the urge to open them. It would only worsen his headache.

He was lying on what felt like canvas with something soft covering him. He wanted to lie still for as long as possible, but he would be forced to do something soon. The nausea was getting worse and something was digging into his hip. The smell wasn't helping either. What was it? Something dead? It smelled salty.

More swaying.

The nausea finally became strong enough he decided the pain would be worth opening his eyes. He squinted at what he was lying on. Canvas, as he expected. Covering him was what appeared to be

"Oh, no." A sail. He tried frantically to remember what had happened. How did he end up on a ship? How long had he been unconscious? He attempted to sit up, resulting in a loud, involuntary groan.

"Oy! What's this?" A gruff voice about ten paces away.

More swaying. The nausea ebbed and flowed with the motion of the ship.

Footsteps approached and his cover was roughly yanked off, forcing him to close his eyes again from the brightness.

"What are you doing here?" The same voice.

"I don't know." The first response he could think of. At least it was true.

"Sure you don't." Dismissive. More footsteps. "Get the captain. Tell him we've got a stowaway."

"I'm not a stowaway. Not of my own doing, at least." He still couldn't remember. His mind was muddled. He caught a glimpse of a thought, but it fell through the cracks somewhere in his head and he couldn't retrieve it.

"We'll just let the captain make up his mind about that."

"Sounds fair to me." Boman felt inexplicably flippant. Maybe it was the nausea and the headache. The fog in his head didn't help.

He heard as well as felt heavy footsteps approaching. The subsequent shuffling from the others indicated it must be the captain. He cracked his eyes open again – well one of them at least. He could see a little, but it sure made his head hurt. A large, rotund man with his hands on his hips scowled down at Boman.

"You're on my ship without permission."

"I realize that."

"What do you have to say for yourself?"

Boman reached up to the source of his headache and winced. He found a significant knot on the back of his head. “If you care to check the back of my head, I think you’ll find all the answer you need, sir.”

The captain stepped forward and turned Boman’s head firmly. “Hmm. So you’ve been dumped here, then.”

“I believe so.”

“You believe so?”

“Well, I just found out myself. Until a moment ago, I was unconscious.”

“I see.” The captain scowled and scratched his bushy brown beard. “What sort of trouble are you in?”

“None that I know of, except I’m not where I should be.”

The captain looked him over for a moment, then something changed in his face, a look of realization, Boman thought. “Bring him to my cabin. I’ll question him further there.”

As two of the other men yanked him up, the captain turned around and scolded, “Gently.”

The walk to the captain’s cabin was uneventful, although the pain and effort made each step seem like a significant event. At least his nausea diminished as his eyes adjusted to the light. One of the men assisted him to a seat at a large wooden table, then left. After a moment of muffled dialog outside the door, the captain entered, shut the door and seated himself at the other end of the sturdy table.

Boman thought the captain fit perfectly into his space. Everything felt a bit unkempt. He wore Streng’s uniform, green with white trim. But he was either missing the second button from the top, or he simply forgot to fasten it. His boots were not polished and the left side of his shirt had come untucked. The bookshelves contained not only books, but leather pouches and various treasures – haphazardly mixed together. Even the table at which they sat was cluttered with a few nautical charts, a pair of leather boots and a leftover bowl of something that appeared to be at least a day old.

The captain exhaled slowly through his nose, then nodded. “You’re a high official, I think. Looks like a Zillean coat to me. And it appears to fit correctly, so I’ll assume it’s yours.” He nodded toward the door. “We are alone now. There are no ears in here but my own. Who are you?”

Boman sighed. At least he could remember his name. “My name is Boman. I’m the prime minister of Zille.”

The captain made no reply, but Boman took note of the look of surprise and

something else he couldn't interpret in the captain's expression.

"I was on a mission for the king. An urgent one. I'm not at liberty to discuss it. You understand."

The captain nodded.

"On my way to Gaeld. Uh. That's where it gets foggy. Clearly, something happened, but I" Boman sighed. "It's right at the edge of my memory, but I can't quite get it."

The captain nodded. "The nasty knot on your head certainly explains it. But I'm being rude. I've asked your name and I haven't given mine." He stepped around the table and bowed. "Pleased to meet you, Lord Boman. I am Fend, captain of this ship, among other things."

Boman attempted to stand and return the gesture, but Fend put a hand on his shoulder and shook his head. "Your intention is polite, but I wouldn't advise standing in your condition."

Boman chuckled and nodded. "Thank you, Captain Fend."

With a thoughtful frown and a hand on his chin, the captain sat down and hummed. "It would seem someone found a way to interrupt you in your duties. I wonder if it was planned or just an unfortunately timed theft."

"I hadn't thought of that." Boman's hand found his own chin. "I assumed someone had planned it. I suppose it could have been an awful coincidence." He let out a long sigh. "I really must get back."

Fend was already shaking his head before Boman quit speaking. "Before you ask, I'll tell you I'm on an important mission of my own. We're a day and a half out from Gaeld and I cannot turn around for anything. I'm late enough as it is. If my men hadn't insisted on attending the opening ceremonies of the festival, this ship wouldn't have been around for anyone to deposit you here."

Boman sagged. "I'm sure I can find passage back quickly enough."

Fend winced and shook his head again. "I wouldn't be so sure. Any other ship in the harbor, and I would agree with you."

"Oh?"

"We're headed for Streng."

Boman's eyes bulged. He had imagined a long voyage, but Streng? It was on the other side of the world. Who would have sent him so far away? It couldn't be an accident. Someone chose Fend's ship on purpose. How could they have known where he was or what he was up to?

"For what it's worth, I'm sorry. I understand how disappointing this must be."

"What about a longboat?"

“Have one. Can’t spare it. And your chances wouldn’t be good, anyway.”

Boman sighed and nodded, dejected. “I understand.”

After a few silent moments, Boman realized he was still a stowaway. “Have I put you in a bad spot as far as supplies? Food?”

“Not at all. We provisioned light, but we’re moving even faster. You won’t starve.”

“Thank you.”

“Speaking of which, you’ve been at least a day and a half without food. I’ll have one of the men bring you something.”

After Fend left the cabin, Boman slumped in his chair. It would take at least a week to reach Streng, even at great speed, and probably even longer to get back to Zille. How much would happen in his absence? What would Jon do? Was anyone else attacked? If so, how could he have missed such a coordinated plot?

His mind railed against his situation – planning, plotting, trying to force reality to shift itself. Eventually, he let out a long, exhausted sigh. It had been a long time since he felt so helpless. He would be traveling for weeks against his will. No plan of his own could save him. He sighed again. Nor could anyone else. Ironic that his last thoughts before being attacked were of his days in the orphanage, the only other time he had felt so helpless.

He groaned from pain as much as frustration and put his head in his hands as he waited for food to arrive.

THE KING'S WRATH

Long shadows from the recently risen sun stretched across the top of the tower like giant fingers. Jon stood in a sunny spot between two of them, worry lines marking his face. The clear day, calm sea and pleasant breeze did nothing to brighten his mood. In fact, he hadn't even noticed the sunrise, though he had been standing atop the tower. His attention was focused on the road to Gaeld, a wide, cobbled road that became a less-wide, dirt road halfway up the grassy hillside. It made a straight line northwest, then curved to the west near the top of the hill.

It was the far end where Jon's gaze was fixed – the last place he had seen Boman, and he hoped it would be the next. The prime minister was late. It should have taken a day, or a day and a half at most. That was three days ago and Jon was worried. Should he have insisted on sending some soldiers along with Boman? At the very least, he should have gone with him. He realized the folly of the idea as soon as he thought it. With both of them gone, nobody they trusted would have been at the palace to keep an eye on things. He sighed. "Now what?"

Hoofbeats from the northwest drew his attention. He squinted against the glare of something shiny. As the approaching carriage came around the bend, the glare shifted. The king's carriage. He groaned. The king's early arrival would complicate things. Surely, negotiations with Onor should have taken longer than three days. The last attempt at an alliance with Cendaria took over a week.

No doubt the king would want to speak with him once he discovered Boman was missing. Jon un-slouched and straightened his clothes. He watched the carriage produce a long trail of dust as he took a few moments to ponder his options. As the carriage neared the gate, he decided he should find a hiding place near the entrance so he could gauge the king's mood. He hurried toward the stairs.

"I need to speak with my prime minister," the king bellowed as he entered the palace. "Immediately!"

Jon stopped in mid-jog. He could have heard the king's demand from the top of the tower. Thom must have told the king Boman was part of the conspiracy. He frowned as he considered his next course of action. Nothing came to him. He sighed and started back up the stairs. He had no choice but to wait for the king to demand his presence.

He returned to his vigil at the top of the tower. Perhaps Boman would return before the king summoned him. Jon looked at the road to Gaeld again as if his gaze could draw Boman back, but saw nothing – not even a stray dog.

Only a few moments passed before he heard footsteps approaching. “Excuse me, Jon.” It was one of the younger pages, eyes wide with fear. “His Majesty requests ... er ... demands your presence.” He stood straighter and made a boy’s attempt at looking confident. “Immediately.”

“Of course.” Jon replied, hoping he appeared confident, though he was bordering on terror. “Lead on.”

Before they moved, the page looked to the southwest and groaned. “Oh, no! Now I’m going to have to deliver *that* news.”

Jon followed the lad’s gaze to see Lief and Salmon hurrying down the road to Gaeld. He patted the lad’s shoulder.

“Let’s go. The sooner you tell someone, the better it will be for you.”

The lad nodded, losing all pretense of confidence as he nervously led the way down the stairs. When they reached the landing, the page called one of the guards. “The king requires the presence of Lief and Salmon, but I just saw them hurrying down the Gaeld road. Could you please go find them? It won’t be good for any of us if the king doesn’t get what he wants.”

The guard’s eyes widened, then he nodded and hurried out the door, gesturing to another guard to follow him.

“At least I’ve got one thing right,” the page said as he looked at Jon and led the way to the throne room.

Jon tensed up despite his attempts otherwise. The page nervously stepped into the room and bowed. “Your Majesty, I have brought Jon as you requested.”

“Good. And what about the generals?” Jon could not see the king, though he could picture the anger on his face.

The page shifted fearfully. “As I was retrieving Jon, I saw them leaving on the road to Gaeld. I informed the guards you want to see them immediately.”

“Gone?” The king’s bellow was loud enough to be heard though the entire palace.

“The guards will see they’re brought back as soon as possible, Your Majesty. But Jon is here.”

The king grunted. “No attempt to flee?”

“No, Your Majesty.”

“Show him in.”

The page bowed, then stepped aside and nodded to Jon.

Whether he was ready or not, it was time to defend his lord and friend. He strode into the room in an attempt to show confidence without being cocky. But the throne room was designed to intimidate people and make them feel the

weight of everything the room represented. Life-sized portraits of previous kings lined the walls, each framed in hand-wrought brass. Ornate, brass moldings topped the Zillean red walls. The large, onyx throne dominated the room, just off center away from the door.

With the entrance to the side, Jon had to turn once he entered the room and proceed along a thick, red carpet leading to a small dais before the throne. As he looked up at the king, he realized the weight of his situation and felt smaller than he ever had.

He made a valiant attempt to reign in his fear, then bowed respectfully. "Here I am, Your Majesty."

"Yes. There you are." The king scrutinized him with a glare, then grunted. "I suppose you have an idea why I summoned you?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then report."

"Yes, sir." Jon paused and did his best to gather his thoughts. "We discovered a group of conspirators several days ago, led by Lief and Salmon." He noted the king's raised brow. "Boman suspected them and sent me to find where they met. This I did with the help of a young lad. He was able to sneak into places I couldn't, you see."

The king nodded.

"I informed Boman when I found out their meeting place, and when I verified they were there, I brought Boman to the spot."

"And he proceeded to join them."

"No, sir. I'm sure that's what Thom told you, but he didn't stay long enough to ..."

The king looked shocked, though it quickly turned to a glare. "Thom? Who is that?"

Jon shuddered. He wasn't supposed to know about Thom. "Um. I may have overheard a conversation, sir."

"When?"

"In the stables. Before the battle."

The king's raised brow was eclipsed by the red anger showing on his cheeks. "What is this kingdom coming to? First, I am informed my prime minister is plotting against me. When I summon him to question him about it, I discover he has gone. Then when I question his man, I find out my secret informant isn't so secret after all. And you tell me it's not Boman, but my generals who are plotting against me."

Jon shifted his weight, betraying his anxiety. “Yes, sir.”

The king growled. “Where is Boman?”

“Pardon, sir. I was just coming to it. As part of my investigation, I discovered they had a man in Gaeld who was to hire mercenaries to aid in their plot. Lief and Salmon sent their aides to Gaeld to meet with him. Boman left for Gaeld three days ago to apprehend them. He couldn’t send me to arrest men who outrank me. And I suspect he wanted to do it himself, because he thought you suspected him.”

“Indeed I do. The question stands. Where is he? Shouldn’t he have returned by now?”

“He should have, but he hasn’t. I’m quite worried, to be honest.”

The king raised his hand to his chin and nodded. “So he fled.”

Jon shook his head. “Absolutely not, sir.”

Geoffrey raised his brow, but didn’t interrupt.

“I know Boman better than most,” Jon continued, relieved for the lack of rebuke. “He wouldn’t flee.” He paused, then added carefully, “Sir, you know him, too. Isn’t he more likely to face whatever is coming?”

The king’s glare turned thoughtful. He sighed. “You’re right. He would never back down from an attack on his honor. I’ve never seen him flee from anything, even when he should have.” Geoffrey frowned after a few seconds, then appeared to have an idea. “When he apprehended the conspirators, what did he do with them?”

Jon hesitated. “Well, sir, you see, he wanted to give the impression ...”

The king smiled. “He imprisoned the men and thanked the generals for uncovering the plot?”

Jon stood frozen in mid explanation with his mouth hanging open.

The king laughed. “I’ve used the same technique myself. In fact, I learned it from Boman. Now the men will never trust the generals again. And the generals will run about frantically trying to clean up their mess.”

Jon collected himself and nodded. “Yes. Exactly.”

“Then why would Thom – about whom you know nothing – tell me Boman was involved?”

“He left before it played out. Probably thought he was about to get caught. I happened to turn toward the door in time to see him rushing down the stairs.”

The king nodded, then frowned. “But Boman hasn’t returned.”

“No. As I said, I’m quite worried. I fear something has happened to him.”

A moment of silence followed as the king frowned pensively. With nothing

left to report, Jon waited silently.

“Page,” the king called suddenly. “Bring Emery to me.” After the page bowed and hurried out of the room, he turned his attention back to Jon. “Emery is not part of the plot, too, is he?”

“I believe not, sir.”

The king nodded. “Good. We will send him and some troops to Gaeld to find answers and bring everyone back here where I can deal with them personally.” Red anger flashed in the king’s cheeks before he sighed and nodded, as if answering an unspoken question. “In the meantime, I need to do some rearranging. It appears I have some positions to fill.”

Tradition and current law required the king to have a prime minister. Although the prime minister was nearly equal with the king in the old days, during the last few hundred years, it had become an advisory position. But the tradition remained, and the king’s decrees would not be official without a prime minister. With Boman missing, Geoffrey would appoint an interim prime minister. He would probably choose one of the higher ranking officers, or a descendant of the previous prime minister.

Jon found he was in favor of the latter. He wondered if he should be bold enough to make a suggestion on a topic of such importance. He decided against it.

“Page,” the king addressed a lad who had replaced the other page who rushed off to find Emery. “Inform the scribe to draft the order to merge all military branches under one command and appoint Emery to the position.” Then he nodded to Jon and continued, “And have him draft the order to appoint Jon as interim prime minister. Bring the orders to me as soon as possible so I can sign them.”

Jon felt faint.

The king noticed. “But first, bring a chair for Jon.”

CHANGING OF THE GUARD

Eyric gazed pensively at the horizon, ignoring several strands of her auburn hair as it tickled her face in the shifting wind. The sound of the gentle waves on the pebbly beach helped soothe her thoughts. She dug her toes into a patch of peach-colored sand and shifted her sitting position on the large, flat stone. A short distance from the water, this was one of her favorite places to sit and think.

As the rising sun slowly erased the pastel streaks in the wispy clouds, she sighed. It was almost time. He would be coming to meet her shortly and would expect her decision. As a descendant of the island ruler Eyric had always enjoyed the perks, but the position also came with extra responsibility. This time, there didn't seem to be any perk at all – only responsibility.

Within a few minutes, she saw him strolling down the path toward the beach. Toward her. Anxiety rose up and she fumbled in her mind for any hint of a decision. She sighed. He was almost here.

“I'm simply not ready yet, Grandpa Caedmon.” Eyric pre-empted his question. “I don't know how to do what you do.” The family resemblance was obvious as she stood and turned to face him. Each had earthy auburn hair and gray eyes.

“And good morning to you too.” Caedmon chuckled, shaking his head. His face betrayed only small hints of age – a few lines at the corners of his eyes and a few streaks of gray in his beard and hair.

“I know you wanted me to decide today,” Eyric continued. “I just haven't. It doesn't seem right.”

Caedmon smiled and nodded. “I know. But don't put so much into the decision. I'm merely asking you to take a peek. See what you think of it. I won't be around forever, you know, though some people seem to think I'm immortal or something.”

Eyric laughed. “Yes, I've heard the rumors. You've been here since the beginning, in the original shipwreck.”

“They have some lovely stories about me, don't they?” Caedmon winked and gave her one of his infamously mysterious looks.

It worked. She felt more relaxed. “You keep making them think you're hiding something, they'll keep believing it.”

“Exactly.”

“Exactly?”

“As long as they believe I'm one step away from madness – only one, mind you – they will tolerate the strange things I must do to keep order around here.”

“And you want me to follow in those footsteps? Be the crazy one?”

“It doesn’t sound as nice when you put it that way.”

“No. Does it sound nice another way?”

Caedmon laughed and shook his head. “No, I suppose not. But I need you to at least consider it. I’m not asking you to decide to rule the island. I’m asking you to start learning the job. See what’s involved. No promises expected. No commitment.”

“Uh-huh. And what happens when I learn your secrets and still don’t want the job?”

“Nothing out of the ordinary. I’ll just have to find someone else.”

“You won’t have to kill me? Get rid of the evidence?”

Caedmon shook his head and laughed.

Eyric sighed and looked out at the ocean. She scanned the beach and the harbor farther to the west, then gazed up the hill toward her village. The island wasn’t just her home. She belonged to it and it belonged to her. More than that, she loved it and had a responsibility to it. Whatever Caedmon wanted to show her, she had to at least look.

“Okay, Grandpa.” She turned her attention back to him. “I’ll take a peek, like you asked. But it’s only a peek. If I don’t like what I see”

She saw the relief on his face as he smiled and patted her shoulder – as if a great weight had been lifted. “Understood. Come on.” He started back toward the hill. “We can begin today. It won’t be difficult.”

She laughed as she followed him. Apparently, he wasn’t going to waste any time. As they walked across the beach and up the hill into the jungle, she pondered his reaction. Was something wrong? He seemed desperate to find someone to fill his shoes. Was he dying?

“Grandpa? Why the urgency?”

“Oh, nothing particularly troubling.” He glanced back at her as he continued up the hill. “I’ll explain when we get there.”

Eyric sighed and shook her head. Mysterious to a fault, that man. “Seems to me we have time now.”

Caedmon chuckled. “Yes, I know. “Now” is always your favorite time. Just like your grandmother. I’ve never been able to get you and “Later” to meet. You’re always so rude to him.”

Eyric laughed. “Yes, I know. But I always thought he had such a silly name. I like your friend “Now” much better, but you seem to be avoiding him.”

Caedmon laughed as he rounded a curve in the path and stopped in a natural

alcove created by a large palm-like tree with dark blue leaves. Underneath it sat three knee-high stones. A perfect place to meet, it provided seating, shade and a nice breeze. Shiny bits of ocean sparkled through the leaves of the trees to the west. “As you can see,” he smiled, “I’ve found “Now”. Would you care to join us?”

Eyric scrunched up her face, shook her head and sat on one of the stones. “Alright, here we are. Why the urgency?”

Caedmon chuckled as he took a seat and cleared his throat. “It’s not nearly as dramatic as what’s probably in your head. I’m not dying or anything. But I’m ... much older than I look. I won’t live forever, despite what some people say. I want to make sure a successor is in place with plenty of time to learn the job. Besides, maybe I want to retire and have a little peace before I need to think about dying.”

Eyric looked at him suspiciously. She didn’t believe for a minute he was telling the entire truth. He wasn’t lying, but she was certain he was holding something back. “First of all, you do look old. I’m not sure how much older you can be compared to how you look.”

“Uh-huh. Here I am trying to be serious and tell you what you want to know and all you can think of is how old I look?”

Eyric laughed. “Exactly. You know us women, always thinking of how pretty – or not – things are.”

Caedmon chuckled and shook his head. “I never should have let your grandmother have so much influence in raising you. Now you use her words against me.”

“And rightfully so. You’re always hiding things. Like now.”

Caedmon started to protest, raising his hands defensively.

But Eyric was quick to cut off his defense. “No. I’m not going to listen to any of it. We’ll let sleeping dogs lie. So what is it you want me to learn first? If we’re starting immediately, then let’s start.”

“I see she taught you that as well.” Caedmon smiled, then nodded as he turned to face Eyric more directly. “I won’t hide things from you much longer. Try to keep in mind some of it needs to come out slowly. There’s a lot to digest.”

Eyric started to regret her decision to look behind the curtain.

“Don’t worry. I’m not about to inform you the people you thought were good aren’t, or that I’m some sort of creature in disguise. But the island holds some secrets nobody knows – nobody except me and Putlag.”

“Putlag?” Eyric’s eyes widened. “I always thought he was a legend. Just

another story to scare the kids.”

Caedmon shook his head.

Eyric stared past Caedmon as she recalled the myriad tales of the mysterious Putlag who exclusively shared his wisdom with Caedmon, who kept to himself and never spoke to another soul. She recalled tales of a protector so vicious in battle he cut some of his enemies completely in half. At least, those were the legends. “So it’s all true?”

“No. At least, not all the stories. Putlag is real, but he’s not what the stories say and he’s ... well, he’s a bit different than the legends.”

“But he’s the ancient one who gives you guidance?”

“Yes.”

“And he tells you what to do? And you have to obey him?”

“No, it’s more of an alliance. We discuss what to do when things come up.”

“Hmm. And why isn’t he part of the village? Why are you the only one he talks to?”

Caedmon sighed. “There’s really no good way to explain it. You’re going to have to meet him yourself if you want an answer to that question.”

Eyric sighed in return. “This is why I dragged my feet about this decision. With you, it’s always mysteries and puzzles. Hardly any straight answers and always another step to get there.”

“I know. But once you meet Putlag, you’ll know the biggest mystery of the island, not to mention the reason so many other things are mysterious. It will all make sense.”

Eyric stood up and peeked at the sea through the trees. Caedmon remained silent as she considered what she was getting herself into. Her grandfather was always good at giving people time to think when they needed it.

What if she didn’t like Putlag? What if she learned the mysteries and regretted it? Although curiosity nearly drove her mad, caution raised a warning. She would not be able to un-learn or un-see what Caedmon was about to reveal. But now that she knew of something hidden, she wouldn’t be able to rest until she saw it.

With a sigh, she turned and nodded. “Okay, let’s meet Putlag.”

THE REAL ISLAND AUTHORITY

“So you bring me another one, eh?” Putlag’s voice was deep and airy, and he spoke with apparent difficulty, particularly his s-es, which seemed more drawn out than they needed to be.

Eyric peered through the trees, seeking a glimpse of the man behind the voice, but she could only see the large, dark-blue leaves and occasional wisps of steam from the volcano she and her grandfather had spent the last half hour climbing. Near the top on the eastern side, a patch of trees had somehow managed to avoid the occasional lava flows that blackened the rest of the volcano.

“Yes, my friend.” Caedmon’s voice was suddenly small in comparison to Putlag’s.

Putlag hummed from his hiding spot.

Caedmon smiled at Eyric, then looked into the trees again. “I think you’ll find this one different than the others.”

“It’s female. That’s certainly different.”

Because of his drawn out s-es and laborious r-s, it took Eyric a few seconds to understand what he said. When she did, she frowned.

Caedmon put a hand on her shoulder, a gesture she knew meant to be patient. “This is Eyric.”

“Hmm. Yes, I know. Do you think I’ve forgotten your family members already?”

Caedmon chuckled. “Of course not. It was just a formality. And I didn’t know if you would recognize her by sight. She’s older than the last time you saw her.”

“I know her by smell.”

Eyric glanced sideways at her grandfather. He stifled a smirk. She was getting annoyed. Before Caedmon spoke again, she decided it was her turn. “Pleased to meet you, Putlag. I’m Eyric.”

“So I already knew, and have yet again been informed,” Putlag replied. “And time will tell whether I’m pleased to meet you.”

Eyric’s frown remained. “Why are you hiding?”

“For your benefit.” Putlag’s words came out a little more ponderously this time. Was he irritated? Eyric figured it fit the situation. After all, she was annoyed.

“Hmm.” Putlag’s hum sounded no different than a growl. She thought about asking him to clarify, but he continued. “Caedmon, you brought me a younger version of yourself?”

Caedmon laughed. “Not quite, but close. Are you going to ask her the

questions?”

“If she can keep quiet long enough to hear them.”

Eyric scowled. Her ire approached its limit, but something about the look on Caedmon’s face convinced her to keep quiet – at least a little longer. “I’m listening,” she said, though she considered how long to allow this scene to play out. Sometime soon, she wanted to see this deep-voiced man with the speech impediment.

An intake of breath was followed by a pause and Eyric thought she saw some leaves move where there was no breeze. Putlag’s voice came through the trees again. “What makes a good leader, and what purpose does he – or she – serve?”

Realization hit her as she recognized the question. Caedmon had been training her for this her entire life. Fine. If Putlag wanted to play it that way, she would have a little fun, too. “Well, Grandpa says a good leader’s job is to get kicked in the groin all day and hope it ends by nightfall.” She stole a quick glance at her grandfather before continuing. “But I think a good leader is available to administer justice and meet the people’s needs.”

She wasn’t sure whether it was coughing or laughing she heard from behind the trees, but Caedmon had turned a nice shade of red. She enjoyed it too much not to laugh.

“You may have brought me an improvement, my friend. You may be able to retire sooner than you think.”

Eyric’s eyes widened. “You were serious about the retirement stuff? Who does that?” Nobody on the island ever quit working, at least not that she had ever heard.

“Only eccentric old island rulers.” Caedmon smiled, still flushed.

Eyric looked at the trees again, trying to peer through them. Who was this man and why did he need to hide? All these secrets and hidden meanings. Why couldn’t her grandfather be straight with her. She didn’t need yet another person in her life with secrets. Her patience finally ran out. “Okay, why are you really hiding?”

“I told you. For your benefit.”

“What benefit? Are you scarred or maimed or something? You think I can’t handle the sight?”

“I’m not deformed.” He sounded insulted. “In fact, I’ve been told I’m a near perfect specimen.”

Eyric snorted. “Then why hide, Mister Perfect?”

“I’m different. Very ... big. Bigger than I sound.”

Eyric's brow furrowed. "Well, you sound huge."

"Yes, huge. That sounds about right. Wouldn't you say, Caedmon?"

Caedmon chuckled and shook his head. "Huge doesn't begin to explain it."

Eyric sighed. "Why can't you just show yourself so we can be properly introduced?"

"I'm not sure you're ready."

"There's only one way to find out," Caedmon smiled and took a few steps back, stopping next to a tree.

Putlag's sigh rustled more leaves than Eyric thought it should have. Then his thick voice became more animal than human and dropped in pitch. "You may want to step back."

Eyric opened her mouth to ask why, but all the trees shifted at once, causing her to involuntarily stumble several steps backward. A sudden burst of wind nearly knocked her over as a mass of blue-green shot above the trees. As if someone had frozen time, Putlag turned to face her, his massive, leathery wings unfurled.

In that brief moment, Eyric was amazed, baffled and terrified all at once. While Putlag's overall shape was that of an enormous winged serpent, his head was more of a large, scaled cat with terrifying teeth and long, sharp whiskers. She judged he was about the length of three men from head to tail. Powerful jaws, spiked tail and huge claws on his four limbs all contributed to his fearsome appearance, but what struck Eyric the most were his deep blue eyes. Almost human in appearance, they bore into her with a sense of perception and understanding she had not expected. And something else. Kindness, maybe? Or perhaps an odd sort of familiarity. But it only lasted for one flap of his wings.

"We have new arrivals," he announced then shot toward the mouth of the volcano. She couldn't take her eyes off him until he disappeared over the rim.

It wasn't until afterward that Eyric realized Putlag's last burst had knocked her over. She glanced at Caedmon and saw he had anticipated the situation and anchored himself against a tree. She lay there for a moment to assess her condition. She wasn't injured, but her underside was wet. Had she wet herself or fallen on damp foliage?

Her grandfather must have recognized the look on her face as he came over and held out his hand. As she pulled herself up, he smiled. "I wet myself the first time, too." How did he always know everything?

He started down the path and called over his shoulder, "We can take the wet road down to the beach. Looks like we have newcomers."

Newcomers? This was almost as exciting as finding out Putlag was a dragon. Eyrice's frustration at her grandfather's vagueness mixed with her excitement about new arrivals left her feeling anxious. This was the first time in her life there had been any new arrivals. Years ago in school, she learned about these events. They were known as the "Three Additions", but she had never witnessed one in person. And although she was excited, she was a little perplexed at the thought of welcoming a new group of people to the island when she wasn't quite sure what to do with her newfound knowledge of Putlag.

As they hurried down the volcano path toward the grotto above the beach, a thought struck her. Newcomers never left. In fact, nobody on the island ever left. They were on their way to welcome people to a prison. As she came alongside Caedmon, she couldn't hold back the question. "Does Putlag hold us all captive?"

Caedmon frowned. "In a way, but it's far more complicated. We'll talk about it soon."

Eyrice sighed. Always soon. Ever more secrets. She considered pressing the issue, but no amount of prodding would pry it out of him at the moment. "Soon" would have to be good enough.

Around a bend and up a small hill later, Eyrice began wondering about some other things. The Kisiwa, the other tribe on the island, believed in the dragon and worshiped it. They sacrificed people to it. She had always thought them silly for such behavior, but after meeting the dragon, she was horrified by the thought.

"No, he doesn't eat people." Her grandfather was looking at her. "Yes, I had the same thought, but he assured me he doesn't eat humans. Said they taste bad and digest even worse."

It took a moment for the last statement to sink in, but as Eyrice was about to voice her disgust, they came to the grotto and her grandfather disappeared down the wide stone stairs. She sighed and followed. She wouldn't get a chance to discuss the situation until later.

The stairs descended into a rock-floored cave with a large pool at the far end. Caedmon dove in and disappeared beneath the water. Eyrice sighed. "Okay," she told herself aloud. "Stop thinking about all of this and just enjoy the ride. After all, this is your favorite path."

Though her mind still churned, she took a deep breath and dove in, enjoying the abrupt lowering of her body temperature. She opened her eyes in the clear water and swam toward the bottom. About halfway down, she stopped swimming and allowed the current to pull her toward a large hole in the bottom.

Once, she had asked her grandfather how the pool stayed full if there was a constant rush of water out the bottom.

He shrugged and asked, “Would you rather it was empty?”

She couldn't help but smirk. He was mysterious even when he didn't need to be. She passed through the hole at the bottom and began the thrilling, enclosed water slide through the mountain. About fifteen seconds later, it emptied into a large shallow pool on the beach. As she came up for air, she looked out to sea for her first glimpse of a real ship.

MUTINY

Boman ignored the first shouts he heard, choosing instead to continue his perusal of a thick volume Fend lent him on the history of Streng. Such things always interested him and he was pleased to find that Fend kept a sizable library in his cabin. But as the shouting became more frequent and mention was made of a waterspout, he hurried on deck to see for himself. Surely, he had misunderstood.

“Another one! There!” One of the men in the crow’s nest pointed just beyond the ship’s bow.

He couldn’t believe it. A waterspout blocked their way – on a cloudless day in the middle of the sea. Although the waterspouts concerned him, he mentally reviewed his notes on the Bahawre as he made his way to where Captain Fend and the first mate stood.

“Whether it should exist or not makes no difference,” the first mate shook his head. “All that matters now is what to do about it.”

Fend sighed. “You’re right. We need to turn away from the forbidden zone.”

“Land!” The man in the crow’s nest pointed starboard.

Boman turned to look, as did Fend and the first mate.

“There’s no land out here,” Fend grumbled. He pulled his telescope from his jacket and slowly scanned the horizon. After a few seconds, his shoulders sagged and he lowered the telescope. “It shouldn’t be there,” he muttered. “It shouldn’t be there.”

“Two more!” Three voices from the bow.

Boman turned to see two new waterspouts blocking their path, leaving them only one direction to turn – toward the island. “Ah,” he sighed to himself. All the research he had done on the fate of the Bahawre was coming together. He started for the railing in fascination. The clairvoyant who saw a vision of land was not so crazy after all. Waterspouts and other tales were now far more than wild mariner’s tales as the reason for these things finally revealed itself. Not just wild, unfathomable disasters at sea, but a secret island. “So this is the answer to the mystery.”

“The lost ships?” Fend joined Boman.

“Yes.” No surprise Fend knew what he was talking about. The whole world knew of the lost Zillean ships. Streng had even lost a few of their own before they believed the Zilleans. Long ago, the forbidden zone became a universal concept in sailing.

“I see.” Fend looked toward the island, then back toward the waterspouts and

his scrambling men. With a furrowed brow, he sighed and shook his head. “I knew I took a risk coming so close to the forbidden zone. But I didn’t realize what kind of risk.”

Boman, still in a scholarly mindset, marveled at the newfound knowledge. He finally understood what happened to the Bahawre. That quest was over, the riddle solved. All the mystery of the forbidden zone was answered by the island’s existence. “The island is the answer. Only ships that come within sight are assaulted. For some reason, nobody is allowed to know about that island.”

Fend nodded and grumbled. “And now we know. If we try to sail away, we’ll be sunk. Looks like we can either sink or call that island home. Only two remaining mysteries: who and why? Let’s hope they’re friendly, eh?”

It took a moment for Boman to switch from scholarly to practical, but when he did, he felt numb. He was left staring blankly at the approaching island as Fend walked away, calling out commands to his crew. Boman frantically sought an escape, but it was short lived. A master of tactics, he understood his situation perfectly. Death or captivity. No other path was possible. So excited about discovering the answer to the mystery, he had missed the obvious impact on his life. As upset as he had been about having to go all the way to Streng, now he would give anything to return to that situation.

His despair was interrupted by shouts near the mast. A group of angry sailors surrounded Fend and the first mate.

“You’ve made the same mistake twice,” said a young sailor with sandy blond hair. Taller than Fend and well-muscled, he seemed to be the ring leader. “And the rest of us have suffered for it. Now we’re under attack, and you want to just give up? I think we should try to break through the waterspouts and escape.”

Several other voices muttered their agreement.

“You’re right. I took one risk too many, and we’re all paying for it. Do you think mutiny is a better idea?” Fend was calm, but stern.

A moment of silence followed. Mutiny was punishable by death in all civilized countries. Even those who fled their countries weren’t safe. If these men escaped and it was discovered they were mutineers, they would be executed no matter what country they found themselves in.

“It doesn’t have to be mutiny,” the blond man replied finally. “We deserve the option to choose our fate.”

By this time, the ship had approached the island and entered the mouth of a natural harbor. The waterspouts followed close behind and to either side.

Fend gestured toward them. “If you challenge them, you will die.” He looked

around the group, meeting each man's eyes before continuing. "Death or whatever awaits us on the island. That is your choice. Your mutiny would be pointless, as would be my calling it such."

Several heads nodded, including the ring leader. Fend looked at his first mate and nodded. "We'll take the longboats. You can have the ship minus those. If you think you can cheat death, stay on ship and challenge the waterspouts. If you'd rather live, even in exile or captivity, go to the longboats. We're leaving as soon as we're loaded."

The circle of men around him parted as he started toward the longboats, followed by the mate and several others. Boman hesitated, looked back at the waterspouts, then shook his head. He had no choice. The Bahawre had been a far more formidable vessel and failed to escape the waterspouts. What chance did a smaller ship have? Fend was right. Death or captivity. The latter at least gave Boman a slim hope of eventual escape. Not to mention, following the captain was the only honorable choice.

Not wasting any time, the blond man began calling out orders. A dozen men jumped into action immediately, while another dozen hesitated, staring at the waterspouts, then the island.

By the time the longboats were ready, twenty-two men had gathered to board them. The rest were a bustling skeleton crew preparing to turn the ship. Boman shook his head. He wondered if they realized they had chosen death or if they really thought they had a chance.

"Quickly, now." Fend nudged his shoulder. "Once they turn the ship, we may all be in trouble. We'll need some distance."

Boman nodded and climbed into the longboat. As he settled between two sailors, he looked toward the beach and was surprised to see a group of people gathered to watch. Would they welcome them? Kill them? Enslave them? Certainly they didn't intend to kill them. Otherwise, the waterspouts – or whatever was causing the waterspouts – would have sunk the ship rather than leading it to the island.

"The welcome party," Fend chuckled wryly.

Boman nodded.

"Which one do you suppose is the leader?"

Boman scanned what faces he could see from so far away and shrugged. "At a glance, I'd say they don't have one."

Fend nodded. "Probably the oldest looking one, then."

Boman pondered the idea as he perused the crowd. The oldest looking one

didn't look as old as he. Either these people had short lives or they only sent the younger ones to the beach to greet their victims. He hoped it was the latter, although suspected the former.

He looked at Fend. "They've been isolated for several hundred years. They're probably quite primitive."

UNCHARTED

“You’d better hurry or you’ll miss it.” Eyric’s grandfather stood just beyond the pool pointing at something in the harbor.

She quickly climbed out of the pool. “We *will* talk about all of this later,” she stated as she passed him on the way to the beach. She heard his chuckle, but refused to look back – not just to pretend she didn’t hear him, but because of what she saw in the harbor. The sight of an actual ship would have kept her gaze regardless of his response.

Bigger than Putlag and made of wood, the ship cut through the water with ease. A single mast in the center hoisted three sails that decreased in size on the way up. Tilted slightly to one side, the ship turned toward the mouth of the harbor. Even though she had never seen a ship, Eyric could tell things weren’t as they should be. Frantic shouts from the deck were clear signs of distress. Then she noticed a few dozen of the crew had moved to smaller boats – lifeboats, she remembered from her books – and were rowing toward the beach.

Most of Bahawre’s people gathered to watch the events unfold. Eyric approached the others while more shouting from the ship drew her attention. As it completed its turn and started for the mouth of the harbor two waterspouts shot up on either side. One waterspout approached the ship’s bow. Shouts from the crew mixed with gasps from the islanders as the ship plowed directly into it. The crew cheered triumphantly as they emerged unscathed and the waterspout disappeared.

But the second spout closed in on the ship from the side. Before it arrived, the ship shook with a loud crack. Then the second waterspout disappeared, followed by another crack that sent splintered wood flying.

Several voices from the ship rang out. “We’re taking on water!” Eyric watched as one of the sailors peered over the side of the ship. “I see it! Down there!” Several men with bows rushed to his side and fired arrows into the churning water.

Eyric gasped as she realized Putlag wasn’t the only creature Caedmon kept secret. Another loud crack split the ship in two as it passed the harbor’s mouth. Shouts became screams as men fell into the water. Eyric cringed as the bubbling and sloshing of the sinking ship mixed with the thrashing of unseen creatures. The few sailors who had managed to jump overboard were roughly yanked below the surface one at a time. In less than a minute, the ship sank, leaving a discolored shadow on the surface of the water.

In the ensuing silence, Eyric noticed the survivors in the smaller boats had

redoubled their rowing efforts. Any minute, they would arrive on the beach. No telling when she would have time to talk to her grandfather again, so she pressed him with one last question. “Putlag has friends who eat people?”

Caedmon frowned. “Not friends. There are good and bad examples of all creatures. Just like us.” He turned to her. “Not here. We’ll talk later. I promise. These people need our help.”

Eyric sighed as her grandfather walked toward the water, but she knew he was right. Even if she thought everyone had the right to know this secret, here and now would not be fitting. This situation was urgent and rather exciting in and of itself. If she hadn’t just discovered Putlag was not only real, but a dragon, newcomers to the island would be the most exciting event of her life. Time to leave fantastic creatures in the background and try to savor this historic moment.

She followed Caedmon to the water’s edge in time to help pull the first boat onto the beach. Once both boats were secure, Caedmon stepped back and gestured for the other islanders to do the same. For a moment, the men in the boat spoke with hushed voices, most of them paying attention to a round, bearded man who wore the biggest hat. Eyric couldn’t help staring. She had never seen someone so big around the middle. And did he have more than one chin?

It was he who disembarked first, causing the boat to tip disproportionately. Eyric marveled at his ability to so deftly control his weight. The others followed until the boat was empty. Caedmon stepped forward and bowed. “Welcome to Bahawre, men of Streng. I am Caedmon, leader of these people. My condolences on your loss.”

The rotund man seemed surprised, but managed a bow in return. “I am Captain Fend. Of Streng, as you said.” He seemed surprised that Caedmon knew where he was from. Or perhaps he was surprised Caedmon spoke a familiar language. “Thank you for your words of welcome. As you can clearly see, we are in need of aid.”

Eyric watched the other men who had gathered behind Fend, all of them sailors with the same uniform as the captain except one. Her gaze settled on him. He was old. Older than her grandfather. What was he doing on the ship? He couldn’t possibly be a deck hand. Besides, his coat was red with more decorations than the captain’s. Was he a prisoner? No, he would be restrained in some way. A foreign dignitary? She remembered something from her history lessons.

Caedmon stepped toward the group, drawing her attention away from the old

man. “We saw your struggle and prepared food and lodging for you. You must be exhausted. As soon as you’re ready.”

“Thank you, sir.” Fend bowed again. “We appreciate your offer. Although, before we follow you, we would ... well ... not to offend, of course, but a man likes to understand his situation. Are you welcoming us as guests or prisoners?”

Caedmon nodded before Fend finished his question. Eyrice wondered how he always expected everything. “I understand. No offense taken. You are not our prisoners. We welcome you as guests. But there is no way off the island. We do not enforce this.” He gestured toward the harbor. “That is why you cannot leave.”

Fend’s face showed his disappointment, although he didn’t look particularly surprised. “Thank you for being straightforward with us.” Eyrice suppressed a laugh at the thought of Caedmon speaking plainly. “We will follow you now.” He nodded to a man Eyrice assumed was his second in command.

The man looked like the majority of the crew – brown hair, average height, short beard. His uniform was intact, but he had lost his hat. He turned to the rest of the crew and said something Eyrice couldn’t hear, then started toward Caedmon.

Caedmon nodded at one of the islanders. “Follow Benie, our ... nurse. She will tend to your wounds and lead you to shelter and food. If you need anything, she’s the one to ask.”

Eyrice wondered what a nurse was as she watched the exhausted crew trudge by – stranded on a strange island. She wondered what they were on their way to do. A mission, maybe? Or perhaps they completed their mission and were returning to their families. They must be heartbroken. But she noticed they didn’t look completely resigned to their fate. Most of them had the look of temporary acceptance. They would probably try to escape.

Her grandfather kept looking at the old man in the red coat. The man looked different than the others – paler skin, taller, less hair and no beard. She had not seen a uniform like his before. It looked more like the regular formal attire she had seen pictures of, but with medals on the chest. She hadn’t really paid attention to non-island fashion. What was the point? She didn’t expect to encounter anyone other than the people on her island.

As the last of the crew walked by, the old man stopped beside Fend and the two of them had a quiet chat. Caedmon started toward them and Eyrice followed.

“You are Zillean.” Caedmon extended his hand toward the old man, who looked surprised as he reached out in the same way and clasped hands. Eyrice

recognized that name. The Bahawre was a Zillean ship. Her people were descendants of Zille. The clasp of hands must be a customary greeting. But his uniform did not match the pictures from her history books. They had probably changed over the last six hundred years.

“So are you,” the old man replied, half question, half statement.

Caedmon nodded. “In a way.”

The old man bowed. “I am Boman. I am – or was – the prime minister of Zille.”

This was the first time Eyrice had ever seen surprise on her grandfather’s face. Caedmon bowed. “I’m honored. Yours is a story I want to hear. After you’re settled, of course.”

Boman frowned pensively. “Pardon the question, but it’s been a mystery for a long time in Zille. Are you descendants of the Bahawre crew? The lost ship?”

At first, Eyrice was surprised by the question. Everyone knew they were the descendants of the Bahawre shipwreck. But then it dawned on her the only thing a Zillean would know about the Bahawre was that it never came back.

Caedmon nodded and smiled. “Most of us are.”

“Most of you?” The captain shifted his gaze between Caedmon and Boman, brow furrowed.

“We can discuss it later. It’s too big a story for now. First, let’s get you settled and fed. I’ll answer what I can later.”

That sounded more like her grandfather. So much for straightforward.

TRAPPED

Boman would have found the hot, tropical sun uncomfortable if not for the cool ocean breeze. As he pried a piece of unfamiliar vegetable – or was it a fruit? – from between his teeth, he thought back to his recent meal. Not that he wasn't grateful for the islanders' hospitality, but the unfamiliar produce and the fact it wasn't cooked caused his stomach to shift and groan.

He had asked about some of the items, but hearing the names made them no more familiar to him. At present, he couldn't remember any of them. What looked like light-blue gourds with bright green flesh appeared no less strange when given a name. The seaweed he recognized, though he hadn't enjoyed that either. Didn't these people know how to cook? He sighed. It was one thing to be trapped in a strange place, but if every detail was unfamiliar, it would be a long adjustment.

The cave to which they were escorted had taken Boman by surprise. Every aspect of it seemed alive. Green, mossy plants grew on the floor and halfway up the walls. It served as a surprisingly comfortable carpet, and produced tiny white flowers with a light, fruity aroma. The cave's walls swirled purple and dark blue with a touch of pale yellow mixed in. The man-sized hole in the ceiling pulled a pleasant breeze in through the vine-covered door. Despite being a cave, Boman thought it was the most beautiful room he had ever seen.

Stalagmites had been carved into low-backed chairs or converted into small tables with bamboo-like tops. But what had become of the stalactites? Where did the water drip now? Perhaps they redirected it into the pool in the center of the room. About five paces across, it bubbled with water from an unknown source, then flowed deeper into the cave. At first glance, he thought the water glowed, but upon further inspection, he saw tiny, neon fish.

Was it all beautiful? Yes. Intriguing? Interesting? Mysterious? Yes, yes and yes. But he was trying to figure this place out when he should be trying to get home. The unique scenery steered him off track. He needed to devise a plan, but could think of no way to beat the sea creatures. If Caedmon held no sway with them and everyone else was a prisoner, what chance did he have?

Boman took a deep breath. He had been sitting on a rock pondering these things for over an hour. Perhaps he *should* take a break and simply admire his surroundings. After he left the cave, he hadn't even paid attention to his choice of seat. The boulder appeared to grow out of the sand. Situated just to the side of the path leading to the harbor, it was an obvious place to sit and watch the sea. Gone were the monsters, waterspouts and shipwrecks. Instead, he found only

calm seas and a sky of sparse, wispy clouds. It was quite beautiful, and despite his desperate need to escape, he decided to give it some attention.

The path led up the hill about a hundred paces to the cave. It continued a short distance the other direction where it blended into the pebbly beach. Beyond the beach, the large natural harbor filled his view, encircled by thin peninsulas except for the mouth at the far end. Back up the hill, he saw thin wisps of smoke from the active volcano.

Despite his attempt at peace, Boman's thoughts turned to his former quest for answers about the Bahawre. Instead of a ship, he had found a people who had taken on its name — the descendants of the original crew. And what about their enigmatic leader, Caedmon? Interesting that he bore the same name as the second mate on the Bahawre.

Boman had met quite a few islanders over lunch, and most of them had unusual names, at least to his ears. But Caedmon was a Zillean name. Why would he alone bear a Zillean name? Maybe all the island leaders over the years had taken on the name, like a title.

No. He would not get caught up in any mysteries. The only interesting question about this place was solved — Bahawre was no longer a ship, but an island. Now he needed to find a way off. Preferably not in the belly of a sea serpent. Boman gazed out over the harbor. He swatted at a buzzing insect, then shifted his position on the large, flat boulder and huffed. Escape would be difficult, if not impossible.

"There you are." Fend trudged down the last bit of hill toward him. "I see you found a place to ponder this disaster. Mind if I join you?"

"Not at all." Boman patted the boulder. "The seating is adequate."

Fend smiled and eased onto the rock beside him. "This ought to support our combined weight." He patted his round belly. "Mine, mostly."

Boman chuckled, then returned his attention to the harbor.

Fend took a few moments to catch his breath, then cleared his throat. "Any ideas?"

"Ideas?"

"Well, you've been here awhile. Do you have a plan yet?"

Boman laughed and shook his head. "I'm just trying to digest what I ate."

Fend laughed. "I may have only recently met you, but I know you weren't sitting here by yourself for the last hour and not contemplating escape."

Boman chuckled. "The longboats are gone. The ship is sunk. The sea serpents are out there somewhere. I was going to say I have no ideas yet, but now that

you mention it, I do have an idea.”

Fend grinned.

“Yes, you’re right. But I didn’t have a coherent thought until you came by.”

Fend straightened his jacket dramatically. “It’s the reason I’m the captain.”

Boman grinned, then shifted his position to look at Fend. “It just struck me these monsters didn’t kill us. They only killed the ones trying to escape. Beasts don’t do such things. A rational being is behind this.”

Fend frowned. “Yes. And?”

“You can’t reason with a beast. It kills and eats and”

“Ah, but a rational being can be reasoned with.”

“If done effectively.” Boman nodded.

Fend’s brow furrowed as he reached up to scratch his beard.

Boman shook his head. “But where to start? Caedmon has claimed no association with the sea serpents, or whatever they are.” He sat up a little straighter. “You know, it bothers me every time I think about it. How could they produce those waterspouts. It doesn’t make sense.”

Fend seemed amused. “Do you always get side-tracked like this? What difference does it make how they produce the waterspouts? We were discussing how to convince them to let us leave. Sea serpents? Waterspouts? Another form of monster? All we really need to know right now is who to talk to.”

Boman turned in time to see Eyrice strolling toward them. He remembered how she had pulled Caedmon away within minutes of the meal being served. He couldn’t help but remember the scowl on her face. No doubt Caedmon had been mysterious with her too often. He would love to have heard their conversation.

“Hello,” she greeted plainly as she came to a stop beside them.

“Hello,” Boman and Fend echoed, not quite in unison.

“Did you get enough to eat? If not, we have more.”

As Fend shrugged, Boman’s belly groaned. “I guess I’m still digesting mine.”

They all laughed and Eyrice nodded her head. “I suppose our food is quite different from Zillean or Streng ... uh ... what do you call food from Streng?”

Fend smiled. “It’s always a point of confusion for those not from Streng. Personally, I think ours is the only language that gets it right. Everything is Streng. A person from Streng is a Streng, we cook Streng cuisine and we speak Streng – the best language that ever was. Never a doubt what word to use.”

Boman laughed and shook his head. Eyrice smiled as she nodded. “Then Zillean and Streng cuisine is probably quite a bit different from Bahawrean cuisine.”

“So we’ve noticed,” Fend replied with a grunt as he stood up.

Boman stood as well and suddenly realized he hadn’t asked if it was acceptable for him to leave the cave. “I do hope I haven’t annoyed anyone by leaving. I just needed some time to think.”

“Not a problem. You can go anywhere you like, although I would advise you not to venture near the other side of the island.”

“Oh?” Boman’s eyes widened.

“Actually, I came to see if you would like a tour. I can explain as we go.” Eyric smiled politely.

Boman noticed she seemed a bit distracted. Her quiet discussions with Caedmon had seemed a bit heated. Perhaps she would say more than she was supposed to in her frustration. He nodded. “A tour would be an excellent distraction, I think. Probably very useful, too.”

Fend nodded. “I agree. Sitting here bemoaning our fate isn’t doing us any good.”

Eyric smiled sympathetically. “I know it must be difficult for you.” She frowned as if suddenly realizing something, but simply said, “Follow me. I’ll show you where you’ll be staying.”

Boman and Fend exchanged looks, then followed her up the path and past the cave to a plateau.

“What were you saying about the other side of the island?” Boman didn’t want to miss the explanation.

Eyric came to a stop in the middle of the clearing and nodded. “Yes, the other side is where the Kisiwa live. They’re the other people on the island. Descendants of the original crew like us, but they disagreed with the leaders. They hated the island and wanted to preserve their Zillean way of life. After many years of failure, they’ve managed to grow potatoes and a grain they grind up and bake into cakes. They also found a way to domesticate wild boars. I guess they’re not so wild now. They’re decidedly different from us. If you get close enough to their side of the island, you’ll smell them.”

“The Kisiwa or the boars?”

Eyric shrugged. “Both, I guess.”

Fend wrinkled his nose, although Boman suspected the man salivated a little at the thought of pork. Boman’s scholarly frown returned. “I didn’t imagine such a thing would happen here – splitting off into two separate cultures. But I suppose it makes sense. It seems there are dissenters in any group of people.”

Eyric smiled and nodded. “Yes, Caedmon says people are people no matter

where you find them.”

Fend chuckled. “Then he hasn’t met the Onorians.”

Boman cringed, not just at the mention of the name, but at the recollection of Geoffrey’s alliance with them.

Eyric seemed to notice. “They must be very much like the Kisiwa.” She started toward the east. “Come this way. I’ll show you the way to your new accommodations. It’s not far. Then I can show you how to get to the important things like baths and food.”

Boman and Fend followed in silence as they left the clearing and entered a dense jungle path. For a few minutes, Boman simply admired the scenery. He would have found it to be a typical tropical island except everything was abnormal in some way. Blue leaves and green fruit seemed backwards, and he didn’t see any woody plants, which made him frown. Even if they decided to build a boat, the materials wouldn’t be strong enough.

The jungle abruptly became another clearing. A large fire pit made of volcanic rock grabbed his attention. About knee-high and two paces across, he imagined it could hold a large, hot fire. A short distance from the fire pit, a pool like the one in the cave bubbled in its center and flowed into a small stream that disappeared into the jungle.

“This is the gathering spot for the village.” Eyric had stopped next to the fire pit. “And fresh water. Each of you will have your own hut.” She gestured toward the jungle and waited as the two men looked at the jungle in confusion. Boman frowned. “I don’t see what you –” His eyes widened and he chuckled. “Ah, I see it now.” The large bushes bent over each other to form canopies around the edge of the clearing, creating small huts. Each stood chest high with openings in the top and front. Apparently, the islanders only ventured inside to eat or sleep.

Eyric noticed their expressions and must have taken them for disapproval. “Do these not meet your expectations? I’m sure we could build bigger ones if necessary.”

“Oh, no. They’re fine.” Boman tried to think of a good explanation. “It’s not a matter of meeting our expectations. Everything is so far different from our homes, we don’t know how to react.”

Fend chuckled at Boman’s explanation. “He’s more accustomed to large palaces made of stone with rooms as large as this entire village.” He chuckled again, and just as Boman was about to defend himself, he added, “And towers four or five stories high. Don’t forget those. And all that in a city as big as this whole island, packed with buildings and people”

“Yes, I think she gets the point, Fend.” Boman shook his head as Eyrice’s eyes widened at Fend’s description of Zille. “The accommodations are perfectly satisfactory, Eyrice. I grew up in very meager circumstances, and these huts are far better.”

“How did you ever manage so many people?” Eyrice looked back and forth between Boman and Fend.

“Well, we have a king,” Boman started haltingly. He had never had to explain such things to anyone. “And the king has ministers and people to enforce the peace.” He sighed as he remembered King Derek. “In fact, we had a really good king until recently. One of our longest living, too. He was one hundred and ten years old when he died.”

Eyrice looked shocked. “Only one hundred and ten? And he was your longest living king?”

“Well ... yes.”

“But surely you must be into your one hundred fifties?”

It was Boman’s turn to be surprised. “One hundred fifties? I don’t understand.”

Fend shook his head, a doubtful expression on his face as he muttered, “No, that can’t be right.”

“Everyone lives into their one hundred fifties, barring things like war or disease.” She eyed Boman briefly. “Not to be rude, but how old are you?”

“Eighty-two.”

She looked shocked again. “I’m seventy-four and I don’t expect to look like you in eight years. How did you get so many wrinkles?”

Boman was at a loss for words, but Fend found his voice. “How can you be fourteen years older than me? You look thirty.”

Before Eyrice could respond, Caedmon’s voice preceded his entry into the clearing. “Things are different here. I’m over two hundred years old. Most of our people live to that age.” He nodded to the two men as he came to a stop, then turned to Eyrice. “One hundred years is a long life where they come from.”

“I don’t understand.” Boman still couldn’t fathom how age could be so different in another part of the world. “Do you use a different calendar? Lunar, maybe?”

Caedmon shook his head. “Many things about the island will probably surprise you. I don’t understand many of them myself. As you have already experienced, our food is quite different, as well as the vegetation and climate. The water is unique, too. I don’t know if or how it all works, but it amounts to

better health and a longer life. You will notice some changes in yourselves in the coming days.”

A silent moment afforded Boman a chance to think. But instead of pondering the age discrepancy and the proposed explanation, he found himself wondering what else Caedmon wasn't telling him.

Eyric nodded her head slowly, then turned her attention back to Boman. “So if he had grown up here, he would look as old as I?”

Caedmon nodded.

Boman frowned. How much of the conversation had Caedmon heard before he made his presence known?

“What other strange things are we to expect?” Fend tried to hide it, but Boman could hear the hint of annoyance in his voice.

“Probably quite a few,” Caedmon replied casually. “I couldn't possibly anticipate all of them, nor could you. You'll just have to experience them as they come. In the meantime, I suggest you pay attention to what Eyric shows you. It will be useful if you want to find your way around.”

After a polite nod and smile, the island leader turned and disappeared into the jungle. Boman wouldn't have noticed the path before Caedmon used it. So much for explanations. He didn't even get a question in before the man left. He turned to look at Eyric.

“Don't forget you owe me a chat,” Eyric called after Caedmon, then smiled at Fend and Boman apologetically. “He tends to end conversations by leaving abruptly.” Before Boman could ask, she continued. “Yes, he always sneaks up on people, and no, I don't know how. Shall we continue?”

ANCIENT AGREEMENTS

Two days after the shipwreck, Caedmon finally agreed to a place and time. Eyrice's usually auburn hair burned a little redder in the light of the setting sun, mirroring her temperament. Combined with the additional heat from the volcano, Eyrice couldn't help a half smile at her grandfather's choice of location. Sure, it was away from prying eyes and ears, but it only amplified her intensity. She wanted answers and she would get them if she had to tie her grandfather down.

But Eyrice had a more pressing agenda. She was determined not to let her grandfather sneak up on her. She had chosen an oddly flat piece of rock jutting out from the slope about twenty paces down from the volcano's rim, from which an ever-present trail of smoke rose. From her vantage point, she could see both the lone cluster of jungle and the exposed path leading up the volcano. Peering alternately down the mountain path and through the clump of jungle, she felt confident she would see him.

A whoosh of air from behind caught Eyrice by surprise, and despite her efforts to the contrary, she stood up, turned and gasped. Of course. He arrived with Putlag from the only direction she had thought wasn't possible. "Why are you always doing that?"

Caedmon and Putlag laughed an odd mix of vocal tones as Caedmon dismounted, then patted her shoulder and shrugged. "It was his idea. He likes to surprise people more than I do."

"And I'm better at it," Putlag added.

"So I see." Eyrice stood with her hand on her hip. "Are you going to teach me?"

"Of course." Putlag's low, airy voice simultaneously scared and comforted her. "Although you probably will never master the flying part."

Caedmon laughed, then turned to Eyrice, smiling. "But you are probably more interested in the answers you've been seeking. I think we should start with a little history, which will probably answer most of your questions."

"You don't know what my questions are." Eyrice scowled.

"Oh?" Caedmon looked amused. "Who or what are the sea monsters? Why can't anyone leave? Does Putlag eat people? What really happened to split the original crew? Why is Fend so fat? How can Boman look so old? How soon will their appearances change? Why is your grandfather so strange?"

Eyrice groaned. After all these years, she still hated it when he got inside her head. "Okay, fine. You know all my questions. Let's just get started."

Putlag's mouth widened into what Eyrice hoped was a grin. She wondered if

she would ever get used to his long s-es or his scary, yet soothing voice or the simple fact he was a dragon. Had Caedmon grown accustomed to him, or did he still get nervous around Putlag?

Putlag's voice grabbed her attention. "Good. We'll start with my part of the tale."

Caedmon nodded and smiled, looking almost like a child excited about story time.

Putlag's intake of breath still seemed too big to Eyrice, but she ignored it as he started his tale. "Long ago, thousands of years ago, dragons and humans lived together. I wouldn't call it harmony, but we had an acceptable peace. As the humans grew in number, things began to change. They built cities ruled by kings – men who craved power and exalted themselves above others. They argued over land and money, resulting in war. Many of these kings forsook the One, exalting themselves instead."

Putlag scowled. "From time to time, one of these kings would wage war against my kind." The dragon's eyes flared, then he shook his head. "At great cost to both dragons and humans were they defeated. Each time, we hoped it would be the end of war. But another king would come to power. Many dragons were killed over the years. Quite a few of my friends, in fact."

Confusion must have shown in Eyrice's face, for Putlag nodded and explained. "You see, although quite a bit more powerful individually, dragons don't join together like humans. We value solitude and peace. Finding everyone and coordinating a defense is not easy or quick. We struggled to find and motivate one another whenever a new king threatened us. So when our greatest threat arose many years ago, it took over a year to gather everyone."

Eyrice had heard some of the story. She nodded and groaned. "Morvik?"

"Does she know?"

Caedmon shook his head. "Only the official story."

Putlag nodded slowly. "Morvik. He united the worst of his kind against us, telling horrible lies. He tried to lure us into one place to destroy us all at once. He thought he had outwitted us, but he only tricked himself. We numbered more than he thought – more than double." His eyes glowed brighter as he continued. "We utterly destroyed him and his army with fire. Before we parted from one another, we made a pact to destroy the humans and put an end to their violence and hatred. No other creature kills except for food or defense. Humans kill for those reasons, too. But also for anger and for fun. And sometimes for no reason they can explain. We wanted to be done with them."

Eyric's shocked expression did not escape his notice and he defensively held up a clawed hand. "Try to understand. If dragons were constantly seeking to kill humans, continually bringing war and destruction, would you not seek a solution?"

The dragon regarded her again, as if looking into her soul, then nodded. He was right, but she didn't need to reply. Somehow, he read her reaction, and she didn't understand how she knew it. He continued. "We thought eliminating them was the simplest solution. The world would be better off without them. But as we gathered to plan their demise, the One appeared."

Eyric was surprised. "In physical form?"

"Yes. Unlike humans, we dragons do not disintegrate in his presence."

"Wow!"

"At this point we made a deal with the One. These islands and the surrounding sea belong to us. Any humans venturing too close must be offered a chance to stay. Otherwise, we may kill them."

Eyric nodded. It horrified her to hear him speak so casually of killing humans, but she could not help but see his side of things. It was his right. "What about the sea serpents?"

A sad sigh escaped Putlag's huge mouth. "They went tribal over a thousand years ago. It's almost as if they've gone feral, yet they know and abide by the rules. I can count none of them as friends."

Eyric nodded as she pondered these things. First, she was offended to find out she was as much a prisoner here as the new arrivals. But then again, she had no intention of leaving. Is a prisoner really a prisoner if she's where she wants to be? She turned her thoughts to the new arrivals. "So nobody is allowed to leave, which suits me fine. I had no intention of leaving. But what of Fend and Boman? Have you heard about their troubles at home? Is there no way to help them?"

Putlag growled something low and guttural that she didn't understand, but before she could ask, he shook his head. "It is not for you to decide. I have had a discussion with the One. It did not go to my liking. I will speak to him again tomorrow. We will decide their fate. If one of them must go, the One must keep his bargain and protect my islands."

Eyric wanted to argue, but hesitated. It would be pointless to argue with the One. She would wait to see what came of Putlag's next meeting and then decide whether or not to argue.

Caedmon interrupted her thoughts. "There's more. We still have my part to discuss, but if you'd rather wait for another time, I understand. It's a lot to

digest.”

“No!” Eyríc was not about to let that happen. “I can never get straight answers from you. I’ll take all I can get right now.”

Caedmon and Putlag laughed.

Caedmon’s face grew serious as he looked her in the eye. “Okay, here is a straight answer. I am not a descendant of Caedmon from the original shipwreck.”

“No?” She hadn’t expected this information.

“No. I *am* Caedmon.”

Surprised again, Eyríc shook her head slowly. “No ... you can’t be.”

“After all you’ve seen in the last few days, you’re telling me something isn’t possible?”

Eyríc was still shaking her head. “But that would make you nearly six hundred years old.”

“Five hundred and eighty-three.”

It took Eyríc a moment to realize her mouth was hanging open. She knew there was something about her grandfather – Grandfather? How many greats in grandfather now?

As usual, he seemed to know what she was thinking. “Forty-three greats, I think, but who’s counting?”

Eyríc giggled. Something about his comment tickled her. She shook her head and laughed again. By the time she realized she wouldn’t be able to stop laughing, Caedmon and Putlag shared in the amusement.

Several minutes passed before Caedmon took a deep breath and let it out. “Now maybe you can understand why I had to hide so much. Too many things could have given away my age, my identity, or the truth about Putlag.”

Eyríc shook her head again. “But how? Nobody else lives so long.”

Putlag hummed. “I believe you humans call it magic. Caedmon and I made a bond a long time ago. An exchange of blood.”

“Yes, and I was sick for a week,” Caedmon chimed in.

“And I felt tainted for as long. Human blood is tainted with corruption.”

Caedmon smiled. “So after my sickness, I became less corrupt and Putlag became more ornery. And he acquired a sense of humor.”

Eyríc giggled despite her concern. But she knew what was coming next, even before Caedmon opened his mouth.

“If you agree to replace me, you will have to make the same covenant.”

“And what will happen to you?”

She saw a sense of relief cross Caedmon’s face. “I’ll finally be able to live out

my life and die like everyone else.”

Although she had suspected his answer, Eyrice was still surprised to hear it. For a long moment, she thought about it. “How old were you when you made the covenant?”

“Thirty-eight.”

“So you would still live another one hundred fifty years or so?”

“If the One wills.”

Putlag nodded. “He will become like other people. I do not know how his years under the covenant will affect his life expectancy. It seems logical to me he will start aging from his current condition, which is fifty-ish.”

Eyrice frowned. “But I don’t want you to die.”

Caedmon shook his head. “Everyone dies. Humans were never meant to live as long as I have. I welcome the opportunity to go home. To see the One face to face. To see Lily again.”

“I wish I had met my grandmother,” Eyrice mumbled as she tried to work out the implications of this covenant. It didn’t take her long. “I’ll outlive everyone I know. Even you. Even my children, if I ever have any, and however many generations after that.”

“Yes. It’s certainly something to consider. I never claimed it would be easy.” The brief wave of sadness in Caedmon’s eyes revealed his experience in the matter.

Eyrice found herself wondering about all sorts of details instead of focusing on the key points. How did he manage to convince people he was a descendant of ... well, himself? What happened to his kids? Was it weird being married to someone who aged while he didn’t? When did people start noticing it? How did he manage everything? She shook her head. “How did you convince everyone you were not the original Caedmon?”

He seemed to know she had more questions, but Caedmon nodded his head and answered all of them at once. “Don’t worry. I’ll teach you everything you need to know. Simply put, I spent a generation arranging things. Eventually, who would believe I was really so old?”

Eyrice laughed, although she felt more like screaming. Her newfound knowledge was worse than knowing about Putlag, and the decision she had to make was far more difficult than she had anticipated. “I need to think. By myself. Maybe tomorrow we can talk again?”

Putlag nodded with a low hum.

Caedmon smiled sympathetically. “Take your time. Come find me when

you're ready.”

TAKING CHARGE

“It’s been awhile since we met.” Gurtie smiled at Emma. The same tower from which they had watched the battle seemed an appropriate place to chat. This time, the chirping of birds and sounds of people milling around the courtyard replaced the sounds of battle wafting into the room. The scene outside the window left no visual reminder of the recent battle – just a green field with a forested backdrop.

The large banquet tables had been put away along with the funeral decorations, returning the space to its usual purpose as a common room. Groupings of small tables and chairs were evenly spaced along the western window, providing cozy spots for tea and semi-private conversation. The remainder of the room was kept empty to allow for impromptu gatherings and functions.

Emma smiled as she seated herself across the small table from Gurtie. She smoothed her long peach dress. It was new, although not exactly the latest palace fashion – cotton, with a white sash around the middle. “More peaceful this time. Thank you for inviting me.”

Gurtie approved of Emma’s dress. Although the queen mother wore a pink satin dress embellished with a floral-patterned white lace, she appreciated the simple elegance of Emma’s country roots. With her rising status, Emma would no doubt influence fashion choices within a month. Gurtie could imagine most of the ladies soon wearing cotton as their fabric of choice.

Gurtie shook her head. “No need to thank me, dear. Like I said last time, I prefer the company of people I like. So often, I’m forced to tolerate the cruel or idiotic for the sake of politics.”

“I understand that now. Because of Emery’s promotion, I’ve apparently become the new social status improvement tool.” She pointed at her dress. “Even though I wear cotton and avoid the latest styles, they continually invite me to tea and lunch – the very same women who scorned me not two weeks ago. Although, I do enjoy their uncomfortable attempts at complimenting my clothes.”

Gurtie laughed. “I would love to hear them. But their scheming is the unfortunate price of success. The trick is to learn what you have to do and what you can afford to decline or ignore. Don’t worry. You’ll find your balance.” She had an agenda regarding Emery’s promotion and hoped it would come up. But she liked Emma and didn’t want to come across as political. She would have to ease into it. “I told you Emery was much better than those two idiots. It was

inevitable that he would distinguish himself.”

Emma nodded. “I just hope I don’t mess it up for him. I’m not like the other ladies. I don’t expect I ever will be.”

“No offense, dear, but the king didn’t promote Emery because of you. Nor will he demote him because of you. My son may scheme and do some things I regret, but he hasn’t the slightest care for social standing. Learn the ropes of royal society, of course, but don’t forget who you are. Your rural origins will not hinder your husband’s success.”

Emma smiled. “Thank you, Gurtie. I don’t know what I would do without your advice and kindness.”

Gurtie smiled back. “Of course, dear. I’m happy to help when I can.”

Emma frowned. “I wanted to ask something last time, but I wasn’t sure it was appropriate.”

“Don’t be afraid. Worst thing I’ll do is tell you it’s inappropriate.”

Emma laughed and nodded. “Okay, then. I don’t understand why you’re not still queen. It seems to me the best continuity for the kingdom would be you.”

This was the open door Gurtie was looking for. “Well, in the company of others, such words might be viewed as treasonous. But I’m glad you feel you can speak openly with me. At least when we’re alone.” Gurtie adjusted her position to face Emma more directly. “A hundred years ago, your suggestion would have been the case. Do you know of Queen Lilah?”

Emma nodded. “Her story is what made me wonder.”

Gurtie nodded. “When she was queen, life was difficult. People did what they had to do to survive. Over the course of her reign, the people of Zille worked hard to increase in power and wealth. They eventually achieved peace, prosperity and comfort. But a comfortable life leads to complacency. Comfort, once experienced, leads to the search for more. People let their guard down to seek pleasure and diversion.”

Seeing the confused expression on Emma’s face, Gurtie shook her head. “While country life stayed the same, city life became an entirely different culture. City life isn’t simply a different set of quirks to get used to. It’s a fundamentally different life. You come from a different world. Country women still work hard. Your mother runs the finances of your house, doesn’t she?”

“Yes.”

“Many years ago, city culture was the same. But with prosperity came a focus on fine dresses and social gatherings. The ladies at court chose soft, clean hands over capable ones. Men preferred ladies with soft, pale skin. Perfumed, painted

and dressed like dolls. Eventually, we became pieces of art. Trophies on display at state events and social functions.”

Emma’s eyes widened. “That’s terrible!”

Gurtie shook her head. “It’s human nature. People will always choose what’s easy and comfortable when given the choice.” She pointed at a tea ball sitting on a small plate, most likely left over from a previous meeting. “We buy those in the market. Simply drop them in a hot kettle and leave them on a plate when you’re finished. If you have the money, wouldn’t you rather buy those than prepare your own tea each day?”

Emma nodded. “Oh yes. Those are brilliant. They collect them when you’re done and refill them.”

Gurtie laughed. “See? It’s already happening to you.”

Emma blushed.

“It happened slowly with things like that. Eventually, most of the ladies enjoyed not having to work. They could focus on pretty things, lunches and teas. The One forbid they should rear their own children or wash their own laundry.”

“And men preferred lazy women?”

“No, no. Men preferred softer, gentler women – not to mention the control it gave them.” Seeing Emma’s disgusted expression, Gurtie shook her head. “It’s not as malicious as it sounds. Men also have an undying need to be needed. To be the strong ones. And women have an undying need to be adored. We share the fault. We let it happen.”

Emma frowned. “So we’ve been reduced to ornaments?”

Gurtie smiled and reached over to pat Emma’s hand. “Don’t let my harsh words discourage you. At least we don’t live in Tyriel where women are required to obey their husbands without question or risk being accused of heresy. And we’re not in Onor where women are no better than slaves. We’re not powerless, dear. We just wield our power indirectly these days.”

For a moment, Emma frowned in annoyance, but then she nodded slowly as her face turned conspiratorial. “Teach me.”

JON'S QUEST

Jon could find no way to calm himself. Not only did he feel as if he was intruding on his master's privacy, but he couldn't help wondering what everyone else was thinking. Probably that he was too big for his britches in the second best room in the palace. To top it off, light from the afternoon sun played off the stone balcony, directing a warm glow through the open door. Of course Emery arrived to see the wonderfully glowing room — and Jon felt unworthy.

“Your situation has improved considerably.” Emery's face betrayed his jealousy, elevating Jon's discomfort.

“It certainly wasn't my idea,” Jon replied quickly. “If it were up to me, I would still be in the stables. I sleep better.”

Emery chuckled.

“The king insisted,” Jon continued his self-defense. “He felt the stables would disgrace the position. Apparently, no other rooms in the palace are empty. I don't know how not to be uncomfortable about it. Especially with people like you who have worked hard to earn their positions.” A fairly transparent attempt, but hopefully it would ease Emery's jealousy.

Emery smiled and shook his head. “It wouldn't be good to question the king's judgment in the matter. I'm a military man. Orders are orders. I know not to cast blame on those who obey. I'm accustomed to decisions not being my own. Although I've worked longer for my position, even my promotion came out of order and at a young age. I'm sure both of us will run into people who have ... some sort of opinion about that.”

Jon smiled and nodded. “I just don't want to start off on the wrong foot, especially with you. We'll need to work well together more than anyone else.”

“Agreed.”

Not terrible so far. Jon needed to keep the conversation moving. He gestured to the cluster of chairs that could be seen through the open balcony door. “Then perhaps we should get to it. I'm sure you have some ideas about where to start looking for Boman.”

Picking a chair at random, Emery took a deep breath and let it out slowly as he settled down. “I believe it's customary for the prime minister to take the first stab.”

Was it a test? Boman had always gathered opinions before putting forth his own. Jon had always believed it was his way of testing those around him. Now he was sure. He chose a chair facing Emery, then sat down and shrugged. “My first plan was to ask you for ideas. You're more of a strategist than I am.”

“I see.” Emery shifted in his seat and frowned briefly.

Jon braced for criticism.

Emery looked down at his lap and shook his head before returning his gaze to Jon. “This may seem a bit unprofessional. My wife seems to have taken a particular interest in my job recently.”

“Oh?”

“It’s a little disconcerting, actually. She’s never expressed any interest in my job or politics. But last night, she told me she had an idea about catching the generals and finding Boman. It was surprisingly good. Not that she’s unintelligent or should have bad ideas. She’s just never been interested.”

Jon laughed. “As far as I’m concerned, the best idea is the right idea, regardless of its origin.”

“Then I’ll run hers by you. Hopefully I’m not the only one who thinks it’s good.”

Jon chuckled. Although he suspected Gurtie’s influence, he kept it to himself. “Go on. Her idea is as good a place as any to start.”

Emery leaned forward and put his elbows on his knees. “As you know, the generals fled to Gaeld. It’s too bad Boman wasn’t able to catch their aides talking to that other fellow. Now we don’t know for certain what they’re up to. So instead of hurrying to capture them, Emma suggested we send men in regular clothes — men the generals won’t recognize — and find out who they’re working with. Unlike some others, she doesn’t think they went to Gaeld to catch a ship.”

Jon frowned and stroked his chin as if he had a beard. “They would have good reason not to flee. Covering their tracks, continuing the conspiracy ... she’s probably right. But the king’s order was to bring them back as soon as possible. If we choose to spy on them, we’ll have to make absolutely certain we don’t lose them.”

Emery nodded. “Of course.”

Jon smiled. “But if there is a small delay in returning them and we uncover the whole plan behind the conspiracy, the king’s impatience should be appeased. And if the delay leads to Boman’s whereabouts ...”

Emery nodded. “Even if all we accomplish is the next piece of the puzzle, it would be worth the delay. Surely, the king will be pleased either way.”

“I believe so. And if they’ve already fled, we’ll find out where.” Jon stood up and walked to the balcony rail. After a moment’s thought, he turned. “You should accompany them, don’t you think? But stay out of sight. We don’t want

to let the former generals know what we're up to."

"Agreed. And I can bring a few soldiers. They're due to show up anyway for crowd control. The festival got a little rowdy yesterday. I'll have adequate forces to arrest them when the time comes."

"Excellent." Jon didn't sound as convincing as he hoped, and his face must have given away his uncertainty.

Emery's brow furrowed. "Do you find fault with the plan?"

"No, no. It's just ... I'm not used to being the one standing by. This will be the second time this week. Until Boman left for Gaeld, I was always the one sent to do whatever needed done. It feels strange."

Emery seemed surprised, as if he hadn't expected Jon to prefer his old job. "Well if we find Boman, perhaps you can return to the action."

"Yes, perhaps."

An awkward silence followed while Jon wondered if Emery hoped they would find Boman so Jon would return to his old position. At the same time, he wondered if Emery wondered if Jon had misinterpreted the statement.

Before Jon could sort out his thoughts, Emery stood. "I should get started. If I leave within the hour, I'll arrive in time to set spies in the taverns."

"Of course. Thank you, Emery. Let me know if you need anything."

After a nod and a smile, Emery departed. Jon sighed. The meeting was easier than he had feared. He was about to open some wine and sit down when he heard Emery's voice again from the hall.

"Good evening, Your Majesty."

"Hello, dear." The queen mother's response was almost always the same. Jon was relieved it wasn't the king. "Any news about Boman?"

"Not yet, ma'am. I'm on my way to deal with it now."

"Then I won't delay you, dear. The One bless your task."

"Thank you, ma'am."

Jon stepped in from the balcony and waited. Gurtie never ventured into this wing of the palace without visiting Boman's room. As Emery's boots echoed down the hall, he heard a knock on the door.

"Come in."

"Hello, dear." Gurtie smiled as she entered. "I hope I'm not interrupting anything."

"Not at all, Gurtie." Jon had been sternly instructed not to call her "Your Majesty" except in public. It had taken him quite some time to learn that rule and it still felt wrong. "We just finished. We're setting a trap for the former generals

in Gaeld.”

“Excellent. I was hoping we’d do something of that nature.”

“Uh huh.” Now he was sure she was behind Emma’s suggestions. “Would you care to join me on the balcony? I was about to open some wine. Perhaps you can explain to me how you convinced Emma to trick Emery into carrying out your orders.”

Gurtie feigned innocence. “I’m sure I don’t know what you’re talking about, dear.”

But Jon saw the satisfaction in her smile. “I’ve seen you do it with Derek and Boman. And now you’re teaching Emma. I’ve always known who runs the kingdom – and I’m not complaining.”

They both laughed as Gurtie took a seat in one of two chairs separated by a small table. Jon opened the wine and poured two glasses before seating himself.

“Well, she has to learn from somebody,” Gurtie continued as if the conversation hadn’t paused. “It might as well be me. At least she’ll learn the art correctly.”

Jon laughed. “And superbly.”

Gurtie laughed, too, then picked up her glass and offered a toast. “To my new ally. Prevent the men from having full reign.”

Jon shook his head and moaned, but raised his glass and clinked anyway. After a sip, he set his glass on the small table. “I’m more concerned the men will hand the kingdom over to you and Emma and have no idea they’ve done it.

Gurtie smiled. “That’s the plan, dear.”

They laughed again.

After a pause, Jon sighed. “Well, it would save the kingdom from my uneducated guidance.”

“Oh, don’t you dare.” Gurtie was suddenly an angry mother. “Geoffrey chose you – and he chose wisely. And it is proper for you to be in Boman’s room. Don’t deny it. I can sense your discomfort here.”

Jon nodded. He didn’t dare interrupt her lecture.

“You will be an excellent prime minister. Don’t get me wrong. I want Boman back as much as anyone else. He is my best friend. If all goes well, you will have more years of tutelage under him before you permanently take on his duties. But the only circumstance that matters is the current one.

“And currently, you’re the prime minister. It is your job and you have no alternative but to do it to the best of your abilities. You have made your first decision and I think it was a wise one. Now simply do what you have always

done. Trust your informants. Trust what Boman has taught you over the years. Most importantly, trust the One. You can't hide behind Boman anymore. You *are* Boman now, like it or not."

How could he possibly fill those shoes? Jon wanted to be offended, but his shame was too powerful to disguise. He had been moping around as if his new position was a great punishment. Gurtie was right. This was his calling, whether for the rest of his life or only for today. He needed to pour himself into it, not skirt around it and hope Boman would come back and rescue him.

When he finally looked at Gurtie, she was waiting patiently for her words to sink in. "You were waiting for me to walk into that, weren't you?"

She smiled. "It wouldn't have been appropriate for me to bring it up out of the blue. I simply waited for you to ask my opinion."

"But I didn't!"

"Oh yes you did. Just because it wasn't phrased as a question doesn't mean you didn't ask it. So I saved the kingdom from your uneducated guidance, thank you very much."

Jon could think of nothing to say. Instead he chuckled, then took a sip of his wine. After Gurtie did the same, he nodded more to himself than to her. "You're right, of course. I'll do better."

"Good. Now that's settled. What do you suppose Boman is up to?"

A SETBACK

“It’s been a week.” Boman’s comment sounded whiny. He sat on a large, flat rock a few paces from the cave where he had been served his first island meal. Halfway up the mountain, the landing provided a wonderful view of the harbor, and the pleasant weather should have made him want to sit around all day watching the market below. But he didn’t care about the weather or the view. “How long does it take to arrange a meeting with someone?”

Fend shook his head and shrugged. “I have no idea how long things take on *island time*.”

Boman chuckled.

Fend looked around. “And I have no idea if anyone is listening in on our conversations, but I’m going to say it anyway. I’m concerned about Putlag. Something isn’t right. They won’t say anything about him. It’s almost as if he’s not a person, but some sort of god they worship.”

Boman nodded. “Yes, I’ve had the same suspicion. Like the Far Islanders. They build statues and worship them. They even believe they’ve heard instructions from them, and do their bidding.”

“I’ll never understand how people can worship and serve something they made with their own hands.”

Boman nodded. “But the treatment of Putlag is different. It’s not worship or blind faith. It’s a strange sense of devotion based on fear. I get the feeling they don’t believe they have a choice. I’m worried all their decisions will be made out of fear instead of reason.” Boman scratched his scruffy face and sighed as he changed the topic. “How do you stand this?”

Fend laughed. “You’re still in the break-in stage. You’ve got another week or two before it stops bothering you.”

“Hopefully not.” Boman frowned. “With any luck, we’ll be on our way before that happens and I’ll be able to shave like a civilized man.”

“Oh! Now it comes out!” Fend stroked his beard and laughed. “I’ll have you know, sir, my beard is as civilized as any bare face in your kingdom.”

As they laughed, another voice laughed along with them.

“Caedmon,” they said in unison.

“I see you’re growing accustomed to me already.” Caedmon smiled as he joined them. “I’m glad I found you together. I have news.” He looked at each of them in turn, waiting so long Boman wanted to shake him. “I spoke to Putlag on your behalf. He will not grant you audience. You will not be allowed to leave.”

“What?” Boman couldn’t believe it. “No chance to present my case? No

chance to even discuss it?”

“He said he has discussed it with the One and the matter is settled.” Caedmon sighed. “I truly understand how distressing this is to you. I wish I had better news.”

“So do I,” muttered Fend, slouching back onto the rock slab.

Boman struggled to reign in his indignation. “It’s unbelievable. How can he deny our request without a proper meeting to discuss it?”

“There are many reasons. I can share a few. First, Putlag is not the only reason you cannot leave. The sea serpents are no friends of his, nor does he have control over them. To allow someone to leave would mean having to provide a way out. This he would do at great risk to himself and those leaving. Second, he has direct discussions with the One. When he says he has discussed something, he means it. It’s not like when we pray and feel the One’s gentle guiding hand. Putlag speaks with the One face to face.”

“How’d he get such a privilege?” Fend’s brow was furrowed.

Caedmon shrugged. “I wish I knew. I certainly have some questions of my own.”

Boman laughed. Not that he thought it was actually funny, but the idea of someone being mysterious with Caedmon was too ironic to miss.

“I know.” Caedmon nodded, regret showing on his face. “Bahawre presents many disturbing and frustrating things. I’m sorry.”

“Ah, there you are.” Eyrice appeared around the corner and approached Fend. “I’ve been looking for you. Some of your men are fighting and we’re not exactly sure what to do about it.”

“You have got to be kidding me!” Fend growled something unintelligible under his breath, then turned to Boman. “Fill me in on anything I miss. I’ll be back when I can.” Then he stood up with greater ease than he had a week ago. “Lead on. I’ll show you what to do with unruly sailors.”

“I’ll go with him,” Caedmon piped up. “I know a thing or two about unruly sailors. I can help. Given the circumstances, it’s the least I can do.”

“Thank you. Let’s get to it.”

As the pair strode quickly up the hill, Eyrice took a few steps closer to Boman and giggled. “They were arguing over whose bum was bigger.”

Boman chuckled. “I suppose next they’ll be arguing over whose is hairier. I can’t wait to hear what Fend has to say about it.”

Eyrice laughed, then looked down the hill. “I need to collect some things at the harbor. Would you like to come with me?”

Boman shrugged. "I guess I have nothing better to do."

At Eyrice's raised brow, he realized she may not know his news. "I'm sorry. I've been informed I won't be allowed to leave. I won't even be given an opportunity to present my case."

"I suspected that would be the case, but I'm sorry anyway."

"Well, I guess nobody can do anything about it." Better to change the subject. "What's at the harbor?"

Eyrice patted a bag tied to her belt. "I have money to spend and I may need help carrying what I buy. Do you mind helping me?"

Boman chuckled. It sounded like something Gurtie would say. "Not at all. I could use a diversion."

"Good. Follow me."

She led the way down the natural stone stairs. Even though he had followed the path more than once, Boman still had to pay close attention to avoid a misstep. The awkward, irregular stairs ended at a sandy path, which they followed toward the harbor market. Boman could see why they called it the harbor. Although no ships would ever dock, a sailor landing here for the first time would have thought it a perfect location. Completely surrounded by land except for one small opening, it looked more like a lake than a sea harbor.

But it was a terrible place for a market. At first, he was baffled at the sight of the single row of makeshift shops on the beach near the base of the hills. Why wouldn't the shops be up in one of the villages? Then he smiled as he thought of sailors starting out fresh and what kind of decisions they might make. To them, the harbor would have been the most obvious place for a market. Still, it seemed odd for such a poor decision to remain for six hundred years.

Eyrice's voice refocused his attention. "It's the second one." She pointed at one of the shops. Made of a bamboo-like plant, it was half ship's cabin and half hut. The walls were constructed like the buildings in Zille, but the roof was a dome of large leaves. In front of the shop stood two tables with various fishing implements and a couple of large bundles.

"Are they ready?" Eyrice addressed the large, well-muscled merchant, who nodded and pointed at the two bundles.

As Eyrice handed the merchant the bag of what sounded like stones, Boman inspected the bundles and was surprised to find a collection of spears, arrows, staves and bows bound tightly together. He picked up the heavier-looking one.

"What are these for?"

"The Kisiwa"

“Oh yes. Your dark side neighbors.” Boman frowned. “What makes it dark?”

Eyric picked up the other bundle and started back the way they had come. “I don’t know for sure what makes it the dark side. They are a backward people who cling to filthy and unintelligent ways. But what makes it dark is more intangible. Some people think it’s cursed. I don’t know about such superstition, but I get an awful feeling if I get anywhere near their side of the island.”

Boman glanced at the bundle he had propped on his shoulder. “They attack you?”

“Not directly. We outnumber them. But from time to time, they raid one of our villages and kidnap some of our young women.”

“You’re kidding!”

“No. Apparently, they have trouble bearing children. I don’t know if it’s their diet or if a mysterious force is at work on their side of the island. Regardless, they’ve resorted to kidnapping, so we must protect ourselves.”

“How often do they succeed?”

“Maybe one out of four tries. But it’s still too many.”

“I agree. What do they do with the women?”

“They are forced to marry one of the Kisiwa men. I don’t believe they are mistreated apart from that. But their families are devastated.”

Boman nodded and frowned. Not even Tyriel committed such crimes. Onor probably would, but he hadn’t heard of it. These Kisiwa must be worse than the Onorians. And what Eyric referred to as “young women” were young girls to his eyes. He patted the bundle propped on his shoulder. “Where are we taking these?”

“Cudleg. Our closest village to the dark side. With the new moon approaching, we’ll need to be on guard.”

“I see.” It was too much distressing news for one day. Boman needed to change the subject. “Is the village far from the main room? Where you found us today? What do you call it again?”

Eyric laughed. She seemed to recognize his need to change the topic, but didn’t comment on it. “Barbad’s Landing. Named after our first leader.”

“Ah, yes. I don’t know why I can’t remember the name.”

“You’ll get it eventually.”

Boman sighed. “No offense, but I hope there is no eventually for me here. I want to go home.”

Eyric nodded. “Yes, I suppose I would feel the same way.” She frowned. “Putlag has never allowed anyone to leave. Not one. And even if he were to

allow you to leave, you'd have to get past the monsters." She raised her hand as he was about to protest. "Until you come up with something nobody here has thought of in six hundred years, you're wasting your time."

Boman stopped. "So I'm supposed to give up?"

Eyric turned to face him and set her bundle down. "I don't know what to tell you. I don't know what I would do in your place."

"But you're trapped, too."

"It's not the same. I was born here. It's my home and I love it. I was only recently informed about the restriction. To you, it's devastating, but to me, it's a mildly disturbing discovery. I never wanted to leave anyway."

Boman nodded. "Yes, I can see that." Her perspective certainly made sense, but it didn't make it any less devastating to him. He needed some time alone. Once the weapons were delivered to Cudleg, he would go back to Barbad's Landing. Several secluded spots near the landing would provide him an opportunity to think.

Eyric picked up her bundle and started down the path. "You have military training. Perhaps you could give us a few pointers."

FAR AWAY

The first glow of sunset touched the horizon and Boman found the perfect spot to watch. A broad leaf from one of the nearby trees blocked the sun from his eyes so he could watch the ever-increasing colors form on the horizon and sparse clouds. Behind him, a storm was forming and he could see the nearest thunderheads glowing yellow through the trees.

He had been here since he left Eyrice in Cudleg. He suspected Caedmon lurked somewhere nearby, but he didn't care. It was time for dinner, but he wasn't hungry. Depression grasped tenaciously at his mind and he wasn't sure if he would go on fighting it.

Sure, it was a blow when Caedmon announced he would not be allowed to leave. But at that point, he had imagined himself a prisoner of war, still at odds with his situation and committed to escape. But Eyrice's words had changed his state of mind. She had offered any help he needed adjusting to his new home. Nobody had put him in prison, for which he was thankful. But being forced into a new *home* somehow hurt more deeply.

He shifted his position to watch the sun as it touched the ocean and began melting into it. To him, it symbolized all his hopes and dreams melting away, and he was helpless to prevent it. Helpless. His least favorite word in any language. He sighed and hung his head as the last point of brightness died away, leaving a pastel display in the sky he no longer cared to look at.

He scratched at his face in annoyance. Yet another thing he would have to grow accustomed to. Yet another thing he didn't want to become normal in a new home.

Home. He couldn't imagine ever using the word for the island. He wrinkled his brow as he reflected. Zille hadn't been home either. Not at first. Neither had palace life. He was reminded of all the transitions he had faced. Why should it be any different now? He could handle this new life.

But just as he started to believe he could live here, he thought of Gurtie, his last true friend his age. Would he ever see her again? What was she up to? Probably scheming and convincing people in charge to do things while making them believe it was their own idea. She would indirectly direct them to search for him. And she would coach Jon.

He sighed. Jon was like a son and a best friend in one person. Would he ever see him again? Was he still alive? Not knowing tormented him. No amount of wishing could transport him back to where he belonged. He found himself pining for simple things. His horse, his room at the palace, the city market.

The words of an innkeeper came to mind. Boman had been distraught about not getting the promotion he was after. Sitting in the inn whining and pining for what he couldn't have, the innkeeper had offered some advice. "If you aren't here, you aren't anywhere." The elderly, rotund man shook his head, his double chin swaying slightly out of sync. "All you can deal with is what's in front of you. Fix what you can, and bide your time. Tomorrow will present new opportunities, maybe better ones you haven't yet considered." Within weeks, Boman had received an even better promotion in the royal stables.

The same advice applied to his current circumstance. He would continue seeking a way home, but he had to at least be useful where he was. He wasn't giving up his hopes, merely biding his time. Tomorrow, he would show up in Cudleg and help train the Bahawre how to use staff, spear and bow. He would protect his new home, regardless how ill at ease he felt calling it such.

Approaching footsteps caught his attention. He recognized Fend's shuffling gait, although he was unsure at first with the lack of heavy breathing. Funny what a mere week can do for a man's conditioning.

Fend sat beside him. "Missed you at dinner."

Boman nodded. "I wasn't hungry."

"I wish I had your problem." Fend patted his belly. "I eat more when I'm upset."

Boman chuckled. "We all have our ways, don't we?"

Fend nodded, then looked at the horizon and sighed. "I suppose we could be stuck in worse places."

"True. At least we're not in Onor."

Fend chuckled and nodded.

A few moments of silence passed as both men watched the sunset slowly diminish. Finally, Fend took a long, deep breath. "So what do we do now?"

Boman frowned. "In terms of escape, I can't find a plan. I see no clear way out. We have no help and no resources. Our only course is here. The island can either be our prison or our home. I suppose the best thing would be to find something to do. A job or a purpose of some sort."

Fend nodded and grunted his assent. "That shouldn't be difficult. The people here seem busy enough."

Boman nodded. "We truly have no better choice. Until we can find an alternative, we're going to have to find a way to live here."

Fend looked around. "Like it or not, I suppose Bahawre is our new home."
"Home." Boman sighed. "Will it ever be?"

The story continues in *The Bahawre Covenant*.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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His journey into writing began when he complained about the excessive description in the fantasy book he was reading at the time. His wife told him to write his own, so he did.

Chris lives in the Kansas City area with his wife and kids where he works from home as a software developer and writes in his free time. Apart from software development and writing, he enjoys geekery, gardening, food and tinkering with things.

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